

# **An organisational life cycle approach to exploring elite sport legacy of Summer Olympic host nations: The cases of China (Beijing 2008) and Australia (Sydney 2000)**

This paper investigates the elite sport legacies of hosting the Summer Olympics for China (Beijing 2008) and Australia (Sydney 2000) respectively. While the classic organisational life cycle approach provides the conceptual framework, a retroductive research strategy is applied. Both the China and Australian cases sourced their data from official publications, academic research, and documents from various government departments and organisations. Additional China data was drawn from three semi-structured interviews with key Chinese stakeholders. The findings suggest that there is clear evidence of planning and development (to various degrees) of Olympic elite sport legacies for both cases. China and Australia experience a similar pattern of elite sport legacy life cycle which features four phases: Start-up, growth, maintenance, and decline. Both countries share many similarities in the key policy and management factors attributable to the development of elite sport legacy at each stage. A key implication of this study is to suggest that an increasing awareness of the sequential characters of elite sport legacy life stages and the policy and management factors in each stage affecting performance at the Olympics would help Olympic host countries maximise their elite sport legacy potential by strategically planning and promptly reacting to any potential decline.

Keywords: elite sport, legacy, Olympic Games, life cycle, China, Australia

## **Introduction**

There is considerable research interest in the relationship between the Olympics and the generation of any kind of legacy within the host community. Many authors give primacy to economic impacts,<sup>1-4</sup> whilst others concern themselves with the social, urban, environmental, and political impacts of the Games.<sup>5-8</sup> Particularly, debates surrounding the impact on and the legacy in the development of sport of the Olympics receive increasing attention.<sup>9-12</sup> According to a systematic review of the literature on the subject of the Olympic Games legacies,<sup>13</sup> sport-related

studies often focus on the legacy of *participation* (see two systematic reviews on examining health and sport participation impact of mega sporting events below),<sup>14, 15</sup> rather than *elite sport* legacy. Whilst several studies have directed their attention to analysing elite sport policy changes as a result of hosting the Olympic,<sup>16-18</sup> their analyses have often treated policy as a single factor for analysing changes, neglecting other associated organisational and managerial factors (e.g. planning, decision-making and configuration). Moreover, in a broad literature of elite sport studies,<sup>19-22</sup> the research to date has not yet deemed elite sport as a legacy dimension (of which the concept is similar to economic legacy, social legacy or urban legacy of the Games) for investigation. This study seeks to address these gaps.

In this paper, the evidence and pattern of elite sport legacy of hosting the Summer Olympic Games are explored from a case study of China, and then this pattern is applied to test the Australian experience. Specifically, the paper addresses the following questions: 1) Is there evidence of the existence or emergence of elite sport legacy planning and development as a result of hosting of the Olympics in the two countries? 2) If such evidence exists, what are the organisation and management factors that contribute to the development of such legacy? 3) Is the evidence and pattern of elite sport legacy identified in the case of China, applicable to Australia and to what extent applicable? A reverse chronological structure was adopted because of the relatively more substantial document and interview data collected for China and the difficulty of gathering interview data for Australia. An additional rationale for directing more research attention to the case of China was because of China's relatively heavier emphasis on elite sport and on Olympic gold medal success traditionally – as noted by Xu, China has long had an 'obsession' with the Olympics.<sup>23</sup> After China won the bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in 2001, the Chinese Government and the General Administration of Sport of China

(GAS) explicitly indicated that a key policy objective of staging the 2008 Olympics was to improve China's Olympic *gold* medal performance and to create an elite sport *legacy*.<sup>24</sup> Such an assertion to was perhaps the first time that the concept of 'elite sport legacy' was explicitly used in a hosting nation's strategy. This study was therefore prompted by the claims to identify and explain the elite sport legacy (if any) as a result of hosting an Olympics.

## **Literature review**

### ***Olympic legacy***

The concept of legacy is often conflated with words such as impact, effect and benefits. For example, the IOC<sup>25</sup> suggests that Olympic legacies are 'lasting benefits which can considerably change a community, its impact and its infrastructure ... covering not only sport but also social, economic, environmental and urban gains'. A widely-used definition of legacy, emphasising the change of structure, is provided by Preuss as 'irrespective of the time of production and space, legacy is all planned and unplanned, positive and negative, tangible and intangible structures created for and by a sport event that remain longer than the event itself'.<sup>26</sup> Legacies can therefore be both planned and unplanned, positive (e.g. economic boosts, urban and environmental transformation) and negative (e.g. high opportunity costs, property rental shortages, resident relocations), and both tangible (e.g. new sport structures and traffic infrastructure) and intangible (e.g. building business networks, 'feel good' factors, cultural ideas, and enhancing destination image).

Cashman also distinguishes the Olympic legacies into six general categories, including sport, economics, infrastructure, information and education, public life, politics and culture, and symbols, memory and history.<sup>27</sup> When defining the meaning of 'legacy', J. R. Gold and M. M. Gold highlight the research complexity underlying the examination of the legacy process and point out the

long time span that ‘legacies’ stretch from the very beginning of the preparation of the bid to a long time after the Games completed.<sup>28</sup> Measuring legacy of the Olympics is also challenging in terms of assessing the net legacy over time.<sup>29</sup> More recently, Preuss proposes a framework for identifying the legacies of a sports mega event, suggesting that the definition of legacy consists of six fundamental elements: Time, new initiatives, value, tangibility, space, and intention;<sup>30</sup> and to measure the legacies of the event, one should take into account what, who, how and when of legacy over a longer period.

### ***Sport legacy***

The concept of sport legacy is not new, and its importance has been highlighted in the IOC’s international symposium – the legacy of the Olympic Games (1984-2000) – as ‘the first strand of Olympism and is the core business of the Olympic festival’<sup>31</sup>. However, such a legacy aspect has not been seriously investigated that, as asserted by Cashman,<sup>32</sup> is perhaps because ‘a legacy of sport seems to rate less than economic legacy’. Until more recently, a considerable amount of literature has been published in relation to the topic focusing on the themes of sport participation, health and physical activity-related impacts.<sup>33, 34</sup> For example, by reviewing the data from Australian Bureau of Statistics, Veal and Toohey’s<sup>35</sup> study identify an increase in sports participation following the Sydney 2000 Games, although they acknowledge that such results were likely prompted by either (or both) the Olympic effect or the changes in survey design. In the case of the London 2012 Olympic Games, Girginov and Hills<sup>36</sup> conclude that to achieve sustainable sport participation legacy requires a national policy and long-term investment strategy. As concluded by two systematic reviews<sup>37</sup> of the topic in question, there is very little academic evidence to confirm the causal link between elite sporting success and general population level participation.

Some literature, to varying degrees, allude to or indirectly involve the topic of elite sport legacy. For example, Wilson<sup>38</sup> investigates the sports infrastructure legacy of the Los Angeles

1984 and identifies that ‘to develop elite athletes who would win Olympic medals’ was an explicit goal established by the United States Olympic Committee prior to the 1984 Games. Certain proportion of the substantial surplus of Los Angeles 1984 was distributed to facility establishment or refurbishment, which also benefited elite athlete training and competitions.<sup>39</sup> Sotiriadou and Shilbury<sup>40</sup> examine how elite athlete development programme of 35 national sports organisations in Australia evolved before and after Sydney 2000. Although the research *per se* did not focus on elite sport legacy of hosting the 2000 Olympic Games, the changes prompted by Sydney 2000 was clearly discernible. Contreras and Corvalan<sup>41</sup> statistically examine the evidence of elite sport performance of Summer Olympic ghosting nations in particular in the aftermath of the home Games between 1948 and 2012. They found that host nations’ medal performance deteriorates soon after their respective home Games, and hence concluded that there is no elite sport legacy. Yet, their research was purely predicated on statistics, while policy and management factors and interventions were not considered. Nevertheless, this research proffered an important suggestion for future research regarding the transition mechanism of the host nations.

More specifically, in the context of China, a group of social scientists provide important insights into China’s political context and administrative structure of elite sport system,<sup>42, 43</sup> as well as its relationship with Olympic movement in general and the Beijing 2008 Olympics in particular.<sup>44-46</sup> Focusing on elite sport policy development before the Olympics, Fan, Wu and Xiong<sup>47</sup> examined how Chinese elite sport system was transformed in order to prepare for winning more gold medals in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Hu<sup>48</sup> investigates the development of Chinese elite sport policy after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and concludes that, in the post-2008 era, elite sport performance was no longer to be regarded as the only or

sufficient means for defining Chinese sport success, rather, other accounts concerning civil-society-based development of sport and the development of sport industries are also important elements for becoming a world sports power. Such findings are consistent with Tan's<sup>49</sup> analysis of the transformation of China's national fitness policy after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

Concerning the case of Australia, there are several studies examining Australia's elite sport policy development,<sup>50-52</sup> as well as some discussions on the 2000 Sydney Games' contributions to elite sport development.<sup>53-55</sup> Although the existing accounts touched on how a nation's policy was changed as a result of hosting the Olympics, they did not dedicate their attention to the investigation of specifically how elite sport legacy emerged and developed, nor did they examine how the changed policy impacted medal performances.

### ***Elite sport legacy***

To contextualise and frame elite sport legacy of the Olympics, it is important to develop a clear understanding of what an elite sport legacy is in this research. Despite the availability of various definitions of Olympic legacy noted above, the existing approaches are broad; therefore a context-specific definition of elite sport legacy is advanced, following Preuss' and IOC's legacy interpretations,<sup>56, 57</sup> as:

The effects of changed policy and strategy, structure, and management approaches to the development of Olympic elite sport, attributable to hosting the Olympic Games; these effects are *directly* evidenced by the host country's performance at the Olympics, with the changed number of gold medals won at each Olympics being as a *primary* indicator, supplemented by the changed number of medals and positions in the gold medal table.

The underlying assumption is that hosting the Olympics, as a catalyst for strategic changes and organisational reform in the elite sport system of the host country will lead to the emergence and development of elite sport legacies. It is necessary to clarify that this strategic

priority change may result in not only increase, but also decrease, in the number of Olympic medals won by any former host nations in the post-hosting era. Thus, the effect of policy changes, i.e. elite sport legacy of hosting an Olympic Game, could be both positive and negative. Equally importantly, the effects here refer to elite sport development at the general level, while the degree and impact of this legacy tend to vary considerably according to each specific sport/discipline, which is not discussed in detail in this paper, because of the page limit. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that other aspects (e.g. the number of elite sporting facilities and elite sport funding) can, to varying degrees, reflect the change of elite sport legacy; however, given the exploratory nature of this study, Olympic (gold) medal performance changes are selected as the primary two indicators that, combined, can largely reflect the effectiveness and sustainability of elite sport legacies created (if any), coupled with a careful analysis to identify if these changes were propelled by the nation's successful bid. What is required next is to conduct further research that integrates a set of secondary indicators (e.g. funding and elite sport infrastructure) within the research framework to develop a more comprehensive understanding of elite sport legacy.

### **Conceptual framework**

Within the research examining elite sport development, the most noteworthy conceptual framework is the 'Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success' (SPLISS) model proposed and developed by De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg and Shibli.<sup>58</sup> The SPLISS model offers a meso-level framework based on international comparison with nine pillars as the benchmarks of elite sport policy factors, including financial support, participation in sport, scientific research, talent identification and development system, athletic and post career support, integrated approach to policy development, international competition, and training

facilities. Although the SPLISS model provides a comprehensive framework for identifying the factors contributing to international success, the model was initiated, adapted and subsequently widely employed in Western countries which are different in many aspects (e.g. political and governance system) to the Chinese context that this research focuses on. In addition, it is not sufficiently nuanced enough to incorporate the host nation effect in context-specific ways<sup>59</sup> because no detailed policy approaches to generate and maintain this effect were mentioned, identified or analysed. Therefore, the mainstream management theory, and the organisational life cycle approach take centre stage in this research

Research in organisational life cycle has been in vogue for several decades.<sup>60-63</sup> As summarised by Scott,<sup>64</sup> the basic assumption in any life cycle model is that regularities occur in the process of development, which can be segmented into distinct stages. Each stage is different because its emphasis and operating contexts vary,<sup>65</sup> and organisational strategies and structures change as stages change.<sup>66</sup> Although different models contain varying numbers of life cycle stages, there is a general consensus on the camel-back-shaped trend.<sup>67-70</sup>

Despite the criticism on life cycle framework for being oversimplified and the doubts raised regarding its validity,<sup>71-73</sup> this model is relevant to elite sport legacies because its various stages represent a contingency or driving force to which appropriate organisational responses can correspond.<sup>74</sup> Bonn and Pettigrew's<sup>75</sup> organisational life cycle model is adopted in this study. Bonn and Pettigrew's model has thus far largely been applied in the field of management and organisation<sup>76-78</sup> and is particularly useful because it not only offers a framework to examine the development of organisations over time, but also acknowledges the dynamic and changing nature of organisations.<sup>79</sup> As further suggested by Bonn and Pettigrew, dominant problems in different life cycle stages change because of this dynamic process; and those different life cycle stages



emerge from specific historical, organisational and environmental contexts.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, by applying Bonn and Pettigrew's framework, the concept of life cycle stages can be interpreted as 'a set of patterns which emerges from a specific historical, organisational and environmental context that logically follows an earlier set, but is not predetermined by that set'.<sup>81</sup> The organisational life cycle model thus directs the identification of evidence supporting an elite sport legacy in this study, and the effects of various policy and management changes of a key organisation on the extent and sustainability of this legacy. The model also offers a framework for detailed analysis of the priorities and focuses, structure and strategies, contexts, and decision-making *modus operandi* of relevant organisations.

Bonn and Pettigrew's life cycle model, incorporating the stages of *start-up*, *growth*, *mature* and *decline*,<sup>82</sup> is adapted for this study to align with the peculiarities of elite sport and social contexts. The turning point of each stage is identified based on a country's gold medal performances at the Olympics. There are two adapted terms of the stages. First, the nature of the *start-up* stage for elite sport performance is different from those in traditional life cycle models (i.e. the start of an organisation). In this research, the *start-up* stage refers to a nation's initiation of a new round of elite sport development process after winning the Olympic hosting right. Second, the stage of *mature* is replaced with *maintenance*. Most nations achieve their peak regarding gold medal performance and government investment in elite sport at the home Olympics, while a decrease, to varying degrees, in gold medal performance in the aftermath of the home Olympics is observed in the vast majority of cases for Summer Olympic host nations. Thus, compared with 'mature', the term 'maintenance' is more compatible in this context of elite sport. The other two terms (i.e. growth and decline) remain the same. Consistent with the life cycle model's focus on organisations, sports governing bodies of China and Australia, most

notably the GAS and the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) are main objects for study. In the case of China, elite sport is largely controlled and managed by the GAS, a government department directly affiliated to the State Council.<sup>83</sup> It governs all sports-related issues in China at the national level, and is regarded as the engine of China's elite sport development and Olympic medal success.<sup>84</sup> For Australia, the ASC, as the 'Australian Government's leading sport agency that develops, supports and invests in sport at all levels',<sup>85</sup> is the most powerful organisation in the Australian elite sport system. Therefore, this study centres on the GAS and ASC as the specific organisations within the organisational life cycle for identifying elite sport legacy for China and Australia respectively.

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

Guided by the retroductive research strategy,<sup>86, 87</sup> the study starts with the identification of the organisational and management factors that are postulated in attempt to explain the change of China's elite performance at the Olympics since the acquisition of the 2008 Games' hosting right. A pattern of elite sport legacy is subsequently constructed and efforts have been made to explore whether and to what extent a similar pattern is identifiable in the case of Australia.

China and Australia are suitable cases for a number of reasons. First, China and Australia both hosted the Summer Olympic Games recently (i.e. Beijing 2008 and Sydney 2000 respectively). Second, the legacy of the Olympics debate only emerged from the early 2000s,<sup>88,89</sup> meaning that these two Olympics were among the first to be conducted in the legacy era. Third, the selected two countries also represent two distinct cases ('eastern' and 'western') whereby the nature, political system, and priority of the government are notably different. Fourth, both China

and Australia are major elite sport nations on the Summer Olympic stage with a reasonably strong competitiveness and great medal success. This is different from Greece, the 2004 host nation. Fifth, both nations have government agencies/departments responsible for funding and developing policy for elite sport. These are the GAS and ASC respectively. Last, researchers can access relevant data because of their language proficiency in English and Chinese. While the UK is another major sports nation and recent Olympic host nation, it tends to be early to assess its post-home Olympic sustainability because there has been only one edition after London 2012, while China and Australia's major decline took place at least eight years after their respective home Olympics (12 years in Australia's case). Therefore, a presentation of a relatively fuller cycle of the UK is impossible and the UK is not included in this research, but is suggested for future research.

### ***Data collection***

#### *China*

As argued by J. R. Gold and M. M. Gold,<sup>90</sup> the process of legacy identification requires a long-time span, starting from when hosting rights were awarded, through to the Olympic Games held in the years after the home Olympics. This lengthy time span encourages the use of archival and other secondary data, including government policy and strategies, management documents and other relevant political, academic, and media commentary and interpretation. GAS' policy documents therefore provided the most important sources of data. These documents were complemented by published works of leading sports researchers in China and online information of influential domestic media such as Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television. The details of key documents and materials reviewed are provided in Appendix 1. The print and online documents used are official documents from the state or from private sources (namely

leading scholars of elite sport study in China who maintain close relationships with sports governing bodies, and the most influential media in China), according to Bryman's categorisation of documents as sources of data.<sup>91</sup> It is noteworthy that the vast majority of these documents were written in Chinese, with a small number of academic publications in English.

In addition, three in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to supplement the data. Purposive sampling approach identified potential interviewees. Interviewees included a leading sport researcher/policy-making consultant of GAS, two previous (retired) department heads of GAS who were key policy makers until the London Olympiad (see Appendix 2). It is worth clarifying that one interviewee who spent most of his time steering basketball in China, used to serve various departments of GAS including elite sport-related organisations, and was heavily involved in the decision making of elite sport development and Olympic strategy. Another interviewee was the former head of the Sports Culture Department, which is responsible for the summary and storage of sport including elite sport documents and archives in China. Retired interviewees provided rich insight into elite sport development in particular in the lead-up to Beijing 2008 and four years after Beijing 2008. More recent data were mainly collected from official and media documents.

These interviews were conducted in 2013, ranging in duration from 50 minutes to two hours as part of a wider study examining elite sport development in China. All the interviews were digitally recorded and conducted in Chinese, asking questions to explore any evidence of elite sport legacy planning and development, ranging from GAS' agenda, organisational structure, operating contexts (including wider political, economic and cultural environment), human resource management, before and after the 2008 Games, to the significance of Olympic medal success and detailed strategies in terms of coaching, athletes, training, sciences,

competitions and international rivalry. Copies of interview transcripts were provided to interviewees for verification and correction. To ensure linguistic consistency, back translation was then carried out before interview data were subjected to formal coding and analysis.

### *Australia*

The sources of secondary data for Australia included the ASC, the Australian Government and its various departments with at least partial responsibility for sport in Australia (e.g. Department for the Arts, Sport, the Environment and Territories, Department for the Environment, Sport and Territories), Australian Institute of Sport (AIS), and published academic works done by researchers studying elite sport policy in Australia (see Appendix 1). These sources covered key documents issued by key government departments and national sports governing bodies in Australia.

Given the changes of political leadership at both the political and organisational level during the relevant timeframe (i.e. 1993-2016), identifying potential interviewees for qualitative data collection was problematic. However, the absence of interview data was not detrimental because a) the secondary data seems to provide substantial information, with no further ‘variability’ to the ASC’s strategy,<sup>92</sup> and b) China is the focus *vis-à-vis* Australia. The analyses of China and Australia are somewhat unbalanced in this research, because of the nature of this paper to extract and develop an elite sport legacy stages model from the more in-depth case study of China, and then test the applicability of this China-derived model to Australia.

### *Data analysis*

Thematic analysis was applied to analyse both document and interview data collected and NVivo 10 was deployed. The process began with the transcription of data and a careful first-round

reading. Prior to data coding, the Chinese material was translated into English. Themes were specified as per Ryan and Bernard's suggestions,<sup>93</sup> including the elements of research questions, repetitions, indigenous typologies or categories, metaphors and analogies, transitions: Similarities and differences, and theory-related material underpinned by the theoretical framework selected. Five nodes with various detailed themes were identified based on an initial clustering of both Chinese and Australian data. These include (1) Nations: Australia and China; (2) Organisations: ASC, GAS, others in Australia and others in China; (3) Stages: Start-up, growth, maintenance, and decline; (4) Issues at each stage: Policy focus, operating contexts, organisational structure, and human resource management; and (5) Detailed management approaches: Start-up, growth, maintenance, and decline. Data were reread and positioned into thematic categories, following which patterns and explanations in the themes were probed to identify any general and causal relationship between different themes (for example, causal relationship between stages, nations, and elements and approaches at each stage). The data analysis process ends with 'selective' coding, which aimed to extract explanations of certain concepts and of contradictory and confirmatory information.

## **Findings – China**

In the following sections, the discussion is structured according to the life cycle framework, detailing key characteristics for each stage in relation to elite sport legacy development during the period 2001-2016.

### ***China's medal performance pattern***

A brief sketch of China's medal performance at the Olympics in the past 20 years indicates that China experienced significant improvement in the run-up to the 2008 Games, achieved its best-

ever performance at the home event, before sliding down gradually – a cyclical pattern that resonates strongly with the concept of the organisational life cycle (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 near here]

#### *Start-up (2001-2004)*

China's case is one of much closer links with strategic planning against the background of the consistent political salience of elite sport success. A senior official of GAS explained:

In comparison to many other areas which are also heavily invested by government (for example, science and film), elite sport is one of the very few areas in which we can be confident enough to argue that China is one of the most successful in the world against a universal rather than self-defined criterion and this enhanced the legitimacy and political 'attractiveness' of elite sport success to the Central Government which has long valued international prestige and ideological superiority.<sup>94</sup>

The operating context was favourable for the development of Olympic sports and disciplines in and out of GAS in this stage. The then President, Jiang Zeming, soon expressed his congratulations on Beijing's successful bid and more importantly, guaranteed substantial policy and financial support from the CCP Central Government for Olympic preparation. In addition, China's economic take-off in the 2000s (with an average annual 0.43% increase in GDP growth between 2001-2004), the globalisation campaign, and membership of the World Trade Organisation in 2001 provided a healthy wider background for GAS to achieve the goal of (gold) medal successes at Beijing 2008.<sup>95, 96</sup>

Two long-term fundamental policy documents and two landmark projects were formulated and launched by GAS in this start-up period. They were *The Outline of the Strategic Olympic Glory Plan: 2001-2010*,<sup>97</sup> *The 2008 Olympic Glory Action Plan*,<sup>98</sup> *119 Project* (GAS restricted internal document), and *Preliminary recruitment of foreign coaches and organisation*

*of overseas training: The inception of the 'Invite In and Go Out'* (GAS restricted internal document). In particular, a comparative document analysis of the three versions of the *Olympic Glory Plans* and their respective summaries suggests that, the contents and structure of the Plan (2001-2010) were notably different from the other two plans, in which strategic targets in relation to Beijing-2008 (in terms of the projected rank of the Chinese team at Beijing 2008, in contrast to a general indication of the position at the Olympics in the other two documents) were made explicitly, and other administrative issues (rather than *operational matters* mentioned in the other two plans) were addressed clearly. According to Hu's discourse analysis<sup>99</sup> of these documents, winning the bid for the Beijing 2008 Games was portrayed as an opportunity for directing GAS' capacity for China's elite sport development.

Moreover, GAS carried out a series of actions for reconfiguration, focusing on ensuring that the mechanisms in each stage of the strategic process were right. As GAS self-summarised:

Since Beijing was awarded the right to host the 2008 Olympic Games, various Central Government organisations including government ministries and departments, have increased the number of sports system organisations and administrative positions of the national adult and reserve teams, elevated Olympic-specific training subsidies and specific investment in Olympic preparation, enhanced the national team training base system, improved elite athletes' training and living facilities and perfected their education and post-retirement arrangements and training allowance, scientific services and guarantee systems.<sup>100</sup>

Such strategic management actions are qualitatively different in the start-up stage than they are in later stages. First, it was noticeable in the case of swimming that the power of some sports management centres and the national teams affiliated with these management centres was strengthened and centralised, to ensure that the national teams are more powerful than their provincial-level counterparts in many sports, and provincial organisations were more cooperative.<sup>101</sup> Examples included increased resources directed to the National Aquatics



Management Centre and the establishment of a regular National Swimming Team at the end of 2002, which replaced the previously loosely federalised national team.<sup>102</sup> Another example was evident in the establishment of a regular national team undertaking training in Beijing for women's short-distance track cyclists, the top priority of the National Cycling Team.<sup>103</sup> The successful management of national-provincial relation can be partly credited to the establishment of regular National Teams and Big National Teams such as in swimming.<sup>104</sup> This 'Big National Team' approach included all the resources, incorporating people and materials, that are available to the national team and that are willing to serve the national team across China into the scope of the national team, transcending national-provincial boundary and strengthening the links and interactions between the national team and provincial-level teams<sup>105</sup>. Second, to create a cohesive workforce with high morale,<sup>106</sup> substantial rewards, including material (e.g. money and real estate) and non-material (e.g. political advancement) were provided to athletes, including those who won medals in 2004. Third, freedom to embrace professionalisation and commercialisation in some non-collective sports was tentatively and conditionally offered by GAS. The National Tennis Management Centre and the Chinese Tennis Association became a pioneer by allowing elite tennis players to seek their own coaches and scientific support staff whilst on the professional tours.

At Athens 2004, China displaced Russia as the second most successful nation in the gold medal table, and made gold medal breakthrough in a variety of non-traditional sports (e.g. tennis, canoeing, and wrestling). Athens 2004 was a preparation and testing 'battle' for greater success at Beijing 2008.<sup>107</sup> Interview data confirmed that Athens 2004's role was strategically important for assessing China's seven-year plan in the development of coaching, athlete, talent,

accountability and organisational structure and relationship, science, competitions, training, anti-doping, and international influence:

Most people think that the success at Beijing 2008 would be taken-for-granted because of the home advantage. However, what we thought and did was to maximise this ‘advantage’ through careful, deliberate, and proactive planning as early and holistic as possible. If we did not launch these programmes in the Athens Olympiad, then we might have lost a good opportunity to seize the market in many sports and understand the efficiency and effectiveness of some approaches and the necessity of reforms, for example, in artistic gymnastics. It would be impossible for us to win 51 gold medals at Beijing if there were no such early and proactive approaches. The number could have been 40, 45, or even 35, which could have been better than Athens 2004, but not so ‘shockingly’ impressive to both domestic and international audience.<sup>108</sup>

Drawing on Porter’s competitive force model,<sup>109</sup> it is argued that there are three distinct opportunities during the start-up phase. The first is to assess emerging opportunities offered by the decline of other nations to acquire new medal-potential sports/disciplines and/or to penetrate new Olympic medal ‘markets’. The decline of Eastern European nations most notably Russia (in weightlifting, shooting, trampoline and later artistic gymnastics) provided China with the opportunity to increase its market share in corresponding sports/disciplines at Athens 2004 and beyond. The second is to assess the intensity of competition posed by former and latter Olympic hosts. Australia, as the former Olympic host, was at the maintenance stage where intensive and aggressive reform seemed unlikely. Moreover, there was a lack of competition overlap between China and Australia’s major advantage events. As for the latter Olympic host, the UK had not yet entered its start-up stage at the Athens 2004 given that it won the 2012 hosting right later in 2005. The third is to identify any potential medal-market opportunities offered by the IOC. For example, the competition intensities for newly introduced Olympic (or relatively new) sports/disciplines (e.g. women’s weightlifting, women’s wrestling, taekwondo, and synchronised

diving events) were less strong in comparison with other existing sports/disciplines. GAS' deliberately concurrent targeting of women's sport and water sports allowed China to pursue these new medal-markets.<sup>110</sup>

### *Growth (2005-2008)*

The key concern of GAS, or even the Chinese Government during this period was to ensure the success of both the hosting of Beijing 2008 and the maximisation of China's gold medal success on home soil.<sup>111</sup> As the Head of GAS, Liu Peng, explicitly pointed out in the Meeting for 2008 Preparation and 2005 Winter Training, 'there are many criteria measuring the success of an Olympic Games among which hosting nation's excellent elite sport performance is the most concrete, straightforward and vivid'.<sup>111</sup>

In the exogenous political context, there was an escalation in Communist Government's policy and financial support. Their 'Beijing ambition' was facilitated by an unprecedented level of political legitimacy and salience,<sup>112</sup> government support, government expectations, and 'gold medal fever'.<sup>113</sup> In particular, there was an extra RMB 2.7 billion (0.41 billion USD) allocated to GAS, as well as another RMB4 billion (0.6 billion USD) for specific Olympic preparation programmes.<sup>114, 115</sup>

GAS directed substantial resources to develop China's capacity in non-traditional sports/disciplines. As warned by Bonn and Pettigrew,<sup>116</sup> this expansion is likely to make management more complex and more difficult as such expansion process requires systematically long-term planning and the establishment of structure, procedures and processes that facilitate communication and coordination among departments.<sup>117</sup> Confronted with this issue, GAS signed contracts with each national sport management centre, detailing medal targets and the rewards (or sanctions) associated with success (or failure).

To develop a more formalised organisation structure,<sup>118</sup> and more coordinated internal systems,<sup>119</sup> GAS had, first, created the 2008 Olympic Preparation Leader Team which coordinated and integrated different stakeholders – sports-related authorities and teams at the national level and provincial-level in preparation for (gold) medal glory at Beijing 2008. Second, a more extensive range of initiatives were underway than in the start-up stage,<sup>120</sup> particularly in the areas of elite athlete development. For example, more sports adopted the Big National Team approach to expand the talent base and more effectively bridge the national team and provincial teams. The number of teams was expanded by constructing three teams, the national team, the youth team and the reserve team for some key events.<sup>121</sup> In addition, elite athletes' education, living facilities, and post-retirement arrangements were enhanced by GAS,<sup>122</sup> together with the elevation of their Olympic-specific training subsidies. Domestic competition opportunities offered to elite athletes were further escalated.<sup>123</sup>

An expansion of initiatives was also notable in coaching, mainly through the recruitment of foreign coaches. The recruitment of leading foreign coaches was a key approach of many sports, in response to the endogenous and exogenous expectation and pressure to enhance medal performance at Beijing 2008.<sup>124</sup> According to Duan,<sup>125</sup> GAS required non-traditional sports with limited coaching capacities to adopt the *Invite In and Go Out* strategy. At Beijing 2008, the scale of recruited foreign coaches was unprecedented with 37 foreign coaches from 16 nations serving 18 sports/disciplines *vis-à-vis* seven coaches from four nations covering six sports/disciplines at Athens 2004.<sup>126, 127</sup> By the end of Beijing 2008, China climbed to top position in the gold medal table at the home Olympics.

#### *Maintenance (2009-2012)*

In the maintenance stage, there should be an array of relatively stable medal-winning sports.

Organisations often take a less proactive approach in terms of decision-making than in the previous stages.<sup>128</sup> The evidence suggests that the elite sport system became more stabilised in this stage and GAS was less aggressive and ambitious compared to its preparation for Beijing 2008. Strategically, there was only one elite sport-specific document published by GAS, namely *The Outline of the Strategic Olympic Glory Plan: 2011-2020* in 2011, as opposed to the four documents and projects in the build-up to Beijing 2008. This ten-year strategic document, for the first time, explicitly emphasised the *quality* of Olympic gold medals, aiming to particularly develop capacity in athletics, swimming, and other water sports traditionally dominated by Western nations. To date there have been three versions of *The Outline of the Strategic Olympic Glory Plan* published by GAS. The underlying philosophy of each of the strategic plan can be summarised as follows: ‘*Shortening the battle line and emphasising the focus*’ (Plan, 1994-2000) prior to the 2000s, ‘*seeking new sources of Olympic gold medals*’ (Plan, 2001-2010) in the 2000s and ‘*raising the quality and value of Olympic gold medals*’ (Plan, 2011-2020) after Beijing 2008.

In this stage, GAS began to face challenges in balancing the development of interests between elite sport and mass sport. A leading sports researcher in China and policy-making consultant of GAS revealed:

I think for any host nation, a major challenge is to maintain the momentum of investment and coherent approach in the aftermath of the home Olympics. This also applies to China. Some officials and sports insiders were complacent, some argued it was finally mass sport’s turn and the profile of elite sport should be downgraded, and some just experienced ‘inertia’ by which I mean they suddenly lost their objectives and morale when their longstanding pursuit of Beijing 2008 success came to an end.<sup>129</sup>

Although the proposal to reduce the emphasis on elite sport was rejected, there was a lack of further proactive approaches by GAS to support non-traditional sports after 2008. Most non-

traditional sports provided examples of ‘being static or even “retrogress”’.<sup>130</sup> For example, the recruitment of foreign coaches and overseas training in some water sports (e.g. rowing, canoeing) ceased. As the policy-making consultant of GAS reflected, ‘all these led to China’s seemingly “natural” medal count decrease at London 2012, yet this was only the beginning of more severe crisis in the long run’.<sup>131</sup>

On the other hand, there were initiatives to maintain the development of strategically important sports (as defined by the Plan 2011-2020, such as athletics and swimming). For example, the 2008 Olympic Preparation Leader Team was maintained to ensure regular dialogues between stakeholders at provincial and national levels. Overseas training was retained and expanded for swimming, cycling and athletics.<sup>132, 133</sup> Overall, China cemented its top two position in the gold medal table at London 2012 and more importantly, its gold medal and medal performance was better than Athens 2004, which indicated only a modest drop in comparison to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

#### *(Temporary) Decline (2013-2016)*

At the Rio 2016 Games, China won 26 gold medals (12 fewer than at London 2012), dropped to 3<sup>rd</sup> position in the gold medal table and was overtaken by Great Britain. In this stage, the decline of total Olympic medal won is a direct result of changing strategic focus, as well as failing to maintain the competitive advantage established in traditional sports/disciplines.

First, as identified by Barker III and Duhaim,<sup>134</sup> organisations in the decline stage often carry out a series of strategic restructuring activities which lead to financial and organisational structure changes. The publication of the No. 46 Document signalled a drastic strategic reorientation post London 2012.<sup>135</sup> This document, entitled *Opinions of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption*,

represented a watershed in the policy status of mass sport in China and signalled a clear government desire to develop sport-for-all and sports industry.<sup>136</sup> The agenda of developing sport for all was elevated as a state strategy and a fundamental goal to address health-related concerns.<sup>137</sup> The change of the emphasis was consistent with discourses in another two documents recently issued, namely the No.37 document,<sup>138</sup> and the *13<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan for Sports Development in China*,<sup>139</sup> which has effectively projected a sense of ‘retrenchment’ for the development of elite sport activities.<sup>140</sup> At least, elite sport was no longer a solitary focus for sport policy in China.

Second, other countries eroded China’s long-standing competitive advantage in some sports. As Olympic host nations, the rise of Great Britain and Japan threatened China at Rio 2016. In particular, Japan and China are direct competitors in many same sports (e.g. swimming, men’s artistic gymnastics, and some events in badminton, and table tennis). The Olympic market that China used to occupy started to shrink, with artistic gymnastics, shooting, weightlifting and badminton being the most notable examples, at Rio 2016. In addition, as per the stages of elite sport life cycle, the Rio Olympic period (i.e. 2009-2012) was the maintenance stage for Britain, and the start-up stage for Japan. The implication of overlapping elite sport legacy development stages is that, Great Britain’s maintenance stage and Japan’s transition from start-up to growth stages coincided with the decline of the proportion of funding directed to China’s elite sport development for Rio.

In summary, elite sport legacy life cycle for China consists of four stages, *start-up* (three years after the host county won the bid), *growth* (four years prior to the home Olympics), *maintenance* (one Olympics after the home Olympics), and (temporary) *decline* (two Olympics

after the host Olympics). Table 1 summarises the key organisational and management factors attributable to the development of elite sport legacy in each stage of the life cycle.

[Table 1 near here]

## **Findings – Australia**

This section centres on Australia and its home Olympics in 2000. Specifically, the following analysis aims to identify elite sport legacy evidence, as well as to explore the utility of the proposed elite sport legacy life cycle model to the case of Australia.

### *Australia's medal performance pattern*

Australia's medal performance between 1993 and 2016 mirrored China's medal performance between 2001 and 2016. The same camel-back trend is evident (see Figure 2).

[Figure 2 about here]

### *Start-up (1993-1996)*

The successful bid in 1993 provided an impetus for the establishment and development of government 'domination' in sports policy.<sup>141</sup> The start-up stage began. As a department within the ASC, AIS was Australia's strategic high performance sport agency with responsibility and accountability for leading the delivery of Australia's international sporting success. The relationship between the ASC/AIS on the one hand, and the national sport organisations (NSOs) on the other, could be characterised as both cooperative and resource-dependent. The ASC/AIS were able to use the NSOs to deliver elite sports objectives through the leverage of funding allocation. In 1993, the National Elite Sports Council (NESC) was established to systematically



promote AIS elite programme and centralised co-ordination of elite organisational resources at elite level.<sup>142, 143</sup> In 1994, the Olympic Athlete Programme (OAP) was launched with a \$135 million budget to promote sports science and medicine and research, to fund athletes to participate in international competitions, and to provide athletes with direct payments (i.e. living allowances). These actions, including the reshaped organisational structure, the increased level of centralisation in sport governing system and coordination between the key agents, and particularly the decisions on adopting federal government-funded administrative structure, propelled Australia's improved Olympic performance at the Atlanta 1996 Games, moving up to 7<sup>th</sup> in the gold medal table from the 10<sup>th</sup> at the Barcelona 1992 Games.

#### *Growth (1997-2000)*

To maximise (gold) medal performance at the 2000 Olympics, emphasis was placed on improving cooperation with the central governing body and funding escalation. Through the OAP, the relationships between the AIS, NSOs, and state academics and institutes were improved. The interaction between the NESC and the AIS created a national network for the development of elite sport.<sup>144</sup> In addition, as Stewart calculated,<sup>145</sup> in comparison with only approximately AUS\$90 million per year of sport funding in the 1980s, national government budget for sport increased to more than AUS\$150 million per year in the lead-up to Sydney 2000, to an extent that the Commonwealth (Federal) government, in combination with the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) and State Governments, provided a total of AUS\$1.2 million each week to Olympic sports in final preparation for the Sydney Games in 2000. The sources of Olympic (gold) medals were significantly enriched (referring to the 'expansion of specialisation') at Sydney 2000. The number of sports/disciplines which contributed at least one gold medal to Australia galloped from six at Atlanta 1996 to eleven at Sydney 2000, and

Australian athletes won at least one medal in 20 sports/disciplines *vis-à-vis* 14 at Atlanta 1996. Australia achieved its peak medal performance at its home Olympics. Thus, the period of 1997-2000 is considered the growth stage.

#### *Maintenance (2001-2008)*

After the Sydney Games, decision making was more complex. There were concerns about the continuity of government funding for elite sport, e.g. *Shaping Up* recommended that OAP funding should be terminated and more money should be directed to community sport.<sup>146</sup> In preparing for the Athens Games, the elite sport budget was not curtailed yet: 77% of the total money for sport (AUS\$556 million) was distributed to elite sport.<sup>147-150</sup> During the Beijing Olympiad, however, this figure dropped to 66% (of the total AUS\$736.076 million for sport).<sup>151-</sup>  
<sup>154</sup> The development of talent identification structure, coaches and sports sciences remained relatively stagnant. At the Beijing 2008 Games, Australia's ranking dropped to sixth, at which Australia's advantage sports started to be challenged and threatened by major rivals (Great Britain in cycling) and its position in the gold medal table was overtaken by Great Britain and Germany. Thus the eight years after Australia's home Olympics (2001-2008) represent the maintenance stage of the life cycle.

#### *Decline (2009-2016)*

At the London 2012 Games, Australia was back to seven gold medals and 10<sup>th</sup> in the gold medal table as where it was in 1992. The elite sport legacy from the Sydney Olympics had all but dissipated. Here Great Britain is central to understanding Australia's decline. The London quadrennial (i.e. 2009-2012) was the growth stage for Britain that was characterised by unprecedented levels of government investment in elite sport. Great Britain's investment

surpassed that of Australia. As pointed out by John Coates,<sup>155</sup> the increased investment in British sport was compounded because these two countries are strong in many of the same sports (e.g. cycling, rowing, and sailing). Moreover, the later Olympic host nation, namely China's rise in swimming, to some extent, eroded Australia's advantage in swimming in general and in men's middle and long distance freestyle and women's individual medley in particular at London 2012. In London, Australia won one gold only in swimming, which contributed to five, seven and six gold medals at Sydney 2000, Athens and Beijing 2008 respectively. The niche Olympic market that Australia used to occupy started to languish. In addition, the federal government's reluctance to significantly increase the funding level is worth noting, evidenced by Youth and Sport Minister – Kate Ellis' non-committal attitude towards Australian Olympic Committee President – John Coates' request to increase funding. Her preference for the improved efficiencies that could be achieved by restructuring the system and avoiding duplication and waste was underpinned by the philosophy that Australia's economy is much smaller than many of the nations it is competing against at the Olympic Games and that any increases in funding would necessarily be at the expense of other areas of public policy.<sup>156</sup>

In the aftermath of the poor performance at London 2012, despite ASC's proactive remedy, including the oft-quoted strategy of *Australia's Winning Edge 2012-2022* and the ruthless application of a result-contingent funding strategy, *Sports Tally*,<sup>157-161</sup> Australia failed to achieve the goal of recovery at Rio 2016. Australia's 2016 performance was on the same level as London 2012 (i.e. eight gold and 10<sup>th</sup> position, Rio2016, 2016).

As Figure 3 demonstrates, the general trend of elite sport legacy cycle extracted from the Chinese case study seemed to apply to Australia, mirroring Bonn and Pettigrew's organisational life cycle model.<sup>162</sup> When compared to China, elite sport legacy development in Australia was

proven to be less apparent and less strategic (particularly in terms of long-term legacy planning). Thus it perhaps explained its sharp fall at London 2012. Although the length of the *maintenance* stage was slightly longer than China's, the triggers for changes, key decision making, major exogenous contextual opportunities and challenges faced in each stage of the cycle were similar.

[Figure 3 near here]

## **Discussion**

The analysis of the two selected cases suggest clear evidence of an initial positive effect but also the possibility that the sustainability of this positive effect can be vulnerable in the absence of sustained government strategic planning and investment. The peak performance achieved at the home event was not a 'one-off show' of elite Olympic success, rather it was an output of a seven-year phase of elite sport development. The political prominence of sport was significantly elevated after Beijing won the bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympics in 2001, which led to an immediate reshaping of the organisational structure and governance (to various degrees) from the top level, enhanced cooperation and heavy degrees of resource dependency at the meso level, and eventually peak performances at the home Olympics.

Whilst evidence collected from Australia scored closely with the key factors identified in the China's elite sport legacy model to a large degree, differences can still be found: China has long valued elite success at the Olympics since the 1980s and has also had a clearer national elite sport policy and vision. In contrast, Australia experienced constant changes in government policy for elite sport and this volatile political environment made long-term planning difficult. Australia adopted a more 'conservative' attitude towards elite sport development, lacking visionary policy or strategic planning on elite sport legacy prior to the Games; consequently, one decade after the

home Olympics, Australia elite sport legacy started to deteriorate notably (i.e. the total number of the Olympic medals won dropped from 59 at the home Olympics to 29 at Rio 2016 – a similar figure gained at the Barcelona Olympics – 27).

China and Australia experienced a predictable pattern of medal performance at the Olympics. This pattern is characterised by four developmental stages: *Start-up*, *growth*, *maintenance*, and *decline*. These stages, corroborating the findings of Lavoie and Culbert,<sup>163</sup> are sequential in nature. Particularly, the findings of this research confirm that strategic priorities vary according to organisations' life cycle stages.<sup>164</sup> The analysis of both nations' elite performances in the decline stage revealed a nation's vulnerability to non-domestic factors, namely challenges posed by competing nations, which share several advantage Olympic sports/disciplines (i.e. the UK vs. Australia in cycling, rowing and sailing, and China vs. Japan in artistic gymnastics and women's combat sports). In specific terms, the sustainability of a previous nation's Olympic elite sport legacy is increasingly constrained by both the approaches taken by later nations and their degree of overlaps of advantage sports/disciplines. It is also worth noting the possibility that some states may go directly from growth to decline, skipping maintenance, if the government does not sustain its level of investment. This applies to the case of Greece, which declined abruptly and significantly immediately after Athens 2004, failing to win any gold medal at Beijing 2008 and London 2012 (vs. six gold medals in 2004).

## **Conclusion**

This study attempts to identify and explain the elite sport legacy (if any) as a result of hosting an Olympics. Although there was some arbitrariness involved in the categorisation of the stages in this context that signals imperfections in the life cycle metaphor, this preliminary study of elite sport legacy was less concerned with demonstrating the universal applicability of the analogy,

rather to understand the process of elite sport legacy development. It also illustrates that a field at an early stage of theoretical development can benefit from exploring analogies and metaphors from other fields. In general, the application of the life cycle approach is instrumental in comprehending the effects of the long process of elite sport legacy development. It also has utility in understanding how and why variations in different stages generate variability in the observed performance outcomes in this comparative investigation from a life cycle perspective.

Concerning the practical implications, first, the fundamental nature of competition at the Olympics is changing. The traditional governance mind-set is unlikely to lead the elite sport model to strategic competitiveness. States are advised to adopt a new approach that can flexibly and promptly react to the challenges that evolve from the life cycle process. Strategic, proactive and deliberate planning can maximise the elite sport legacy and its sustainability. Second, future host countries are encouraged to consider developing strategies for each phase of the life cycle, because host countries face different threats and opportunities in varying life cycle stages. These changes and strategic thinking and planning have the potential to serve as a point of reference for making the decisions of shaping structure and governance system and hence avoiding or minimising threats and decline. In particular, in later life cycle stages, certain changes are likely to be so critical that if they are not undertaken, the elite sport performance will decline dramatically. This paper is also likely to provide some insights for forthcoming host nations for example Japan to fully take advantage of Tokyo 2020 to elevate its elite sport competitiveness and perfect elite sport policy and system in a more proactive way.

The findings of this study are subject to at least two limitations. First, the sample size of interviews was small. This is problematic for political reasons when conducting policy-related research about China in some cases, unless the researchers have very good networks. But

substantial document data provide a useful remedy. Second, the selected case studies have distinctive features. Both China and Australia are major elite sport nations on the Summer Olympic stage with a reasonably strong competitiveness and great medal success, which thus necessitate cautions in generalising findings to other settings. This research generates many questions in need of further investigation. For example, further empirical investigations in relation to the changes of funding pattern during the elite legacy life cycle for China's case are strongly recommended. Researchers are advised to pay close attention to the Olympic (gold) medal performance of the UK, Brazil and Japan in the future to examine and further our findings. Another possible area of research in the future would be to explore sport-specific legacies for Olympic host nations.

(Word count: )

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