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# **A multi-level analysis of the transformational leadership during the 2015**

## **Chinese football reform**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an analysis of the Chinese national football reform which was initiated by the Chinese government in 2015. The chapter focuses not only on the leadership of the central government in facilitating the transformation of the Chinese Football Association (CFA), as it was decoupled from the General Administration of Sport (GAS) to become an autonomous organisation, but also focuses on the role of the CFA as it led a series of changes that affected local football associations nationwide. The chapter therefore explores a multi-level leader-follower relationship between the central government (including the GAS), the CFA and the local football associations and discusses the facilitating and constraining factors affecting the leaders of the reform.

### **Research context and method**

The Chinese political system, which was characterised by strong top-down and centralised mandates, has undergone a series of reforms since 2013 (He et al., 2016). These reforms attempted to ‘streamline government agencies and delegate government authorities to public institutions and enterprises’, with an ultimate purpose of improving governance efficiency and enhancing overall social and economic development (Chinese State Council, 2013). The 2015 national football reform was initiated against this backdrop. The Chinese State Council released *The Overall Plan for Chinese Football Reform and Development* (in short, the *Reform Plan*) with the aim to improve Chinese football performance. It acknowledged the necessity to minimise government interference in the football governance system (Chinese State Council, 2015). Following the *Reform Plan*, the CFA was decoupled from the

A multi-level analysis of the transformational leadership during the 2015 Chinese football reform government system (i.e., the GAS) to become the only legitimate national football governing body and an autonomous organisation to manage national football affairs independently from the government (Peng et al., 2019). As a cascading effect, member football associations of the CFA at the local level were also required to be separated from their respective local government agencies (i.e., local sport bureaus) to become independent organisations (Chinese State Council, 2015).

An embedded single case study research design was adopted for this project to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of leadership in managing the change process (Yin, 2018). The 2015 national football reform was selected as the ‘main’ unit of analysis because of its uniqueness and radicalness (Bryman, 2016); the CFA, together with local football associations were considered as sub-units of analysis. Based on the qualitative nature of this study, semi-structured interviews ( $N=18$ ) were used for data collection (with an Ethical Clearance Checklist approved by Loughborough University London). Secondary data such as media reports and policy documents by the government and the CFA were also selectively collected and analysed to support the study (Bryman, 2016). Thematic analysis was used for data analysis with the support of software NVIVO12. For confidentiality reasons respondents were assigned pseudonyms. (i.e., R1, R2, R3, R4...R18).

### **Theoretical Background: Transformational Leadership Theory**

An overarching integrative theme of leadership literature is associated with organisational change (Kan & Parry, 2004). The importance of leadership in change can be understood via the various roles that leaders play to manage the change process. For instance, Antonakis and House (2014) discussed the role of leadership in motivating followers and mobilising resources towards the fulfilment of organisational change. Moreover, leaders’ competency to manage the diverse, sometimes conflicting demand of stakeholders during a

A multi-level analysis of the transformational leadership during the 2015 Chinese football reform change process is considered vital to generate positive outcomes. Transformational leaders, according to Schaubroeck et al (2007) are those who inspire followers to transcend self-interest and perceptions of their own limitations to become more effective in achieving collective goals. In order to achieve the ideal change outcome, transformational leaders do not just share the vision with their followers and encourage them to embrace the change; they also support followers to realise the vision by formulating a feasible implementation plan and, at the same time, encouraging followers to think ‘outside the box’ and to adopt an explorative thinking style (Eisenbach et al., 1999). The desired outcomes of such leadership are heightened awareness of organisational values, unusual levels of effort, and the forgoing of self-interest of followers for the good of the collective (Ammeter et al., 2002).

Bass (1985) conceptualised transformational leadership as comprising four different elements, as depicted in Figure 1. *Idealised influence* refers to the charismatic role modelling behaviour of leaders; *Inspirational motivation* means that transformational leaders provide meanings to followers’ work by articulating an appealing or evocative vision for the team or the organisation. *Intellectual stimulation* means that these leaders encourage followers to challenge existing assumptions, to reframe problems, and to approach old situations in new ways. *Individualized consideration* relates to coaching and mentoring behaviour of transformational leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2010). Essentially, a transformational leader should not only facilitate the change process by promoting the creation of an organisational culture that encourages change recipients to embrace the change, but also effectively convert the collective motivation into organisational outcomes (Sun & Anderson, 2012; Wart, 2003). Bass’s (1985) transformational leadership theory served as an analytical lens for the study of the leadership during the 2015 national football reform.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

Apart from the many attributes a transformational leader possesses in shaping a follower' behaviours in the change course, researchers have also identified the influences that institutional norms and values, as well as the social influence processes can have on the outcome of leadership phenomena (Ahearn et al., 2004; Schaubroeck et al., 2007). In particular, when examining public reforms, political processes (e.g., government institutions and party ideologies) and political power can contribute to the effectiveness of leader outcomes (Ammeter et al., 2002; Ospina, 2016; Sun & Anderson, 2012; Wart, 2013). DeLuca (1999) identified three benefits that political coalitions that can make an impact on the outcome of the leadership (cited by Ammeter et al., 2002, p. 768). The first benefit is convergent validity, as agreement among coalition members with varied perspectives lends credibility to the importance of the issue and the need for action; the second benefit is task legitimization, as individuals who would otherwise refrain from political action come to recognize the legitimacy of their concerns and the importance of addressing them; and finally, increased manoeuvrability arising from the combined resources and abilities of the coalition members. Such a political coalition was assembled during the 2015 Chinese reform which had, to an extent, influenced the change process as a whole as will be explained later. In the next section, findings related to the demonstration of the leadership of the central government as well as the CFA will be presented.

## **Findings**

### *The leadership of the central government*

The leadership of the central government with the reform context is mainly demonstrated through three aspects: first, the utility of building coalitions as a joint force to pursue the reform outcomes; second, empowering the CFA as the leader to lead the nationwide

A multi-level analysis of the transformational leadership during the 2015 Chinese football reform implementation process of the reform plan; and finally, retaining the supervisory role over the change course. Next, each of these aspects will be examined in detail.

#### A ministerial coalition for the football reform programme

As aforementioned, the 2015 national reform was unprecedented due to its scale as well as the level of radicalness, as such, this had imposed challenges on the implementation process. In order to facilitate the reform process on the national level, the State Council established an Inter-Ministerial Joint Assembly for Football Reform and Development (in short, the Assembly) shortly after the release of the *Reform Plan*. The Assembly was made up of representatives from seventeen government departments and ministries, including the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the GAS, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Education and was led by the Vice Premier of the State Council, Mrs Li Yandong. The main functions of this coalition were to support and supervise the implementation of the overall reform programme through the collaboration of all participating ministerial departments; coordinating and providing consensual solutions to issues that could occur during the reform process; and more importantly, creating an amenable change environment for the Chinese football reform (General Administration of Sport, 2015).

With the support of this coalition, the implementation process of the reform programme was able to go underway. When reflecting upon the outcomes of the joint forces, the former CFA President Cai Zhenhua made a comment on a press conference (General Administration of Sport, 2015):

All member organisations of the Assembly have taken their individual responsibility and worked diligently to fully implement the *Reform Plan*. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been the most supportive and flexible partner institution in assisting the CFA foreign affairs; the Ministry of Education is doing their part in establishing a school football system for the promotion of youth football. The Ministry of Finance is

providing policy support to transfer fees related issues as well as financial support to the football foundation and other investments...

The former Vice-President of the Assembly Li Yuyi also emphasised the importance of the joint forces in creating a positive environment for the reform process (Chinese Football Association, 2017a). Consequently, because of the positive influence of the Assembly, local governments in provinces and municipalities soon followed the central government to establish their own joint Assembly to support the reform at the local level. For instance, a Beijing municipal government representative stated in a football forum (People's Daily, 2017):

Referring to the joint Assembly, we have established a similar mechanism at our municipality with twenty local government departments and units including the Beijing Municipal Department of Publicity, Bureau of Public Security, Bureau of Education and so on; this assembly has supported the consultation process for some of the recently released football reform policies.

A selection of the policies by the respective organisations in the Assembly is presented in Table 1. Undoubtedly, this mechanism of a joint Assembly has facilitated the mobilisation of governmental resources, legislative power in particular, to enable the football reform to be successfully initiated.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

### Empowering the CFA

As the national football governing body, the CFA was a salient part of the reform agenda. According to the *Reform Plan*, the first step of the reform was to decouple the CFA from the government to become an independent organisation (Chinese State Council, 2015). Straightforward and profound as this step was, a latent issue existed for the leadership of the CFA in the reform process, that is, without the 'government hat' on, the CFA could be in a

A multi-level analysis of the transformational leadership during the 2015 Chinese football reform more difficult position in obtaining support from its stakeholders and thus weakening its ability to lead the reform process. However, the Assembly and its policies had, to an extent, empowered the CFA with the much-needed governmental support and strengthened its capacity to mobilise necessary resources (see Table 1). The deliberate location of the Assembly office within the CFA (Chinese State Council, 2015) demonstrated the intended empowerment of the CFA leadership by the central government.

Furthermore, to facilitate the autonomisation process and empower the leadership of the CFA, the Assembly had issued the policy of *Chinese Football Association Reform and Adjustment Plan* and decided to empower the CFA with five essential decision-making rights, which included rights to independently manage its finance, human resource, international affairs, strategic planning and organisational structural design (Chinese State Council, 2015). It is important to point out that all these essential rights were previously held by the GAS as a means for the government to control the governance of football. By delegating these powers to the CFA, the central government demonstrated its commitment to minimise its intervention in the football governance system. Specifically, financial independence means that after decoupled from the GAS, the CFA will become a non-government and non-for-profit civil organisation and no longer receive a budget from the central government. In terms of human resource management, the CFA will have autonomy in designing its own recruitment, training and development, performance appraisal and, more importantly, pay and benefit systems. This level of flexibility was not possible prior to the reform when the CFA was maintained as a government agency. The delegated autonomy in dealing with international affairs provides the CFA the paramount capacity to: 1) manage the number of overseas business trips for the CFA staff and 2) issue official invitations to foreign collaborators (e.g., football experts), both of which were previously restricted by the GAS and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. With regards to organisational strategy and structural planning, since the GAS has withdrawn its intervention



A multi-level analysis of the transformational leadership during the 2015 Chinese football reform from all football-related affairs, the CFA is fully in charge of the policy-making, implementation and evaluation of national football development strategies at both elite and grassroots level (Chinese State Council, 2015). An important example of the CFA's decision-making powers is that the CFA's president will no longer be directly appointed by the government, but be elected through the assembly of the organisation (Chinese Football Association, 2015).

To ensure that the CFA is well-prepared to take over the leadership of the change, the *Reform Plan* also made sure that the CFA was the only legal and authoritative organisation in China by annulling the National Football Management Centre, which was a parallel organisation with the CFA to manage national football affairs. As such, the central government, through the elaboration of reform policy, empowered the CFA by firstly, providing the governmental support and resources through the Assembly; secondly, providing five essential decision-making rights for the CFA to gain autonomy from the GAS; and finally, making sure that the CFA is the one and only national football governing body in the country.

#### Retaining the supervisory role

It is important to point out that whilst the central government had committed to the separation and autonomy of the CFA from the government system, it maintained a role of 'supervision' over the CFA (Chinese State Council, 2015). This supervisory role is achieved via two routes: 1) the GAS offering relevant policy 'guidance and services' to the CFA as the governmental department; and 2) the Chinese Communist Party (in short, Party) network led by the GAS Party Committee in the CFA. 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, this includes formulating policies; improving grassroots and professional leagues; and managing the national teams and so on, whereas the GAS will provide the purchasing capacity for the CFA's deliveries/services. The GAS will also provide other safeguarding services and supervise the CFA.

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.

Indeed, to make sure that the CFA as well as its member associations were well supported in the reform process, the central government advocated 'insulation but not isolation' (in Chinese pinyin: Tuogou, dan bu tuoli), which meant that governments cannot simply 'let go of' the football associations and turn their back on all football affairs (Xinhua News, 2017). Instead, governments should exploit their advantages in terms resources deployment to fully support the football reform process. However, this was not straightforward in practice.

For instance, a respondent talked about the challenges faced by the local member associations during the implementation process – whilst member associations were seeking cooperation with their counterparts (i.e., sport bureau) in local governments, the latter were not 'willing' to provide this support or acknowledge these duties, 'because their top leaders did not command them to do so', or 'there is no such regulation which articulates these duties' (R16).

And when asked what caused the problem, the respondent commented:

I think the problem lies in the fact that there was not a systematic implementation strategy prior to the issuing of the Reform Plan. The idea of 'government purchase' of our services is good, and it is a trend. Yet how to actually implement this idea so that

the member associations can benefit from it becomes one of the biggest challenges we are facing right now (R16).

Based on the interviewee's reflection, the supervisory role of the government seems necessary to 'safeguard' the reform process, particularly to ensure that the insulated football associations are not isolated by the government system, which could add further impediments to the change process. With a framework of support and policies set in place by the central government at the start of the reform process, it was time for the CFA to take the leadership and continue the implementation of the *Reform Plan*.

### *The leadership of the CFA*

The leadership of the CFA was essential in directing and supporting the reform of football associations nationwide to gain autonomy from the government system. Since the separation meant that these associations would no longer receive a budget from the government, most of them were not ready to accept and implement the change; and in some cases, even if they were ready, they did not know how to carry out the change. As such, the CFA was expected to take the leadership in tackling these challenges and steering the organisational change direction and process. Next, the demonstration of the CFA leadership will be examined in detail.

### Reorientation of the CFA leadership: 'From a leader to a servant'

Following the separation from the GAS, the CFA needed to reposition itself as a national football governing body, no longer a governmental agency, to lead the change of the football governance system. As such, the first step the CFA took was to 'rebrand' itself as a servant organisation of its members rather than a political authoritative organisation as it used to be (Han et al., 2010). The former General Secretary of the CFA Zhang provided a rationale why this change was necessary (People's Daily, 2015):

It's undeniable that in the past, CFA didn't set up an administrative system that catered for the needs of member associations... our investigation showed that local member associations shared both similarities and dissimilarities with CFA, and the conditions and environments these associations confronted varied...After the reform, how we can work together to build a system to enable better interactions among local associations and with CFA will be another crucial task!

Indeed, when comparing the CFA Statutes published in 2014 and 2017, that is, before and after the reform, it was evident in the revised CFA Statutes that a change was added to the new CFA domain: 'to build an efficient management system to better serve its members' (Statutes of Chinese Football Association, 2017b, Point 4.7). When asked to reflect on the reorientation of the CFA leadership as a servant organisation to its members, a member of staff from a local football association commented:

At a recent meeting with the CFA, they [CFA officials] described member associations as the 'base' of the CFA. This is the first time I have heard a description like that in the nineteen years I worked in the Chinese football sector. Maybe this is a strong indication that CFA will start to think about how to better 'serve' (pinyin: *Fuwu*) the member associations (R13).

However, another interviewee from a local football association held a more conservative view:

Well, 59 out of 100 is the mark I would give to the CFA in terms of the servant leadership style. There might be some improvement, but at the moment, it is still pretty much bureaucratic, and leaders centred! We were asked to complete quite a few tasks since the reform; however, we have not been consulted whether we have the capacity to do these things...(R14)

R17 pointed out the challenges for the CFA to transition its leadership style:

It is normal in the Chinese context that the CFA do not seek advice from its member associations for its own change; and the truth is, we cannot offer better advice. What happens is, we observe how the CFA implements their change and once they are completed, we will refer to their change process and duplicate the changes in our organisations.

Despite the CFA's vision to change its leadership style to better serve its members, it seemed in practice, particularly during the decision-making process, the CFA tend to follow the traditional way of leading, that is through giving commands to its member associations without consulting them, at least not in every circumstance. As followers, the member associations are also used to 'follow' and implement the orders given by the CFA and are not confident or able to take initiatives in providing advice during the change process.

The CFA's steering of the organisation change direction

Following the *Reform Plan*, a new structural principle was adopted by the CFA, which was to embrace wide representativeness in its strategic apex:

The leadership group in the CFA should consist of wide representativeness and expertise. Members of the Executive Committee could be from the governmental agencies, local football associations and communities, professional league members, well-known and accomplished football practitioners and football experts, etc (Chinese State Council, 2015).

'This confirms that the Chinese football system is ready to breakthrough the old bureaucratic system and restructure the organisation into one which embraces innovation and expertise (knowledge)', as R17 commented. In accordance with the changes to the organisational domain, the CFA had also gone through a series of structural change from a form of 'machine' or 'professional bureaucracy' to one described by Mintzberg (1979, p.380)

A multi-level analysis of the transformational leadership during the 2015 Chinese football reform as ‘the divisionalised form’. A bureaucratic organisation, according to Pfeffer and Salancik’s (1974) definition, refers to ‘a well-defined authority structure and well-defined objectives for the organisation, which tend to result in a computational, optimising or rational type of decision strategy.’ (p.35) While the divisionalised form, or multi-divisional form (M-form) was defined as a structural response to diversification, size and/or market (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1974).

Before the reform, the secretariat was the main working body in the CFA. There were 13 departments, which included the community development department, youth football department, event management department, women's football department, national team administration department and professional league office. Three years later, 14 more departments were established based on the previous structure. Among them, some department was divided into the smaller departments for more specialised management; for example, the youth department was divided into the men’s and women’s youth department; and the original professional league office was separated into the Chinese super league department, League A department and League B department to cater for the divided tasks.

This structural change echoes Mintzberg (1979)’s argument that divisionalisation would occur in an organisation ‘simply because all the decisions cannot be understood at one centre, one brain. Sometimes the necessary information just cannot be brought to that centre’ (p.182) and as such, the sharing of decision-making powers enables individuals to respond more efficiently to a specific situation or problem. A manager of the Human Resource Department summarised:

Since March 2015, there has been three rounds of recruitment, through which we have successfully recruited 36 staff and most of these new staff have their educational or industrial background in economic, law, sport management and media communication etc. Now within CFA, we have almost 90 staff with more than 10 people with PhD titles,

and half have had master's degrees. At least 20 people have had the experience of studying or working abroad (R5).

It can be seen from the quote that the CFA was committed to expanding the expertise team and recruiting staff with specialisation. R6 suggests that the structural change of CFA is mainly aimed at improving internal working efficiency. As they described, the old structure was helpful for centralised management, but it sometime causes problems:

Within my department, I have six people working under my supervision, and they are very good at their jobs. However, for most of the time, these people had to deal with many types of work at the same time, and consequently it resulted in inefficiency...

This is not only happening in our department,

The new structure of the secretariat, has expanded (in fact, doubled) the number of departments for the purpose of 'more effective management', as the interviewee interpreted, whilst some interviewees held a hesitant view towards the new structure:

Personally, I am not sure how the new structure would work out. I think there are more factors that can affect work efficiency than just restructuring the organisation. For example, the competency of the employees can to some extent affect problem-solving process and outcomes. (R8)

The organisational structural change in the CFA had inspired the local football associations to take a similar change route, as they perceive the change was efficient in solving issues:

After the CFA structural adjustment, my personal feeling is that the CFA has become more professional and specialised. When I need to talk to somebody in the CFA about any inquiries, I will be instructed to go to a relevant department and get it sorted...

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previously, it was bit ambiguous, sometimes I have to go to different offices and ask everyone in the building until I get to the right person... (R14).

This comment was echoed by another interviewee:

The new departments established in the CFA definitely make it more specialised. Professional people in their specialised roles, this change will support our associations to become more professional as well... (R15).

Supporting the change within member football associations

As aforementioned, the local football associations were struggling to survive when asked to separate from their respective local government system because they would 'lose' their major, if not sole source of income to keep the organisation operational. As such, how the CFA would approach and communicate the change to its member associations and provide timely support is vital to reach the desired change outcome.

Based on the reflections of the interviewees, the CFA had strived to improve the communication between them and the football associations since the reform programme was initiated in 2015. This is evident in the various new channels created by the CFA to enable its stakeholders to participate in the decision-making process:

I think the communication with the CFA is better now, at least we have more opportunities to speak out our minds. CFA have constantly organised meetings with us since the reform, such as the regular investor meetings, or the ones with member associations (R14).

The CFA would ask for our honest opinions during these meetings. There were usually different demands put forward by different regions or organisations, CFA cannot always meet their requirements. However, you can see they (CFA) were striving to



make some changes after each meeting. Some meetings are quite useful, unlike in the old days when some decisions were made based on nothing (R17).

Undoubtedly, the member associations valued the fact that they were provided with opportunities to contribute to the change and have their voice heard by their leaders, the CFA, during the decision-making process. However, some were also frustrated by the outcome of the communication, because they think that ‘the process is somewhat useless ... and it makes no impact afterwards’ (R13). The mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness of communication demonstrates that there is scope for improvement in terms of the CFA’s ability to engage its followers throughout the reform process.

Support, whether financial or political, was considered by football associations staff as a pivotal element which could easily determine the success or failure of their organisational change in the reform process; this is largely due to their previous dependent status on their respective local governments for funding:

We need our government to give us enough support and make sure we can safely walk down the [marketisation] path (in pinyin: *fushangma*, *songyicheng*) rather than a sudden push-out (R13).

...if there is not any financial or policy support from the CFA or the local government, you could only imagine the level of difficulty of us surviving after the decoupling. And this causes a problem: if every association is just managing to survive, who would have the time to consider development?... (R15)

In 2018, the CFA issued a funding scheme – ‘Breakthrough Scheme’ to support local football associations in the reform process (Chinese Football Association, 2018). This scheme aimed to provide eligible associations with an amount of one million *Yuan* per annum, for three

A multi-level analysis of the transformational leadership during the 2015 Chinese football reform years, to tackle the financial challenges after separating from their respective local governments. This policy received positive comments from local associations, as R13 commented:

Before the scheme, there was no obvious support from the CFA to member associations and we think it is important to provide such kind of financial incentives to encourage member associations to participate in the change. This scheme is a good start to help us go through the hardships and I am feeling more confident about the transition...

Other interviewees R16 still expressed concerns:

I appreciate the scheme in place, but the support could be bigger. After the separation from local government, it will be a very difficult situation for member associations and if there are no such policies in place, which associations are able to support your [CFA's] work in the future?

Indeed, despite some efforts made by the CFA to facilitate the change process in the local football associations, there is a shared issue existing in all followers which is the lack of financial income, which has impacted the change participants' confidence towards the change outcome. Although the participants were feeling the political pressure to implement the change, the CFA need to address these issues in the change process so as to maintain a sustainable football governance system. Figure 2 depicts a summary the multi-level leadership that has been demonstrated by the central government and the CFA during the reform process. Next, the demonstration of leadership of the central government and the CFA through the lens of transformational leadership theory will be discussed.

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

## **Discussion**

Based on the findings, it can be observed that, situated in the specific Chinese political context, that is, a top-down and centralised system, the 2015 football reform agenda was a radical break with the ‘traditional’ way of managing sport, as it aimed to achieve the minimisation of the political interference within the football governance system. The centralised political context had made the reform process more challenging in terms of removing the constraints of previous institutionalised organisational values and norms, as well as changing the structural arrangement which had existed since the foundation of the nation. Nevertheless, under the leadership of the central government and the CFA, as displayed in Figure 2, some changes did occur in the football governance system.

The fact that the reform was initiated top-down by the government, rather than from bottom-up, was a double-edged sword which both facilitated and constrained the change outcomes to certain extent: the positive side being, this had enabled the reform process to gain enough (political) momentum to commence and, with a sweeping force, it reinforced the change agenda at a nationwide scale; however, the down-side is that a top-down reform agenda means this is a planned change, meaning the government on one hand can deliberately, purposefully and explicitly change what they want to change to improve the system, and on the other hand will not change what they think is unnecessary or are unwilling to change (Levy, 1986). As such, there could be elements overlooked by the leaders during the change process. Next, the leadership of the central government and the CFA will be discussed to illustrate the facilitating and constraining factors of the change process in concert with Bass’s (1985) transformational leadership theory.

*How did the central government and the CFA facilitate the reform as leaders?*

The central government’s commitment to lead the reform had set the tone for the reform process, which was to create an innovative, collaborative, and amenable change environment.

In particular, by firstly releasing the *Reform Plan*, the government provided an evocative change vision for the football landscape and encouraged the football sector to adopt an open mind towards the change. From a leadership point of view, this had demonstrated some features of a transformational leadership through *inspirational motivation* (Bass, 1985), which facilitated and provided meaning to followers' (e.g., the CFA) work through the envisioned appealing future state of the Chinese football. Moreover, the establishment of the joint ministerial coalition had been the anchor for the reform agenda, which evoked the many collaborative initiatives at the national level as displayed in Table 1. This political coalition had also inspired local governments to establish a similar mechanism to support local football association reform. According to Lane and Wallis (2009), the ability to facilitate team collaboration and the sharing of information is essential for public leaders to lead change. The multi-sector coalition design had provided the CFA and its member organisations the capacity and resources to adapt and respond to the change. In addition, this political coalition had also enabled the convergent validity to occur (Ammeter et al., 2002) as all members in the coalition lend credibility to the importance of the reform and the need for action. In a nutshell, the central government had provided a structural context for partnership to bridge various differences amongst the participating organisations and created a common purpose – facilitating the football reform nationwide.

*Inspirational motivation* was also captured in the CFA's leadership. Having a say in the introduction of new work processes can create the motivation amongst followers to do what is required to do (Wohlgemuth et al., 2019). Moreover, *inspirational motivation* through employee participation can overcome defensive forces such as emotional resistance, political pressures, and cultural bias (Salvato & Vassolo, 2017). This was evident in the CFA communication with the local member football associations as the CFA created more opportunities for members to speak up their minds during the reform process.

Furthermore, by empowering the CFA with the five essential decision-making rights to reconfigure the organisation itself, the central government has demonstrated *individualised consideration* in its leadership style, that is, paying attention to followers' needs for achievement and growth (Bass, 1985). As suggested by Eisenbach *et al* (1999), a transformational leader does not just share the vision with followers, but also supports them with a feasible plan to realise this vision. The rights to manage the organisation without having to gain approval from the central government had undoubtedly provided the CFA with new opportunities to develop and grow as it transitions from a government agency to an autonomous organisation. In contrast with the central government, the level of individual consideration demonstrated to the local football associations by the CFA could have been improved, which will be discussed later when analysing the constraining factors.

*Intellectual stimulation* was also captured in the leadership style of the central government (Bass, 1985). As presented in the findings, after the separation from the GAS, the CFA needed to reposition itself not only in its relationship with its member football associations, but also to reorganise the organisation structurally to make sure it can better serve its stakeholders. As such, the 2015 football reform was a collective exploration of a new football governance model required the CFA as followers to challenge the existing way of thinking and dealing with football governance. *Intellectual stimulation* was also evident in the CFA's leadership as it communicated with its member association in terms of seeking advice on how to improve the football governance system via meetings.

*Did the central government and the CFA constrain the reform as leaders?*

As aforementioned, the 2015 football reform was a top-down planned reform, which meant that there could be elements neglected by leaders in steering the reform programme. Two factors were identified which could potentially lead to constraining the reform process.

The first factor lies in the CFA's relatively lack in individual consideration of local member associations when pushing forward the reform agenda. As the interviewees mentioned, not every local football association faced the same level of financial pressure when decoupled from the government system – some were previously dependent on the government and as such, under more pressure than those which were previously able to monetise partially their assets and make income from it. Therefore, when asked to implement the reform programme in 2017 and 2018, some were concerned about their abilities to survive, which led to a gloomy atmosphere among some local football associations when the interviews were conducted. These concerns demonstrated that the CFA should consider more carefully the individual situations that the followers were facing at the beginning of the reform. According to Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory, it is important for the leaders to respect individual interests and support individuals' efforts to develop themselves. Despite the good will of the CFA to push for local member associations' independence from the government, the initial step took was arguably radical for some followers, let alone for them to grow. Fortunately, the CFA had realised this potential issue and put forward to the 'breakthrough scheme' which to some extent, relieved its followers concerns and financial stress. In addition, there were also some indications that the CFA has 'soften its requirements over member associations', advocating 'adjusting the reform and strengthening the local associations' (Xinhua News, 2019). However, the outcome of this adjustment is yet to be evaluated.

The second factor which may potentially contribute to constraining the reform was the fact that a supervisory role was maintained by the GAS in its relationship with the CFA during the change process. Although it has been presented in the findings that this role was for the purpose of supporting the CFA in its transition to an autonomous organisation, that is, making sure that the football reform was about 'insulation but not isolation', this design could have many layers of meanings and outcomes. For instance, due to the path dependency, the CFA

A multi-level analysis of the transformational leadership during the 2015 Chinese football reform may incline to consult with the GAS before making policies, which could lead the reform to go back to the 'traditional' way of decision-making. Laughlin (1991) mentioned that organisational change could revert from the new structural design, when the change is not powerful and profound enough; and indeed, previous research suggested that the majority of change initiatives fail (Cunningham, 2006; Jimmieson, et al., 2008). Therefore, the role of leadership is important in the sense that leader will need to make ensure that the direction of the change process is going forward, not backward.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a multi-level analysis of the transformational leadership by the Chinese central government and the CFA during the 2015 Chinese football reform. As an authoritarian political regime, the Chinese government has often been perceived by advanced democratic countries as the kind of state machinery that imposes extreme power on its people and as such, individuals in the country have limited liberty and capacity to make changes (Cheng et al., 2020). However, it is evident that in the past three decades, the Chinese government had determined to change its way of governance from a state centred approach to one that encourages coproduction, that is, 'citizens can play an active role in producing public good and services of consequence to them.' (Ostrom, 1996, 1073) Contaminant with this political system change was the Chinese political or public leadership transition from *charismatic* and *traditional authority* to *rational-legal authority*, as distinguished by Weber (1922). Indeed, this transition has been well-captured by the case of the 2015 football reform and the transformational leadership demonstrated by the government and the CFA. Nevertheless, this transition of authority also resulted in tension amongst key stakeholders. From the followers' perspective, difficulties and challenges seemed to have occurred during the transition process, particularly when they were given the agency role and they were not able to or unsure how to enact upon their autonomy. These could be due to the deeply-rooted

A multi-level analysis of the transformational leadership during the 2015 Chinese football reform values and norms resulted from the *charismatic and traditional authority* as well as the path dependency of relying on the government for support. As such, going forward, more thinking needs to be done in terms of how to make a public reform a success – it should not just be leaders learning how to be a good leader, followers should also learn how to be a good follower, because when provided the chance to act, can followers actually make it count?

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