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The new hope of Chinese football? Youth football reforms and policy conflicts in the implementation process

Qi Peng [a,b], Zhisheng Chen[c], Juan Li[c], Barrie Houlihan[d,e] and Nicolas Scelles[a,b]

[a]Department of Economics, Policy and International Business, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; [b]Sport Policy Unit, Manchester Metropolitan University Institute of Sport, Manchester, UK; [c]School of Journalism and Communication, Beijing Sport University, Beijing, People's Republic of China; [d]School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK; [e]School of Sport Sciences, The Norwegian, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

Research question: This research focuses on the implementation of youth football policies in China following the 2015 national football reform. It asks the question 'To what extent have contextual and organisational factors facilitated and/or constrained the effective implementation of Chinese youth football policies?'

Research methods: Guided by a critical realist ontology, we conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in the implementation process of the youth football policy including members of the national and local football associations, schools, and professional football clubs.

Results and findings: The findings reveal a number of policy conflicts that restricted an effective implementation of the youth football policies. The main conflict lay in the ambiguous intertwinement of two dominant policy coalitions (i.e. sport and education), which consequently led to confusion and conflicts among key implementers in the three pathways. Other factors such as the continuous mismatch of traditional values and beliefs held by actors towards youth football participation, as well as the emphasis on excellence over participation by some actors are also identified as having potentially inhibited effective implementation.

Implications: This paper contributes to the debate of the positioning of youth sport in an increasingly elite-driven sporting context. It argues that policymakers, implementers, and the overall society, even if they are willing to foster a positive youth sport development, can also generate an adverse effect if they do not work together.

Introduction

The 2015 Chinese national football reform (Chinese State Council, 2015) depicted a beautiful vision for the Chinese football fans. Signified by the policy *The Overall Program of Chinese Football Reform and Development*, the 2015 reform agenda aspired

to make China a football power by 2050 (Chinese State Council, 2015). The reform aimed to improve Chinese football at both elite and grassroots levels. According to Peng et al. (2019), it was the most radical reform in Chinese football history, not only because of the prominent changes made to the national football governing body – with the Chinese Football Association's (CFA) separation from the central government (General Administration of Sport of China – GSAC), but more importantly, because it marked an unprecedented prioritisation on youth football development (Peng et al., 2019). Consistent with this priority, the present study focuses on the area of youth football development. Specifically, it examines the implementation process of a series of youth football policies resulting from the 2015 reform agenda.

Stating the objective to significantly increase Chinese youth football participation, the reform plan outlined some clear performance targets: by 2020, 'a total number of 50 million people are projected to regularly participate in football', among which 'more than 30 million should be schoolboys and girls'; and 'registered youth players under the age of 18 should reach one million (including 100,000 female players)' (Chinese State Council, 2015). More than 200,000 specialised youth football schools were planned to be built nationwide, which according to the Director of the Ministry of Education, was not only achieved, but also doubled by 2020 (Hupu, 2020). In addition, 2,725 kindergartens have also been selected as specialised football schools (Ministry of Education, 2020). Based on these figures, one may think that progress towards football 'superpower' status was well underway.

However, more than five years into the reform, the performance of the Chinese national teams remains unsatisfactory because six of the seven main targets listed on the *CFA 2020 Action Plan* are far from being realised (Sohu.com, 2020). The recent disbandment of some Chinese Super League (CSL) professional clubs (Xinhua News, 2021), a reflection of investors' crisis of confidence towards the game, has also impeded progress towards improving the performance of the national team. Not surprisingly there is an intense focus on the country's youth, with the hope that they will finally be able to achieve the levels of international success that have eluded the current and previous generations (Liu, 2018; You et al., 2021). However, current research has revealed a number of problems associated with Chinese youth football development, such as the general lack of football participation at the grassroots level (Luo & Gong, 2019), an insufficient number of young talents in national reserve teams (Cheng & Sun, 2018), and conflicts existing in the implementation process of youth football policies (Su & Su, 2020). The causes of these problems remain unclear, a fact that adds to the rationale for the present study. Asking the research question 'to what extent have contextual and organisational factors facilitated and/or constrained the effective implementation of youth football policies?', we analyse the implementation process of youth football policies derived from the reform announcement in 2015 (Appendix 1).

The implementation of youth football policies involves a complex web of diverse stakeholders, which includes the CFA, local football associations (FAs) and the affiliated youth football training centres, hundreds of football clubs with their youth academies or teams, thousands of schools nationwide from primary to university level; in addition, young football players, parents, coaches, and referees also play an important role in contributing to youth football development. Following Freeman et al. (2018, p. 15), we define stakeholders as those groups (and sometimes individuals) who are considered to have a

valid interest (a stake) in the activities and outcomes of a firm [organisation] and whom the firm [organisation] relies on in order to achieve its objectives'. For this study, we focused on the key stakeholders, who have been centrally involved in the implementation of youth football policies. These include policy actors in three different pathways, i.e. employees at the CFA and local FAs; commercial clubs; and school football representatives under the aegis of the Ministry of Education. The existence of three pathways for the development of Chinese youth football and the difficulty of aligning them can explain the existence of conflict in the implementation process of youth football policies (Su & Su, 2020). Following a review of the literature on policy conflicts (e.g. Coleman et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2021; Weible & Heikkila, 2017; Zheng et al., 2019) the Policy Conflict Framework developed by Weible and Heikkila (2017) was identified as having the potential to generate insights and underpin our research.

Theoretical framework: the policy conflict framework

Conflicts accompany the policy process and are integral in shaping the outcomes of governance and politics of any society (Zheng et al., 2019). Upon reviewing the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF; Sabatier, 2007) and other theories and concepts, Weible and Heikkila (2017) introduced the Policy Conflict Framework (PCF), which centres on understanding and explaining episodes of policy conflict over time. This framework is useful for this study because it not only enables an examination of policy conflicts at the agenda-setting stage, but also other stages (e.g. implementation) of a policy cycle (Weible & Heikkila, 2017). Based on the 'where', 'who', 'what' and 'why' elements of policy conflicts, Weible and Heikkila (2017) proposed four interactive conceptual components that constitute the policy setting, i.e. levels of action, policy actors, the policy issue, and events. The resulting policy setting shapes and is shaped by the episodes of policy conflict (Weible & Heikkila, 2017).

Policy setting components

'Where': levels of action
Weible and Heikkila (2017) argue that there are three levels – political systems (broadest scope), policy subsystems (focused on a policy-related issue), and policy action situations (arenas where actors meet) – where policy conflicts can appear. The attributes of these levels of action include, but are not limited to, the political, societal, and economic conditions and the institutional arrangements within each level. The political context, such as political arrangements and institutions (Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan, 2005) as well as party ideologies (Chen et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2019), is often neglected by scholars when investigating organisational or interpersonal conflicts. Yet, Dolfsma and McMaster (2011) argued that institutional tensions can be the first source of policy conflict. For instance, different ministries may formulate different rules and regulations for the same activity or issue and as such, implementers can be confronted with different values that are instituted through these different sets of rules. In this study, although the education and sport sectors reside in the same political system in mainland China and same policy subsystem when focusing on youth football development, they still represent two different sectors with potentially different objectives. Hence, when the two are

required to cooperate on the subject of youth football development, it presents a potential setting for policy conflicts.

'Who': policy actors

Policy conflicts can be influenced by intrapersonal and interpersonal attributes (Weible & Heikkila, 2017). Intrapersonal attributes refer to 'fundamental mental models and cognitive features of individuals that shape their policy position, perceived threats, or willingness to compromise', as well as their behavioural reactions towards conflicts (Weible & Heikkila, 2017, p. 32). Intrapersonal conflicts mainly reside in the deep core beliefs and knowledge of individual policy actors (Sabatier, 2007). The deep core beliefs are normative or ontological orientations that are typically resistant to change, while individual knowledge, on the other hand, can be based on a person's experience, expertise, skills or training (Weible & Heikkila, 2017). Such knowledge can affect a policy actor's perception of, and approaches towards, the policy implementation process (Pyrko et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2017). Conflicts can thus be derived from a person's cognitive lenses that emphasise or de-emphasise various attributes of a policy issue.

Interpersonal attributes refer to the interconnections among people and organisations, which can potentially lead to conflicts during the policy implementation process (Weible & Heikkila, 2017). In particular, interpersonal and interorganisational conflicts within mutually dependent relationships or networks usually result from diversities of personalities, group values and objectives, resource and power struggles, organisational leadership style, or organisational culture and identities.

'What' and 'why': policy issue and events

Policy issues at the centre of debate as well as events that trigger or are led by the focal policy issue account for the last two components of the policy setting. Weible and Heikkila (2017) identified two key attributes of policy issues: complexity and morality. The more difficult and ambiguous a policy issue is for policy actors to understand and respond to, the more potential there is for conflicts; similarly, the higher degree to which actors perceive a policy issue to be right or wrong or how the society ought to be, the less likely they will be willing to compromise their position. This motivates intense conflicts amongst actors. Events, on the other hand, 'are neither good nor bad but rather opportune moments of a policy setting that possibly provoke an episode of policy conflict and new outputs and outcomes' (Weible & Heikkila, 2017, p. 34).

Characteristics of policy conflicts

Cognitive characteristics

In the PCF, Weible and Heikkila (2017) argued that policy conflicts can be categorised into three cognitive dimensions: (1) divergence in policy positions, (2) threats from policy positions, and (3) unwillingness to compromise on policy positions. The first dimension is mainly drawn upon the ACF's deep core beliefs (Sabatier, 2007). For instance, a coalition supporting elite sport development could potentially be in conflict with another coalition advocating for grassroots sports participation. Each of these coalitions normally resists information that challenges their deep core beliefs and is in constant competition with other coalitions for influence on the government policy

decisions (Sabatier, 2007). Such divergence in policy positions can therefore lead to conflicts over how to implement and deliver policies. The second dimension relates to the perceived threats by policy actors from the policy positions of their opponents (Weible & Heikkila, 2017). Specifically, it built on the ACF's 'devil shift' concept, where policy actors exaggerate the power and maliciousness of opponents (Sabatier, 2007). Conflict emerges when a policy position of one set of policy actors puts costs on other actors' interests, values, or identities. Threats in this context can also be linked to the perceptions of loss and the stakes involved (Weible & Heikkila, 2017). The third dimension involves actors' persistence with their own policy positions. Weible and Heikkila (2017) argued that conflicts would not exist if policy actors were willing to compromise and cooperate with each other.

Behavioural characteristics

Responding to the perceived policy conflicts, policy actors may exhibit various behavioural characteristics, which may not be as overt as one might observe in other settings. In policy conflicts, exertions of different faces of power, coercive efforts to keep issues off government agendas or attempts at shaping rival's policy positions are more common tactics (Dolfsma & McMaster, 2011). One behavioural characteristic was emphasised in the PCF, which is the action of engaging in one or more political strategies or tactics to influence public policy decisions (Weible & Heikkila, 2017). Alongside the adversarial behaviours, cooperative behaviours are also a choice, though conditioned by the intensity of perceived policy conflicts by the involved policy actors. That is, depending on the three-dimensional cognitive characteristics such as perceived threats, as mentioned above, policy actors may choose various collaborative or competitive strategies and tactics that shape the outcome of policy conflicts (Weible & Heikkila, 2017).

Literature review

Youth sport (football) development internationally

It is widely acknowledged that sports programmes can help young people develop physically, psychologically, and socially (Coalter et al., 2020; Haudenhuyse et al., 2012; Spaaij et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2017). With that premise, it is unsurprising to see governments allocating large sums of funding for initiatives aimed at enhancing young people's participation in sports and physical activity (Houlihan & Green, 2006; Kinoshita et al., 2021; Lindsey & Bacon, 2016). Alongside governments' interests, an increasing number of domestic and international sports federations and sports event organisers have also been incentivised to create a 'youth version' of their events (Skirstad et al., 2017). For instance, FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) organised its first under-16 World Cup in 1985, and the first Youth Olympic Games were held in 2010 (Kristiansen et al., 2018). Skirstad et al. (2017) insightfully pointed it out that this level of interest was not only motivated by these organisations' need to maintain and expand their talent pools, but more importantly, the underlying mission to cultivate youngsters' commitment to their particular sports at an early age. In spite of the steady progress of youth sport fostered by the aforementioned stakeholders, a range of issues concerning young people's welfare have been raised as they are exposed to

intense sport competitions, particularly at the international level (Kristiansen & Houli-han, 2017; Skirstad et al., 2017). Kristiansen and Houlihan (2017, p. 448) in their study of young athletes in the Norwegian sport system argued that due to the competition for market share of young talent amongst sports, the age at which attempts are made to identify potential talent 'has got younger'.

Parallel to this process of early selection and specialisation (Côté & Hancock, 2016), existing literature also points to the ongoing issue of young people dropping out from traditional (organised and competitive) sports in the age range of 16–19 (Chalip & Hutchinson, 2017; Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Guzmán & Kingston, 2012; Strittmat-ter, 2016). The reasons for the increasing drop-out rate are complex, with some attribu-ted to the programming that focuses on competitive excellence and winning rather than enjoyment (Visek et al., 2015); while others are ascribed to the rise of alternative, new disciplines such as street sports (e.g. skateboard street and parkour) and extreme and adventurous activities (e.g. skydiving and windsurfing) (van Bottenburg & Salome, 2010; Wheaton, 2013). The recent explosive growth of electronic sports (esports) has also allegedly played a role in diverting young people's attention away from traditional sports participation (Peng et al., 2020).

Football being one of the most popular sports globally has undergone some fundamen-tal changes in the last two decades in aspects such as commercialisation and professiona-lisation (Reeves & Roberts, 2018). These changes have implications for youth football development in general, especially when it comes to designing pathways to support young talents' identification and development processes (Bailey, 2018; Coutinho et al., 2016). A plethora of studies have examined physical (e.g. height or weight), psychological (e.g. self-efficacy), and socio-cultural factors (e.g. parental support) that affect young foot-ball talents' development (e.g. Elferink-Gemser & Hettinga, 2017; Reeves et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2021). Other studies explored the experience and pathways enabling young football players' transition into elite players in different countries such as the UK (Reeves & Roberts, 2018), Canada (Holt, 2002), Germany (Güllich, 2014), Norway (Helle-Valle, 2008), and Denmark (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). However, it is necessary to point out that current literature on youth football has dominantly focused on western societies, in which community/grassroots clubs play a dominant role in supporting youth football development. By contrast, youth football in non-western countries, where community sports clubs may not be as developed, is less explored.

In addition, youth sport (including football) is a complex realm that can be influenced by multiple policy fields such as education, sport and health (Houlihan & Green, 2006). Interestingly, to date, there has been little study of the cross-sectoral and interorganisa-tional relationships amongst policy actors in the aforementioned fields, as well as of factors that facilitate or constrain the development of youth sport (football). This study addresses these knowledge gaps by providing an empirical study of Chinese youth football development.

Youth football development in China

The pre-reform context of Chinese youth football development

The development of youth sport (including football) in China has been a joint policy space dominated by two ministerial departments – the GASC (Youth Sport Division)

and the Ministry of Education (MoE). Prior to 2009, Chinese youth football development was mainly led by the GASC and then the affiliated CFA (Wang, 2018). The youth football system was characterised by the traditional 'pyramid' structure that consisted of specialised sports schools and professional teams (Li & Zhang, 2012). This structure had been effective for a period of time (1980s–1990s) in channelling some young talents from the bottom to the top levels (Yang, 2007). However, its overcentralised approach in training and selecting young players, as well as its emphasis on the elite football performance rather than grassroots participation had led to some problems in the 2000s (Sun et al., 2008; Han & Zhang, 2019). According to Liu (2018), the overall number of registered youth football players in the country had fallen from 650,000 in 1995 to a mere 13,524 in 2008. Moreover, there was a lack of coordination between stakeholders in education and sport sectors in terms of how to best guide the youth football development (Guo & Lai, 2020). In order to address these issues, it was decided in 2009 that the GASC and the MoE should partner together to promote football participation in China. Specifically, the two organisations issued a joint policy, *Notification on Launching National Youth (Campus) Football Activities,* that not only outlined the objective of growing youth participation via the school system, but also provided guidance on how to share resources from both sides, such as financial subsidies from the GASC and football training facilities from MoE, to support the development of youth football (General Administration of Sport, 2009).

During the period 2009–2014, GASC has been the dominant policy coalition leading the development of youth football (General Administration of Sport, 2013). GASC, together with sport bureaux at the local level, invested 40 million Chinese *yuan* (4.4 million GBP) annually in youth football development and this figure increased to 56 million *yuan* (6.2 million GBP) from 2013 onwards (Chinese Sport Lottery, 2020).[1] However, it was pointed out by the MoE that this financial support was not enough to increase the number of youth football players (Ministry of Education, 2015a). It was suggested that schools have advantages in promoting youth participation because of the accessibility to participants and should be utilised as policy instruments to implement youth football policies (Ministry of Education, 2015a). Therefore, since the 2015 national football reform, with the CFA and its member associations being disaffiliated from the government and more emphasis being placed on youth football participation, the Chinese State Council (2015) decided that the MoE should be leading on youth football development. Consequently, collaborative working group systems led by the MoE – 'Youth (Campus) Football Work Leadership Groups' (in short, *Leadership Groups*), consisting of representatives from national and local authorities, sport organisations and schools – have been created to lead and coordinate policy delivery (Ministry of Education, 2015b).

The three-pathway structure led by the MoE, the CFA and professional clubs

There are three main pathways that have emerged for young players to participate in football following the Chinese government's policies on youth football development (Figure 1). Each pathway has a different policy focus and delivery structure. The first pathway is called the 'School-based Youth Football Development System', led by the aforementioned *Leadership Groups* and supported by other key stakeholders such as local levels of government and schools. The Chinese school system is usually divided

into four main parts based on the education route, i.e. primary school (age 6–12), middle school (age 13–15), high school (age 16–18) and university/college (above 18). The school-based youth football system, therefore, leverages schools at all four stages to support grassroots football participation, with youth football mainly targeting the age range of 6–18 (Ministry of Education, 2019). Competitions are organised among schools of the same city, region, and province to ensure that all registered school kids can compete in their appropriate age group. With financial resources from the National Lottery and local government, four key objectives were expected to be delivered by these *Leadership Groups*: (1) to increase football participation in schools; (2) to improve the youth (campus) football competition system for talent ID; (3) to enhance the capacity and skills set of football coaches; and (4) to strengthen the collaboration amongst group members and ensure sound governance (Ministry of Education, 2015b).

The second pathway, the 'National Youth Football Training Centre', is led by the CFA and supported by local football associations, with a primary focus on talent identification and training (Chinese Football Association, 2017a). From 2015 to 2020, there have been 12 men's and 14 women's youth training centres established in provinces or municipalities, where youth football is considered more developed than in other regions, based on the number of youth players registered and team performance in previous years (Chinese Football Association, 2018). The CFA invested an annual amount of two million *yuan* (0.22 million GBP) in each of these training centres, which is often supplemented from local government budgets, varying in the range of 1:1–1:4 (Chinese Football Association, 2017b). The money has mostly been used to build youth teams from U7 to U17, organise training sessions and competitions (the U series), and train coaches and referees (Chinese Football Association, 2018). The CFA then picks the best players nationwide (including all these training centres) to form 15 national elite youth teams from U13 to U17 (each age group has three teams) to compete for eligibility for international competitions.

The third pathway is through the professional football club system. In 2017 the CFA issued the regulation, Entry Criteria for the CSL, League One and League Two, requiring all clubs in the top two tiers to establish five youth teams from U13 to U19 (see Figure 1) and four youth teams (U13–U17) for clubs in the third tier (Chinese Football
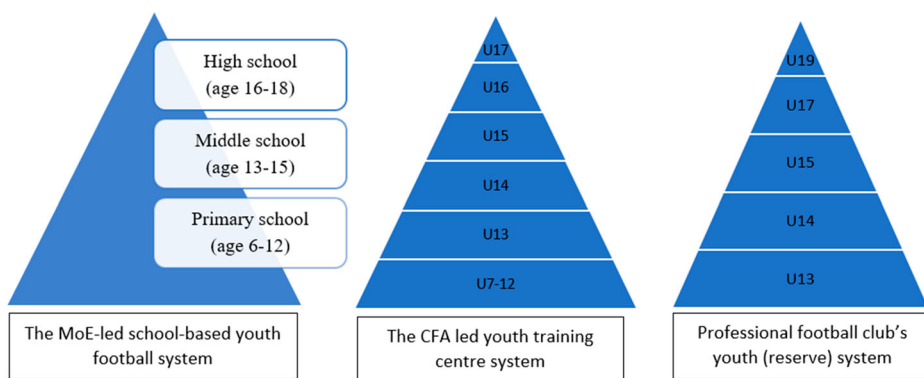

Figure 1. The three-pathway structure of Chinese youth football development.

Association, 2017c). The objective of this compulsory entry regulation was to channel resources from professional football clubs to develop the quantity and quality of youth football players (Chinese Football Association, 2017c).

In summary, the pathways led by the CFA and professional clubs focus on elite football development, while the pathway led by the Ministry of Education has a broader scope focused both on participation and talent identification and development. These two dimensions are potentially complementary in the sense that higher participation means a larger pool from which to identify and develop talent, as supported by sport policy and economics literature (see Scelles (2021), Scelles and Andreff (2019) and Valenti et al. (2020)). The broader scope of the pathway led by the Ministry of Education overlaps with the other pathways. This is consistent with the overall policy objective of elite young footballer development. However, this can create complexity and confusion amongst policy actors that can be a source of conflicts if there is a lack of clarity, communication and understanding surrounding the respective roles in the different pathways and their complementarity.

Research methods

This research is underpinned by a critical realist ontology (Bhaskar, 2008), whereby knowledge (e.g. the contextual/structural factors influencing the development of youth football in China and the status of interpersonal relationships/conflicts) is assumed to exist, but at the same time, is 'in a constant state of revision' because 'social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors' (Bryman, 2016, p. 33). A case study design (Yin, 2018) has been adopted to explore the implementation process of the Chinese youth football policies since the announcement of the national football reform in 2015, with a particular focus on the extent to which contextual and organisational factors have facilitated or constrained effective implementation. An interpretivist epistemology guided the selection of the data collection method: semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2016).

Data collection

Twenty-three interviews were conducted at two separate times (in 2017/2018 and 2021) with key stakeholders involved in the implementation process of the youth football policies. Interviewees were senior managers or directors of the youth football department or division of their organisations such as the CFA, the local FAs, commercial clubs and representatives of the school-based youth football system. Two sampling strategies were adopted in recruiting participants. The first strategy was purposive sampling, which meant that we approached certain participants knowing that they fit our selection criteria (Neuman, 2013): (a) working in one of the aforementioned organisations; (b) involved in the implementation of youth football policies; (c) senior managers or directors of their organisations. The second strategy was snowballing – as we finished one interview, we would ask if the participant could provide referrals within their network for us to reach out to other potential participants or organisations (Neuman, 2013). Interviews were conducted either over the phone or in person. A summary of the interviewees' profile is presented in Table 1. The first round of interviews was conducted

between 2017 and 2018. The reason why they were not undertaken earlier (i.e. in 2015 or 2016) was that the youth football policies were gradually implemented and there were stakeholders such as commercial clubs not involved in the compulsory youth teams building process until 2018 (see Appendix 1). If interviews had been conducted earlier these key stakeholders would have not been able to inform us of their perceptions or experience of the youth policy implementation process. Therefore, we believed two or three years into the process was a better time to conduct interviews because almost all key stakeholders were then involved in the process. The second round of interviews was conducted in 2021 for the purpose of detecting any change of strategic planning or perception during the implementation process. As can be seen from Table 1, the first round of interviews consisted of 15 interviewees, and the second round eight.

Although we aimed to have the same interviewees as well as numbers for both phases, some of the interviewees changed jobs during this period while others simply lost their positions in their organisations (with some clubs going bankrupt) in the aftermath of the global pandemic. Six interviewees (three from the local FAs and three from the clubs) from the first round agreed to participate in the second round. In both rounds, interviewees were asked to reflect on three main topics: their experience of implementing the youth football policies (addressing primarily the theoretical concepts of intrapersonal attributes and complexity); their relationships with other stakeholders (in other youth football pathways) during the process (addressing primarily the theoretical concepts of interpersonal attributes and characteristics of conflicts); and their perceptions of social and moral attitudes towards youth football participation (addressing primarily the theoretical concepts of morality and degree of perceived threats). The interview guide is available in Appendix 2. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. All transcripts were then translated to English from Chinese by the leading author and double-checked for linguistic accuracy by the co-authors. The transcripts were analysed with NVivo software.

Data analysis

The data analysis consisted of a hybrid approach of a data- and theory-driven coding process. The first author started with an immersion by reading the transcripts and

Table 1. Interviewees' profile.

Stakeholder categories	Interviewees (2017/2018)	Interviewees (2021)
The CFA	One senior manager of the Youth Football Department (R1)	N/A*
Local FAs	Seven senior managers of seven local FAs, responsible for youth football development (R2–R8)	Three senior managers of three local FAs, responsible for youth football development (R9–R11)
Commercial clubs	Six senior managers in charge of youth football development in six clubs (four CSL clubs; one League One club; one League Two club) (R12–R17)	Three senior managers in charge of youth football development in three clubs (one CSL club; one League One club; one League Two club) (R18–R20)
School (Campus) Football Representatives	One senior member of the National Youth School Football Expert Committee (R21)	Two senior managers at two *School Football Leadership Groups* (one in Northern China; one in South China) (R22–R23)
Total	15	8

*Despite the research team's efforts, it was not possible to obtain a second round of interviews with interviewees from the CFA. As such, we collected policy documents as a supplement.

familiarising with the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A priori themes were developed, guided by the PCF from Weible and Heikkila (2017). Specifically, three contributing factors to policy conflicts identified in the PCF (i.e. policy setting; policy actors' intrapersonal attributes; and policy actors' interpersonal or interorganisational attributes) were selected. Next, emergent themes were identified from the data using an inductive approach, with particular attention paid to similarities and differences (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). These new themes included the structural design, traditional values and beliefs, social perceptions, resources, skills and knowledge, and interorganisational relationships and interactions. Both a priori and emergent themes were then grouped together based on their relationships, leading to three main themes that uncovered the implementation process. The research team frequently discussed and cross-checked their interpretation of the data to act as each other's 'critical friends' during the process (Vincent & O' Mahoney, 2017).

Regarding the limitations of this study, the purpose is not to generalise the findings since it is recognised that they are specific to China. However, a comprehensive case study of the Chinese youth football development, despite its limited generalisability, contributes to the discussion of how countries should balance their policies and resources to maximise the developmental benefits of youth sport (Côté & Hancock, 2016). We also acknowledge that the interpretation of qualitative data can be subject to researchers' bias (Bryman, 2016). We attenuated this by triangulating the data with multiple participants from various organisations (i.e. national governing bodies, schools and commercial clubs).

Findings

The findings section is structured in accordance with the three main themes emerging from the data: (1) the policy setting that was reported to have directly influenced the implementation process of the youth football policies; (2) policy actors' perceptions of their resources, skills and knowledge; and (3) policy actors' interorganisational relationships and interactions.

Policy setting

Three pathways: a complex structural design
Policy actors recognised the central government's policy commitment to develop youth football in the recent years and believed that it was beneficial for grassroots and elite football development overall. For instance, R1 (2017) stressed that:

> Our priority at the moment is to create as many opportunities as possible for our youth to play football […] we need all schools, professional clubs, and many other organisations to support this agenda because the more kids play football, the wider our talent pool will be in the future.

However, concerns regarding the three pathways for elite youth footballer development were raised, with suggestions that the structural design creates unnecessary complexity during the implementation stage:

> The youth football development system is a mess […] and this is due to the various entities involved in leading youth football: the GASC, the MoE and the CFA, and no one is talking to another. (R4, 2018)

The multiple-leadership has caused managerial confusion for implementers and barriers for players, according to R4, who pointed out that 'both the MoE and the CFA established their own youth player registration systems and competitions […]; these systems are not inter-channelled for our players'.

The same issue was raised by other respondents three years later:

> there is a lack of clarity on who should be doing what […] both the CFA and the MoE are leading youth football development, but neither side has drawn a clear line between their respective responsibilities […] this has made the implementation extremely difficult. (R9, 2021)

There has also been confusion over 'who can play in what competitions?' For example, some respondents at the local FAs believed that 'if a school kid has registered with the CFA system, then they should not be allowed to play any match organised or recognised by the school system' (R11, 2021). The same perception was identified by the school-side representative:

> we cannot play in the U series organised by the CFA, because if we play in these series, then we cannot play in the national school football leagues. (R23, 2021)

Regardless of whether or not there is a restrictive regulation for young players registered in both systems, it is clear that such structural design has created a certain level of confusion amongst policy actors.

Traditional values and beliefs held by key implementers: significant cognitive differences

Significant cognitive differences were identified in the range of actors involved in elite youth football development. These differences correspond to the traditional values and beliefs held by key implementers. One respondent interpreted the positioning of each of the three systems of youth football development as follows:

> If you choose to play for the school system, then you are more likely to play football as a hobby […]; if you choose to play for the CFA youth training system or club system, then you are looking at developing a professional football career. (R10, 2021)

Another respondent echoed this point by highlighting that 'one system [school] focuses on the grassroots participation while the other [the CFA system] is on a more advanced level' (R22, 2021). Young players, therefore, have to make an early choice regarding which path (i.e. amateur or professional) to take, and there seemed to be a lack of middle ground for a young player to transition from being an amateur to an elite player within one system.

Furthermore, conflicts emerged in policy implementation by professional clubs, who believed that the policies issued by the CFA (e.g. the CFA Clubs Entry Regulation) did not necessarily align with their traditional values and beliefs:

> we should embrace the idea of promoting youth football development, but for us [clubs], this [developing youth football] is mainly to support our first-team […]. How could the

> CFA ask clubs to spend so much money on kids' compulsory education, which is supposed to be the government's responsibility? (R12, 2018)

From a club's perspective, R12 believed the priority for professional clubs should be their elite football performance, and the value of youth football was merely to serve this priority. This belief was consistent across professional clubs, as R16 (2018) also commented: 'our clubs' mission is to compete at the elite level, and we need players who can compete'. Hence, the CFA's regulation for clubs to build multiple youth teams came as a shock for clubs who did not see it as a necessity for fulfilling their elite goals.

Similar concern was raised from the perspective of local FAs, as R7 (2018) commented:

> football at school is all about getting fit, but for us, we'd like to see elite sporting results […] and, which adolescent doesn't go to school these days? Such conflict is inevitable.

The significant cognitive differences identified above are not surprising: they all have considerably different policy positions and experiences within varying administrative structures and funding systems. It is obvious that there is an ongoing struggle among youngsters between their sporting and education aspirations, which caused the inevitable conflicts in the policy implementation process, especially for professional clubs, which were desperate to recruit young players to meet the CFA Clubs Entry Regulations.

Social and moral perceptions of youth football participation: education first for parents

Apart from the challenges derived from traditional values and beliefs, policy implementers have also commented on the ideological conflicts between clubs which aim to recruit young talents to play football and the social perceptions of playing football, particularly from parents. R17 (2018) voiced their concern:

> kids at the age group of 13–15 are normally studying in middle schools, if they were to come to play for us, their education will be impacted, and parents cannot allow that to happen.

R14 (2018) shared a similar view pointing out that 'Parents are not willing to let their child play football nowadays', because although (some) clubs offer classes after their training sessions, 'there is still a problem of players having a busy competition schedule and not being able to attend classes like a normal student'. The conflict between education and football training schedule appears to be the underlying cause of the shortage of elite young footballers above the age of 13. A respondent 'humorously' highlighted the fact that adolescents in China nowadays have to attend a variety of classes to face the increasingly competitive society:

> you can see that our pitches are full of under 12 players, but how many above 13? Not many, they got classes at school and they even got classes after school … Players may want to continue, but their parents are not willing to do so. (R9, 2021)

Social and moral values 'such as parents' attitude towards football participation can take time to change' (R14, 2018). It became one of the contextual barriers that contributed to the issues in elite youth football development.

Policy actors' perception of resources, skills and knowledge: a lack of qualified coaches

All respondents in 2021 reported a significant increase of funding into youth football development compared to 2018, when less support was made available to them:

> We are not supported by our government in youth football projects […] we are facing all kinds of issues such as lack of funding, lack of young players, a shortage of qualified coaches […] there is no guidance whatsoever. (R6, 2018)

The same respondent revealed in 2021 that 'since our last interview, the CFA has finally invested 2 million *yuan* annually to support us running the youth football training centres' (R9). It is clear that there has been a learning process for the CFA and the government in terms of the support that local FAs needed to implement the youth football policies. The increase of funding in schools has enhanced the level of youth football participation, as a school respondent highlighted that:

> Since 2015, the local government has annually invested 200,000 *yuan* to each of the established specialised football schools in our region, and we have about 200 schools! This money has really helped us grow the number of young players. (R22, 2021)

However, some policy actors underlined a cross-cutting issue that requires policymakers' attention – the *skills and knowledge* of youth football coaches at the grassroots level, as R10 (2021) commented:

> The most fundamental problem of Chinese youth football, I think, is the lack of good, qualified coaches at the grassroots level. Most of our coaches simply have a certificate and zero experience of coaching […] or worse, they don't have the right values towards youth football.

Respondents explained that it was difficult to find coaches who possessed the right coaching skills and values. Some coaches were too 'excellence-driven' (R10) and focused only on the 'short-term goal of achieving elite performance' (R21), while some were 'not able to communicate effectively with and motivate young players' (R14) or 'to create an enjoyable training environment' (R16). Regarding the knowledge of their coaches, R11 commented:

> You'd be surprised to know that some of our coaches don't even know how to plan a training session, which I believe is the basic requirement of a coach. (R11, 2021)

It was a shared belief that 'the best coaches should coach at the youth level because it is important that a young footballer gets their basic skills right before turning into a professional' (R22, 2021).

Policy actors' interorganisational relationships and interactions: segmentation vs. collaboration

There was mixed evidence concerning how policy actors in the three pathways interact with one another. On one hand, respondents reported that the lack of communication between the three systems has given rise to segmentation of the youth football community, as R11 (2021) highlighted:

> We have different training systems, and there are regular meetings organised for us to exchange our experience in youth football training, but most of the time, we [and our school counterparts] are simply doing our separate things.

By contrast, some actors use their local knowledge and networks, and collaborate to achieve the desired outcome:

> We make sure that our competition schedules are not in conflict so that players can make it to the schools' competitions, which are normally during the weekdays; they then move on to play for their clubs in the weekend. (R9, 2021)

Another respondent stressed the importance of collaboration:

> Our kids play at the national school leagues, but at the same time, we collaborate with the local FA – we provide education opportunity to their players and in return, we receive training support and sometimes coach exchange from them. (R23, 2021)

In addition, driven by either mutual business interests or political pressure to produce policy outcomes, new initiatives have occurred between schools and professional clubs in regions, with schools receiving clubs' reserve teams for good quality education and in return, clubs providing coach services and regular training sessions to schools' youth teams. R22 (2021) spoke highly of this mode of interaction:

> It is great for the school players because they get to work with an elite football coach on a regular basis and the outcome of such collaboration is phenomenal.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the contextual and organisational factors that have facilitated and/or constrained the effective implementation of youth football policies in China. The findings suggest that whilst the central government's enhanced awareness of and financial investment in youth football have created a more positive environment for youth football participation, there are some underlying issues and conflicts within the landscape of Chinese youth football development, which may have hindered the effective implementation of these policies. Informed by the Policy Conflict Framework (Weible & Heikkila, 2017), four main factors were identified as having contributed to policy conflicts that undermined the effectiveness of the policy implementation.

Firstly, the '*where*'. Weible and Heikkila (2017) suggest that there are three levels of action where policy conflict can appear. In this study, we identified that the third level of action – policy action situations (arenas where actors meet) – was the place where most policy conflicts occurred during the implementation of youth football policies. The study highlighted the three-pathway design as the arena where policy actors from different systems meet to deliver youth football policies. Although the intention of policymakers to diversify the opportunities for youth football participation by involving multiple systems and platforms (e.g. FAs, schools and clubs) was acknowledged, the data revealed a lack of bridging mechanism between these systems, which had actuated policy conflicts. In addition to the relatively independent platforms and pathways, the lack of communication between policy actors further contributed to the task-related conflicts (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003) and inhibited the effective implementation at the operational level.

Secondly, the '*who*'. That is, stakeholders with varying policy positions have played a role in progenerating the emergent policy conflicts during the implementation process. Our findings suggested that there were more than one policy coalition (Sabatier & Weible, 2007) involved in the youth football development agenda – the sports coalition led by GASC and the CFA, and the education coalition led by the MoE. As such, it is not unexpected that stakeholders from different systems held different, sometimes conflicting, views towards the implementation process. As Weible and Heikkila (2017) argued, interpersonal attributes such as the group values and objectives and organisational culture that each stakeholder holds can affect their perception of, and approaches towards, the policy implementation process. The findings highlighted two contradictory views towards youth football development: excellence and participation. The CFA's youth training centres and the professional clubs appeared to focus more on elite-development goals, whereas schools emphasise participation and educative goals. Therefore, club managers who did not see youth teams as a necessity for developing their elite goals, were not ready to embrace the regulation of building reserve teams, because this is contradictory to their performance-oriented views. There was also evidence suggesting that in some schools, coaches of the young football teams were being too elite-driven, which is a sign of 'early selection' and 'early specialisation in one sport' (Côté & Hancock, 2016, p. 57). This can potentially lead to negative outcomes such as increased burnout, overuse injuries and reduced enjoyment, which will eventually discourage children from playing sports (Côté & Hancock, 2016).

Thirdly, the '*what*'. Another factor that facilited policy conflicts in the Chinese youth policy implementation process was the policy issue – youth football – itself. Weible and Heikkila (2017) identified complexity as orchestrating policy conflicts at various levels. Consistent with Houlihan and Green (2006) and Skirstad et al. (2017), our findings suggested that youth football was a complex realm that can be influenced by multiple policy fields such as education, sport and health. Moreover, it is a policy arena in which a complex range of stakeholders attempt to assert control over policy (Houlihan, 2000). For instance, there was competition amongst schools and between schools and clubs, especially when it came to talent recruitment. While competition between schools is largely internal to the educational community, competition with both clubs and CFA elite youth teams was cross-sectoral and involved more stakeholders. The latter type of competition was also more complex and prone to conflicts.

Finally, the '*why*'. Morality was another dimension that prompted policy conflicts. Weible and Heikkila (2017) insightfully pointed out that the greater the degree to which policy actors perceive a policy issue to be right or wrong, the less likely they will be willing to compromise their position. In the case of Chinese youth football development, this morality issue not only lay in the different traditional values and beliefs held by policy actors (e.g. elite- or participation-focused), but also in the mismatch of societal values, particularly parental perceptions towards football participation. There has been a considerable amount of research indicating that parents' expectations and voices play a significant role in the diversity and length of youth sport participation (e.g. Chalip & Philip Scott, 2005; Holt et al., 2017; Kristiansen & Houlihan, 2017). Chinese society is well-known for its strong 'educational desire' or 'educational aspirations' (Kipnis, 2011). It is not uncommon for a family to save up money for their children to attend after-school tutoring classes in disciplines such as English, mathematics and even

programming. Hence, compared to countries such as Norway, where parents normally spend an enormous amount of time and resources in their children's sport activities (Helle-Valle, 2008), Chinese parents seemed less willing to devote resources to sports. Instead, interviewees stressed that parents prioritise education for their children. This suggests that, according to interviewees, Chinese youth football development is constrained by the power-ratios (Elias, 1978) over youth between stakeholders, with parents (and indirectly schools) being potentially more powerful than football organisations (CFA and clubs) and unwilling to let football participation jeopardise their children's education. Following the Freeman-inspired view on stakeholders, this finding urges youth football policy makers and managers to not only consider but prioritise parents as a potential primary stakeholder in order to achieve their objectives. Moreover, both aforementioned traditional values and societal perceptions are usually resistant to change in a short time period, which makes the identified policy conflicts long-lasting and as such, presents one of the biggest challenges to Chinese youth football development.

Despite these challenges, Houlihan (2012) pointed out that policy implementation is an on-going process of learning and adaptation. In particular, conflict over ideas and the underlying policy assumptions is important for motivating change (Peters et al., 2005). Two notable aspects of policy learning were identified. The first aspect was policymakers' increased awareness of the existing barriers between the different youth football systems. This is evident by the joint initiative to achieve a more integrated approach (i.e. integrating sport and education) towards youth football development. Indeed, since 2020 there has been an emphasis on how to better 'integrate the education and sport systems' not only in football, but in Chinese youth sport development in general (e.g. General Administration of Sport, 2020). One of the policy priorities is to establish an integrated system by lifting the entry restrictions, allowing young talents to compete in different systems. Although the policy change process is not within the scope of this study, it showed that the policy conflicts have effectively induced incremental changes within the Chinese youth football development context. The second aspect is the learning experience demonstrated by implementers at the local level in their search of collaboration. Regardless of their incentives, there have been some innovative and collaborative approaches adopted by different stakeholders to achieve their policy goals. In other words, whilst conflicts did occur during the implementation process, policy actors demonstrated willingness to compromise on their positions by learning how to work with each other within the youth football system and deliver policy outcomes. According to Weible and Heikkila (2017), this is one of the strategies and tactics that policy actors may choose in order to shape the outcome of the policy conflicts.

In summary, this paper mainly focused on the implementation process of youth football policies. It did not discuss the actual impact of these policies on adolescents, which could be a direction for future research. In particular, it would be interesting to investigate if these policies were made less effective by potential factors contributing to the challenges of youth football development in China such as a declining interest in sport and physical activity overall. Another direction for future research would be to find out whether and how new disciplines have impacted traditional sport participation at the youth level. Although the case study does not empirically allow for a generalisation of the findings, it is believed that the research, through the theoretically guided analysis,

contributes to the overall debate between '*excellence* or *participation*' regarding youth sport development. It also adds to the literature by identifying the underlying factors responsible for sport policy conflicts, the evolution of policy conflict, and its impact on the policy agenda process.

Note

1. To provide a context for comparison and highlight the political priority on youth football development, in 2015, the GASC invested 60 million yuan out of the total budget of 100 million yuan on youth football-related infrastructure construction, 12 million yuan on swimming pools, 8 million yuan on winter sports facilities, and the remaining 20 million yuan on community fitness facilities (General Administration of Sport, 2016).

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ORCID

Qi Peng 🅓 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8730-4458

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Appendix 1: National policies supporting youth football development in China as part and continuation of the 2015 reform agenda between 2015 and 2020

Issuing/Leading Unit	Policy	Date of release
Chinese State Council	*The Overall Plan for Chinese Football Reform and Development*	27 January 2015
The Ministry of Education	*Guidance on Accelerating Youth Campus Football Development*	27 July 2015
The General Administration of Sport, the CFA & the Ministry of Education	*The Mid- and Long-term Plan for Chinese Football Development (2016-2050)*	6 April 2016
The CFA & the Ministry of Education	*Chinese Youth Football System Construction "165" Action Plan*	23 January 2017
The CFA	*The Chinese Football Association Clubs Entry Regulation (2018)*	12 December 2017
The CFA & the Ministry of Education	*About Issuing the National Youth Football Physical and Educational Combination Development Policy List*	11 June 2018
The Ministry of Education	*National Youth Campus Football Work Leading Group's Notice on the 2019 Campus Football Work*	26 March 2019
The Ministry of Education	*About the Construction Work of National Youth Campus Football Specialised Schools, Polit County (Region), and 'All Star' Football Training Camps*	29 June 2020
The Ministry of Education	*National Youth Campus Football 'Eight System' Construction Action Plan*	28 August 2020

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

1. Please briefly introduce yourself and your role in the organisation.
2. Since the 2015 national football reform, what has been changed in the area of youth football development?
3. What is your experience of implementing these youth football policies?
4. How much money has been invested annually by your organisation in youth football development? And how has the money been spent?
5. What is your perception of the relationships with other stakeholders in the (local) FA/schools/clubs systems in terms of youth football development?
6. Any collaborations and/or conflicts during the implementation stage?
7. What are the current challenges of youth football development?