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Within or Outside International Sport? Chinese Leaders in the 1950s and 1960s

Dans ou hors du sport international ? Les dirigeants chinois dans les années 1950 et 1960

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Abstract: This article examines how sports leaders from the People's Republic of China (PRC) served as key figures in building and leading new transnational networks in the time between the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966—even as constantly changing political tides, both domestically and internationally, affected their ability to do so. It begins with a brief discussion of the new sports leadership in the early 1950s before then tracing China's involvement in the socialist bloc sports networks and competitions, as well as its attempts to join and participate in the Olympics. The article then moves on to discuss how Chinese sports leaders in the 1960s, in particular Rong Gaotang and Huang Zhong, helped orchestrate the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO)—a politically motivated sporting federation and competition established in the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet split to assert Chinese socialism in the world, while also challenging the IOC's domination of international sport. Next, the article looks at the turn of events in late 1966, during the early Cultural Revolution, when State Sports Commission leader Rong Gaotang—involved in most diplomatic and high-level political activities—was denounced and criticized for his past activities. Just before the first (and last) Asian GANEFO was held in December 1966, the Chinese leadership in charge suddenly replaced Rong as China's delegation leader, and China soon retreated from the world of international sport for several years. The conclusion section notes how Rong's rehabilitation in early 1979, after Mao's death, the end of the Cultural Revolution, and the rise of Deng Xiaoping, was no coincidence: it came just as the new PRC leadership decided to return to the IOC as part of the plan to position China on the world stage as "open," "reformed," and "modernized."

Keywords: China, international sport, diplomacy, competitions

Introduction

Just weeks after the closing ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, *China Daily*, an official mouthpiece for the government, declared:

> Is it true that the West has already had a positive change of attitudes to China? In fact, the long-standing image of China as the "Sick man of East Asia" that the West fostered in history was broken more than 20 years ago when Chinese athletes snatched 15 gold medals in the Los Angeles Olympics, pushing it into the world camp of sports powers.
> However, a sense of intrinsic superiority about its civilization still prevails in the Western world. The essence of their reluctance to see China play a crucial role in international politics or take it as an equal partner still remains, although Western countries have changed their deep-rooted mindset about China a

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> little after the end of the Beijing Olympics. (*China Daily,* 2008)

Invoking history, this quote explicitly highlights how the Chinese government saw its participation in the world of international sport as key to crafting China's position in the world. It also implicitly continued to reinforce the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP)'s claim to political legitimacy as the sole ruling power of China. Since the early twentieth century, sport in China had been associated with an official narrative of overcoming national humiliation, in which the nation had suffered from "victimization" at the hands of foreigners – often succinctly described using the phrase the "Sick Man of East Asia" or "Sick Man of Asia" (*dongya bingfu).*[1] The origins of this phrase date back to the late nineteenth century when Chinese intellectuals, foreign missionaries, and others more generally described the weakness of the late imperial Chinese body politic. The "sick man" – epitomized at the time by an effeminate male intellectual – was incapable of saving Chinese women and, by extension, China. Alongside humiliation, the "sick man" became permanently grafted into the foundations of Chinese nationalism as representative of China as an always-already-behind nation within the world system of nation-states.

Between the fall of the empire (1911) and the establishment of the People's Republic (PRC) (1949), a narrative of national humiliation flourished (Cohen, 2010, p. 36) and the "sick man" phrase became fused with national needs for sports and physical education. Many Chinese intellectuals and elites – influenced in part by Euro-American discourses – likewise felt that improvement in mass physical fitness would contribute to a superior national race and a stronger nation (Morris 2004). In the first half of the twentieth century, Chinese athletes were often portrayed as lagging behind both their Western counterparts and Japanese athletes, while working hard to overcome the backwardness of their nation on the world stage.

After 1949, the CCP set out on a path of socialist transformation that sought to firmly establish its rule by blatantly repudiating the previous regime and building a socialist state. This included marking the CCP as "victor" in having finally overcome a "Century of Humiliation" stretching from the Opium Wars to the establishment of the PRC (Gries, 2005; Wang, 2012). Sport was given a prominent position in this new state with the creation of a ministry-level body – the State Sports Commission.

Producing competitive athletes in the Mao era was seen as an important way to boldly represent the nation internationally and, through "people-to-people diplomacy" (Brady, 2003), help gain (or solidify) alliances, legitimate the CCP's ruling claim over China and the new socialist state, and improve the status of the Chinese nation on the world stage. Internationally, the PRC leadership from the 1950s through 1970s sought recognition as the rightful ruling power in China (as opposed to the Republic of China, then governed by the Guomindang, or Nationalists, in Taiwan). Participation in international sport also helped foster the PRC leadership's ongoing efforts to open China to the world during this time. Under the new communist leadership, and with the development of a Soviet-inspired, state-sponsored sports system, Chinese efforts to send and receive sports delegations – a form of "sports diplomacy" – increased exponentially as part of a broader program in foreign affairs work.

Chinese sports leaders in these years thus had a formidable task ahead of them: securing China's position in international sport as

1 The humiliation refers to Chinese defeats in the Opium Wars, the Sino-Japanese War, the Boxer rebellion, and during the war of resistance against Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. The phrase continues to be invoked to the present, especially when giving reasons for China's continued obsession with the Olympics. See, for example, Fish (2016).

paramount to establishing the new socialist state's position in the world and to assuring its legitimacy. Much attention then and since has been paid to the so-called "two Chinas" issue (Brownell, 2007; Xu, 2008). This is the main focus of secondary literature on sport in the Mao era, especially with regard to the Olympic committee and affiliated international sports federations. Yet, Chinese sports leaders and athletes were also embedded within a world of international sport that is now – with the subsequent shifts in geopolitics and the dominance of the Olympics – often forgotten. In the 1950s through 1970s, these leaders were at the forefront of diplomatic work that occurred through sport.

This article starts from the premise that despite China's troubles with the Olympic committee in the Mao era, and its non-participation in the Olympics for more than two decades, the country and its sports leaders were continuously involved in a diverse world of international sport made up of various sports networks. It examines how changing domestic and international political tides, from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 through the early Cultural Revolution in 1966-1967, influenced and were influenced by the work of China's top sports leaders in these networks. The article begins with a brief discussion of China's sports leaders in the early PRC, their involvement in the socialist bloc sports networks and competitions, and their struggles with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in the 1950s. Employing archival sources I personally gathered from Chinese archives in 2011, when such archives were accessible, the article then discusses how Chinese sports leaders in the 1960s led important sports delegation visits and helped orchestrate the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO) – a political movement in the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet split that the Chinese leadership hoped would promote Chinese socialism in the world while challenging the IOC's dominance. The article then turns briefly to the early Cultural Revolution and focuses on the fate of one specific leader, Rong Gaotang, who as State Sports Commission vice-chair (and de facto leader) was deeply involved in diplomatic and high-level political activities from the early 1950s until late 1966. As political tides shifted in late 1966 against China's participation in elite international competitive sport for its alleged "trophyism", Rong became an easy target for persecution. Just before the first (and last) Asian GANEFO was held in December 1966, the Chinese leadership in charge suddenly replaced Rong as China's delegation leader; China soon retreated from the world of international sport for several years. The article concludes with Rong's rehabilitation in early 1979, which came just as the new PRC leadership decided to return to the Olympic committee as part of its plan to position China on the world stage as "open", "reformed" and "modernized".

The PRC Joins the World of International Sport

Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the new leadership worked hard to establish its control nationwide, while also rebuilding a country devastated by years of war and sending off its soldiers to fight in the war to "Resist America and Aid Korea". There are two overlapping stories that can be told about China's involvement in international sport in this period. One is an oft-told story concerning the new leadership's battle with the Republic of China (Taiwan) for sole recognition by the International Olympic Committee. This story is incomplete and must be joined with another: the Chinese leadership's intense efforts to join the Soviet-led socialist bloc, build political solidarities with new allies, and ultimately solidify China's new position in the world.

The new communist leadership mobilized a diverse set of sports leaders to meet the goals of institutionalizing sport domestically and representing China in sport internationally. These early PRC sports leaders included a

mix of experts and specialists from the earlier Republican era, such as veteran sports leader Ma Yuehan (John Ma), and communist party cadres, such as Marshal He Long and Rong Gaotang.[2] The new regime employed veteran sports leaders like Ma to help build the state-sponsored system, and this older generation of sports leaders frequently published articles related to their deep knowledge of sports and physical education (Shuman, 2014, pp. 52-7). However, only party cadres were entrusted to carry out orders – even when they had little to no experience in sports administration.

The chair of the newly formed All-China Sports Federation (ACSF) was a loyal Party member, Feng Wenbin, and alongside him, serving as vice chair and secretary general, was cadre Rong Gaotang. Born in Hebei in 1912 to "a peasant family", Rong had attended Qinghua's foreign languages department, became a member of the basketball team in 1932 (a fact that Ma Yuehan allegedly recalled 17 years later when Rong asked him to join the newly formed sports preparatory committee in 1949), and a year later entered the Communist Youth League (Rong, 1992, pp. 327-30). Rong later spent a year at the CCP's Yan'an University in 1938, and joined the Eighth Route Army in 1941 – where he spent the next five years working alongside future premier Zhou Enlai. During the Civil War he was given various top administrative positions in the Youth League (Shuman, 2014, pp. 58-9). Well-versed in sports he may not have been, but by 1949 Rong was a decorated cadre and clearly held the trust of top Party leadership. The State Sports Commission was formally established in 1952 and Marshal He Long was named as honorary chair, but it was Rong who effectively took the helm. He was accompanied by other young communist cadres, including Huang Zhong, another Yan'an graduate who was named vice secretary-general of the State Sports Commission in 1952 and quickly became an important figure for China in international sport.

China and Socialist Bloc Sport in the 1950s

In the early years of the PRC, Chinese sports leaders were embedded within international sports networks that included both the Olympic committee and a broader, Soviet-led socialist bloc. The socialist world of sport in the 1950s was especially transnational. Publishing houses and the press circulated translations of various materials – sports news, technical handbooks, and articles on or by famous coaches and athletes – throughout the Eastern bloc and China. In China, the leadership was focused on adopting mass sports programs based on Soviet models, and was also interested in understanding Soviet competitive programs and the country's athletic ranking system (Shuman, 2014, pp. 48-51, 134).

Sports competitions with socialist bloc countries – or "friendly" learning experiences, as they were sometimes called – were also considered vital in bettering China's position in the international socialist movement as they emphasized the unilateral nature of the Sino-Soviet relationship. The point of these early exchanges was explicitly to study Soviet sports models, the training methods of socialist bloc athletes, and to begin to use sports activities as a way to foster stronger relations with other

2 Ma Yuehan, a long-time professor at Qinghua University, is perhaps the most prominent representative of an older generation of sports experts who had remained on the mainland after 1949. Ma was well known and respected within the sports community, having already had an illustrious career under the former regime. In addition to his own athletic participation in the First National Games held in 1910 in Nanjing, he had studied at St. John's University in Shanghai, twice in the 1920s at Springfield College, Massachusetts – at the time known as the International YMCA College and more famously as the birthplace of basketball (Springfield College Library, 2019), served as chair of the physical education department at Qinghua, and had even been one of the leaders of the Chinese delegation to the 1936 Berlin Olympics (Qinghua daxue Ma Yuehan jinian wenji bianjizu, 1998, pp. 339-40). It was likely a combination of personal connections and Ma's decades of experience in promoting sport at all levels that contributed to his being chosen as a vice-chair for the preparatory committee for the new national sports organization, the All-China Sports Federation (ACSF), and then the State Sports Commission when it was formally established in June 1952.

countries. Chinese sports leaders also claimed that working with their Soviet comrades in international sport matters further helped relations between the countries. This attitude extended to athletes and leaders in the rest of the Soviet-led world, with Chinese publications portraying Soviet and socialist bloc allies as comrades-in-arms seeking to achieve worldwide peace together through international socialism.

China received official sports delegations at home and sent their own abroad. Smaller events and goodwill tours made up the majority of these exchanges, which aimed simultaneously to exchange sports skills, link athletes and coaches within the socialist bloc, and build on existing political solidarities. Famous teams and athletes from socialist bloc countries, ubiquitous in the Chinese press, made visits to China. Most of the gold-medal-winning Soviet gymnastics squad from the Helsinki 1952 Olympics toured China in 1953, an event highlighted in a subsequent Chinese-narrated newsreel showcasing each athlete in action and listing their achievements (Shuman, 2019). A Hungarian football contingent visited in 1954, just a few months before the country sent its "Magical Magyars" to the World Cup final, and toured the country with Chinese "study" teams in tow (*ibid*). Emil Zatopek, the famed Czechoslovakian distance runner, visited China on more than one occasion, including in 1958 when he watched the first official Chinese marathoners surpass his own Olympic marathon time (Bo, 1958; "Zatopek's Mark Cut," 1958).

Larger sports competitions outside the Olympics also took place in these years, including those sponsored as part of the World Festivals for Youth and Students (WFYS). In the first decade, these festivals and associated events, perhaps the most attended and diverse at the time, took place every two years in the Soviet-led socialist bloc – Prague 1947, Budapest 1949, Berlin 1951, Bucharest 1953, Warsaw 1955, Moscow 1957 – and included the participation of thousands of athletes. Given the sponsorship and locales, the festivals are generally understood to have been fronts for Soviet interests (Rutter, 2013). They were a common feature of the international socialist landscape and surrounding propaganda touted these events as promoting friendship, unity, peace, and similar ideals. The brochure for the Berlin WFYS boasted the attendance of world-class athletes and boldly stated that the festival was "the only international event where every aspect of the culture and sport of all the peoples of the world finds its highest expression" (World Festival of Youth and Students, 1951).

Indeed, in the 1950s, socialist bloc and Soviet-leaning nations like China often sent large delegations; more than 100 countries were represented at the 1950s festivals. Every other year, these mega-events became sites for the circulation of and interactions between young people from not only Eastern bloc and socialist-leaning countries, but also Western Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia.[3] Political and academic meetings, cultural events, sports, and sightseeing were all on the agenda; festival guides and maps in multiple languages were distributed to attendees, and a significant component of each festival – as indicated by event programs and the high numbers of athletes listed on delegation rosters – were the sports events and competitions.[4]

3 Of course, not all governments approved of the premise of these festivals or of sending their own citizens to them, so sometimes people had to make their own travel arrangements and pay their own way. For example, it is unsurprising that the US was notorious for making it difficult for people to travel to such events during the so-called McCarthy era. Battles between Americans asserting their travel rights also made headlines in the New York Times when the event was held in Moscow in 1957; some of these Americans were invited to and then traveled to China afterwards. A quick Google search reveals US Congressional record hearings from the "Committee on Un-American Activities" in which these American WFYS attendees were questioned about their activities. For a more thorough account of the WFYS as a phenomenon and all the resistance it met, see Rutter (2013).

4 Every festival attendee could also earn a sports badge of sorts for participation in sports activities. This seems to have been connected to ideas of mass sport and international socialist citizenship, such as that already found in the widespread adoption across the socialist bloc of the Soviet Union's "Ready for Labor and Defense" sports system.

Outside of the Olympic Games, this was the premiere venue for international sports competition. And even after socialist bloc athletes like Zatopek and Soviet gymnast Nina Bocharova won Olympic gold in Helsinki in 1952, they continued to compete at the WFYS. Although China only sent a men's basketball team to the Budapest World Student Games in August 1949, held in conjunction with the WFYS (ZTNBW, 1964, p. 891), two years after the official establishment of the PRC Rong Gaotang led a slightly larger delegation, which included men's basketball and volleyball teams, to the WFYS held in Berlin (ZTNBW, 1964, p. 34). The nation sent a delegation of 80 athletes, including members of the swimming team, to the fourth WFYS in Bucharest in August 1953 – attended by approximately 30,000 participants. Chinese athletes competed in men's and women's basketball, volleyball, track and field, and swimming; the highlight of the trip was when 25-year-old Wu Chuanyu – an ethnic Chinese born in Indonesia, who had been recruited from the 1951 Indonesian delegation – won the only gold medal for China in the men's 100-meter backstroke (Shuman, forthcoming).

Debacles with the Olympic Committee

In fact, the WFYS gave the PRC's top athletes a way to compete internationally when their Olympic participation increasingly seemed like a pipe dream. PRC involvement in sport outside of the socialist bloc was in a state of flux during these first few years and primarily followed whatever was best for their position vis-à-vis the Soviets. When PRC leaders received an invitation in February 1951 sent by the Helsinki organizing committee for the upcoming 1952 Olympics, the All-China Sports Federation decided that, although they believed the PRC should participate, the decision hinged on whether or not the Soviet Union would also participate (CFMA, 1951). Most likely this response was made because the Soviet Union, which had not yet officially participated in any Olympics Games, was not yet in the IOC. In late April 1951 Soviet leaders, perhaps because of the IOC's decision to consider allowing "two Germanies" to join, finally decided they would participate in 1952 and they sent a telegram to the IOC; in May the IOC voted to recognize the Soviet Olympic Committee (Parks, 2017, pp. 11-13). In order to remain in solidarity with their "Soviet elder brother" in their relationship with the IOC, it seems that PRC leaders waited for the outcome of these events before also deciding to participate (Shuman, 2014, pp. 84-89).

PRC sports leaders also needed Soviet support in their own Olympic battle. IOC rules technically stated that each nation could have only one National Olympic Committee (NOC), but the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan each claimed to be the only "China". During these years, the PRC also developed a policy in sport to refuse joining any international sports organization that also recognized the Republic of China (Taiwan) (the so-called "two Chinas" issue) (Brownell, 2007; Liang, 2007; Xu, 2008). The PRC hastily sent a representative from its local embassy, Sheng Zhipai, neither a sports expert nor familiar with how the IOC functioned, to the IOC meeting held in Oslo in February 1952 (Xu, 2008, pp. 80-81). Representing the All-China Sports Federation, Sheng immediately presented the case for PRC recognition. He noted China's historical relations with Olympic organizations and cited efforts made by PRC leaders over the previous two years to build amateur sport in China – as represented by numerous competitions and large circulations of sports publications. Sheng argued that as the only governing body of sports in mainland China, the ACSF by default also represented the only National Olympic Committee for China. He asked that all correspondence be sent to the ACSF in Beijing, and noted that the PRC was prepared to send teams to Helsinki in July (Sheng, 1952). IOC executive board members apparently viewed Sheng as inexperienced and unaware of formal IOC procedure; IOC President Sigrid Edström received "Loud cheers from the Assembly"

for informing Sheng that he was "not qualified to impose conditions nor to give [the IOC] advices or instructions" (International Olympic Committee, 1952, p. 9).

Paying attention to this debacle was Dong Shouyi, the only official IOC member from China who had remained on the mainland following the Civil War.[5] Dong was another veteran in the Chinese sports world, with strong personal connections to the YMCA. In the 1910s, he had been captain of his school's basketball team at the Tongzhou Xiehe Academy in Beijing, run by Christian missionaries from North America, and upon graduation was invited to work in the Tianjin YMCA's Physical Education Department. Zhang Boling (then the director of Tianjin's YMCA and considered the first sports expert to advocate China's participation in the Olympics) subsequently invited Dong to teach at Nankai University, where he led morning exercises and helped coach several basketball teams (Sun, 2008, pp. 172-74). He also coached and refereed basketball for the YMCA where, in 1919, one of the students who frequently came to play basketball was Zhou Enlai (Brownell, 2007, p. 256). The YMCA sent Dong to Springfield College in 1923, and when he returned two years later he simultaneously served as director of the Physical Education Department at the Tianjin YMCA and Nankai University. Dong was also sent as the basketball coach for the Chinese delegation to Berlin and, in 1941, became a member of the China National Amateur Athletic Federation (which organized the National Games and Olympic delegation, and which included members Hao Gengsheng, who later fled to Taiwan, and Ma Yuehan). At the 1947 IOC meeting in Stockholm Dong became the third elected Chinese IOC member (Sun, 2008, pp. 174-77). Suffice it to say that Dong was no stranger to Ma Yuehan or many other leading sports experts in the early PRC.

Nevertheless, Dong first heard about the PRC leadership's problems with the IOC only in early 1952 in a newspaper article that published the telegram expressing the PRC's intention to participate at Helsinki. He quickly realized that PRC leaders had no idea what they were doing and sent a letter to the newly formed ACSF that explained how the IOC worked. The letter was forwarded directly to Zhou Enlai, who probably recognized Dong from Nankai and soon thereafter called him to Beijing – a move that was also praised by the Soviet embassy (Brownell, 2007, p. 256). From then on, Dong became a mainstay – often alongside Rong Gaotang – in Chinese dealings with the IOC.

Just a few days before the opening ceremonies at Helsinki, the IOC decided to allow both PRC and ROC delegations to attend as "China" (Morris, 2004, pp. 238-9). The ROC withdrew in protest, while the PRC delegation, because of the late IOC decision, arrived six days after the start of the Games and only one swimmer was able to officially compete. Despite this, Rong Gaotang, who had led the delegation (with Huang Zhong in tow), sent a report to Liu Shaoqi and the Central bureau claiming that attending the Games had been very successful in raising the international status of the PRC in light of the ROC's non-participation (Rong, 1952). Soviet athletic successes at the Olympics, the first in which they had ever participated, also impressed PRC leaders. Rong cited five things in his post-event report that the PRC needed to do: strengthen national sports leadership (and mimic Soviet sports organizational structure); centrally train outstanding athletes and create a program for future prospective athletes; hire five Soviet sports experts to come and work in China; hold national games each year in every Olympic discipline; and build sports stadiums and facilities around the country (Rong, 1952).

5 The Nationalist Party (Guomindang), which ruled the Republic of China until it lost the Civil War, fled to Taiwan in the late 1940s. Of the ROC's three IOC members, two of them also left the mainland but did not settle in Taiwan (Brownell, 2007, p. 256). Veteran sports leader Hao Gengsheng (Gunsun Hoh) nevertheless did go to Taiwan and became a prominent ROC international sports leader and advocate in this period.

The PRC leadership meanwhile instructed their Olympic delegates to rely on Soviet comrades in the IOC for advice on all matters. The Soviets gladly took on this role as part of an agenda to build their own position and influence in the IOC, to promote the Soviet Union as a leader in sports development, and to make the IOC more inclusive – all part of their effort to "democratize" sport (Parks, 2017, pp. 37-39).

In 1954, the IOC changed its rules so that territories under the control of a NOC could receive the same recognition as nations, thus recognizing both the ROC and PRC (Hill, 1996, p. 45). When the IOC invited both to the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, the ROC rejected, and then accepted, the invitation. The PRC delegation, in an attempt to discourage ROC participation, apparently planned to arrive at the Olympic village ahead of time – they were shocked upon their arrival to see that the ROC flag had already been hoisted. They formally voiced their discontent to the IOC and organizing committee to no avail and subsequently withdrew from the Games (Xu, 2008, p. 85). Sino-Soviet solidarity at IOC meetings also broke down as PRC representatives felt increasingly belittled and that their interests were being ignored. The Soviets had silenced them at a 1955 IOC meeting for having brought up the "two Chinas" issue, claiming that socialist unity was more important (Brownell, 2007, pp. 259-60).

Ideological differences with the Soviet Union following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953 had already created a rift between the two nations, and the years 1956-1957 saw a general disintegration of this supposed socialist unity (Lüthi, 2008, pp. 46-47). The earlier emphasis on "learning from the Soviet Union" declined as Chinese leaders began to show a more active interest in pushing their own agenda. This continued into 1958, when China kicked off the Great Leap Forward, a massive political, economic, and social movement marked by an intensive propagation of Maoist ideology that stressed revolutionary action and practice. In August, as the Politburo approved the nationwide establishment of communes that accelerated collectivization and marked the beginning of the most extreme phase of the movement, the PRC withdrew from the IOC and several other international sports associations. In a letter to the IOC, Dong Shouyi accused IOC President Avery Brundage of serving the American imperialists and their "two Chinas" plot (Dong, 1958).

In short, in the 1950s, socialist bloc sports networks and events like the WFYSs provided a much more fruitful space for those in the Chinese sports world to forge new connections – especially with top athletes and coaches – than the Olympics and its affiliates. For the PRC leadership, the appeal of participation in the WFYS also included fostering "friendly" relations with new political allies and promoting a positive national image. Moreover, even after leaving the IOC, the PRC continued to build elite sport programs and promote international sports exchanges. During the Great Leap Forward a campaign to boost the number of elite athletes over a ten-year period began (Shuman, 2014, p. 203) and although international sports federations affiliated with the IOC technically had rules prohibiting competitions between member and non-member nations, many countries still sent athletes to compete with the PRC in "friendly" (unofficial) competitions (Liang, 2007, p. 51). In fact, these types of sport exchanges, primarily with countries from the socialist bloc and Asia, but also from Western Europe and northern Africa, increased in the following years (ZTNBW, 1964, pp. 88-142). For the next half-decade, as exchanges with socialist bloc countries continued much as they had before, PRC leaders also began to forge their own path by fostering new sports relations with Third World nations.

Forging a New World of International Sport in the 1960s

Less than two years after the start of the Great Leap Forward, in the face of financial disaster and widespread famine, the leadership called off the campaign. Mao retreated while Liu Shaoqi (Mao's second in command), Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping undertook a more pragmatic approach to domestic growth (Lüthi, 2008, p. 194). Austerity measures implemented nationwide meant that funding for sports programs ran out – except, that is, for the very best athletes. Major changes in Chinese foreign policy were taking place, including the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations, the establishment of diplomatic relations with newly decolonized nations, and a rise in participation in various Afro-Asian solidarity movements. Sino-Soviet competition began in the Third World, with both sides determined to influence and gain the upper hand in national liberation struggles worldwide (Friedman, 2015). The country was bankrupt, but Chinese leaders were determined to build relations with new allies while positioning China as the ideologically superior socialist model, and they believed sport could help accomplish this.

PRC leaders thus engaged in a form of sports diplomacy in the 1960s explicitly for the purposes of improving China's image and wielding what in today's terms would be called "soft power" (Nye, 2012). Elite sport and sports diplomacy, largely under the direction of Rong Gaotang, Huang Zhong, and a handful of other CCP sports leaders, helped open up new transnational networks and establish foreign relations that reconfigured China's place in the world. The state intended for its athletes and sports leaders to deliver a positive image of the nation through "cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions" and legitimate its alternative model of socialist development in the eyes of others (Nye, 1990, p. 167). Chinese sports diplomacy was also a form of public diplomacy that aimed to spread China's soft power. The leadership believed that foreign media coverage of its sports teams, as well as drawing large audiences of spectators for competitions and exhibition matches, would "influence broader opinion in foreign societies" (Melissen, 2011, p. 9).

Sports leaders like Rong and Huang were at the forefront of forging connections with top leaders in other nations, particularly those in recently decolonized nations. State-sponsored sports delegation visits – in which Huang and Rong, as well as top athletes like ping-pong world champion Rong Guotuan, served as *bona fide* diplomats – were plentiful. At a time when travel for Chinese citizens was severely restricted, the State Sports Commission and the Chinese Foreign Ministry worked together to send Chinese sports delegations abroad and to receive foreign delegations in China. The plethora of official documents produced during official sports visits speaks to their broader diplomatic importance to the Chinese state.[6] As far as the leadership was concerned, these could be just as successful as – or even more successful than – larger events in expanding Chinese influence and in gathering leaders together for diplomatic purposes.

These visits sought to reinforce political solidarities by strengthening emotional bonds between those involved, while showcasing a Chinese brand of socialism that leaders hoped would appeal to these new "friends" by, among other things, placing the revolutionary struggle of oppressed peoples against colonialism and imperialism above the struggle against capitalism (Friedman, 2015, p. 1). PRC leaders firmly believed that underdeveloped African and Asian countries could learn from China's alternative (non-Soviet) socialist path of development. They were, that is, building personal affect in an effort to take the lead over the Soviet Union in the Third World.

6 I personally gathered or recorded several documents cited below at the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives in Beijing in 2011. Unfortunately, following changes to the political situation in China in recent years, they are probably no longer publicly accessible.

In China, sport delegation visits in the 1960s were also always simultaneously about reinforcing foreign and domestic policies (Wilson, 2015, p. 1193). The official framing of visits in the domestic media – which usually highlighted meetings and receptions with important political leaders and always claimed "warm" relations between "friends" – was clearly geared towards a general readership. In the wake of the Sino-Soviet split, such visits were used to teach the Chinese public about the nation's position in the world among new "friends" and to demonstrate the early successes of China's own socialist path. Nowhere was this more prevalent perhaps than the Chinese ping-pong team's tour of several African countries (Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Sudan, the United Arab Republic (UAR) and Egypt) in spring 1962 – more than a year prior to Zhou Enlai's much celebrated tour of Africa. Declassified telegrams and reports from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, as well as official media, show how the Chinese leadership utilized this first-ever sports delegation to West Africa to strengthen political solidarities and uphold a positive image of China. The official Chinese media as well as the summary report on the visit from the Foreign Ministry, written by Huang Zhong, show how the leadership measured and understood diplomatic efforts through sport – sometimes in very concrete ways, but more often in terms of building affective relations. In an official summary of "achievements and weaknesses" for 1962, the State Sports Commission stated that the year's most important accomplishments in international activities had been increasing "understanding and friendship" particularly between Asians and Africans, as well as "coordinating foreign struggles and expanding political influence" (Guojia tiwei, 1963, p. 85).

Furthermore, the Chinese leadership made no distinction between public diplomacy and propaganda. The peak of these efforts came with the creation in 1963 of the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO) movement, a Sino-Indonesian-sponsored challenge to the International Olympic Committee's dominance in sport that also attempted to solidify China's geopolitical position as a Third World leader (Shuman, 2013a). Technically speaking, GANEFO was the brainchild of Indonesian President Sukarno in the aftermath of the 1962 Asian Games held in Jakarta (Hübner, 2012). However, Chinese leaders quickly supported the idea. In light of the fact that the Olympics had become a stage for showcasing American and Soviet athletes, and that Chinese ping-pong athletes had brought international glory through their wins, the leadership in the PRC knew that one way to display their power would be through the talent of Chinese athletes in a large-scale, international, multi-sport competition. Except for ping-pong, many Chinese athletes had yet to participate in any large-scale sports competition outside the socialist world. The creation of an alternative organization appealed to leaders at all levels, including in sport, as well as to Chinese athletes.

In early February 1963, the IOC passed a resolution that would suspend the Indonesian Olympic Committee, who then voluntarily withdrew from the IOC (Pauker, 1965, p. 173). Sukarno subsequently announced the creation of a new international sports organization, the Games of the New Emerging Forces. Politically inspired by the Bandung conference, GANEFO would have specific and explicit political aims in line with Sukarno's larger political project. He believed that the world was made up of "New Emerging Forces" and "Old Established Forces". "New Emerging Forces" constituted "all countries opposing imperialism and colonialism and struggling for justice and prosperity" ("Imperialist Intrigues in Olympic Games", 1963, pp. 8-9), whereas the old forces were essentially those of colonialism. Apart from these political aims, the Games themselves would resemble the Olympics in nearly every aspect.

From the start, PRC leaders played a central role in steering GANEFO towards fruition. A week after Sukarno's announcement, Zhou Enlai wrote to him in praise of the decision to

uphold "the national dignity of Indonesia as well as that of the Asian-African countries and peoples". "The Chinese government and people", he stated, would "strive jointly with the Government and people of Indonesia to bring about the realization of this proposal" (Zhou, 1963).

But the Chinese interest in GANEFO also extended beyond the Sino-Indonesian alliance, as leaders intended to use the event to re-position China on the world stage as the Afro-Asian leader. Chinese leaders privately concluded that even though Sukarno's definition of "new emerging forces" was "vague", China should "strive for … GANEFO to become a gradual realization of African-Asian-Latin American strength and a world competition in opposition to the IOC" (CFMA, 1963a). Even though participation in this first GANEFO would probably be limited, the potential long-term importance was enough to make Chinese leaders conclude that "no matter how many athletes, what the budget" they should "make [this first one] happen". So confident were they of their own influence among African and Asian nations that the only concern they had was possible Soviet-led sabotage.

At the first GANEFO preparatory conference, held in April 1963, Huang Zhong gave by far the most supportive speech in favor of GANEFO, with anti-Americanism (and anti-ROC policies) high on his agenda. He stated that both Indonesia and the PRC had suffered from "discrimination, restriction and interference" by the IOC "under the manipulation of the American imperialist elements" – GANEFO would unite countries in the "common struggle against imperialism" (GANEFO Preparatory Committee, 1963, 23). A clause was also added to the GANEFO charter, stating that only one sports delegation from each country could participate; in other words, excluding the ROC from eligibility (GANEFO Federation, 1963, p. 19). The committee for GANEFO consisted of four vice-presidents from Asia, Africa, Latin American, and Europe – China, under the leadership of Rong and Huang, was named as the representative for Asia.

Beneath all this talk of unity, preparations for the first GANEFO also brought to light the Sino-Soviet competition for influence in Asia and Africa. The Soviets interpreted Chinese leadership in GANEFO as an attempt to divide the world of international sport, in which they had invested so much time and effort (Parks, 2009, pp. 184-86). Meanwhile, Chinese leaders made preparations to send their best athletes to the first GANEFO to be held in Jakarta in November 1963. Chinese internal documents estimated that, in the best-case scenario, more than thirty countries would participate, competitions would be well organized and results would be good, leading to a permanent structure. In the worst-case scenario, there would be fewer than ten countries, results would be dismal, and GANEFO would be "destroyed by imperialism and old revisionist elements" (CFMA, 1963b). Following the successful completion of the first GANEFO, in which Chinese athletes took home by far the most medals, the Chinese leadership continued to reinforce the underlying political significance of GANEFO as a unifying force among countries engaged in an anti-imperial ist, anti-colonial struggle. For example, in *GANEFO Opens New Era in World Sports* (GANEFO Chinese Sports Delegation, 1964) an introductory statement by Rong Gaotang stated that GANEFO "clearly demonstrates that countries and peoples free from imperialist and colonialist control are fully able to organize and develop their own independent sports activities" and they could also "contribute much to the development of world sports". The importance of GANEFO, above all, was in strengthening solidarity "among the peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the rest of the world". World sport no longer included only those countries in the Olympics – the GANEFO torch would "shine forever" for all nations engaged in the anti-imperialist, anti-colonial struggle. PRC leaders fully recognized they had successfully created a large-scale media spectacle through international

sports that promoted their own international political position. GANEFO proved, at least to them, that Chinese athletes could serve as one method for China to position itself as a leader of Afro-Asian, underdeveloped, and Third World nations.

A Temporary Halt to China's Involvement in International Sport

Over the course of 1965 and 1966, Chinese politics promoted a revolutionary, militant version of Mao Zedong Thought that began to influence sports delegation visits. This radicalization of politics at home, alongside continuing anti-US and anti-Soviet foreign policies and political coups in Indonesia and Ghana, caused China to become increasingly isolated internationally.[7] Declassified reports on sports delegations sent from Africa to China between June and October 1966 reflect the growing tension between radical ideology and foreign affairs during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution. Replete with references to Mao and the ideology of Mao Zedong Thought , and the ostensible admiration Africans had for both, the discussion of sports activities is almost completely absent. Efforts to build "friendship" with visiting sports teams through joint practices, social activities, open discussion and "finding things in common" (Brady, 2003, p. 14) – all typical features of cultural delegation visits sent to China (Shuman, 2018; Shuman, 2019) – waned as domestic politics began to undermine work in foreign affairs.

Rong Gaotang first came under attack in August 1966 when, according to his daughter, Red Guards raided and destroyed much of the family home (Li and Zhou, p. 204). Then, between mid-September and December 1966, the situation in the Foreign Ministry and State Sports Commission deteriorated rapidly. The Foreign Ministry had received two letters in late August, including one from Tanzania, criticizing the "bourgeois" habits of Chinese embassies that contrasted with Cultural Revolution principles (Ma, 2004, pp. 73-74). Chen Yi forwarded the letters to Mao, who responded on September 9 that they should get "revolutionized, or it will be very dangerous" (Ma, 2004, pp. 73-74). The resulting instructions, which the Foreign Ministry sent to Chinese embassies and institutions abroad and implemented itself a week later, called for an overhaul. A campaign began to criticize, expose, and "revolutionize" the work of foreign affairs (Ma, 2004, p. 75), and by October, the CCP Central Committee declared that the most important mission of embassies abroad was to disseminate Mao Zedong Thought (Ma, 2004, p. 152).

Declassified official reports also indicate a rapidly deteriorating situation on the ground, as indicated by Red Guard verbal attacks taking place during the Congolese football team matches in Shanghai in late October (Shuman, 2017, p. 65). While the Foreign Ministry was rapidly losing its battle to remain autonomous as the central government lost control to rebel groups, the leadership of the State Sports Commission came under attack (Lu, 2016, pp. 570-1). The magazine *New Sport*, already confined in the preceding months to Cultural Revolution rhetoric, ceased publication.

Top leaders and athletes in the State Sports Commission and Foreign Ministry were criticized or arrested in October through December (Griffin, 2014, p. 142; Lu, 2016, pp. 570-1). Rebel groups accused Rong Gaotang of having focused too much on sports skills and technique – "putting skills in command" as opposed to "putting politics in command" (Shuman, 2014, p. 332) – and "trophyism"; they criticized the ping-pong team as "big revisionists", top athletes as "capitalist seeds", and

7 China had diplomatic relations with 50 countries at the time the Cultural Revolution was launched, but relations with the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union remained unfriendly following the earlier Sino-Soviet split, and relations with others had begun to deteriorate rapidly (such as those with Indonesia following the September 1965 coup, and Ghana following the February 1966 coup), and other nations had already suspended relations (such as Burundi in 1965 and the Central African Republic in 1966). See Ma (2004, p. 152), and Larkin (1971, pp. 66-67).

world champions as "revisionist seeds" (Li and Zhou, 2002, p. 203). A denunciation meeting for Rong was held on October 31 (Li and Zhou, 2002, p. 206), following which he was not allowed to lead the delegation to the Asian GANEFO held in Phnom Penh, and in late 1966 a series of criticism materials were produced against him.

In Rong's absence, Huang Zhong led the delegation to Cambodia in what became the PRC's last major participation in the world of elite sport before the three most radical years of the Cultural Revolution. The fact that the event took place at all was largely the result of Chinese support to continue GANEFO and close relations between Cambodian and Chinese leaders at the time (Jeldres, 2012). Chinese political interests and athletes dominated the event: the main theme was the struggle against US imperialism ("Ya Fei La renmin yao tuanjie qilai fandui Meidi," 1966), and when Chinese athletes set world, national, and GANEFO records, the media attributed it to Mao Zedong Thought ("Zhe shi Mao Zedong sixiang de shengli!", 1966; "Mao Zedong sixiang de juda weili," 1966). The domestic political situation had changed so dramatically in China that elite sports training soon came to a halt. By early 1967, He Long, Chen Yi, Rong Gaotang – and many other leading cadres – were under attack (Lu, 2016, p. 572; Ma, 2004, pp. 107-110). In the space of two months, sports delegation visits had become of little use to those still in power, and as the lack of entries in the national sports yearbook's chronicle of events makes blatantly clear, they soon ceased for the remainder of the decade (ZTNBW, 1983, pp. 9-11).

Conclusion

For the PRC, elite sport essentially came to a halt until the early 1970s, when the leadership ushered in the adoption of an official sports policy known as "friendship first, competition second" (Wei, 1971).[8] The policy and accompanying slogan instructed athletes and leaders to put "friendship" above all else at international sports competitions and during delegation visits, and this was especially true with African and Asian nations.

Domestic politics shifted between radical and less radical periods until the death of Mao and fall of the Gang of Four in late 1976. Deng Xiaoping came to power in late 1978 and announced that the government would begin redressing past injustices on a wide scale – alongside the "Four Modernizations" and market reforms, as part of "Reform and Opening Up". In January 1979, as China and the US established diplomatic relations – thereby solidifying a recognition of the PRC as the only "China" – Rong Gaotang was finally called back to Beijing for work after a 12-year hiatus (Li and Zhou, 2002, p. 293). In February, the State Sports Commission formally rehabilitated him at the start of the annual Nationwide Sports Work Conference (Guojia tiwei, 1993, p. 91). While a Chinese delegation traveled to Lausanne for the IOC Executive Board meeting in early March, the Work Conference summary report published March 9 explicitly made preparation work for Olympic participation the top priority (Guojia tiwei, 1982, p. 132). The IOC Executive Board meanwhile began discussions over the PRC's re-entry into the Olympic committee, and in October 1979 the PRC was officially recognized as the "Chinese Olympic Committee" (Brownell, 2008, pp. 136-40).

Sport in China has always been about the nation's place in the world. In the early PRC, sports leaders played an intrinsic role in helping solidify and sustain the CCP's ruling power by joining in (or, in the case of GANEFO, attempting to provide an alternative to) the world of international sport, despite tumultuous political shifts. This article has shown that China was constantly involved in the world of

8 Albeit not before more tragedy. Over the course of several months in 1968, three famous ping-pong players, including World Champion Rong Guotuan, committed suicide.

international sport as part of an ongoing opening to the world – or, rather, opening to different worlds and actors, at different moments in time. The relationship with the Olympic committee was not favorable and it was not the body within which Chinese sports leaders predominantly worked. Yet, in much secondary scholarship on Chinese sport, through to the present, the narrative of the PRC's non-participation in the Olympics continues to dominate discussions of this period. Perhaps, then, rather than asking whether or not Chinese sports leaders were "in" or "out" of international sport in these years, we should instead ask: who and what gets to count as international sport? And who are the Chinese sports leaders that allowed the country to reach its goals at the international level?

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