

The Institutional Change Occurring in the Chinese Sport Sector: A Case Study on the Chinese Football Association Reform

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Abstract : The Chinese sport sector is currently undergoing a dramatic institutional change. A sport system that was heavily dominated by the government is starting to shift towards one that is driven by the market. During the past sixty years, the Chinese Football Association (CFA), although ostensibly a 'non-governmental organization', has been in fact operated under the close supervision and control of the government. The double-identity of CFA has taken most of the blame for the poor performance of the Chinese football team, especially the men's team. In 2015, a policy initiated by the Chinese government introduced a potentially radical change to the institutional structure of CFA by delegating the power of government agency - the General Administration of Sport of China - to the organization (CFA) itself. Against such background, an overarching research question was brought up- will an organization remained institutionalized within the system change in response to the external (policy) jolt? To answer this question, three principal data collection methods were employed: document review, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Document review provides the mapping of the structural and cultural framework in which the CFA functions during the change process. The author have had the chance to interact closely with the organization as participant observer in the organization for a period of time, long enough to collect the data, but never too long to get biased view of the situation. This stage enables the author to gain an in-depth understanding of how CFA managed to restructure the governance and legitimacy. Conducting semi-structured interviews with staff within the CFA and from staff within selected stakeholders of CFA also provided a crucial step to gain an insight into the factors for change as well as the implications of the change. A wide range of interviewees that have been and to be interviewed include: CFA members (senior officials and staff); local football associations members; senior Chinese Super League football club managers; CFA Super League Co., LTD (senior officials and staff); CSL broadcasters; Chinese Olympic Committee members. The preliminary research data shows that the CFA is currently undergoing two levels of change: although the settings of CFA has been gradually restructured (organizational framework), the organizational values and beliefs remain almost the same as the CFA before the reform. This means that the plan of shifting from a governmental agency to an autonomous association is an going process, and that organizational core beliefs and values are more difficult to change than its structural framework. This is due to the inertia of the organizational history and the effect of institutionalization. The change of Chinese Football Association is looked at as a pioneering sport organization in China to undertake the "decoupling" road. It is believed that many other sport organizations, especially sport governing bodies will follow the step of CFA in the near future. Therefore, the experience of CFA change is worthy of studying.

Keywords : Chinese Football Association, Organizational Change, Organizational Culture, Structural Framework

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