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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# To let go or to control? Depoliticisation and (re)politicisation in Chinese football

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of depoliticisation has become increasingly popular in Western governance studies. However, empirical analysis of depoliticisation processes in non-democratic political regimes is less prevalent. This article addresses this gap through an examination of China's recent efforts to depoliticise the sport sector, using football as a trial. Documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews were adopted for data collection. Specifically, we delineated the principles adopted, activities occurred, and tools used for football depoliticisation at three political levels (macro, meso and micro), highlighting the inconsistencies between the desired outcomes and strategies for depoliticisation. We reveal that the depoliticisation of Chinese football is a convoluted and incremental process and various depoliticisation strategies were used in an attempt to reform the football governance system. A nexus between depoliticisation and (re)politicisation constantly emerged due to factors such as historic path dependency and the lack of determination of the government to fully relinquish control.

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Depoliticisation; policy change; governance; China; football

## Introduction

The concept of depoliticisation has recently been the subject of innovation in Western governance studies (see Beveridge and Naumann 2014, Fawcett *et al.* 2017). Burnham's (2001) pioneering groundwork defines depoliticisation as 'the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision making' (Burnham 2001, p. 128). Flinders and Buller (2006, p. 295) elaborated the definition further by including 'the range of tools, mechanisms and institutions through which politicians can attempt to move towards an indirect governing relationship'. More recently, Flinders and Wood (2014, p. 135) depicted the depoliticisation process as 'the denial of political contingency and the transfer of functions away from elected politicians'. In essence, depoliticisation has been most associated with the attempts to insulate decision-making processes and crisis avoidance strategies of politicians; as such, some scholars also refer to such attempts as insulating reforms (Herrera and Post 2014).

Although depoliticisation is not a new phenomenon, depoliticisation in non-democratic political regimes has received relatively little attention from social scientists. Partly because an authoritarian regime seems unlikely to be a candidate to deploy depoliticisation strategies

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(Unger *et al.* 2014). Nevertheless, there has been some research that uses depoliticisation as a theoretical instrument to understand, for example, the decline of citizen participation in electoral politics in a post-authoritarian country, Chile (Carlin 2006); and the political and social crises in African societies (Benin and Ghana) (Trzcinski 1991). Together, it seems to suggest that authoritarian countries indeed have attempted to depoliticise for the purposes of stabilising society (Lee and Zhang 2013), liberalising the economy (Fong 2019), or paradoxically reinforcing state control (Maghraoui 2002, Tubilewicz 2016).

However, in general, there has been a paucity of research on depoliticisation beyond the macroeconomic policy terrain in non-democratic countries (Bates *et al.* 2014, Beveridge 2017). Such a thin empirical evidence base (Fawcett *et al.* 2017) limits our understanding of depoliticisation in authoritarian countries. Therefore, this paper aims to address these knowledge gaps by examining China's attempt at depoliticising football.

## Research context

China as an authoritarian regime has had an extensive record of marketisation since late 1970s, which has contributed to the country's soaring economic growth (Lin and Liu 2000, Jin and Zou 2005). However, compared with the largely freed-up economy, Chinese political system is rather centralised with strong top-down mandates and a homogeneous governance structure, which has been alien to the pace of economic development and thereby, to a certain extent, impeded the country's further development with no exception in sport (Zhang 2006, He *et al.* 2016, Tian and Chen 2016). The discussion involving political reform (e.g. to reduce the political control over the market) emerged in the early 2000s, although the idea of depoliticisation was not introduced in China until the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (NCCPC) in 2012 when the Chinese government initiated a series of reforms in the political system (People.cn 2012). The depoliticisation started with the Chinese State Council reform in March 2013, which focused on streamlining administration and delegating power to lower-level governments (Chinese State Council 2013b). The Chinese football reform in 2015, which is the focus of this study, took place against this backdrop.

The Chinese government initiated a national football reform in 2015 to restructure the football governance system within the governmental and non-governmental spheres. *The Overall Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme (2015)* (in short, *the 2015 Reform Programme*) was the policy that embodied the government's decision to depoliticise the football governance system. As a salient part of the reform programme, the national football governing body -Chinese Football Association (CFA) was decoupled from the government system to become an autonomous organisation that would manage the national football affairs independently from the government (Chinese State Council 2015, point 2).

Against this background, the study aimed to examine the depoliticisation process in the Chinese football sector and ask the following questions:

- What is the role of the Chinese government in the football depoliticisation process?
- What were the depoliticisation strategies, tactics, and tools utilised at different times?
- To what extent has the Chinese football governance system changed during the depoliticisation process?

Next, literature surrounding depoliticisation and the theoretical background underpinning the paper will be presented, followed by a description of the research methods adopted for the study. Research findings will be presented and discussed before the conclusions are presented.

## Literature review

### *Why depoliticisation?*

Depoliticisation is seen as a 'mode of statecraft', which can be used to 'deflect blame and accountability from governments' (Wood and Flinders 2014, p. 152). Scholars point out that the tenet of democracy nowadays is facing crisis as political trust in public institutions (including politicians and government) decreases and political and citizen disengagement increases (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 2005, Hay 2007, Schyns and Koop 2010, Davis 2015). Depoliticisation, against this backdrop, seems to offer an ideal antidote to the crisis by empowering autonomous and responsible individuals through the narrative of a reduced or minimalist state (Peck and Tickell 2002, Foster *et al.* 2014).

Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) pointed out that government deploying depoliticisation strategies in its problematic policy fields could enhance political control and trustworthiness. This can be understood in two ways. First, by depoliticising certain policy fields, the government gives the impression of transferring elements of that control to the public; it also creates a distance between the polity and the difficult supporters or opponents and if the depoliticisation strategy is not successful, depoliticisation constitutes a way for the government to shift responsibility and blame. Second, if policy objectives are realised through the depoliticisation policy, it is beneficial for the government as the credibility of the depoliticisation policy and the competence of management are reinforced in the process.

The rationales of depoliticisation could potentially shed light on the motives of the Chinese government's attempts at depoliticising football. Firstly, it may be argued that the depoliticisation strategy was linked to the repeated underperformance of the national (particularly men's) football team. The Chinese men's national team has been performing poorly in international football for the past two decades (Tan *et al.* 2016). It has been argued that the cause of the poor performance was that the CFA was part of the central government sport organisation, i.e. the General Administration of Sport of China (GASC) (Peng *et al.* 2019). In other words, this football governance system was in effect not representing the interest of Chinese football development; rather, it was largely serving political purposes for the government. By depoliticising football, it allows the Chinese government to shift the responsibility of improving the national team performance to the CFA, an empowered autonomous governing body. Secondly, as the defeats of the national teams often led to public blame of the government and its policies (Peng *et al.* 2019), it was arguably the government's desire to deflect the blame away from themselves. By delegating decisions to the CFA may shield the government from critical public opinions. Thirdly, deploying depoliticisation strategies in its problematic policy fields gives an opportunity to the government to distance itself from failure. Constant failure to deliver success may lead to a loss of public trust in its governance mechanisms, which in return affects the entity's legitimacy (Poppo and Schepker 2010). Depoliticising football was an acknowledgement of the government's lack of necessary expertise to deliver football success and is beneficial for the government as the credibility of the depoliticisation policy can be reinforced once the Chinese national team performance improves.

### *Forms of depoliticisation*

In the discussion of the nexus between politicisation and depoliticisation, Hay (2007) argued that it was necessary to distinguish the political and non-political arenas where issues and ideas were transmitted. Therefore, he differentiated the political sphere into three arenas: i.e., (1) the public and governmental arena; (2) the public and non-governmental arena; and (3) the private arena, all of which are categorised into the realm where political contingency and deliberation occur, in contrast to the 'realm of necessity', which Hay referred to as the non-political realm. Specifically, the realm of necessity (non-political realm) refers to the arena (e.g. the environment/nature) without the capacity of human agency and 'it is fate and nature that fight it out for supremacy' (Hay 2007, p. 79). By increasing the capacity for human agency or interference in matters previously the preserve of

nature and resulting in the transfer of issues from the realm of fate to that of deliberation is what Hay conceptualised as Type 1 politicisation. Examples may include the co-ordinated campaign of anti-globalisation protestors against McDonald's restaurants. As issues become further politicised when they become subject to public processes of deliberation, where previously such deliberation was confined to the private sphere, is called Type 2 politicisation. The consciousness-raising activities of feminism drawing public (but non-governmental) attention to issues of domestic violence and discrimination provides an example of politicisation Type 2. Type 3 politicisation might be seen to promote issues from the public (but non-governmental) sphere into the arena of direct government deliberation through channels such as successful lobbying of government (e.g. the petitioning of government to restrict smoking in stadiums). As a result, issues that may already have considerable salience within public discourse are taken up to the formal legislative process.

Then, reversing the process of politicisation, which gradually promotes issues from the realm of necessity to the governmental sphere, Hay (2007) identified three types of depoliticisation depicting how issues and ideas were transmitted from the central governmental arena to the non-political sphere. In specific terms, Type 1 depoliticisation refers to the demotion of issues from the governmental to the public sphere. The displacement of responsibility from government to public or quasi-public authorities is a general form of this type of depoliticisation. In this way, contentious issues can effectively be passed to officials who can present them as purely technical matters (e.g. improving the national football team performance). Politicians can therefore be insulated from having to answer for the problematic consequences of their policies (Hay 2007). Type 2 depoliticisation refers to the demotion of issues from the public to the private sphere – becoming matters for domestic deliberation or consumer choice. The privatisation of the professional football clubs can be considered as an example of Type 2 depoliticisation as it involves a transfer of responsibility for the provision of football products from the public to the private sector. Finally, Type 3 depoliticisation refers to the demotion of issues from the private sphere to the realm of necessity, which is no longer a political concern. The most prevalent form of Type 3 depoliticisation is often associated with the identification and appeal to process that we no longer have the capacity to manage or steer (Hay 2007). For example, politicians often invoke globalisation as a non-negotiable external economic reason for their series of policy necessities. Useful as this typology unarguably is, it is limited in explaining the contextual dynamics and process.

Building on the work of Hay (2007), Wood and Flinders (2014, p. 156) reconstructed the types of depoliticisation into a 'three-face approach', namely, a) *governmental*; b) *discursive* and c) *societal* depoliticisation. The governmental face of depoliticisation is similar to the Type 1 depoliticisation identified by Hay (2007), which mainly involves the demoted issues in the state, whereas the other two dimensions focus on civil society (not just the state) and the role of social actors in the depoliticisation process (Wood 2016). In specific terms, Wood and Flinders (2014) explained governmental depoliticisation as a process, through which policy issues are shifted from the responsibility of the central state machinery to the broader public sphere of quasi-autonomous agencies. Societal depoliticisation revolves the transition of issues from the public sphere to the private sphere and focuses on the 'engaged' and 'active' citizenship as well as the drivers of political disengagement (Wood and Flinders 2014, p. 159). Discursive depoliticisation is associated with the neoliberal discourse, i.e. ideas and language that are involved in the promotion of a topic, or an issue, which denies the idea of politics (Wood and Flinders 2014).

Despite the various forms of depoliticisation identified in the literature, research on depoliticisation has predominantly focused on the governmental initiatives (e.g. Burnham 2001, Flinders and Buller 2006). This strand of depoliticisation research mainly focuses on the governmental arena and characteristics of political decision-making (Beveridge 2017). For instance, Kuzemko (2016) examined how the UK government has deployed depoliticisation strategy in the energy and climate sector and the impact upon its political capacity. Jenkins (2011, p. 158) pointed out that this type of depoliticisation contains statecraft such as 'concealment, alteration or reduction of state control' over certain issues or policy field. This paper, focusing on the reduction of state control over the national football

affairs (see research context section), shares the same origin with Type 1 depoliticisation identified by Hay (2007), and focuses on the governmental dimension of depoliticisation (Wood and Flinders 2014).

## Dissecting the depoliticisation process

For the purpose of distinguishing between different types of depoliticisation tactics and understanding the interplay between them, Flinders and Buller (2006) deconstruct the concept of depoliticisation and provide a multilevel analytical framework (see Figure 1). This framework categorised depoliticisation activities into three levels for analysis, namely, the macro-; meso-; and micro-political level; within which the three core elements are *principle*, *tactics* and *tools*. 'Principle' refers to the macro-political level acceptance of the pursuit of depoliticisation (Flinders and Buller 2006). 'Tactics' refer to different implementation mechanisms or forms adopted by the meso-political level to realise its overarching depoliticising goals (Rogers 2009). The last element 'tools', occurring at the micro-political level, involves the operationalisation of the depoliticisation strategy (Flinders and Buller 2006).

In their analytic framework, Flinders and Buller (2006) further classify the meso-political level depoliticisation tactics into: a) institutional depoliticisation; b) rule-based depoliticisation; and c) preference-shaping depoliticisation. Institutional depoliticisation occurs when politicians pass the day-to-day management of a particular issue (e.g. management of football in our case) over to an agency (e.g. national football association) which operates autonomously from, but within parameters set by, central government officials (Beveridge 2012). This is an institutional reform in the sense that it instigates a shift in organisational and administrative structures of autonomy and accountability for decision making. Rule-based depoliticisation happens when the government officials adopt an explicit framework of technocratic rules (e.g. a reform plan) as a public commitment to constrain the need for political discretion (Flinders and Buller 2006, Kettell 2008). These rules should not be discriminative or in favour of certain groups, otherwise, they are likely to generate a sense of inequality and provoke protest (Flinders and Buller 2006). Preference-shaping depoliticisation tactics do not involve any structural (institutional depoliticisation) or legal (rule-based

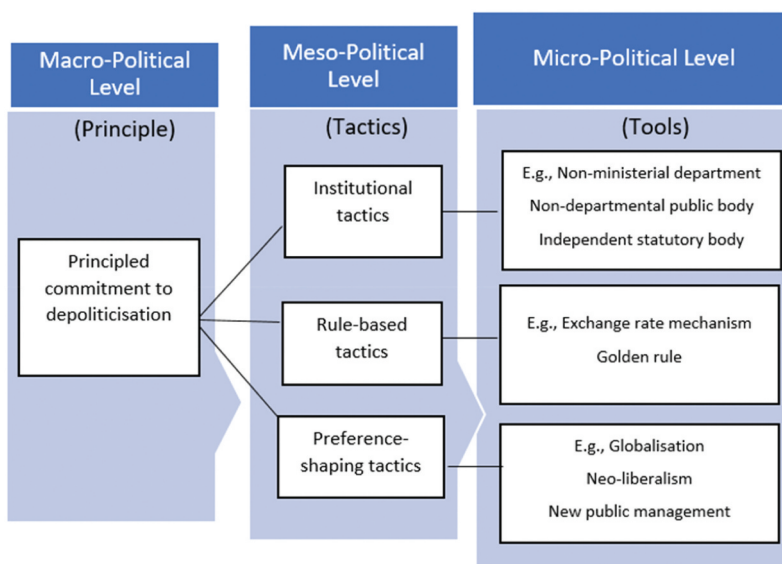


Figure 1. Dissection of the depoliticisation process (Flinders and Buller 2006).



depoliticisation) capital and can be adopted when officials seek to 'justify a refusal to intervene or regulate a certain issue' (Flinders and Buller 2006, p. 308). Figure 1 summarises the above illustration of the dissection of depoliticisation.

## Research methods

The research is guided by a critical realist ontology that views reality as both objective and socially constructed, which is complemented by an interpretative epistemology and qualitative research strategy that relies on non-numerical analysis to provide an understanding of the depoliticisation process (Bhaskar 2008). A single case study research design was employed (Yin 2018). Specifically, the study examined the depoliticisation process of the football governance system in China over the 1980s–2010s period. The case is worth investigating because of the uniqueness of the Chinese football context. As aforementioned, there is a relative lack of studies on depoliticisation beyond the macroeconomic policy terrain (Bates *et al.* 2014, Beveridge 2017), as well as in a non-democratic setting. This case not only addressed both gaps, but also answers the calls from political scientists (e.g. Beveridge and Naumann 2014, Bond *et al.* 2019) to study depoliticisation processes via a situated and empirical analysis. Indeed, the series of interconnected and entangled depoliticisation attempts in the Chinese football sector since the 1980s presents an ideal case to investigate depoliticisation processes.

## Data collection

Document analysis and semi-structured interviews were utilised for data collection (Bryman 2012). Documents included football reform related policy documents published by central and local governments as well as national and provincial football governing bodies during the examining period, i.e. 1980s–2010s (see Table 1). Documents were selected based on Scott's (1990) four key criteria: authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning. Official documents derived from the government 'can certainly be seen as authentic and as having meaning (in the sense of being clear and comprehensible to the researcher)' (Bryman 2012, p. 550). Media reports are often challenged regarding their authenticity. To ensure authenticity and credibility, the documents used in this study are, wherever possible, traced back to the original source or authorship. For example, when a policy is adapted and embedded in a media article, the original policy will be located, to ensure that the original wordings and sentences were analysed and used.

Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2018 with 12 senior managers at the CFA, as well as key stakeholders in the commercial clubs (10) and member football associations (7). Interview participants were selected based on two main criteria: first, participants should have been involved in the football reform process and second, participants should have experience in football-related policy process. All participants recruited in this study have worked in the football sector for at least eight years (with some up to 25 years). As such, they have been actively involved in the reform policymaking and implementation. A translated Chinese version of the ethical checklist was provided to all participants. A summary of the interviewees' profiles can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 1.** Types and sources of documents reviewed.

| Types of Documents                             | Sources   |
|--|---|
| Official documents derived from the government | Publications, policies, reports by the Chinese State Council, the Chinese Football Association and local football associations, General Administration of Sport of China, the Chinese Olympic Committee; municipal and provincial governments   |
| Mass-media outputs (Internet)                  | Official Websites of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China; the Chinese Football Association and local football associations, commercial football clubs, the All-China Sports Federation, the Chinese Olympic Committee, the China Central Television (CCTV), Xinhua News Agency, China Daily; Sina Sports; Tencent Sports; HuPu Sports; Titan Sports |



**Table 2.** A summary of the profile of interviewees in the study.

| Organisations  | Interviewees  |
|--|---|
| The Chinese Football Association (12)<br>(Code name: R1-R12) | Senior managers in the General Administration Department (1), International Relations Department (1), Planning and Legal Department (2), Communication Department (1), Market Department (1), Community Development Department (1), Youth Football Department (1), Event Management Department (1), Women's Football Department (1), National Team Administration Department (1) and Professional League Office (1) |
| Member football associations (7)<br>(Code name: R13-R19)     | North region (2)<br>South region (4)<br>West region (1)   |
| Commercial football clubs (10)<br>(Code name: R20–29)        | Chinese Super League clubs (7)<br>Chinese League One clubs (2)<br>Chinese League Two clubs (1)  |

Interviewees were asked to reflect on the reform process of Chinese football in general, and specifically comment on the strategies and tactics used to depoliticise the football governance system<sup>1</sup>. Interviews were carried out by the lead author in Chinese and digitally recorded. Each interview ranged in length from 30 to 120 minutes. For confidentiality reasons, respondents were assigned pseudonyms (i.e. R1, R2, R3, R4 ... R29). All data collected were first transcribed verbatim and participants were given the opportunity to verify their transcripts for accuracy. Back translation was also conducted to ensure linguistic consistency. The data was then imported into NVivo 12 for analysis.

### Data analysis

Both document and interview data were subject to thematic analysis (Patton 2002). Guided by Flinders and Buller (2006)'s deconstruction of depoliticisation process (Figure 1), the theme identification process of this research was largely premised on the three levels of depoliticisation, namely, the macro-level principled commitment to depoliticisation; the meso-level institutional, rule-based, and preference-shaping depoliticisation tactics; and the micro-level depoliticisation tools. Finally, the trustworthiness of the data was maximised by a data-source triangulation technique (Guba and Lincoln 1994), that is, by selecting two different data collection methods we were able to ensure the consistency of the data.

The three levels of investigation of this case study include: (1) the macro-political level: the central government (the Chinese State Council) that oversees overall sport policy objectives and direction. (2) The meso-political level mainly refers to the institutional arrangements related to football governance. This can be a network of organisations (the GASC and the CFA, in this study) that are in place to implement the principled commitment at the macro-level. (3) At the micro-political level, we focus on specific operationalisation of the depoliticisation strategy within the football system, such as the restructuration of member associations, commercial leagues and clubs.

## Findings

### Macro-level principled commitment to depoliticisation

China, in the 1980s, was only a few years into the national economic reform, and the government agenda during this period was mainly focusing on how to revitalise the economy through depoliticising the traditional state-owned economic structure. Following the liberalisation of the planned economy, in 1986 the National Sport Commission (NSC, former body of the GASC) issued the *Decisions on Chinese Sport System Reform (Draft)*, which pointed out that the centralised political structure had impeded the sustainable development of the sports industry; in particular, severe problems were derived from the state-owned sport system, such as shortage of state funding, lack of support for elite sport talent development, and low efficiency in sport governance (National Sport

Commission 1993). Therefore, the government was committed to transforming the sport governance system from 'the state-owned approach' to one that allowed the market to play a supplemental role to the state-support approach (GASC 2007).

Despite the overall objective of depoliticising the sport sector in the 1980s, the government did not offer a clear implementation plan for sports organisations, resulting in limited outcomes in the process. In 1993, another policy encompassing detailed depoliticisation strategies was issued which had consequences for the depoliticisation of the sport system. Unlike previous attempts, the government proposed to separate governmental organisations and sport associations, enabling individual sport organisations to govern with full autonomy (National Sport Commission 1993). Following this policy, several changes were implemented at the meso- and micro-level. For example, major changes included the introduction of the system of Individual Sport Management Centres to take over the delegated power from the GASC.

However, the promise of 'full autonomy' had not been fulfilled by the sport organisations in the second round of reform in the 1990s. As such, a further round of reform was launched in 2000, specifically calling for:

Further separate the responsibilities of the government and society; transfer all rights that should not be held by the government to sports public institutions, civil society and immediate organisations. (GASC 2000, Point 8:32)

The rights mentioned above included decision-making in relation to organisational structure, human resources, finance, and international management (GASC 2000, Point 8:35). However, the determination of the government to depoliticise the sport system was undermined by the hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games (GASC 2002, Point 9). The state-owned sport system, that is, the policy referred as 'whole country supporting elite sport development' was perceived to be the most effective approach to maintain Olympic success (Zheng and Chen 2016); therefore, depoliticisation, particularly in terms of achieving autonomy in the aspects of finance allocation and decision making, was constrained during this period.

After the Olympics, discussion of depoliticisation was once again brought onto the policy agenda, emphasising explicitly the reform of the sport governance structure (Chinese State Council 2013a, points 1). The change of sport governance structure was primarily focused on setting up boundaries amongst the three spheres, namely, the government, private sector, and civil society, and aligning with a broad policy commitment to the modernisation of the governance system. Football was identified as a testing case for such reform, as explained in the *Reform Plan* (Chinese State Council 2015):

Football is a very popular sport in China and has a wide social impact ... In the 1990s, football has been the pioneering sport to explore professionalisation and commercialisation. Now football will once again become the breakthrough of Chinese sport system reform ... The revitalisation of football is an indispensable prerequisite for China to become a sport power.

Different to previous rounds of reform, a comprehensive reform list entailing 11 main points and 50 sub-points was proposed (Chinese State Council 2015). The most significant reform was the decoupling of the CFA from the GASC. Of particular significance was the transfer to the CFA from GASC of five main decision-making rights: organisational structure, strategy formulation, finance, human resources and international affairs management (Chinese State Council 2015, Point 2:7). The transfer of these essential rights had enabled the CFA to further operationalise the depoliticisation strategy at the meso- and micro-level.

### **Meso-level depoliticisation tactics**

In response to the macro-level depoliticisation policies or commitments made by the government, a series of meso-level depoliticisation tactics were adopted by the GASC and CFA. In relation to the institutional tactics, the depoliticisation process can be summarised as a two-step process: first,

changing the football governance system from a fully politicised and state-owned model to a quasi-autonomous one; and second, subsequently shifting from quasi-autonomy to full autonomy.

The change from a fully politicised and state-owned governance model to a quasi-autonomous one was typified by the establishment of a National Football Management Centres (NFMCC), as the unit of the system of Individual Sport Management Centres (National Sport Commission 1993). The Individual Sport Management Centres were set up with an intention to delegate the power of the GASC to each management centre. However, in reality, these management centres remained largely centralised. This is because the GASC required that all essential decision-making rights, such as human resources, finance as well as organisation strategy planning should be retained by the GASC (GASC 2001).

The centralisation of football was typified by the fact that the NFMCC and the CFA had co-existed from 1995 to 2015, sharing the same office and, more interestingly, the same group of staff. In other words, the football governing body, consequently, became a hybrid organisation crowning 'double' identities – one identity (the NFMCC) representing the government authority when dealing with domestic football stakeholders such as member associations and commercial clubs; and another identity (the CFA) dealing with international stakeholders in accordance with the FIFA's non-interference rule.<sup>2</sup> A senior staff within the CFA commented on the 'double-identity':

The 'double-identify' has caused confusions to us for many years; the CFA was not able to exercise its functions as a voluntary organisation, rather it had functioned as a political authority in the name of the NFMCC giving mandates to its member organisations ... (R3)

In addition, the functions of the CFA were overshadowed by the extended government agency, the NFMCC. As such, individual sport management centres became 'quasi-autonomous' and quasi-governmental organisations. This status of the CFA/NFMCC was maintained until 2015, when the second step in the depoliticisation process was initiated to generate full autonomy for the CFA.

Two depoliticisation tactics in particular were employed, including the annulment of the NFMCC, and the detachment of the CFA from the GASC. By doing so, as commented by interviewees:

The separation of the GASC and the CFA means the government will no longer interfere with the football governance system; it also allows the full autonomy of the CFA to become a reality. (R1)

Annuling the NFMCC means the CFA will become the only legal national football governing body, which could help improve the governance efficiency ... (R3)

The two steps of depoliticisation processes are depicted in Figure 2. Before the 2015 national football reform, the overall governance structure was a quasi-autonomous one with the GASC acting as a government authoritative body for sport, and giving direct orders or mandates to the CFA/NFMCC (the unbroken arrow represent political orders); and the CFA/NFMCC was the subordinate

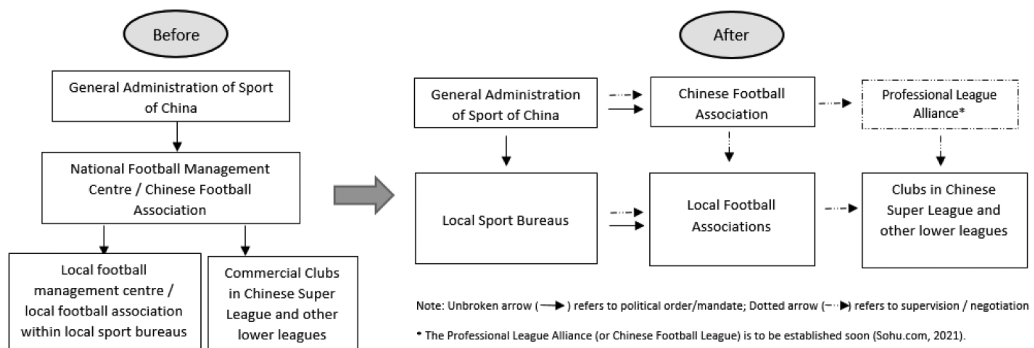


Figure 2. Chinese football governance system before and after the 2015 national football reform.

organisation of the GASC, operating as a government agency and serving as a superior policy authority to its member associations and commercial clubs.

As a result of the depoliticisation tactics, the NFMC was annulled, with the CFA becoming the sole national football governing body. The GASC had also changed its relationship with the CFA from a command role to a supervisory one (represented by the unbroken arrow in [Figure 2](#)). This role enabled the GASC to offer relevant policy guidance but not issue direct instructions to the CFA. Opposition to such arrangement emerged, criticising that the government did not intend to really let go of the control; the annulment was merely a gesture as the real control of power is still retained via the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) structure, as the policy indicated (Chinese State Council [2015](#)):

[we will] insist on the comprehensive leadership of CCP, establishing party organizations based on The Constitution of Communist Party of China, starting party activities and providing necessary conditions for such activities held by the party organizations. The CFA must establish a Party Committee, to be led by the Party Leadership Group within the GAS.

When asked about how these arrangements were going to support the CFA independence, the former President of the CFA Cai explained (Chinese Football Association [2015](#)):

After the separation, the CFA will take full leadership of national football development [...] the Party Committee in the CFA is mainly to enhance the employees' political awareness and the integrity of Party members. There is no conflict between establishing the CFA Party Committee and the independence of the CFA.

Despite the above quote, it is important to note that the current Secretary of the Party Committee of the CFA, Mr. Du Zhaocai, is also the Deputy Minister and a member of the Party Leadership Group of the GASC. He was selected by the GASC to run for and become a member of the FIFA Council in 2019 (Sohu.com [2019](#)). Therefore, one could argue that the central government was not fully committed to depoliticising the football governance system as they claimed to be; rather, it is taking a careful and meticulous approach, which may risk rewinding the previous efforts and repoliticising the system.

### ***Micro-level (de)politicisation tools***

At the micro-level, a series of depoliticisation tools were introduced into the football system, exemplified by the establishment of the commercial league (*Jia A* and *Jia B*)<sup>3</sup> (Chinese Football Association [1993](#)). The introduction of commercial leagues was an indication of the demotion of issues from the governmental to private sphere (Hay [2007](#)), aiming to bring in a market mechanism to attract businesses to start investing in football (Wu [1999](#)). Nevertheless, the utilisation of this depoliticisation tool was not very effective in insulating the commercial leagues from government intervention because both the professional football clubs and the league system were state-owned. Amongst the 24 professional football clubs in the league system, a majority of them were sponsored by local governments, with the rest sponsored by state-owned enterprises. All football players received government subsidies (Hu [2002](#)).

In a nutshell, the depoliticisation of the Chinese football was replaced by re-politicisation of the privatised sphere, i.e. the commercial leagues. Since the early 2000s, several attempts have been made by the clubs and the CFA to further depoliticise the commercial league by proposing to establish an independent Professional League Alliance (Liu *et al.* [2020](#)), but to date, no substantial change has been recorded. The depoliticisation tactic of changing the CFA from a government agency to a quasi-autonomous organisation had created barriers to the daily operation of the CFA, as one of the CFA employees from the International Relations Department commented:

In our department, whatever decision made related to international affairs in the CFA had to go through and obtain approval from the GASC, and this process often resulted in inefficiency as sometimes the decision could be delayed. (R2)

Being a quasi-autonomous organisation, much of the decision-making within the CFA was still dependent on or approved by the GASC. As an interviewee from Human Resource Department of the CFA commented:

CFA was constantly short of staff, but we could not recruit new people as we want, because we had to abide by the limited manning quotas given by the GASC, similar to other government organisations [...], we also cannot fire people because this has to be approved by the GASC. Therefore, people can be indolent sometimes and there was not much we can do about it. (R1)

It is worth explaining that the General Assembly is the supreme decision-making body and the Executive Committee is the executive body of the General Assembly (Chinese Football Association 2019a). The majority of the Committee members were political officials. This has been perceived as a challenge to the depoliticisation process, as commented by the former President of the CFA, Chen Xuyuan (CCTV 2019)<sup>4</sup>:

The CFA has to change. It has to depoliticise and avoid political formalities, which can only result in inefficiency [...] we have to be more open to field experts in our decision-making.

As such, when the CFA disaffiliated from the GASC in 2016, efforts were made to restructure the CFA Executive Committee by, first, decreasing the number of political officials sitting in the Executive Committee, and second, recruiting experts from a variety of fields relevant to football to engage with the decision-making process. R3 from the CFA's Planning and Legal Department described the change to the political representativeness in the CFA strategic apex:

The Executive Committee used to comprise of only political officials from sports bureaus, who represented the government' authority. Now, the Committee is made of wider representatives who have the field expertise, such as Rong Zhixing (former men's national team player), Sun Wen (former women's national team player) and Wang Dazhao (famous football journalist), etc. [R3]

In the General Assembly held in 2019, the number of politicians in the Committee had been reduced from twenty to only five, with an increasing number of members representing football associations ( $n=6$ ), school sports ( $n=5$ ), commercial clubs ( $n=4$ ), media ( $n=3$ ), football players ( $n=2$ ), and football fans ( $n=1$ ) (Chinese Football Association 2019b). Moreover, a number of new Special Committees ( $n=13$ ) were established to supplement the Secretariat in the CFA. Those Special Committees were put in place to support the Executive Committee in formulating strategies and work regulations and proposing annual budget plans, each of them focusing on a specific area of football.

Using the example of the new specialised Five-A-Side and Beach Football Committee, R7 from the CFA's Community Development Department explained that instead of waiting for political orders from the GASC in the past, the new Committee can consult with relevant experts and make decisions based on evidence which is a process more beneficial for the development of the sport. Furthermore, these Special Committees were empowered to take charge of formulating strategies.

With regards to the depoliticisation strategies taking place in the football system, there were mixed perceptions from the member associations. Some interviewees were in favour of the change. For instance, R14, a senior manager from a provincial football association commented:

Yes, the CFA has been separated from the GASC [...]. However, I believe there should be a clear cut between the CFA leaders and the GASC [...]. [R14]

Others believed that a careful approach should be taken – an interviewee from a member association expressed a slightly different view as he raised his concern over the depoliticisation process:

This is a big project and requires a careful and consistent approach by the government [...] we cannot simply separate all member football associations from their respective government as it may bounce back quickly. [R15]

Most interviewees from commercial clubs pointed out that they are supportive of the depoliticisation strategies, but found that these strategies were slow in implementation:

Personally, I have not felt that there has been any depoliticisation related changes at all. For example, if I were to go to the CFA to deal with our club's player transfer issues, I'd still experience the same old hierarchical, bureaucratic working style. [R21]

## Discussion

It appeared that various strategies, tactics and tools were adopted by the Chinese government to depoliticise the football governance system. Despite the generic dissection of the depoliticisation process at three political levels, Flinders and Buller (2006, p. 310) added that such clear-cut distinction 'risks over-simplifying the complexity of modern governance'. Hence, it is important to bear in mind that a mixture of different depoliticisation tactics or tools can operate simultaneously across different political theatres.

As the findings suggest, the depoliticisation strategies were initially put forward by the government after reflecting upon several problems situated in the state-centred sport system and the fact that sport can be used as a useful tool to establish China's reputation in the international community (Connell 2018). Although the intention to depoliticise was made clear, there was no clear plan to carry out this envisaged depoliticised sport governance structure. As such, the depoliticisation policies in the 1980s can be argued to have insufficiently demonstrated a Type 1 depoliticisation (Hay 2007) as it had made limited impact on the overall Chinese football governance system. In particular, we did not capture any evidence of the transfer of responsibilities to any public or quasi-autonomous agency. During the 1990s and 2000s, some changes started to occur at the meso- and micro levels. For instance, the National Football Management Centre was an outcome of the meso-level depoliticisation tactic. This is an institutional depoliticisation tactic (Flinders and Buller 2006) adopted by the government to change the direct governing relationship to a shared responsibility. Despite there being no real insulation of the governance of football from political intervention, the introduction of the quasi-governmental, quasi-autonomous organisation (i.e. the NFMC) had allowed the idea of depoliticisation to permeate into meso and micro political level (Lamm and Gordon 2010). This period has, to a large extent, delivered a Type 1 depoliticisation, which entailed the demotion of football issues from the governmental to the public sphere and a limited demonstration of the Type 2 depoliticisation, i.e. the demotion of issues from the public to the private sphere (Hay 2007). What constrained the impact of such depoliticisation attempts during this period was the lack of consideration of the specific setting of the depoliticisation strategy at the micro level. In other words, there was limited change to the CFA as it remained as a shadow organisation of the NFMC without any decision-making rights. The CFA was acting as an extended government agency of the GASC prior to the 2015 national reform, which suggested that the government was not yet ready to let go of its control over football governance, consistent with the previous literature (Liu *et al.* 2021, Ma and Zheng 2021, Newman *et al.* 2021).

To avoid further public blame, the Chinese government implemented a relatively more comprehensive depoliticisation policy in 2015, which took into consideration of all three political levels. It demonstrated not only a state-level principal commitment to depoliticisation, but also a range of meso-level depoliticisation tactics (e.g. the decoupling of the CFA from the GASC to become an autonomous organisation) as well as micro-level tools (e.g. a wider representation of experts in the decision-making mechanisms of the CFA). This period demonstrated fully Type 1 and Type 2 depoliticisation, which included the demotion of issues from the government to the public sphere and from the public to the private sphere. In addition, more institutional depoliticisation tactics were visible during this period such as the separation of the football governance system (including the CFA and their member associations) from the government system; however, there was limited evidence of preference-shaping depoliticisation tactics (Flinders and Buller 2006) identified. Furthermore, there is no evidence of Type 3 depoliticisation that shows Chinese football governance has been removed from the governmental sphere to the realm of necessity and is no longer



a political concern (Hay 2007). A combination of depoliticisation principles, tactics and tools were identifiable during the process, strengthened by the inclusion of wider representativeness and stakeholders in the CFA's decision-making process. Nevertheless, it is important not to ignore the fact that the Chinese government has still not fully relinquish the control of the football governance system. Moreover, an enhanced Party leadership was established through the GASC-appointed personnel within the CFA, through which the Chinese government still has strong control over the CFA and local football associations. The unwillingness to 'let go' of the control on the one hand implied the challenge faced by the government to fully commit to the depoliticisation process, on the other hand, it demonstrated a cautious attitude by the central power towards its delegated parties. In other words, Chinese football governance is still residing in the complex realms of the government, public and private spheres.

Our finding is also consistent with Jenkins (2011) observation that depoliticisation is not a stable endpoint, but an effect or outcome of policies or political strategies, which can be reversed. When an issue is considered unsatisfactory or unacceptable to – or threatening the interests of – the government or politicians, (re)politicisation might occur, or to(re)politicise this issue in order to fit with the norm or ideology of a person or a group of people (Beveridge and Naumann 2014). Examining the case of Chinese football, one of the possible explanations for the emergence of re-politicisation was that, due to historic path dependency, governmental control of sport was considered 'normal' and depoliticisation was 'abnormal'; as such, it was almost a 'voluntary' or 'rightful' action for the government to intervene and support the commercial clubs and professional players during the depoliticisation process.

The ambiguous practices of control and autonomy potentially offers an explanation why the depoliticisation of the Chinese football system was not a single, transformative shift; rather it was an incremental process with nexus emerging over time between depoliticisation and (re)politicisation (Wood 2016). In fact, such a dilemma has been persistent throughout all three stages. For example, the GASC's was reluctant to delegate the essential decision-making rights over football, and therefore had maintained these powers until 2015. This dynamic interplay between the processes of depoliticisation and (re)politicisation (Hay 2007) can also be exemplified by the privatisation and re-politicisation of the commercial leagues, as presented in the findings.

Furthermore, it was evident from the Chinese football case that challenges existed in the depoliticisation process. The main challenge lay in the wider social-political environment which was not fully ready to embrace the idea of depoliticisation. Findings suggested that the unsupportive environment had resisted the efforts to depoliticise the football governance system. This challenge has caused and will continue to cause disturbance to the overall depoliticisation process.

## Conclusion

This paper analysed the depoliticisation process within the Chinese football sector and examined the dynamics associated with the decision and commitment to depoliticise the football system at the macro-, meso-, and micro-political levels across three time periods. It provided an empirical investigation of depoliticisation in an authoritarian political region. Through dissecting the process of depoliticisation committed by the Chinese government to the football governance system at different times, the study contributed to literature on depoliticisation in several ways: firstly, it broadens the scope of depoliticisation research: by examining depoliticisation in non-democratic settings, it enables a more comprehensive analysis of depoliticisation as a global phenomenon. Secondly, it enhances our understanding of non-democratic political systems – in this case it is Chinese sports system. By investigating depoliticisation in the case of Chinese football reform process it can shed light on the unique mechanisms and dynamics of political decision-making in this system, which leads to a better understanding of how political power is distributed and exercised in different political environments. Thirdly, applying depoliticisation theory to non-democratic contexts can help identify



factors that may be unique or particularly relevant to these settings. This can contribute to the development of more context-sensitive theoretical frameworks for understanding depoliticisation and lay the foundation for future comparative analysis. We acknowledge that the Chinese government has been utilising football as an instrument to achieve its political objectives; however, this by no means suggests that the Chinese government has no intention to depoliticise the football governance system. In fact, we see that depoliticisation is not necessarily about embracing 'better governance', but about an objective to grow the sport for political (and economic) reasons.

This paper has some practical implications too. It suggests that in an authoritarian regime the central government plays a decisive role not only in driving forward the depoliticisation agenda, but also in hindering the implementation of the depoliticisation strategy, particularly when there is a lack of determination to fully relinquish the control. As such, it is necessary for the government to be fully committed to the depoliticisation agenda, not only at the macro level, but throughout the whole policy process. Future research is recommended to examine the use of the depoliticisation strategies in Chinese sport system and to explore the role of civil society and social actors in the Chinese sport depoliticisation process. It would be also interesting to observe whether or not some of the depoliticisation efforts made so far will be re-politicised in the future.

## Notes

1. Depoliticisation is translated to Chinese (pinyin) Qu Xingzhenghua in this study, which is a common word being discussed frequently in government policies and media articles. It is a familiar term to all interviewees; therefore, during the interviews, no detailed explanation was asked by the participants. We appreciate that readers may have different interpretation of this concept due to the fact that there is no equivalent word in Chinese. However, we believe for this study Qu Xingzhenghua is the best and most contextualised interpretation.
2. Article 19 of the Federation Internationale de Football Association Statutes provides that 'Each member shall manage its affairs independently and without undue influence from third parties' (FIFA 2018).
3. Jia A and Jia B, the precedent form of the current Chinese Super League and League One.
4. CCTV: Chinese Central Television, the mainstream state TV broadcaster in China.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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