

Sports Diplomacy: The Chinese Experience and Perspective

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Summary

Sport is a political and diplomatic arena where politics parodies sport and vice versa. When relations between two nations are poor, sport can be employed as a tool to heighten confrontation or, if relations start to improve, sport can also create and accelerate diplomatic momentum. In both cases, sport is politicized, but in the Chinese perspective only the latter instance can be considered as sports diplomacy. Sport itself is neither sufficient for diplomatic breakthrough, nor sufficient for diplomatic breakdown. The increasing importance of sports diplomacy also validates the transformation of traditional to new diplomacy.

Keywords

Chinese diplomacy, sports diplomacy, sport and politics, Beijing Olympics, Sino–ROK normalization, Yao Ming

Introduction

The 2008 Beijing Olympiad was ‘exceptional’,¹ not only in terms of sport but also in the amount of national and international disputes that it caused. Considering that this was the first time that the old nation had hosted the world’s biggest sporting event, and that it occurred against the backdrop of a rising, modernizing China, such tension was to be expected. Four years later, when the Olympics moved on to London, China remained in the political and sporting spotlight: whether it was the controversy caused over the manufacture of the US Olympic uniforms in Chinese factories, the doping allegations over record-breaking Chinese swimmers Ye Shiwen and Sun Yang, the merits of China’s state-controlled training system, and/or the questions about who would win the final medal tally,

* The author is grateful for comments and suggestions from Stuart Murray, Geoffrey A. Pigman and two anonymous reviewers. Like other scholarly works, the author alone is responsible for the views in this article.

¹) ‘IOC Chief: Beijing Olympic Games “Truly Exceptional Games”’, 24 August 2008, available online at <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6485412.html>.

China was at the forefront of global sport and politics. Many of these disputes are evidence of the politicization of sport in Chinese eyes. Mindful of the famous ping-pong diplomacy between China and the United States in 1971, China's use of sport as a foreign policy tool serves as a valuable case study when substantiating the term 'sports diplomacy'.

Using the experience of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in sports diplomacy, this article poses and addresses the following questions: how is sport related to politics and diplomacy? How does politics affect sport? How does sport facilitate diplomacy? How does the transformation of traditional diplomacy to new diplomacy affect the functions and characteristics of sports diplomacy? And lastly, what do the parameters of sports diplomacy imply? The article is divided into four main sections. The first defines the key terms and briefly and generally chronicles the relationship between sport and politics before, second, tracing the corruption of sport by politics in China's diplomatic history. The third section details how sport was employed as a facilitator in Chinese diplomacy as the Cold War drew to a close, while the fourth focuses on sports diplomacy in the globalized world, as well as a specialized area of theory and practice of 'new' diplomacy. The article concludes with some observations on the Chinese perspective of sports diplomacy.

Sport, Politics and Diplomacy

Sport is defined in political science as 'an institutionalized competitive activity that involves vigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by individuals whose participation is motivated by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors'.² It is played under standardized conditions with strict limits of time and space, has rules, and stresses fair play, discipline, organization and professionalism. To succeed in sports requires practice, discipline and determination; important skills that help young people succeed in all areas of their lives. Participating in sports teaches leadership, teamwork, respect for rules and respect for one another. It is a popular social activity that is practised mostly by young people but enjoyed by all people.

Politics, on the other hand, is concerned with power and interests. The *Collins English Dictionary* defines politics as the 'practice or study of the art and science of forming, directing and administrating states and other political units; the art

² Lincoln Allison, 'Sport and Politics', in Lincoln Allison (ed.), *The Politics of Sports* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 7, quoted in Victor D. Cha, *Beyond the Final Score: The Politics of Sport* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 1.

and science of government'.³ A simpler, more popular definition views politics as 'who gets what, when and how'.⁴

Diplomacy is the politics among nations. Satow defines it as 'the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of relations between the governments of independent states'.⁵ Nicolson considers diplomacy as 'the management of international relations by negotiation; the method by which these relations are adjusted by ambassadors and envoys; the business or art of the diplomatist'.⁶ The Chinese embrace such traditional definitions and define diplomacy as:

[...] the exercise of sovereignty by an independent state in external affairs through official activities; an important means for a state to protect its interests and implement its foreign policy by peaceful method; [...] the science, art and skill of peaceful management of state relations.⁷

Two features are emphasized in the Chinese understanding: diplomacy is political; and it is the behaviour of a sovereign state.

Theoretically speaking, diplomacy is a specialized form of political means and in the past it was understood that diplomacy and politics had little to do with sport. For the purists, sport 'may be many things, but it should not be political'. The original Olympic Charter cautions strongly against the use of sport for political purposes, and decries such practices as dangerous to the Olympics.⁸ Statesmen — from IOC Chairmen to UN Secretary-Generals to national leaders of the world — all stress that sport and politics *should not* mix and remain firmly opposed to the politicization of sport.

However, reality has consistently shown that sport, politics and diplomacy do have a storied, at times violent, relationship. It is well known that relationships between politics, war, peace and sport existed as early as the first Games in ancient Olympia. Sport before the preliminary states existed led to fighting, wars and killings. And in modern times, sport is often related to alcohol, nationalism and sometimes politics, occasionally leading to violence.⁹ As sport grew into a popular profession with massive economic stakes, sport politics became a reality. At the time of writing, for instance, two former heads of the Chinese Super League (football) were jailed for ten-and-a-half years each for corruption.

³ Patrick Hanks, *Collins English Dictionary* (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 2nd edition 1986), pp. 1186-1187.

⁴ Harold D. Maxwell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith Publisher, 1990).

⁵ Ernest Satow, *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 4th edition 1957), p. 1.

⁶ Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 15.

⁷ Lu Yi et al. (eds.), *Waijiaoxue gailun [Introduction to Diplomacy]* (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2003), p. 5.

⁸ Cha, *Beyond the Final Score*, pp. 2-3.

⁹ There is much violence resulting from sport. The exemplary football violence is chronicled online at http://www.footballnetwork.org/dev/communityfootball/violence_history_of_violence.asp.

Nicolson traces diplomacy to pre-history times, writing that ‘diplomacy, in the sense of the ordered conduct of relations between one group of human beings and another group alien to themselves, is far older than history’.¹⁰ When sport transcended national boundaries after nation-states came into existence, sport became an intimate companion of diplomacy. Since then, sport has played an important role in politics, promoting diplomacy, amplifying national identities, and facilitating domestic and foreign policy changes.¹¹

Modern sport has developed on a parallel track with international politics. Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic movement, tried actively after the First World War to associate the spirit of the Olympic Games with the political goals of the League of Nations, in the hope that sport could operate as an international institution that could help prevent another world war.¹² The Olympic Charter states that:

The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of human-kind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity. The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.¹³

The spirit of the Olympic Charter also echoes that of the United Nations (UN) Charter, which acclaims:

1. To maintain international peace and security. . . ;
2. To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples;
3. To achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and
4. To be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends.¹⁴

The parallel aims of these two international organizations illustrate a common goal to be achieved through different avenues. In fact, they have often worked on joint projects on alleviating poverty, education, and facilitating peace.

Sport has played a positive role in diplomacy as one the cheapest tools in facilitating peace and bridging gaps between nations and cultures (hence the term ‘sports diplomacy’), but, for some, the merging of sport and politics has proved

¹⁰ Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, p. 17.

¹¹ Cha, *Beyond the Final Score*, pp. 2-3.

¹² Cha, *Beyond the Final Score*, p. 28.

¹³ See the International Olympic Committee, *The Olympic Charter*, available online at http://www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic_charter_en.pdf.

¹⁴ See *The Charter of the United Nations*, available online at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/>.

to be a mixed blessing. Sport has also been used as a punitive instrument of statecraft, either as a sanction or ban against a target state, or nations can regularly protest against or boycott sporting mega events, which perhaps led to Orwell describing it as 'war minus the shooting'.¹⁵

The intimate relations between sport and politics are exemplified by the Olympic Games, which themselves were not immune from the turbulence of international politics. Since the inauguration of the first modern Olympic Games in 1896, the 1916, 1940 and 1944 Games were cancelled because of the two world wars. Other egregious examples include Adolf Hitler's abuse of the 1936 Olympics, as a stage to promote Aryan superiority for Germany as part of his ideological belief in racial supremacy; eleven Israeli athletes participating in the 1972 Munich Olympic were killed in an attack by Palestinian gunmen; and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led to a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics by a number of states; while the Soviet Bloc retaliated by boycotting the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

However, since ancient times the Olympic Games have afforded more significant opportunities for truce and peace. In 1993, for example, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) put forward the Olympic Truce Proposal. Signed by 184 IOC members, it called for a cease-fire in the Balkans during the Olympic Games. In addition, a special arrangement was made to allow athletes from the former Yugoslavia to participate in the Barcelona Olympics, although it was under UN sanctions at the time.

Politicized Sport as a Diplomatic Means of Confrontation

Political Isolation Constrains Involvement in International Sport

China's embrace of modern sport is a microcosm of its modernity process, while its relationship with the modern Olympic movement is a miniature of its relations with the international system. To understand fully this complex and intimate relationship between sport and politics, one has to begin with China's history.

With its unique geographical position, China developed in history what is known as the 'tribute system', which somewhat paralleled the Westphalian system. Although connections like the Silk Road existed, the Chinese system did not have much interaction with the Western system until the nineteenth century. At that time there were no words in the Chinese vocabulary that were entirely

¹⁵ George Orwell, 'The Sporting Spirit', in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 321, quoted in Cha, *Beyond the Final Score*, p. 8; and Danyel Reiche, 'War Minus the Shooting? The Politics of Sport in Lebanon as a Unique Case in Comparative Politics', *Third World Quarterly*, no. 32, 2011, pp. 261-277.

equivalent to the Western term 'sport' (although activities that were later referred to as 'sport' have a long history in China). What is called *tìyù* (physical exercises, or sport) today was initially included in military training and therefore came under the general term of *wuyi*, or martial arts. Modern sport was introduced into China as a result of the modernization of sport in the West on the one hand, and of the Westernization movement in China on the other.¹⁶

The import of the term 'sport' is evidence of China's early interaction with the Western system. At the time, China was unfamiliar with the modern, Western Olympic movement. However, soon after the birth of the modern Olympiad in Paris in 1894, Pierre de Coubertin and the Greek King George I issued an invitation to Qing Dynasty rulers through the French Embassy in China. They asked China to send athletes to the first Olympiad, to be held in Athens in 1896, but the Qing Government, which was being passively integrated into the international system after its defeat in several ugly wars, made no response.¹⁷ Furthermore, it was on the verge of collapse.

China, consequently, did not participate in the first nine Olympic Games. Its relations with the Olympic movement began in 1932 when Liu Changchun became the first Chinese person to compete in the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, with the official report calling him the 'lone representative of four hundred million people'.¹⁸ Civil war, domestic chaos and the Second World War, however, then prevented China from regular involvement in international sporting activities until the birth of the PRC in 1949.

Sport as a Diplomatic Tool to Gain International Legitimacy

Founded after the revolution, the PRC faced the immediate task of gaining international recognition, and sport neatly served this political goal. Since the former government of the Republic of China (ROC), which fled to Taiwan, still claimed to be China's legitimate government, the PRC insisted on the 'one China principle' in all of its foreign affairs, including issues concerning its position in international sporting organizations. As the PRC made efforts to join international governmental organizations such as the UN, it also tried to join international sporting organizations such as the IOC. Having organized the All-China Sport Federation, which later became the Chinese Olympic Committee (COC), the PRC decided to participate in the 15th Olympic Games to be held in Helsinki in 1952. On 5 February 1952, the COC sent a telegram to the IOC conveying

¹⁶ 'Westernization of China's Physical Education', available online at http://en.olympic.cn/china_oly/history/2004-03-27/121807.html.

¹⁷ 'China and the Olympic Movement', available online at http://en.olympic.cn/china_oly/china_olympic/2008-11-04/1665784.html.

¹⁸ Xu Guoqi, *Olympic Dream: China and Sport, 1895-2008* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 43.

willingness to participate in the Games, but insisted that it was the only sporting organization to representing the PRC, while no other institution, including the former ROC sport representatives, was entitled to represent China or participate in the Olympiad and its relative resolutions.¹⁹ On 23 March 1952, the PRC also telegraphed the international federations of basketball, field and track, swimming, football, cycling, and so on, expressing its will to participate in these institutions and their relative games under the same conditions.

The IOC invited athletes from both the PRC and Taiwan to the 1952 Games. The ROC in Taiwan, which also insisted on the 'one China principle', declined the invitation once it learned that the PRC was also invited. The PRC athletes were able to participate, but only arrived after the opening ceremony. In May 1954, the IOC discussed the China problem at its 50th session and recognized the All-China Sport Federation as the Chinese Olympic Committee (COC) by 23 votes in favour and 21 against. However, IOC President Avery Brundage, an American, whose government did not recognize the PRC, put the 'Olympic Committee of the Republic of China' into the list of IOC-recognized National Olympic Committees (NOCs). When the Games moved to Melbourne in 1956, the IOC invited the ROC in Taiwan rather than the PRC in Beijing, thus violating the PRC's 'one China principle' — the bottom line in its diplomacy. As a result, the COC withdrew from the IOC and fifteen affiliated sporting federations by 1958.²⁰ After Melbourne, athletes from the PRC were barred from international sporting contests, just as China was excluded from the major international governmental organizations.

One exception was the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF). Because the ROC's Chinese Table Tennis Association failed to join the ITTF, the PRC joined ITTF as the 'first' and only China in 1953. It therefore had no reason to withdraw from the ITTF when it withdrew from all other special sport federations in 1958. Again, politics played a role. The Chairman of the ITTF, Ivor Montagu, was a prominent British communist and a noted leftist. He visited the PRC in 1952 and had good inclinations towards the nation. Disregarding the IOC's decision, Montagu supported the PRC's membership in the ITTF. While China was denied the right to participate in other international sports, it was able to compete in table tennis (ping-pong) contests. One year after China withdrew from all other international sport federations, Rong Guotuan took gold in the men's singles at the 25th World Table Tennis Championships in 1959. Since then, the Chinese team has played a dominant role in world table tennis circles for over 60 years. Statistics show that from 1926 until 2002, the World Table

¹⁹ '50-70 niandai woguo tiyu duiwai jiaowang de jiben taishi' [The State of Our Country's External Sports Exchanges from the 1950s to 1970s], online at <http://www.chinasfa.net/lshg/xzgy/wj1.htm>.

²⁰ 'China and the Olympic Movement', available online at http://en.olympic.cn/china_oly/china_olympic/2008-11-04/1665784.html.

Tennis Championships have produced 314 championship titles, of which China has won 89.5, followed by Hungary (with 68.5) and Japan (with 47).²¹ This is one of the reasons why ping-pong became China's *guoqiu* (national sport). More importantly, it provided the platform for ping-pong diplomacy in 1971.

China's participation in the international sporting system was conditioned by politics, as were its bilateral sport exchanges. At the founding of the PRC, only a handful of socialist countries, a few neighbouring nationalist countries and several Nordic countries (which pursued a neutral policy) extended diplomatic recognition to the new Chinese government. The PRC's international sporting exchanges were thus limited to these pro-China countries. For example, the Soviet Union was the first country to have sporting exchanges with China, coinciding with — or conditioned by — the fact that it was the first country that recognized the PRC. Exchanges with other socialist countries in Eastern Europe soon followed, and in 1951 the All-China Sport Federation visited India and observed the First Asian Games, because India had one year earlier, in 1950, been the first non-socialist country to establish diplomatic ties with the PRC. The COC was then able to participate in the Helsinki Olympics, because Finland did not have diplomatic ties with the ROC, and the PRC established diplomatic ties with Finland without the 'one China' problem.

Sport as an Instrument of Revolutionary Diplomacy

After the Second World War, when the world was once more locked in political confrontation, sport became another arena for political and diplomatic wars and competition. As the major theatre for hot wars during the Cold War, Asia was also a place of sporting confrontation, and China was a major player in both domains. In these cases, sport was used as a means of Chinese revolutionary diplomacy.

China's staunch support of the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF) provides a good case study. Because of political reasons, Indonesia — a close friend of the PRC and a Muslim country — denied visas for Taiwanese and Israeli athletes for the 4th Asian Games in Jakarta in 1962. As a result, Indonesia was expelled by the IOC, because its decision was considered against the IOC spirit of 'separating politics from sport'. In response, Indonesia set up GANEF for the athletes of the so-called 'emerging nations' in late 1962, making it very clear that the purpose of GANEF was to be politically opposed to the IOC, which served the imperialist cause. Indonesian President Sukarno proposed the establishment of GANEF against the old established order, saying:

²¹ 'Fifty Glorious Years in Table Tennis', available online at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/international/42217.htm>, accessed 26 June 2012.

The international Olympic Games have proved to be openly an imperialist tool [...] They said to have sport without politics in the Olympic games [...] When they excluded communist China, is that not politics? [...] Now let's frankly say, *sport has something to do with politics*. Indonesia proposes now to mix sport with politics.²²

China stood firmly behind Indonesia from the very beginning, praising the anti-imperialist spirit of GANEFO and giving Indonesia its most unqualified support, both in its decision to hold the 'Games' and in their anti-Olympic nature. China also opposed a Soviet proposal that the goals of the IOC be included in GANEFO, and insisted that the 'Bandung Spirit' be included in the GANEFO Charter. In contrast to the IOC doctrine, which separates politics from sport, GANEFO's constitution stressed that 'politics and sport were intertwined'. For that purpose, China was said to have contributed between one-third and the full amount of the foreign-exchange cost of the Games (estimated at US\$ 1.5 million) and provided 80 per cent of the sports equipment.²³

GANEFO was a great success for the PRC, not only for sport but also for its diplomacy: the Chinese teams, unhampered by the Olympic considerations, were outstanding, in the sheer number of contestants and in their athletic achievements. The Chinese athletes set two world records, won 68 gold, 58 silver and 45 bronze medals, followed by the USSR with 27, 21 and 9 respectively. The tournament also provided an excellent forum for 'people-to-people' diplomacy. Young people from half of the world had the opportunity to meet Chinese athletes on a common footing.

GANEFO was also a public demonstration of a growing cordial relationship between Indonesia and China. The Chinese media dramatized the 'atmosphere of harmony, friendship and unity that prevailed in the Games', and considered the achievements of GANEFO as 'a great blow to the imperialist'²⁴ and 'a significant triumph of the people of the whole world in their struggle against imperialism and new and old colonialism'.²⁵

As the Chinese media carried out their propaganda, the torch of GANEFO began to sputter. The second GANEFO was planned to be held in Cairo, Egypt, in 1967, but was cancelled because of political considerations. In its place, Beijing offered to step in, and even constructed the Beijing Capital Stadium. However, the Games never happened because of more politics, this time a split among the participant countries. GANEFO was launched for political purposes, but its short life also resulted from political reasons. This might be a lesson in the politicization

²² *GANEFO Bulletin*, no. 1, July 1963, pp. 5-6, quoted in Ewa T. Pauker, 'GANEFO I: Sport and Politics in Djakarta', *Asian Survey*, vol. 5, no. 4, April 1965, p. 174.

²³ Pauker, 'GANEFO I', p. 180.

²⁴ Fang Huisheng, 'Rang xinyunhui de huoju yongfang guangmang [Let the Torch of GANEFO Shine Forever]', *Shijie zhishi* [World Affairs], no. 23, 1963, pp. 9 and 10.

²⁵ Ren Dao (ed.), *Guoji tiyu yundong zhong de xinqizhi* [New Banner in the International Sport Movement] (Beijing: People's Sport Press, 1965), p. 59.

of sport, but the PRC considered GANEFO historically significant in the sports field because it was a great shock to the conservative ideas in the Olympic Movement and the IOC. Furthermore, it offered an ideal 'specimen' to research the relationship between sport and politics.²⁶

Sport in Politics as a Diplomatic Facilitator

The End of China's Political Isolation and the Beginning of Engagement through Sport

The Sino-US rapprochement, which was facilitated by ping-pong diplomacy in 1971, removed the hurdle for restoring the PRC's seat in the UN and diplomatic ties with other Western powers. This political breakthrough in China's participation in international government organizations paved the way for China to join the IOC and other international sports organizations.

The change began with the Asian Games Federation (AGF). China was barred from the second to the sixth Asian Games because of the 'Two Chinas Problem', as was the case with the Olympic Games. When the 7th Asian Games were due to be held in Tehran in 1974, ten of the 21 AGF member countries had established diplomatic relations with the PRC. Most of them, and other countries that had not yet established diplomatic relations with China, held that the AGF should, even at the risk of being sanctioned by the IOC and international federations (IFs), accept China as a member and invite it to participate in the Asian Games, which would otherwise not be worthy of the name.²⁷ The AGF executive committee's Bangkok meeting in 1973 concluded that China should be represented by the All-China Sport Federation in the AGF and that Taiwan be expelled.

China's early experience with sporting regimes illustrates how politics hinders sport and how sport follows politics. The decision of the AGF, for instance, initiated changes in the IOC. In 1972, IOC President Brundage was replaced by Lord Killanin of Ireland, who held that China should be reinstated in the IOC and that the only way forward was to solve the Taiwan problem. At the same time, the PRC changed its policy towards Taiwan from 1 January 1979, the very day that Sino-US relations were normalized. While reaffirming the 'one China principle', Beijing negotiated a special arrangement with the IOC: that the COC would be the sole legitimate presence at the IOC, while Taiwan might stay in the IOC under the name of Chinese Taipei, on the conditions that it would not

²⁶ Li Hui, 'Xinxing liliang yundonghui de faqi, zhongjie jiqi lishi yiyi [The Short Existence of GANEFO and its Historical Significance],' in *Tiyu yu kexue [The Journal of Sports and Science]*, vol. 4, 1998, p. 7.

²⁷ 'Reinstatement in the Olympic Movement', available online at http://en.olympic.cn/china_oly/history/2004-03-27/121827.html COC website.

attach 'Republic of China' to its name, nor that it would use the appellation of 'Taiwan', or use its 'national flag' and 'national anthem', or anything symbolic of the 'Republic of China'.²⁸ Taiwan had no choice but to accept this new arrangement, which has been in place ever since.

Sport as a Diplomatic Facilitator

During the Cold War, sports diplomacy was mainly used by China to emerge from isolation, gain international legitimacy and support revolution. The improvement in China's relations with the international community in general and the United States in particular was both a reason for and result of a relaxation in Cold War tensions. This changing international atmosphere created new opportunities and functions for sports diplomacy, as the famous ping-pong diplomacy case illustrates.

At the outset, it is important to note that ping-pong diplomacy was only possible because China and the United States intended to change and improve their hostile bilateral relations because of strategic and other considerations. Both US President Nixon and China's Chairman Mao were looking for opportunities that could create goodwill and signal good intentions. It was against such a backdrop that Chinese ping-pong athletes encountered their US counterparts at the 31st World Table Tennis Championship in Nagoya, Japan, in 1971. They talked and exchanged gifts and their meeting was supported by both administrations, as were future meetings. With the approval of both leaders, the US team visited China after the Nagoya Championship, along with other teams. The visit opened the door for a people's exchange between the PRC and the United States and paved the way for Nixon's 1972 visit to China, leading to a Sino-US rapprochement. The changes that the visit instigated were so tremendous that ping-pong diplomacy has been remembered as 'a small ball turning the big ball'.²⁹

The event's significance in international relations has spurred scholars from different fields to study ping-pong diplomacy.³⁰ However, it is not the only such case where sport has playing a positive role in bringing peoples of our time together. For example, the role of sports communication in the process of normalizing ties between the PRC and South Korea is an equally important but under-studied case.

The PRC and the Republic of Korea (ROK) were born enemies because of the Cold War's international structure. The PRC was founded in 1949, one year after

²⁸ 'Reinstatement in the Olympic Movement'.

²⁹ Qian Jiang, *Xiaoqiu zhuandong daqiu — 'pingpang waijiao' muhou [Small Ball Turns the Big Ball — Behind 'Ping-Pong Diplomacy']* (Beijing: Oriental Press, 1997), p. 128.

³⁰ For example, Qian, *Xiaoqiu zhuandong daqiu*; Tang Hao, *Pingpang waijiao gaoceng neimu [Inside Story of Ping-Pong Diplomacy at the High Level]* (Beijing: Contemporary China Press, 2012); and Xu Guoqi, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sport, 1895-2008* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), chapter 5 on 'The Sport of Ping-Pong Diplomacy', pp. 117-163.

the ROK, and the two sides engaged in the Korean War from 1950 to 1953. They remained major enemies thereafter, and had no connections or exchanges between them. Again, the importance of sport as a diplomatic tool can be discerned. Sport exchanges were accompanied by the relaxation of political confrontation and played an irreplaceable role in improving bilateral relations.

As China opened its door, 'going out' to join the IOC and other international sport federations, it also began to 'invite in', particularly the idea of hosting international sports meetings. In 1983, for example, China approached the Asian Olympic Council (AOC) with an intention to host the 11th Asian Games. According to the AOC's charter, no country would be granted the opportunity to host the Asian Games if it declined the participation of athletes from any other AOC members. However, the concern was ill-founded. From the outset, China committed to welcoming all members of the AOC, including South Korea (although at the time the two nations had no diplomatic ties) to come to China for the Games.³¹ To create favourable conditions, people from Chinese sporting circles and their South Korean counterparts had their first meeting in Hong Kong in November 1983, setting in motion a number of bilateral sports exchanges, such as the April 1984 participation of the Chinese male and female youth basketball teams in the Asian Youth Basketball Cup held in Seoul, which put an end to years of no cultural and sports exchanges between the nations.

South Korea found itself in a similar situation. At the time, Seoul was planning to host the 10th Asian Games, in which North Korea had already declared its intention not to participate. Naturally, Seoul did not want to see the Games boycotted by China, Asia's largest country. Furthermore, South Korea, which was experiencing domestic turmoil, wanted to host a successful Asian Games in order to stabilize its domestic situation and improve its international image. South Korean Olympic Committee Chairman Roh Tae Woo said as much in his New Year's message on 31 December 1984: 'pending the 1986 Seoul Asian Games and the 1988 Olympic Games, the South Korean Sport Committee and the South Korean Olympic Committee will spare no effort to engage in sport diplomacy'.³² Seoul strongly desired China's participation and made it clear that it would handle the Taiwan issue in a way that conformed to the IOC rules and took into full consideration China's sensitivity (although the ROK maintained diplomatic ties with Taipei throughout, rather than Beijing).

With its political concerns addressed, China sent a delegation of 550 people (including 350 athletes) to the 10th Asian Games, and China's active participation was understood among South Koreans as timely and valuable support. The arrival of the Chinese delegation in Seoul was headline news and they were

³¹ Qian Qichen, *Waijiao shiji [Ten Stories of a Diplomat]* (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2003), p. 150.

³² Song Cheng You et al. (eds), *Zhonghan guanxi shi [History of Sino-South Korean Relations]* (Beijing: Social Science Documents Press, 1997), p. 190.

awarded a very warm welcome by the Seoul Organizing Committee for the 10th Asian Games. This exchange also exposed the Chinese to South Korea, as more than 500 Chinese visited the 'enemy' country. The Chinese media covered their every move and conveyed a very different image of South Korea than the traditional negative view, which had been largely responsible for the gap between the peoples.

Further momentum was added to the relationship-building process by the 24th Olympic Games, which was held in Seoul in 1988. Again, the Chinese sent a big delegation (of 400-plus athletes). During the Games, the COC had communications with their ROK counterparts and officials of other South Korean sport organizations, which led to a diffusion of reciprocity and mutual adjustment of public adversarial attitudes.³³ As a result, tourist exchanges between the countries skyrocketed from less than 2,000 in 1988 to 20,000 in 1989; Sino-South Korean trade, which was a negligible US\$ 434 million in 1984, jumped to US\$ 3.1 billion in 1989 following the Seoul Olympiad, a figure that accounted for 80 per cent of South Korea's total trade with all socialist countries.³⁴

Beijing's support to Seoul later paid off. In the run-up to the 11th Asian Games — which were held in Beijing — China was under sanctions that had been imposed by the United States, Europe, Japan and other Western countries because of its crackdown on the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989. Beijing wanted to counter this diplomatic and political isolation by hosting a successful Asian Games and it wanted *all* members of the AOC who were unable to participate. Reciprocating Beijing's support for the last Asian Games and the Olympiad in Seoul, the South Korean government refused to follow its Western allies in condemning the Chinese government. Roh Tae Woo, who was by now the President of ROK, said in February 1990 that 'it takes time to realize diplomatic normalization with China, but the Beijing Asian Games to be held this coming fall will be an important opportunity'.³⁵

To the contrary of what its allies expected, South Korea went to extraordinary lengths to promote exchange, trade and tourism with China, sectors that had been badly damaged by Tiananmen, dispatching a delegation of 700 members to the Beijing Games as well as many figures from the economic field. It also provided Beijing with US\$ 15 million in advertising revenues and other donations.³⁶ Only a few weeks after the Beijing Games, the PRC and South Korea announced simultaneously on 20 October 1990 that they had agreed to established trade

³³ Chae-Jin Lee, *China and Korea: Dynamics Relations* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 1996), pp. 145-146.

³⁴ Song et al. (eds), *Zhonghan guanxi shi*, p. 195.

³⁵ Song et al. (eds), *Zhonghan guanxi shi*, p. 195.

³⁶ Samuel S. Kim, 'The Making of China's Korea Policy in the Era of Reform', in David M. Lampton (ed.), *China's Foreign and Security Policy-Making in the Era of Reform* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 377-378.

offices (consular offices in all but name) in each other's capitals, which greatly upgraded their bilateral trade to US\$ 5.8 billion in 1991.³⁷ The 10th and 11th Asian Games and the Seoul Olympiad paved the way for Sino–South Korean diplomatic normalization, which was realized in 1992.

The 11th Asian Games were not only a catalyst for Sino–South Korean diplomatic normalization, but also provided an opportunity for Sino–Vietnamese relations to change. The Vietnamese Vice-Premier, Vo Nguyen Giap, visited China during the 11th Asian Games, signifying a major shift in the position of no high-level contact between the two sides since China's war with Vietnam in 1979. One year later, in 1991, the Secretary-General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Do Muoi, and Vietnam's Prime Minister, Vo Van Kiet, paid a joint visit to China. The summits between the two communist parties and two governments signified an end to the strained relations. Not long after, Sino–Laotian relations, which were also conditioned by Sino–Vietnamese relations, were normalized. While the sanctions imposed on China by Western countries after the 'Tiananmen Incident' endured, China's relations with its neighbours greatly improved. Encouraged by the success of the 11th Asian Games, China decided to bid for the Olympic Games.

Sports Diplomacy as New Diplomacy

New Versus Traditional Diplomacy

During the Cold War, sovereign nation-states were the main actors in international relations. Under such conditions, diplomacy was the management of interstate relations that was concerned exclusively with the political behaviour of sovereignty. International sport exchanges were therefore conditioned by relations between national governments, which retained the privilege of managing their relations with other national governments, including international sporting exchanges and contacts. Whether sport was used as a tool of political opposition and disagreement or for signalling goodwill, these were largely governmental decisions and actions. The end of the Cold War fundamentally changed this political environment, not only in where and how diplomacy was conducted but also in terms of who engaged in diplomacy.³⁸

For example, one of the major changes in diplomacy after the end of the Cold War was an increase in the diversity and scope of diplomatic actors. Beyond the idea of diplomacy as the 'dialogue between nations', evidence that international

³⁷ Kim, 'The Making of China's Korea Policy in the Era of Reform', p. 377.

³⁸ Geoffrey Allen Pigman, 'Debates about Contemporary and Future Diplomacy', in Pauline Kerr and Geoffrey Wiseman (eds), *Diplomacy in a Globalizing World: Theories and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 69-73.

governmental organizations (IGOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnational corporations, the media and even individuals participated in unique forms of diplomacy began to emerge, where these non-state actors acquired new instruments and resources for engaging autonomously in diplomatic activities.³⁹

A second change, driven by globalization, was the transformation of inter-state diplomacy into inter-social diplomacy. Unlike inter-state diplomacy, which bridges state relations through diplomats, inter-social diplomacy bridges societies in a decentralized and fragmented way. Under this view, the role of diplomacy is no longer limited to solving problems between states by professional diplomats, but expanded to narrowing the gap between peoples and societies, individually or collectively.

The major task of traditional diplomacy is to further national interests. Thus sovereignty, national security and territorial integrity are always at the top of the agenda. Consequently, these high political goals limit domestic involvement in diplomacy. Inter-social diplomacy, however, is influenced by all of the social actors and forces that strive for their own interests rather than national interest through pressuring activities, lobbying, public protests and demonstrations.⁴⁰ These days, diplomacy is no longer the privilege of elites: all layers of society exert a significant influence on diplomacy.

In the modern environment, sports diplomacy is one of the many vehicles and platforms that are evidence of a transformation in diplomacy. The traditional use of sport by governments — to exacerbate deteriorating bilateral relations, for example — is declining. Moreover, sport is employed less and less to send signals between countries with normal relations, because national leaders often meet, as well as exploit new communications channels and technologies. In the twenty-first century, sport is more likely to be used to explore the possibility of thawing frozen relations. The competing political voices during the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 and the role of the Chinese National Basketball Association (NBA) player, Yao Ming, demonstrate such new roles, and the power and impact of sports diplomacy.

The Beijing Olympiad: New Actors and Different Voices in Sports Diplomacy

The idea to host the Olympic Games began soon after China joined the IOC, when the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping said that China would bid to host the Olympic Games when the time was appropriate. After the success of the 11th Asian Games, China's desire to bid for the Olympic Games only increased. However, the road to the Beijing Olympics demonstrated that the political and diplomatic problems were much more acute, significant and complicated than those

³⁹⁾ Bertrand Badie, 'Transnationalizing Diplomacy and Global Governance', in Kerr and Wiseman (eds), *Diplomacy in a Globalizing World*, pp. 86-87.

⁴⁰⁾ Badie, 'Transnationalizing Diplomacy and Global Governance', pp. 86-87.

encountered when the PRC hosted the Asian Games. While China's bid was encouraged and welcomed by the IOC and many others, some NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch, editorial writers and pundits expressed their discontent. They saw China's bid as an opportunity to outline their positions, air their voices and further their own specific goals. As one, they rallied against Beijing's plan and were firmly opposed to granting Beijing the opportunity to host an Olympiad. Even the US Congress took up resolutions against the selection of Beijing and urged the United States' IOC representative to vote against it.⁴¹ It was little wonder, then, that when the IOC voted on 2 September 1993, Beijing led the first three rounds of voting, but lost out to Sydney by two votes in the end.

Undeterred, Beijing renewed its efforts and bid for the 2008 Olympiad. This time Beijing was granted the opportunity without difficulty, but domestic and international politics played a far greater role, from the decision to award the Games to Beijing, to the Games themselves, to until long after the Olympic circus had departed.

In terms of nation-building and image projection, Beijing wanted to emulate the Tokyo Games of 1964 and the Seoul Games of 1988. It intended to showcase China's economic, cultural, social and political developments since 'opening up' and reform in 1979, sought to enhance its internal credibility and to establish the PRC as a global player. The Chinese government held great hope for the Olympics and introduced several flashy concepts for the 2008 Games: a 'Green Olympics', a 'Hi-Tech Olympics', a 'People's Olympics', all planned around the longest Olympic torch relay in history.

These hopes for the Olympic Games were clear and went unopposed by many governments and leaders. But liberal forces were keen to exploit the world's attention and to press China. Unconcerned with sovereignty, territorial integrity or traditional security, they had different political agendas. In the run-up to the Games, every subject imaginable that could be tied to the Olympic Games and China found its way into Olympic coverage: human rights; religious freedom; China's environmental policy; and so on. In the end, two issues became central: Darfur; and Tibet. One year before the Games, for example, the US Congress introduced three 'sense of Congress' resolutions calling for the US government to boycott the Games and instead press China to change its domestic human rights policy and its international policy on Sudan, Burma and North Korea.⁴² The torch relay, which was intended to present a good image of China to the world, also attracted global discontent as protest groups mobilized in an effort to publicize their different cases. In fact, the torch relay became so politicized that it was eventually shortened.

⁴¹ Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of US-China Relations, 1999-2000* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2003), p. 170.

⁴² Cha, *Beyond the Final Score*, p. 133.

Such sentiment ran in direct opposition with Beijing, which insisted that before and during the tournament the Olympics must not be politicized (quite a change from the GANEFO days). As a result, Beijing went to great efforts to ensure the success of the Games and it stood firm on the Tibet issue, arguing that it was a domestic issue that was central to China's core national interest. But there were subtle tweaks and changes. Careful observers noticed that as the pre-Olympic pressure mounted, Beijing quietly started to effect changes in its Sudan policy in order to bring itself more in line with the international community. Chinese leaders and foreign ministry officials paid several visits to Sudan in the run-up to the Olympic Games, pressuring the Sudanese government to accept peacekeeping operations and to comply with its obligations under a hybrid UN peace plan developed and offered by (then) UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.⁴³

Notwithstanding the opposition and protest, Beijing's Olympics turned out to be among the most successful Olympic Games in history. The spectacular opening ceremony impressed the world with Chinese cultural elements: history; arts; music; and, most importantly, the Chinese idea of peace. Not only was the athletic body the biggest in history, the Beijing Games also set a new record in China's diplomatic history: 54 heads of state, fifteen heads of government and ten royal dignitaries from more than 100 countries across the world visited Beijing to watch the Games and to cheer for their athletes.⁴⁴ On the sidelines, the Chinese leadership held more than 100 meetings with leaders from other countries, thanking them for their support for the Games and exchanging views on international and regional issues of common concern. Visiting leaders also had friendly communications with the Chinese people; and however hard China tried to keep the Olympic Games from being politicized, it began to dramatize the 'great Olympic Games as a grand diplomatic ceremony'.⁴⁵

Debates about the Beijing Olympics did not end after its curtain fell. Critics said that such a successful Games could only have taken place in a totalitarian country where the government could direct resources at will towards any national project. But most came to see the Beijing Olympiad as a success. As the Public Diplomacy Center at the University of Southern California keenly pointed out: 'through the broad ranging media coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games, China became much more than pandas, ping-pong, and the Great Wall. It became a real place, with real problems and real people'.⁴⁶ After all was said and done, the

⁴³ Cha, *Beyond the Final Score*, pp. 142-143.

⁴⁴ 'Aoyun waijiao biao zhi zhongguo jinru zixin miandui shijie xin jieduan [Olympic Diplomacy Signifies China Has Come to a New Era of Confidently Facing the World]', *International Herald Tribune*, 12 August 2008.

⁴⁵ 'Aoyun shenghui, waijiao shendian [Great Olympic Games, Grand Diplomatic Ceremony]', *People's Daily*, 25 August 2008.

⁴⁶ Meg Young, 'Public Diplomacy and the Beijing Olympics: Narratives and Counter Narratives', 8 October 2008, available online at http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/newswire/media_monitor_reports_detail/public_diplomacy_and_the_beijing_olympics_narratives_and_counter_narratives/.

legacy of the Beijing Games was to lay the foundation for greater international government and public acceptance of Chinese policies in the future.

Yao Ming: The Athlete as Diplomat in New Sports Diplomacy

In traditional diplomacy, diplomats are political representatives of their country, who further the national interest by implementing foreign policy. In sport, athletes represent their country and engage in international sporting competition. Successful diplomacy helps a country to protect and further its national interest, while successful athletes are important for national reputation and pride. In sports diplomacy, the athlete can play the role of diplomat, an occurrence that is best epitomized by Yao Ming, a Chinese basketball player in the American NBA. Yao Ming continued the spirit of ping-pong diplomacy, but also gave sports diplomacy several new features that are indicative of the changing diplomatic environment.

Yao Ming, a 7-foot 6-inch Chinese man, was the number-one pick by the Houston Rockets in the 2002 NBA draft and the first Chinese player with no US basketball background. His success on the court was dramatic. After a slow start, when he only averaged three points in his first six games, he started playing better and better and soon hit a career best record of 19 points, 9.2 backboards and 1.9 caps per game. Yao only played nine seasons because of frequent bone fractures and torn tendons, but was voted onto the All-Stars to start for the Western Conference in the NBA All-Star Game eight times, and was named in the All-NBA Team five times. Even after he retired from the NBA, he continued to participate in basketball training for youngsters. 'I hope more children will take part in and love physical activities, making themselves stronger and helping themselves become better people through sport', he said.⁴⁷

Through his play on the court, Yao Ming brought the NBA — along with US sports culture — to the Chinese people. He attracted hundreds of millions of Chinese fans to the NBA and won admirers all over the world. Reporters from China followed him from city to city, and television cameras chronicled nearly his every move to satisfy an adoring fan base back home. Whenever he played, tens of millions of Chinese were glued to the screen. Newspapers covered not only his play but his life — how he was treated in the United States and how he encountered and overcame difficulties in a different culture. Even those with little to no previous interest in the NBA watched his games and entrusted him with the hopes of 1.3 billion people. To many Chinese, the United States was no longer the hegemonic power that was always interfering with China's internal affairs and hurting Chinese people's feelings, but a country where Yao Ming was well received

⁴⁷ 'Welcome Home, Yao Ming!', *China Daily*, 21 July 2011.

and able to realize his dream by competing successfully in the most competitive basketball league in the world.

Yao Ming not only brought the NBA to China, but also brought China to the Americans through his play, modesty, flexibility and perseverance, which helped the world to get to know Chinese culture. His teasing sense of humour made him accessible and genial, generated interest in Chinese heritage and debunked the stereotype that a Chinese athlete could not compete professionally at the highest levels or that Chinese people lack humour. Many arenas, including the Verizon Center in Washington, DC, welcomed Yao with dragon dances as part of Chinese appreciation night and arranged special Chinese events during the timeout. The fans joined in too, wearing Chinese national team jerseys and waving the Chinese flag. In time, Yao Ming became a leading symbol of China, the face of a changing culture that was more open to Western ideas than before. 'Yao Ming gave the Chinese people and China a human face in the United States', said James Sasser, the US Ambassador to China from 1996 to 1999. 'He had a commonality Americans could identify with, particularly those who are interested in sport and sport fans.' Never before had a Chinese athlete, or any athlete of Asian descent for that matter, generated as much buzz on US soil.⁴⁸

Yao Ming was not only an excellent basketball player, but also a role model for young people: 'dedicated', 'hardworking', 'intelligent', and he showed 'loyalty to his family', a local Houston newspaper wrote. 'In an age in which athletes are regulars on police blotters and gossip pages', the *Houston Chronicle* implored, 'Yao has remained trouble-free. The world was watching. Any misstep could cause international embarrassment. Yet he shined'.⁴⁹ 'I never heard one bad thing ever spoken or written about him. That is a great thing to say about anyone', added Nels Hawkinson, a former basketball player: 'Yao Ming was and still is a great Chinese Ambassador to people from all over the world'.⁵⁰ Arguably, Yao Ming became the most recognizable and tangible representation of China in the United States.

His success extended far beyond the NBA and sport. For example, he founded the Yao Ming Foundation in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China, and pledged two million dollars to rebuild schools that were devastated by the 8.0 quake. Since then, the Yao Foundation has sponsored twelve schools.⁵¹ Leading from the front, he regularly visited Sichuan, interacted with the children and encouraged them to be strong and optimistic. Such good works later extended to

⁴⁸ Gene Wang, 'Yao Ming's Influence was Far-Reaching during Distinguished NBA Career', *Washington Post*, 20 July 2011.

⁴⁹ Jerome Solomon, 'Gentle Giant a Pioneer, Ambassador of First Order', *Houston Chronicle*, 9 July 2011.

⁵⁰ "Yao Ming Still Ambassador": Nels Hawkinson', *China Daily*, 9 August 2011, available online at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/sport/2011-08/09/content_13078995.htm.

⁵¹ 'Yao ming fang yaojijin yuanjian xuexiao [Yao Ming Visits Schools Funded by Yao Foundation]', available online at <http://sport.sina.com.cn>, accessed on 18 February 2012.

the Houston community, when he helped to rebuild four playgrounds in the Houston/Galveston area that had been destroyed by Hurricane Ike. Yao has since been an Ambassador for WildAid's shark campaign, filming a public service announcement asking for a ban on shark fin soup in China; he raised funds for arts collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, aiming at exposing local residents to China's evolving arts culture by introducing Chinese art to new and wider audiences;⁵² and — like a giant bridge spanning the Pacific Ocean — Yao helped to promote understanding between a modern, rejuvenating China and the United States and Americans. In the light of such evidence, it is fair to argue that no other individual has made a bigger contribution in narrowing the gap between China and the United States.

The case of Yao Ming reveals a new, dynamic and exciting role for sports diplomacy in the age of globalization: not to thaw confrontation like ping-pong diplomacy but to improve understanding and narrow the gap between disparate peoples and cultures. China and the United States traditionally have a strong but complicated relationship that is full of conflicts and frictions — trade, Taiwan and human rights, to name only a few — but all of these tensions are temporarily suspended when it comes to talk about Yao Ming and sport. Sport introduces young athletes to each other without the economic, political and military issues that burden traditional diplomacy, and focuses on building lasting relationships through sport, thus providing an opening for increased dialogue and greater cultural understanding.

Conclusion

Sport, diplomacy and politics constitute different, singular aspects of social life, but they are increasingly becoming tangled together. It is such trends in the international political environment that determine the general trend of diplomacy, which in turn conditions the way that sport is used in diplomacy. During the Cold War, for example, when the East–West confrontation was acute, China's use of sport was an effort to obtain international legitimacy, end its political isolation, or demonstrate its support for anti-imperialism. When international tensions relaxed, however, sport helped to thaw, catalyse and normalize China's frozen diplomatic relations with the United States, the ROK and many other nations.

This adaptability demonstrates how the function of sport can change in diplomacy, confirms the transformation of diplomacy from inter-state to inter-social (a more socially embedded form of diplomacy, which is usually related with grassroots movements, civil society organizations and young people) and suggests

⁵² 'Yao Ming: China's Newest Arts Ambassador?', *Jing Daily*, 19 November 2009, available online at <http://www.jingdaily.com/en/culture/yao-ming-chinas-newest-arts-ambassador/>.

a rise in the use, application and interest of sport as a diplomatic tool. This trend is likely to continue as sport becomes more popular, with more athletes and fans traversing oceans and continents to compete, as well as a general increase in the amount of live broadcasting of major sporting competitions. The host, its people, culture and history, economic situation, political ideals and domestic policy, and so on, all garner worldwide attention. In this way, sport blurs the borders between territorially-bound sovereign states and changes diplomacy's interlocutors.

In traditional diplomacy, the players are government leaders, ambassadors and diplomats, who are well versed in diplomatic skills, speak foreign languages well and are skilled in the arts of negotiation. They are often professionals in suits and ties, carrying attaché cases, clustered in meeting rooms and engaging in secret negotiations on issues of international importance on behalf of their government. By contrast, in sports diplomacy the players are but athletes in shorts, t-shirts, and cross-trainers with nary a briefcase or file/folder in sight. They play their role not by engaging in negotiation but through competition. Successful athletes like Yao Ming are cultural ambassadors 'in smile' and 'in sport clothes' that can help to narrow gaps between cultures and cement new ties between peoples.⁵³

Sports diplomacy extends beyond the athletes, however. During the Beijing Olympics, groups that disagreed with the Chinese government's policies rarely missed an opportunity to report on China's problems. The interlocutors of sports diplomacy expanded to opinion groups, who were vocal and tried to shape public opinion and perceptions of China. In response, Beijing assiduously created a positive story of a modern, vibrant, growing and culturally rich nation. This positive cultural narrative helped to soften the truthful but harsh critiques of Chinese policy and helped to create a context for better understanding of China. What Beijing did is exactly what successful public diplomacy is all about. In this sense, sports diplomacy is an important platform of public diplomacy.

Beyond the modern utility and application of sports diplomacy, it is futile to debate whether or not sport should be politicized because the politicization of sport is simply a fact. The conclusion to be drawn from the Chinese experience is that the answer to whether sport should be politicized or not depends not on who responds to the question but on when and under what circumstances you propose it. China was strongly opposed to the idea of separating sport from politics decades ago when it supported GANEFO. It then became equally strongly opposed to the politicization of sport during the process of hosting the Beijing Olympiad, hailing the Games as successful sports diplomacy. Of course, such PRC flip-flopping on sport and diplomacy is not unique; many other countries do exactly the same.

⁵³ Ye Jiabao and Su Lianyong (eds.), *Tiyu gailun* [Survey of Sport] (Beijing: Beijing Sport University Press, 2005), p. 85.

One source claims that ‘politics and sports or sports diplomacy describes the use of sport as a means to influence diplomatic, social, and political relations’.⁵⁴ The merging of sport and diplomacy leads to sports diplomacy, but the Chinese understanding of the term in theory and practice confirms two further characteristics. First, sport offers a ‘tool for creating openings and progress between estranged countries that ordinary foreign-ministry negotiations cannot use’; and second, sport is ‘used as a form of sanction that sends a high-profile and symbolic political message of disapproval’.⁵⁵ As long as sport is used to influence or to send signals, including friendly sports exchanges and unfriendly sports sanctions and boycotts, all exchanges should be considered sports diplomacy. Such an understanding conforms to the Chinese experience.

This Chinese case study validates both experiences. However, the Chinese government does not consider sporting exchanges that have been hindered by political hostility or sporting boycotts and bans as sports diplomacy, although they do provide governments with a low-cost, high-profile way of conveying disapproval over a particular policy.⁵⁶ The Chinese government understands sports diplomacy as ‘a term to refer to the external sports communications and exchanges conducted by a sports agency or sports circle with the purpose of *promoting relations with other countries* [emphasis added]’.⁵⁷ The Chinese are not alone. This view is shared by some Americans. One article from the US State Department’s website, for instance, also considers sports diplomacy as ‘an international sport programming initiative designed to *help start a dialogue* [emphasis added] at the grassroots level with non-elite young people’.⁵⁸ As China becomes increasingly integrated into the international community, it has been more consistently opposed to the negative use of sport in diplomacy and the politicization of sport.

The rationale behind such a narrow concept of sports diplomacy is that it is a relatively new notion and term. Although the relations between sport, diplomacy and politics have a long and storied history, the concept of sports diplomacy has only attracted attention since the latter part of the Cold War, when international tensions relaxed and when sport began to be used as a special means to improve relations. Scholars may have a broad sense of sports diplomacy that includes both the negative and positive uses of sport in international exchange, but China does not think that way. In the Chinese perspective, sport that causes conflicts, wars and riots, or that incites nationalistic fervour and violence caused by victories or losses on sports fields, is not sports diplomacy. Neither has the negative use of

⁵⁴ ‘Politics and Sports’, available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_and_sports.

⁵⁵ Cha, *Beyond the Final Score*, p. 72.

⁵⁶ Cha, *Beyond the Final Score*, p. 96.

⁵⁷ Qian Qichen (ed.), *Shijie waijiao dacidian* [World Diplomatic Dictionary] (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2005), p. 1999.

⁵⁸ Steve Jones, ‘A Muscular Foreign Policy’, available online at <http://usforeignpolicy.about.com/od/usstatedepartment/a/Sport-Diplomacy.htm>.

sport, such as boycotts and sanctions, or the politicization of sport, been considered sports diplomacy, although they were frequently applied as a diplomatic tool by China in its history. As this article has illustrated, a consistent goal in China's international sporting activities is to undermine the legitimacy of the ROC in Taiwan, a priority in China's diplomacy, but in the Chinese view this must not be considered as sports diplomacy.

Theoretically and practically, sports diplomacy is attracting more attention and usage in international relations, but its role must not be exaggerated. As Cha points out, 'sport is rarely itself a sufficient condition for diplomacy. If it were, we might be able to solve many problems' that we face today.⁵⁹ 'Sport is a diplomatic lubricant'; it 'is most effective as a facilitating condition rather than as a specific cause of diplomatic breakthrough (or breakdowns)'.⁶⁰ Sport exchanges provided an invaluable channel for bilateral exchanges for a Sino–US rapprochement and Sino–South Korean normalization, because conditions in the international political environment were ideal. Otherwise, sports diplomacy would falter and become impossible. Deterioration of bilateral relations or diplomatic breakdowns can hardly be stopped by sports diplomacy alone. Hostile relations shut the door on all diplomatic means, sports diplomacy included.

The advantage of sports diplomacy lies in the fact that sport lies outside the domains of politics and diplomacy, and that sport appears to be apolitical in theory. The evolution of their relationship confirms two situations when sport is politicized: the negative signalling of punishment; and the positive signalling of goodwill. If we do not have the luxury to choose between the two, it is advisable and beneficial to keep sport some distance away from diplomacy and politics.

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⁵⁹) Cha, *Beyond the Final Score*, p. 73.

⁶⁰) Cha, *Beyond the Final Score*, p. 73.

