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The Economics of Sport in China: A Maturing Sector

SÉVERINE BARDON

For a long time, sports in China were mainly organized in a way that maximized their contribution to national prestige. The emergence of a true sports market is a very recent phenomenon. Tracking the development of China's sports market, this article argues that the industry has not yet reached its maturity and remains highly risky for investors.

Up to the mid 1990s, sport in China remained the prerogative of the state. The General Sports Administration, backed up by the sports federations, saw to every detail, from training and education to housing, food, expenses, and salaries, in the lives of the country's athletes, who were sometimes recruited as young as five or six years old. The Chinese authorities were exclusively responsible for the organisation of competitions, whether local or national, casual or vying for a championship. Moral as well as sporting criteria were used to select those athletes who would have the honour of representing the country on the international scene. The entire sporting system, conceived by Chinese rulers as a tool to serve national prestige, hung on the decisions of government officials. They alone controlled the national budget that financed a sporting system clearly inspired by the Soviet model.

The situation began to change when a professional football championship was set up in 1994. Aware of its limited financial capacities, and of the constraints this imposed on the development of high-level sport, China cautiously opened up to outside investment; clubs were urged to raise funds from local enterprises, the championship sought private sponsorship, and a sports market gradually emerged, initially confined to football but soon extending to basketball.

The trend towards the privatisation of Chinese sport accelerated under the combined influence of structural factors such as the determination of the sports administration to reform its financing system and special circumstances such as the organisation of the 2008 Olympics and the growing reputation of certain Chinese athletes. However, while economic reforms have been carried out briskly all over the country, the sports market remains largely controlled by a State administration that is very jealous of its prerogatives.

The tentative legal framework remains insufficiently clear for investment by purely commercial enterprises. Favouring international sporting results over the economic stakes that have become the driving force of Western sports, China harbours surprises for investors attracted by the potential of this fast-growing sector.⁽¹⁾

The sports system established with the arrival of the Communists in 1949 remained in place for decades. Apart from a totalitarian management structure of a kind that only the Soviet Union had heretofore experienced, the system was characterised by the extreme poverty of its financing. After a drastic increase in anticipation of the Beijing Olympics, the budget for sports administration in 2004 amounted to the equivalent of only 200 million Euros.⁽²⁾ This is a very small sum with which to finance China's entire professional sports sector, which numbers 150,000 people, including athletes, trainers, and technical, medical and scientific personnel, as well as administrators.⁽³⁾ By comparison, the French budget in 2005 allotted 497 million Euros to a considerably smaller national sports sector.⁽⁴⁾ Chinese budget constraints have resulted in living and training conditions that are particularly modest, as are the salaries paid to athletes and trainers and the premiums paid for success.

This was the case in the past: Rong Guotang, the table tennis player who won China's first world championship title in 1959, did not receive any bonus for his performance. The

1. This article is mainly based on interviews carried out in China between December 2004 and February 2008, in the course of reporting for the French sports daily *l'Equipe* and the weekly *L'Equipe Magazine*.

2. Strangely enough, the state budget allocated to sports administration is kept secret, and this figure can only be taken as approximate. See *The Guardian*, "Going for Gold," 10 November 2004.

3. *China Statistical Yearbook 2003*, China Statistics Press.

4. Budget projected in 2005, on the U.S. Senate internet site.

salary paid to the world champion women's volley-ball player, Lang Ping, was less than 100 RMB a month in the 1980s. Xu Haifeng, who won China's first Olympic Gold Medal in the shooting event in Los Angeles in 1984, remembers having received a bonus of 8,000 RMB, but national pride compensated for the lack of hard cash reward. "The country spent a lot of money to train you, and when you became a champion they gave you more great honours. At the time, honour was very important,"⁽⁵⁾ Xu recalls with a touch of nostalgia. Even nowadays, less popular sports, with no resources other than those allocated by the State administration, continue to struggle with extremely limited budgets.

Sports with limited budgets: the case of boxing

The national boxing team, for example, has a total budget of less than 2 million RMB to support 40 people. Zou Shiming, the 2005 World Champion in the 48 kilo category, spelt out his income a few months before winning his title: "When I joined the provincial team, I was on probation for three years. During those three years, the province provided board and lodging, but my family provided everything else. In 2000, I earned my first boxer's salary: 300 RMB per month. Now I earn 1,000 RMB."⁽⁶⁾

Boxing training does not have a fixed training camp but moves around the various provinces, depending on the climate and the condition of local facilities. Athletes have to settle for provincial facilities such as the summer training camp in Guizhou. Located 30 kilometres from the town of Guiyang, this center is an example of austere seclusion: the gymnasiums, dormitories, and canteens are surrounded by a stockade jealously guarded by a caretaker who is a stickler for his prerogatives. The athletes share narrow and sparsely furnished rooms, and the endurance track is no more than a field churned up by the hooves of buffalos from the neighbouring village.

These spartan living and training conditions did not prevent Zou Shiming from shining on the world stage. The star boxer's international success prompted the State administration to devote more funds to the sport in hopes of an Olympic Gold Medal in 2008. While boxing remains dependent on State funds, other sports with higher media profiles have already gone the way of China's market economy. In a reform that is similarly decided and controlled by the administration, the two most popular sports, football and basketball, have been chosen as pioneers in the capitalisation of sport.

Initially chaotic reform: the difficulties of football

Football had to face all the initial problems of the transition with the creation of a professional championship in 1994. Implemented by state employees with little training in the rules of the market, the reform of football was accompanied by a long period of confusion that ultimately affecting the general level of the game. With unstable investment, rising costs, corruption, and the low profile of a championship that had become highly disappointing, Chinese football was the unhappy guinea-pig of fumbled reform.

The opening up of the clubs to investors had unleashed the enthusiasm of Chinese enterprises, which saw a business opportunity and a means to promote their brand image. But the increase in funds made available to Chinese football sparked a rapid rise in salaries paid to trainers and players, for which club owners were not always prepared. According to a study published by the magazine *Caijing* in 2000, the 14 clubs in the First Division at that time earned an average of less than 20 million RMB per season, while expenses averaged 30 to 70 million RMB per year. Confronted with irremediable losses, enterprises withdrew from the game one after another, and clubs changed hands sometimes even in mid-season. In the first ten years of the Championship, all 22 teams in Jia A (the equivalent of the First Division) changed names at least once. The record probably goes to the Liaoning club, which had been "king of the trophies" before the professional championship began: between 1999 and 2004 the club was renamed 11 times.

The privatisation of football also led to an administrative shambles at the outset. Ill-trained in the rules of the market and preoccupied above all with protecting their prerogatives, the government authorities had great difficulty opening up the game to private marketing. At its creation in 1994, the commercial exploitation of the Chinese championship was headed by the international group IMG, which specialises in sports marketing. But the arrival of the Chinese Super League, and problems between the Chinese Football Association (CFA) and IMG, led the CFA to transfer commercial exploitation of the League to the Chinese Football Development Corporation. This commercial entity, specially set up in 2002, issued directly from the CFA, allowing the State administration to retake control of the championship and impose financial goals. Modes of fundraising were also

5. Interview in Beijing in September 2005.

6. Report from the National Training Center in Guizhou, from 17 to 20 October 2005.

Yao Ming
© AFP

imposed by the CFA, and were often excessively constraining for sponsors, who saw their return on investment curbed. To these structural difficulties, resulting from confusing regulations ill-suited to the needs of the market, were added several scandals linked to the championship. The new financial stakes in football generated far-reaching corruption: match fixing, illegal betting, and the bribing of players or referees to influence the results of competitions (as in the so-called "Black Whistles" scandal) quickly tarnished the image of the championship. Enterprises that had invested in clubs or sponsored the championship found their names associated with the biggest sports scandal in contemporary China. Probably the most representative experience of the hazards of this market was that of PepsiCo Inc.⁽⁷⁾ In 1999 the company signed a five-year sponsorship contract with the CFA. The contract called for the broadcasting of 30 matches per season on CCTV, during which the Pepsi logo was supposed to be prominently visible. However, national television ultimately broadcasted far fewer matches than had been agreed during the 2001 season, and broadcasted no matches at all at the beginning of the 2002 season. PepsiCo broke off its contract with the CFA at the end of 2002, two years before its legal expiration date.

The situation of football continued to deteriorate to the point where an official document of the Commission of Regulation and Administration of State Capital, revealed by the Guangdong media at the beginning of 2004, advised State enterprises not to invest in football clubs.⁽⁸⁾ Despite denials by the CFA and the Regulation Commission, the article revealed fundamental problems in Chinese football: the occasionally chaotic regulations of the CFA and the Bureau of Sports, the broadcast monopoly held by CCTV, and the powerful commercial constraints on the Chinese clubs made investment in them extremely risky.

An administration in search of money

This somewhat shaky start did not prevent the sports administration from continuing on the path of reform, with sports marketing emerging as the only way to adequately finance clubs and championships and thus high-level sport as a whole. Along with its role as legislator and organiser of the professional sports sector, the administration set out to develop commercial events. "China tends to choose sports that are popular abroad in order to attract international sponsors,"⁽⁹⁾ explains Mei Wong, assistant director general of China Sports Industry International, the commercial section



of the sports administration. "The main sporting events of the year — Formula 1, the NBA, and the tennis championship — all have high commercial potential. The main objective is to make money."

According to government statistics, Formula 1 racing generated profits of 2 billion RMB for the city of Shanghai (in the hotel, real estate, tourism, and advertising sectors) in 2004. These wide-ranging economic benefits far exceed the profitability of the track itself, which has trouble drawing crowds. Similarly, the Shanghai Masters and the Beijing Tennis Championship were designed to fill the tills of the Tennis Federation and the Sports Administration. These funds are then reinvested in the training of athletes and the development of sports infrastructure. Management of sponsors and marketing that the federation does not outsource is done in-house, but is often considered of secondary importance. "In table tennis, for example, the federation manages the rights itself. Apart from football and basketball, most sports concentrate on winning medals. They have State funding for that,"⁽¹⁰⁾ notes Paul Wong, director of Infront China, an international sports marketing agency.

It is therefore the most popular sports that have been entrusted with generating cashflow for the general administration, and the federations have not hesitated to call on outside experts to facilitate their entry into the market. The reform of basketball began a year after that of football, and

7. *Business Week*, 15 September 2003.

8. "SASAC blocks Chinese soccer", *Zuqiu* (Soccer), 7 January 2004.

9. Interview in Beijing, 14 December 2004.

10. Interview in Beijing, 21 February 2008.

ran into the same initial problems, in particular a premature end to the League championship when sponsors withdrew. The Chinese Basketball Association (CBA), however, proceeded to follow marketing logic and accept market orientation, and is now an example of successful reform on both the commercial and sporting level.

In 2005, the commercial arm of the Basketball Federation (CBA Marketing) set up a joint venture with Infront, an entity that controls all the rights of the Basketball League, other than the names of the clubs and income from matches, as well as the rights of the national teams. The amount invested by Infront to acquire these rights is, of course, confidential. "We offered the CBA a new concept: we are more than just a bank, we take part in the organisation of sporting events, including stadium management," Paul Wong explains. "It is an efficient division of labour: the CBA concentrates on the performance of the players, and we focus on the promotion of basketball."

The strategy seems to be paying off, as viewing figures more than doubled from 200 million spectators in 2006 to 420 million in 2007,⁽¹¹⁾ and sponsorship has experienced similar growth. Basketball is now very popular, and has attracted the famous American NBA. In January 2008, a joint venture called NBA China, with an initial investment of \$253 million, was set up with Chinese enterprises.⁽¹²⁾ Its objective is to manage the NBA's merchandising, marketing, and TV rights in China. It was already a successful brand in 2006, with the NBA site receiving 10 million visitors and the NBA earning \$50 million in broadcasting rights, merchandise, and sponsoring. This may seem modest in comparison with the NBA's \$3.5 billion turnover in the United States, but is likely to rise quickly with the setting up of a special department⁽¹³⁾.

Yao Ming and the birth of the Star System

Apart from structural reform initiated by the administration, the other decisive factor in the development of the sports market comes from the athletes themselves: thanks to their emergence on the international scene, Chinese athletes are now seen as heroes in their own country. Basketball is once again at the cutting edge, with the relentless mediatization of Yao Ming's performances in the NBA. Other athletes, such as Liu Xiang (Gold Medallist in the 110 meter hurdles in Athens and world record holder) and to a lesser extent the diver Tian Liang (winner of several Olympic medals and world champion), female volleyballers, table tennis players,

and some footballers have taken advantage of the popular infatuation with successful sportsmen.

The emergence of these stars of the halls and stadiums has made it possible for China to enter into the virtuous circle of sport: the more international success an athlete accumulates, the more sponsorship he attracts. This income then makes it possible for the federation and the general administration to finance new infrastructures and to hire top trainers, who train new talent ready to shine in their turn in world competition. This sports "star system" is very new to China: when he played in Shanghai, the basketballer Yao Ming, despite his local fame, had no advertising contracts. Chinese administrators at that time preferred TV and movie starlets to the tall beanpole in a tight shirt. It was not until Yao Ming emerged in the NBA that sponsors realised his commercial potential.

Now he is followed by a team of advisers from the University of Chicago, to whom the promotion of Yao Ming is a subject of research in itself. The basketballer, who had never signed an advertising contract during the whole of his professional career in China, has become the representative of a number of international brands. He has appeared in a TV spot for Apple computers with Verne Troyer; he has signed contracts with Visa International, Nike (which supplies his equipment), Sorrent Inc. (which is developing video games based on the Yao Ming character), China United Telecom, and McDonalds. The exact amount of this advertising revenue is a closely guarded secret, but unofficial figures have emerged: 40 million RMB over two years from China United Telecom, \$700,000 a year from Sorrent and Apple, a seven-digit figure from Nike. Added to his contract with the Houston Rockets, these sums enable the basketballer to earn around \$6 million per year. By comparison, the female basketballers on the Chinese national team are paid between 6,000 and 8,000 RMB a month⁽¹⁴⁾ (to which are added a few bonuses).

This financial windfall does not benefit only the NBA's Chinese Giant; the general administration, the federation, and the player's original club all take a percentage. In April 2002, the President of the CBA announced new regulations requiring Chinese players abroad to pay 30 percent of their earnings to the CBA, 10 percent to the government of their city or province, and 10 percent to the general sports admin-

11. Interview with Paul Wong, 21 February 2008.

12. Associated Press report, 14 January 2008.

13. *Business Week*, 23 October 2007.

14. Interview with Gaëtan Le Brigant, the French trainer of the Chinese women's basketball team, Beijing, November 2007.

istration. This is in addition to the \$350,000 the Houston Rockets already had to pay to “rent” Yao Ming from China. No athlete escapes the rule, although the percentages paid are usually kept secret.

This system is apparently well accepted by the athletes, who recognise, at least on the record, the good care the State has taken of them during their years of training. “I’ve done ads for Nike and Coca Cola, and some of the money was paid to my federation and to the sports administration. That’s only natural, because the State invested in me for years. Thanks to the money, they can develop other things,”⁽¹⁵⁾ explained Liu Xiang. There is only one discordant note in all this harmony: “I have to give part of my commercial income to the federation, but I cannot say how much. It’s a difficult question to talk about, it’s one of those subjects that are not very official,”⁽¹⁶⁾ said the star diver Tian Liang reluctantly. The world champion and Olympic gold Medallist had just been excluded from the national team, officially for having put his commercial activities before his training. Unofficially there is said to have been disagreement over the sums to be paid over, and the administration preferred to do without a medal-winning athlete rather than to tolerate dissension in the ranks.

The status of sportsmen: the federations play for money

The example of Tian Liang reveals the constraints that continue to hamper the development of the sports market in China. “The sports industry is in transition: privatisation has begun, but State control persists. There is a gap between what investors would like to do and what the government is ready to do,” notes Mei Wong. Structural reforms have been launched, but they have not followed the logic of privatisation to the end. The status of athletes is an example. “Sportsmen belong to the government. Contract negotiations take place not with the sportsmen but with their federations,”⁽¹⁷⁾ explains Jérôme de Goyon, Business Director of S2M, a sports marketing company that has selectively sought to represent athletes. “There are no agents in China; it is the federation officials who carry out that function.” These officials are apparently very attached to their prerogatives, as Tian Liang emphasised: “I have to get the agreement of the swimming federation in order to hire an individual agent.” While the federations want to hang on to their monopoly, they are not trained for this new role. Liu Xiang, for example, found himself featured in an advertising campaign for Baisha, a Chinese brand of cigarettes. Against the advice of

Liu Xiang’s family, the campaign had been approved by the athletics federation, but was finally forbidden by the Ministry of Industry.

A survey of bureau administrators in various sports carried out in 2000 revealed that most of them did not understand what purpose agents served and could not see the point of organising commercial sports events.⁽¹⁸⁾ “If you want to set up an event, you don’t deal with the federations because they aren’t interested. They want only professional events,” confirms Jérôme deGoyon. Sports officials in China often lack economic training in the rules of this developing market: “Sport is political, and is run by people who don’t understand the sports business,”⁽¹⁹⁾ concludes Pierre Justo, Director of TNS Sport, a sport and media research center. The few Chinese businessmen who have ventured into the sector are often similarly ignorant of the peculiar logic of sports.

More recently, a few specialised training programmes in sports management have been set up:⁽²⁰⁾ in 2005 the Beijing Sports University set up an MBA in partnership with Ohio University; the Qinghua Institute of Management has offered a similar programme with Sidney Technical University since 2003; and Peking University and Shanghai’s Fudan University have set up specialised MBAs. However, these programmes are still expensive (29,800 RMB a year at the Sports University, 160,000 RMB for two years at Fudan), limiting the number of students who can take advantage of them, and career opportunities remain uncertain: the administration recruits many of the young graduates who find their options limited, while private agents have trouble establishing themselves in what is not yet a real market.

Yet, the competence of officials in the sports bureaus and federations, and their familiarity with the rules of the market, are key elements in the development of the sports economy in China. “The men at the head of the federations change every four or five years, and the well-being of the federations is closely linked to their personalities,” notes Paul Wong. He has had occasion to compare the CBA with the CFA, with which Infront also holds rights on the national team. “The directors of the CBA are very open; they

15. Interview in Beijing, 17 December 2004.

16. Interview in Beijing, 12 October 2005.

17. Interview in Beijing, 22 February 2008.

18. Xudoo.com, 18 June 2007.

19. Interview in Beijing, 26 February 2008.

20. *Zhongguo Tiyu Rexian*, 21 November 2007.

have a real think tank behind them. At the CFA they concentrate too much on getting their teams to qualify for the World Cup and the Olympics. We don't have very good relations with them; their management style is very different from that of the CBA. Our experts find it very difficult to talk to them." Administrative control over sport thus remains an obstacle to the development of a market.

Broadcast monopolies and volatile sponsors: an economy in its infancy

Another constraint is unique to China: the virtual monopoly of CCTV, the national television company, in sports broadcasting. CCTV5 is the only sports channel with national coverage for its programmes, and thus dominates the multitude of local sports channels. "Those who hold the rights to international events think they must be broadcast in China, because you can reach a big audience that way. It gives them visibility and it's good for their sponsors," Pierre Justo explains. "This means the Chinese stations don't pay much for the rights, because the advertisers are prepared to supply their programmes for nothing. The initiative doesn't come from the channels." CCTV5 is thus in a strong position when it comes to negotiating broadcasts of matches, whether live or pre-recorded. "We are desperate for a second national sports channel," laments Paul Wong.

At the moment, CCTV uses its virtual monopoly to pay ridiculously low broadcasting rights. While TV rights are one of the main sources of income for clubs and championships in Europe and the US, their contribution remains negligible in China. Between 1999 and 2001, the national station paid only 11 million RMB for the 78 matches in the national championship, barely 2 percent of the revenues of the clubs involved. And this was already relatively favourable, since CCTV had agreed to pay for the rights. Such is not always the case, as Paul Wong confides: "CCTV pays for the rights for the basketball league, but the sums are very small. For matches with the national team, if Yao Ming is not playing, we have sometimes had to pay CCTV up to 200,000 RMB for them to be broadcast. CCTV can make a lot of money with us!"

Marketing companies therefore have had to come up with bypass strategies, and have fallen back on the new communication technologies of the Internet and mobile phones. Sports sites on the Internet are increasing and enjoy massive and steadily growing traffic. Instant messaging services have also been set up to provide Yao Ming's fans with real-time

information about his NBA performances. New markets are thus appearing to suit the local situation.

However, China's sports economy remains unique, and its rules are still poorly understood by Chinese investors. "The sponsoring of sports events has to be long-term, and local enterprises have difficulty understanding this," notes Jérôme de Goyon. "Many have been disappointed because they expected quick returns. They have withdrawn from their initial projects and are cautious about committing themselves again."

Marketing sometimes also suffers from the relatively low prestige of local championships, particularly in football. Some Chinese enterprises therefore prefer to invest in foreign championships, which have a large following among Chinese fans. In 2002, the mobile phone company Kejian signed a sponsorship contract for \$3.2 million over two years with England's premier football club Everton, which with the transfer of the Chinese stars Li Weifeng and Li Tie guaranteed Kejian an enormous window of advertising in China. The featuring of the English championship in China's sports lottery had already provided it with a regular audience, and Chinese fans are now able to follow live coverage of all Everton matches, and see the logo of a Chinese enterprise on the shirts of the English players. "It was a great idea. In terms of brand recognition, in two years Kejian has gone from number 26 to number 2 among Chinese mobile phone brands," notes Pierre Justo. Chinese enterprises such as Li Ning, Mengniu, and Haier also have partnerships with the NBA, and every match is followed live by an average of 20 million fans despite the early morning broadcast time.

These funds continue to elude the Chinese sports system, which has failed to retain investors who want to be associated with quality championships. The quest for a positive public image is not the only reason for local enterprises in China to invest in sport, however. There is also a political incentive, unique to China, which distorts the rules of the market. "Sponsorship in China is an opportunity for brand names to get closer to the authorities and to engage in lobbying,"⁽²¹⁾ explains Nathalie Bastianelli, director of Havas Sport in China. "The Hyundai company, which was given a contract to replace Beijing's 60,000 taxis, became the sponsor of the capital's football club."⁽²²⁾ Other enterprises are obliged to become sponsors: "State enterprises sometimes don't have

21. Interview in Beijing, 18 February 2008.

22. In March 2003, Beijing Hyundai Company bought the rights to the name of the Beijing football club, until then known as Beijing Guo'an. The company paid 118 million RMB to hold the rights for three years. Source: Beijing Hyundai website.

any choice. Sinopec is a sponsor of the games, but does nothing to exploit it," notes Jérôme de Goyon. Investment decisions, often imposed by the general administration, are not always based on economic rationales. The construction of stadiums for prestigious events such as the national Games leads to massive outlays, but the buildings are seldom put to full use afterwards. The magnificent sports infrastructure in Nanjing, specially designed for the national Games in 2005 at a cost of \$285 million, remains forlornly empty in a deserted suburb of the city.

Unclear or excessively constraining regulations on sponsorship, outlays and frameworks for action imposed by the administration without any consideration of economics, and the lack of experience of many players combine to make sports an immature and relatively risky sector in China. The organisation of the 2008 Olympics, which was entrusted to China in July 2001, was expected to considerably accelerate the development of a genuine local sports market. In order to finance the games, China would not be able rely on State funds, and would therefore have to open up to private investment. The Beijing Organising Committee (BOCOG)

quickly demonstrated that it understood perfectly how to lure international sponsors with the prospect of access to a dream market of 1.3 billion consumers. The marketing programme of the Beijing Olympics, set up well in advance and with funding that was the envy of all past Olympic host cities, proved to be an unparalleled success.

But once again Chinese specificity made itself evident. Whereas the regulations of the games guarantee a single sponsor per sector of activity, the Beijing Olympics will feature the logos of three different brands of beer. The Chinese sponsors, tied to BOCOG and thus restricted to Chinese territory, have had to spend more to ensure their status than the ICO sponsors, who can unfurl advertising campaigns featuring the Olympic logo all over the world. During the Olympics, the Beijing government plans to organise cultural activities open to all sponsors, including those who are not sponsoring the Olympics. China has invented its very own marketing regulations in the Olympics, as elsewhere, and remains serenely in control of its prerogatives in the field of sport. •

• **Translated by Michael Black**