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A rebel and a giant: change and continuity in the discursive construction of Chinese sport heroes

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A rebel and a giant: changes and continuities in the discursive construction of Chinese sport hero(in)es after the 2008 Olympics

Abstract

The essay examines the changes and continuities in the construction of elite athletes as national hero(in)es after the Beijing 2008 Olympics, and investigates this development at the discursive level in the context of the reform of Chinese elite sport. Through employing Critical Discourse Analysis to interrogate the traditional Chinese sport hero discourse in the pre-2008 era and in the post-2008 data from government-run media concerning two of the most renowned Chinese national sport hero(in)es, the paper identifies the maintenance, albeit with subtle changes, of the traditional nationalist account concerning the outstanding performances and political qualities of Chinese national sport hero(in)es. Concurrently, however, there are also new features, which are argued to be the consequence of a shift in the political climate in Chinese sport, evidenced in the post-2008 construction of national sport hero. The paper concludes with a discussion, from a Foucauldian perspective, of the relationship between the discourse, knowledge and the power of/over discourse in the construction of Chinese elite athletes as national hero(in)es throughout the period.

Keywords: Nationalism, Sport Nationalism, Chinese elite sport, sport hero, discourse analysis

Sport is recognised as a powerful apparatus that is able to realise various aims, such as being ‘a peacemaker’ (Coubertin, 2000), acting as ‘war minus the shooting’ (Orwell, 1945) or a platform for establishing or reinforcing national identities (Bairner, 2008). In addition, sport has become increasingly implicated in the emergence of the overarching concept of the celebrity which today often subsumes other terms including ‘star’ and ‘hero’ (Marshall, 1997).

The political function of elite sport is well recognised in China. For instance, elite sporting success, especially in the Olympics, is traditionally clothed in the Chinese media in a nationalist and ideological rhetoric to reinforce the ruling ideology-based concept of the Chinese nation and to legitimise the superiority of its communist belief system (Fan and Lu, 2013; Hu and Henry, 2017b; Lewis and Teets, 2008).

Due to the progress in China’s Olympic performance, since its economic reform, reaching its peak at the 2008 Olympics, a great number of athletes have been

described as national heroes by the media for their achievement in both athletic and other facets of their careers.

This paper seeks to investigate the changes and continuities in the construction of Chinese sport hero(in)es, by the government-run Chinese media in particular, following the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Moreover, it also examines the relationship between those changes and continuities and the reform of Chinese elite sport.

I Introduction: The Chinese Elite Sport System

Since China's economic reform, the government-run and -financed elite sport system, known as *Zhuanye* sport, has been directed towards market-oriented reform, which aims to ultimately replace the planned-economy-based system with one that is based in civil-society (Hu and Henry, 2017a).

This task has resulted, at discursive level, in reforming narratives in elite sport policy, public criticism of the state-run system since 1980s, and some modifications of *Zhuanye* sport, such as the commercialisation of football and basketball (Tan et al., 2016; Zheng et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the pre-2008 reform had strengthened, rather than weakened, the power of *Zhuanye* sport by producing an outstanding performance in the Beijing Olympics (Hu and Henry, 2017a).

The end of the 2008 Olympics was recognised as a release of the pressure on the reform of Chinese elite sport, and a number of pro-reform policies have been published at the national level (Hu and Henry, 2017a; Zheng et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, changes in the media accounts of Chinese elite athletes, some of whom are portrayed as national hero(in)es, have also been evidenced in the post-2008 era.

In this paper, this post-2008 Chinese sport hero discourse is studied through two case studies, and its relationship with the reform of, and with the power relationship in, Chinese elite sport is also discussed.

II Methodology

Following Critical Realism, it could be argued that an investigation of the development of the discourse concerning Chinese sport hero(in)es can enhance our understanding of the development of Chinese elite sport, which not only constrains and facilitates such discursive construction but is also restructured by the discourse (Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2010).

Given the dominance of the Chinese government over the domestic media and Chinese elite sport, narratives of the Chinese media, especially the government-run ones, are examined in this study of the discourse defining national sport hero(in)es. Although, in rare cases, there is divergence in government media's accounts of practical issues, such as the criteria needed for 'being a Sport Power' (Yang, 2010; Zheng et al., 2019), ideological consistency is maintained throughout the government-run media system, above which the central government's discourse looms large. Therefore, the government-run media is considered as a central element in this study which aims to investigate the influence of reform, representing political correctness in China, on the construction of Chinese sport hero.

Moreover, this study does not stop at the *linguistic* and *semiotic* level, but rather endeavours to investigate the 'dialectal relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it' (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 5:6) through employing Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter, the CDA) (Fairclough, 2005, 2009).

Given its concerns with power relationships in a society, the CDA is also used to discover the control/power over the production of truth through analysing the discourse on, and about, the subject (in this case, the construction of Chinese sport hero) (Fairclough, 2005; Foucault, 1980a, 1988). Piggin *et al.* (2009: 465) indicate that 'through studying the speaker or writer's employment of various rhetorical devices and themes ... we can understand relations of power', because the production of truth via discourse which 'sets limits on what can be said' (Bacchi, 2000: 48), is a

necessary condition for exercising power, or as Foucault (1986: 230) argues, 'we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth'.

In addition, such construction of "a truth" is also constrained and facilitated by "the truth", which 'produces the true discourse which, at least partially, decides, transmits and itself extends upon the effects of power' of a given society during a certain period (Foucault, 1986: 230). Therefore, before investigating the construction of the heroic status of two athletes in the post-2008 era, the traditional Chinese sport hero discourse in the government-run media is investigated as a discourse constructing "the truth" due to Chinese government's power over discourse.

The construction of the heroic status of Yao Ming, the No.1 pick of the Houston Rockets and the current Chair of the Chinese Basketball Association, and that of Li Na, the most successful Chinese female tennis player with two grand slam single titles, has been selected as our cases for their unparalleled achievement in athletic and other aspects of their career.

The media data was collected via the 'China Core Newspaper Database', the first and largest domestic full-text database, containing full-text articles from 637 of the most influential and popular newspapers in China.

The keywords 'Yao Ming' provided 42 media texts that are directly related to the study from 28 national and regional newspapers. The *China Youth Daily*, the official paper of the Communist Youth League of China, showed the greatest interests in the giant with five reports about him. Fifty-six articles about Li Na from 35 national and regional newspapers were directly related to the study. The *China Youth Daily* was again the most productive with 7 reports.

For a cross-language discourse analysis, there are, undeniably, difficulties and challenges, which necessitated subtle interpretations between denotation and connotation of terminology translated from one language to another. Nonetheless, it proved to be academically feasible and potentially productive. (Henry et al., 2007).

III The traditional construction of a national sport hero

The significance of outstanding performance

With 56 officially recognised ethnic groups in China, it is difficult and even politically dangerous to name truly national heroes, for example amongst those who have been involved in past conflicts between ethnic groups in the history (Hu and Liang, 2019). Nevertheless, those who stood against foreign powers are less contentiously given heroic status by scholars, the media and the Chinese people as a whole (Li, 2015; Wang, 2006).

Such a criterion of a national hero endorses the nationalist discourse of modern sport in China, and in particular that of elite sport, which is recognised as a vital means to restore the nation from its past suffering (Brownell, 2008). Moreover, elite sporting success is also portrayed as the embodiment of the superiority of socialism by the People's Republic of China (Fan and Lu, 2013; Hu and Henry, 2017b). Thus, 'winning glory for the country' is officially identified as a political task for Chinese elite sport, and Chinese athletes, particularly those with Olympic medals, who are subsequently idolised as national heroes (Fan and Lu, 2019).

For instance, in their study of the construction of Chinese elite athletes in an official paper of the General Administration of Sport (hereafter, the GAS)¹, Li *et al.* (2011) identify four typical features, which are:

1. recalcitrance and the will to outdo others,
2. positivity and endeavouring to make progress,
3. a high sense of honour and duty, and
4. vivacity and gregariousness.

The first three could be argued as performance-related, if not -based and are consistent with the aforementioned political task, i.e. 'winning glory for the country.'

¹ The GAS is an institution directly affiliated to the National Council and is responsible for the administration and development of sport affairs in the PRC (Wu, 1999).

In addition to the government-run media's accounts, the Chinese government also stresses elite sport performance through associating it with the national spirit and image. The then-Minister of Sport, Mr Liu Peng, addressing the annual conference of all states' sport ministers before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, announced that

[Elite athletes] must achieve great result in the Beijing Games. [Because] Elite sport has unique, or even irreplaceable, effects in increasing national cohesion and centripetal forces and in inspiring the national spirit

(Liu, 2007: 1).

We must understand the goals of staging and participating in the [2008] Games from the aspect of promoting ... the development of society and the prosperity of [Chinese] culture. It is incumbent upon us to strive for outstanding results in the Beijing Games... [because] the performance of Chinese elite athletes will be a showcase of the national image.

(Liu, 2008)

In the above statement, the anticipated outstanding performance of Chinese athletes was identified as the embodiment of national triumph by Liu through interpreting the significance of 'great results' and 'outstanding performances' in terms of 'the development of society and the prosperity of [Chinese] culture'. Chinese athletes were, therefore, assigned the 'incumbent' duty of 'achiev[ing] great results in the Beijing Games' to realise the 'irreplaceable effects' of elite sport in boosting the national spirit. Such a nationalist narrative from the government legitimises the heroic status of athletes who achieve Olympic success.

Moreover, the emphasis on elite sport performance also considerably enhances the importance for ZhuanYe sport of Chinese sportswomen, who overwhelmingly dwarf their male counterparts in the Olympics, (Brownell, 1996; Lu, 2009; Riordan and Dong, 1996). Indeed, this gender difference in elite sport performance is acknowledged and frequently discussed by scholars looking at gender and sexuality in relation to Chinese sport (Besnier et al., 2018; Chong, 2013; Dong, 2003, 2011; Dong and Mangan, 2008; Riordan and Dong, 1996).

The importance of ideological correctness

Besides the requirement for their performance, elite athletes are also expected to evince certain ideological qualities, for example, to be 'red and professional' (both socialist-minded and professionally competent) and 'to prioritise national and collective value, to make individual values subordinate to collective values, and to ignore their individual interests' (Hu and Liang, 2019; Wu, 1999: 52).

It could be argued that this is collectivist and socialist ideology that is accentuated in the specification of the expected behaviour of elite athletes, who are officially identified as 'the precious treasure of Chinese sport, the intangible resource of Chinese [elite] sport... [and the] intangible asset to repay [their] motherland and to make further contribution to [Chinese] sport' (GAS, 2006: 1). Such an identity for elite athletes is related to the government-run character of Zhuanye sport, which is officially endorsed by the top Chinese leaders as 'an embodiment of the superiority of socialism' (Hu, 2008; Wang, 2014).

In other words, the mainstream ideology of China legitimises Zhuanye sport and empowers the socialist discourse, which produces the truth concerning the appropriate ideology and practices of elite athletes. Meanwhile, knowledge of their identity, ideological quality and appropriate behaviour, in return reinforces the dominance of the socialist ideology embedded in the Zhuanye system.

The simultaneous emphasis on performance and ideological traits was well evidenced in the pre-2008 construction of 'Chinese sport hero(in)es', including both individuals such as Xu Haifeng, Li Ning, and also the Chinese women's volleyball team, whose victories are normally depicted, in revolutionary rhetoric, as symbols of the development of the socialist country (Jianjun Tang et al., 2010). This was also apparent in the pre-2008 image of Yao Ming and Li Na. For example, the athletic talent of Li Na had been a main theme in her media image (Liu and Deng, 2013), while the political and nationalist connotations of Yao's NBA career had also been well evidenced in his media portrayal (Cao, 2007).

In short, elite sport has provided a valuable, albeit challenging, opportunity for China to realise its nationalist task, i.e. to restore the nation and escape its past suffering. Chinese athletes are expected to 'win glory for the country'. Concurrently, ideological quality is also imposed, and they are envisaged as the embodiment of the country's mainstream political beliefs. Those who managed to do both were consequently granted heroic status by the Chinese government and society, at least in the pre-2008 era.

IV Changes and continuities in the construction of Chinese sport hero(in)es in the post 2008 era

It is argued by some that there has been a decrease in the political significance associated with Chinese athletes and their success in media narratives since China's economic reform in the 1970s (Liu, 2011; Wu and Wei, 2017). This trend has been reinforced in the post-2008 era, particularly after the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, during which time the ZhuanYe system and its political tasks were even harshly criticised by the official mouthpiece of the Chinese government, *the Xinhua News Agency* (Wang and Yang, 2011; Yang, 2010).

Admitting such a trend and its connection with China's reform, we would, however, argue that, as shown in the following analysis, this new trend at discursive level is inherently consistent with the traditional Chinese elite sport discourse and the power relationship that exists in Chinese elite sport.

Li Na, a 'tennis rebel' from China

Li Na, the former WTA No.2, retired in 2014. Even though her Olympic performances, the best of which was the fourth place, were dwarfed by those of her compatriots, who won gold and a bronze in the women's doubles in the 2004 and 2008 Games respectively, the winner of seven WTA titles and two Grand Slam singles remains recognised as China's best ever tennis player.

Additionally, the tennis rebel, as the *NY Times* named her, is also portrayed as an unorthodox sporting heroine who symbolises the reform of Zhuanye sport (Larmer, 2013). This is because Li Na was one of the first four Zhuanye tennis players who were allowed to leave the traditional system and to 'fly solo' after their fight against the system (Wan, 2011). The 'flying solo' policy of the Chinese Tennis Association (hereafter, the CTA) represented a significant reform, enabling the 'lone rangers' to a) choose their own coach and tournament, b) have full control of the majority of their prize money (88%) and commercial income (92%), at the cost of covering their own expenses. In contrast, Zhuanye players are fully supported by the government, but are also required to participate in the tournaments selected by the CTA, and to hand in the majority of their winnings and commercial income (65% in total) (Li, 2012). The flying solo policy, as stated by Pu, Newman and Giardina (2019), aims to optimise the economic and political possibility through a market-driven mechanism.

Li Na has been followed by the Chinese media throughout her career. Consistent with the traditional accentuation of athletic achievement, the interest of the state-run newspapers was closely related to her success. For instance, it was in 2011, the year in which she won her first Grand Slam singles title in Paris, and in 2014, when she retired after winning the women's singles in the Australian Open, that Li Na attracted most attention from *the People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Party (24 and 20 reports in the two years respectively). After her retirement, the number dropped dramatically (two reports in 2015, one in 2016 and none since 2017).

Her unmatched success even made the state-run media forget about her overt challenge to the aforementioned nationalist task of Chinese athletes. In 2013, after her loss at Wimbledon, Li rhetorically questioned in response to a journalist why she needed 'to carry a country on my back'. Immediately, *the People's Daily* condemned the statement as 'intolerable and uncomfortable', and reminded, if not actually warning, her that 'it won't take long for people to be annoyed and thus abandon a star' (Zhong et al., 2013: 1). Nonetheless, just six-month later, the same newspaper

placed her photo on its front page, where reports of the country's leaders are normally found, on the day after her victory in Melbourne.

This discourse, we would argue, suggests a forgiveness in China's official narrative for her former rebellious speech. The government-backed discourse also enhanced knowledge regarding the significance of outstanding performances for one's identity as a national sport hero, even though she was an unorthodox one, flying solo from the Zhuanye system and questioning her own nationalist task less than six-months earlier.

This emphasis on performance, which is a feature of the traditional narrative of a national sport hero, is not only one of the main themes in the representation of Li Na but also in the interpretation of the 'flying solo' policy. The CTA describes the policy as a strategy aimed at developing Olympic success, even though it is well understood as having resulted in a continuous struggle between China's top female players and the Zhuanye system (Wu, 2014). For instance, the then-Chair of the CTA, Ms Sun Jinfang, remarked before the London Olympics that

While kites are flying, [we] hold the string tightly and keep our eyes on her... There is no conflict between 'flying solo' in professional tournament and representing one's country in the Olympics. ... Li Na has shown a stronger sense of belonging [to the country] after experiencing the professional [tournament by herself] ... and cherishes the opportunity to play in the [2012] Olympics.

(Wang, 2012: 1)

Here the leader of Chinese tennis frames the post-reform relationship between the athletes and the CTA through employing terms such as 'hold the string tightly' and 'keep our eyes on her'. It could be argued that the phrases directly construct the power relationship between the two and suggest the continued dominance of the CTA over Li Na even after 'kites' were allowed to fly solo (Fairclough, 2009).

In addition to the maintenance of the institutional power relationship, the traditional characteristics of the discourse of Chinese national sport hero were also retained in this statement. For example, the nationalist task of elite athletes is acknowledged by Ms Sun, who associated the Olympics not only with the reform *per*

se but also with Li Na in particular, by interpreting her ideological growth, for instance in acquiring 'a stronger sense of belonging' and in her appreciation of the Olympic opportunity, as a positive consequence of the reform. In other words, the unchanging knowledge in relation to the significance of Olympic performance for Chinese elite sport enabled Ms Sun to endorse the reform through identifying Li Na's appropriate ideological growth.

Such an interpretation is supported by Ms Sun's final comments that

If 'flying solo' is proved by the performance of Chinese tennis players in the London Olympics as [a] successful [policy], [the CTA] will then deepen the reform further.

(*ibid*: 1)

Therefore, Li Na's success is interpreted as a consequence of the 'flying solo' policy which is consistent with China's reformist trend and its main ideology in the reforming era i.e. Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. This feature, we would argue, is in line with the other characteristics found in Chinese sport hero discourse, particularly clothing elite athletes in a political rhetoric that is consistent with the dominant ideology of the country. Even though, this time, this was not traditional socialism and its planned economy, but rather China's reform of traditional socialism and its planned-economy-based Zhuanze sport. For instance, it was commented in *China News Week*, administered by Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, that

Li's success in Roland-Garros unquestionably confirms the correctness of ... the professionalisation of tennis. The endeavour is respect-worthy for it is a new model that is different from the planned-economy-based model, and is based on the market economy and in line with the status quo of a diverse and open Chinese society.

(Wan, 2011: 34)

It was also noted by the *Xinhua News Agency* that

Li Na's success makes her dream comes true, and more significantly, is enlightening for the development of Chinese sport, ... [which] requires courageously creative moves. During our leaping-forward development to become a Sport Power, Li Na shall not only be a single case but also be a model [to learn from].

(Lin, 2011: 1)

There are a number of concepts with reforming connotation in the Chinese context that are employed in these extracts from two mainstream Chinese media. Examples include 'endeavour in the direction of professionalisation', 'market economy', 'diverse and open', 'courageously creative moves', and most importantly 'to become a Sport Power', which was emphasised by the then-President of China, Hu Jintao, and then officially identified as the new political task for Chinese elite sport after the Beijing Games. These terms frame the perspective, i.e. the reform of Chinese elite sport, from which the Li Na's identity as a model is politically constructed, and the criteria by which a model is worthy of further endeavour (Fairclough, 2009).

Furthermore, we would also argue that other phrases, such as 'confirms the correctness', 'is respectful', 'dream comes true' and 'enlightening for the development of Chinese sport', signify approval of the correctness of the 'flying solo' reform, which challenged the Zhuanye system and developed a relationship with the reform of Chinese society. This is to say, through framing Li Na's identity as a spearhead of the reform, her career, although it challenged the traditional Zhuanye system, has been well deployed in the post-2008 era to construct a new representation of political correctness or of the practices expected in the reforming era, namely to reform the Zhuanye sport system towards a civil-society-based one (Fairclough, 2009; Zhang and Liu, 2013). Though Li's rebelliousness may, to a degree, repudiates Juguo Tizhi and state power (Pu et al., 2019), her eventual success is ultimately interpreted and instrumentalised by the government-run media as a case legitimises not only the reform of Chinese sport but also its facilitating context, i.e. Socialism with Chinese characteristics, which, in return, politically guarantees her heroic status.

To sum up, Li Na's unprecedentedly successful career made a remarkable contribution to her status as a national sport hero. However, more importantly, the 'tennis rebel', who was well known for her strong personality, is then anointed by the mainstream media for the political correctness that she represented during the reforming era. The construction of such an unorthodox national hero is, nonetheless,

inherently consistent with the traditional understanding of the Chinese sport hero, who should be outstanding in athletic terms and also be recognised as an appropriate hero in political terms.

Yao Ming, from a basketball centre to a core of the reform

Yao Ming, the star of the Chinese men's national basketball team, was the No.1 pick of the Houston Rockets of the NBA in 2002. The career of the 8-time NBA all-star seems overshadowed by that of Li Na, for he had neither taken the Rockets to the NBA finals nor made the Chinese team achieve more the best eight in the Olympic Games. However, Yao's status as a national hero has been well identified and maintained even after his retirement in 2011.

Throughout his career, the 7 ft 6 giant was framed as a gentle behemoth, against whom there had hardly been any criticism in a nation of 1.7 billion (Hong, 2011). In addition to his peaceful and thoughtful personality, Yao was also highly complimented by the government-run media for his commitment to the national team and his astute reaction to some humiliating situations during his NBA days, which, as we demonstrate in the following discussion, had been imbued with additional significance (Gu, 2017).

Described as 'China's single largest export to the US' by President Bill Clinton (Wan, 2016), Yao's status was related to his political significance throughout his NBA career. For instance, it was commented by the *Worker's Daily* on the day of Yao's retirement that

Why does Yao have such incredible influence? Besides other reasons, what is particularly important is that Yao presents a new image of the young Chinese to the world... Yao is also a great cultural ambassador, connecting China and the US...

Yao, but not anyone with a more successful career in sport, becomes the face of Chinese sport of the decade This suggests that there are changes in how sport is valued in China... Though the Olympic gold remains important, additional meanings have been associated with sport in China. [Therefore] Yao Ming and Li Na, neither of whom have any Olympic medals, both became national heroes ... [which] presents China's will to integrate with, and to be recognised by, the international community.

(Liu, 2011: 1)

It is claimed by Fairclough (2009) that the construction of identity, which is the focus of the quote, frames the expected behaviour of its subject. It could therefore be argued that this quote frames new knowledge in relation to the expected achievement of a national sport hero, or the criteria for someone to be installed as a sport hero. More precisely, through acknowledging Yao and Li's limited success in the Olympics and the 'additional meanings' of Chinese sport, the government-run paper suggests that it is Yao's role as a national representative and 'a great cultural ambassador' that underpins his heroic identity, even though 'the Olympic gold remains important'.

In other words, while maintaining the traditional emphasis on elite sport performance and the Olympics, this new knowledge relating to 'how sport is valued' in the post-2008 era reinforces the political connotations associated with the identity of sport heroes, enhances the importance of their additional duties, and empowers those new hero(in)es who lack Olympic success. In Yao's case, the additional political duties along with the heroic status have been maintained even after his retirement.

In 2017, Yao was elected as Chair of the Chinese Basketball Association (hereafter, the CBA). His inauguration is identified by Chinese media, using reforming, rather than sport, rhetoric, as a landmark in the reform of the administration system of Chinese elite sport (Wang, 2017). The distinguishing feature of the construction of Yao's leading role in the reform process is his identity as both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' of the ZhuanYe system.

An official of the ZhuanYe system with 'insider' status normally means a former ZhuanYe athlete or coach assigned an administrative role after his/her retirement. This route is well known domestically as 'whoever excels in training and in competition can gain access to an official career' (Hu and Henry, 2017a). Examples include the former Sport Minister Mr Yuan Weimin and the former vice Sport

Minister Cai Zhenhua². In this sense, Yao is an ‘insider’ undoubtedly. On the other hand, Yao is also recognised as an outsider, because he was neither enrolled into the hierarchical administrative framework of Zhuanyue sport, nor had he served in any administrative roles in the system before winning the election (Wang, 2017).

Nevertheless, this combined, and to a degree contradictory, ‘insider/outsider’ identity of the new leader of Chinese basketball is interpreted as the consequence of the reform of Zhuanyue sport, and in particular, of the reform of its most essential part, i.e. the Administration framework. *The People’s Daily* commented on the day that Yao took power that

(The issues of) Chinese basketball, like a mirror, reflect the dilemma of the reform of the administration framework of [Zhuanyue] sport... i.e. ‘two titles shared by one group’.

In this regard, Yao ... represents a totally different idea of reform: given that those with vested interests in sport neither want to nor are able to (implement) reform, an outsider with no administrative experience is selected to accelerate reform using external pressure.

The reform of basketball, to a degree, is a vivid and specific example of the reform of China... the best way of which, sometimes, is [to employ] the simplest way..., [which] Yao represents. The simplest way [of reform] is to name the most professional and appropriate candidate and simultaneously to release the burden of the administration system, which is expected to render its power (to civil society) ...As Yao perfectly indicates today, the administration department’s duty is to complement the environment for, rather than to compete with, the market. A lot of bureaucrats need to learn from Yao.

(Gongzi, 2017: 1)

As contextual information for the analysis of this statement, ‘two titles shared by one group’ refers to the inherent characteristics of the administration system of Zhuanyue sport, in which Sport Associations are politically, financially, institutionally and administratively overseen by the Chinese sport administration departments

² Mr Yuan Weimin, the Sport Minister from 2000 to 2004, was a former volleyball player and coach leading the Chinese women’s volleyball team that won five international champions in a row in the 1980s.

Mr Cai Zhenhua, the vice-Sport Minister from 2007-2018, was a former table tennis player and the former head coach of the Chinese table tennis team that has been a dominant force in the table tennis world since mid 1990s.

(hereafter, the SADs), and hence are, in essence, virtual incarnations of the SADs (Li et al., 2003). Thanks to this combined identity, the SADs govern sport issues as public sector departments with administrative power; meanwhile, they also competes with other stakeholders in the market as non-for-profit organisations, or sometimes private ones (Gongzi, 2017). One of the key goals of the reform of the administration system of Chinese sport has been to make Sport Associations independent from the SADs in order to promote the civil-society-based development of sport (Hu and Henry, 2017b).

In the above quote, Yao is identified by the mouthpiece of the CPC as an outsider, who is free from the vested-interests network of ZhuanYe sport and 'is selected to accelerate the reform'. At the same time, the insiders, particularly 'those with vested interests in sport', are constructed as being resistant reform in their own interests.

As previously indicated, the construction of the identities of different stakeholders, from a CDA perspective, regulates the way in which they are expected to behave (Fairclough, 2005). The CPC, by framing Yao, in its official newspaper, as a reforming force who 'is selected to accelerate the reform with external pressure', endorses the rightfulness of Yao's reform and empowers outsiders in the reform and the administration of Chinese basketball. Concurrently, the vested interest groups, in particular those within the SADs, are explicitly requested to 'learn from Yao' and 'to complement' rather than 'to compete with the market'.

Moreover, we would also like to argue that this account suggests the CPC's preference between the market-oriented reform and the planned-economy-based ZhuanYe system, since the construction of practices is recognised as a discursive apparatus framing the appropriate relationship between its subjects (Fairclough, 2005). Through subtly indicating a preferred practice via its own official newspaper, the CPC thus defines *the* new political correctness for Chinese elite sport, which sport heroes must honour and protect.

In sum, Yao has been closely associated with nationalist and political connotations throughout his career and is well recognised as a national hero by the Chinese community. Similar to the case of Li Na, Yao is also lionised by the mainstream media, after his retirement from the NBA in particular, for the political correctness that the new Chair of the CBA represents. We would argue, therefore, that, although Yao is portrayed as a challenger to the traditional ZhuanYe system, his heroic status is maintained, if not reinforced, through the traditional discursive technique which jointly emphasises the athletic and the political quality of the sport hero it defines.

IV Discussion

Through examining the portrayal of Chinese elite athletes as national hero(in)es, we identified two features of the sport hero discourse in China. The first refers to the accentuation of elite sport performance with strong nationalist narratives; the second is consistency between athletes' ideological quality and the political agenda of the country.

This two-fold character of the heroic status of Chinese elite athletes is consistent with the definition of the Chinese nation, which is based not only on cultural but also political criteria (Lewis and Teets, 2008). It enables the political instrumentalisation of the heroic images of elite athletes, which aims to reinforce the identity of the Chinese nation and endorse the correctness of China's socialist ideology.

Wu and Wei (2017) state that there have been changes in the construction of the national sport hero since 1990s. However, we would argue that this new trend is essentially consistent with the traditional Chinese sport hero discourse. More precisely, the themes of the discourse have been carefully maintained, despite adjustments in some personal-specific details and/or at the rhetorical level.

Before developing the analysis of the cases of Yao and Li, it is worth noting there are also examples of the orthodox construction of sport hero(in)es in the post-2008 era. Examples include the Chinese women's volleyball teams and Liu Xiang, the winner of the men's hurdles at the 2004 Olympics, China's first Olympic Gold in men's track

and field. In both cases, athletic success was the cornerstone of their heroic identities. Indeed, the women's volleyball team has long been presented as a traditional embodiment of the diligent spirit and collectivist ideology (Hu and Liang, 2019). Moreover, it is officially documented that volleyball and track and field remain administered and dominated by the General Administration of Sport through the traditional system (National Development and Reform Commission, 2019).

However, the cases of Yao Ming and Li Na reveal a loosening of the association in media accounts between an athlete's identity as national hero or heroine and Olympic success. As previously indicated, their heroic status is well recognised, although neither managed to win an Olympic medal. In contrast, Li Ning, a Chinese gymnast who won three gold medals at the 1984 Olympics, was heavily criticised after returning from the 1988 Games empty-handed (Zhao, 1988). Such a change in discourse, particularly in media accounts, reflects a change in social attitudes towards elite sport performance, which was once recognised as a vital showcase of the power of the nation but was then questioned by the Xinhua News Agency for its value during the era of the reform of China (Wang and Yang, 2011; Yang, 2010).

Furthermore, such change at the discursive level concerning the importance of performance is related to a new political identity associated with sport heroes, for instance, a tennis rebel representing the fruitful reform of Chinese sport and a cultural ambassador who is expected to lead the reform of his sport. Whilst challenging the political task of the ZhuanYe system, this altered discourse can be viewed as the perpetuation of the requirement of the ideological quality or political correctness of the national sport hero.

Although there are studies of the media construction of Li Na from cultural or historical perspective (Bien-Aimé et al., 2019; Fan and Lu, 2019), gender is less often mentioned than it is in literature discussing China's Olympic performance, which Chinese sportswomen dominate. It could be argued that given a) the loosened association between Olympic success and heroic status in the post-2008 era, and b) the limited gender change in the procedures of Chinese elite sport reform (for

instance, tennis is the only Zhuanye sport in which female players have experienced a faster pace of professionalisation), gender differences are less significant in the post-2008 discourse, which instead highlights the importance of the political correctness of sport heroes in the new reforming era. Changes in this political discourse, we shall argue, can be seen as a consequence of the new knowledge and/or of the *new* truth of Chinese elite sport.

As previously demonstrated, the 'production of truth' is regarded as the necessary condition for the exercise of power (Foucault, 1980b). It could be argued that the insidious exercise of power over Chinese elite sport discourse, which regulates the appropriate ideological quality and political connotations of a national sport hero in the post-2008 era by controlling which voice is heard, is based on the 'truth' concerning the political correctness of the reform of China in general, and the reform of Chinese sport in particular in the post-2008 era (Hu and Henry, 2017a; Wang and Qian, 2014). Therefore, Li Na was portrayed as an embodiment of the reform and of Socialism with Chinese character after the Beijing Games, rather than of the superiority of socialism as in traditional discourse. Yao Ming was officially identified as a representative of China's willingness to integrate, rather than to compete, with the world during his NBA career and is now presented as a force for reform after taking control of the CBA.

Such changes in knowledge, on the one hand, directly regulate the acceptable practices of Chinese elite sport. As shown in the cases studied, the interpretation of the success of the tennis rebel restructures the relationship between athletes and their sport, particularly those with mature professional structures, such as tennis, golf and snooker. Meanwhile, Yao Ming and his induction as the Chair of the CBA significantly announced the ideal relationship between the SADs, NGBs and the market against the background of the reform of the administration system of Chinese elite sport.

On the other hand, the new knowledge also reinforces the power of the discourse that frames the new 'function' and 'role' of national hero(in)es in elite sport. This is

to say that these empowered reformist discourses which reinforced *the* accepted truth in Chinese sport in the post-2008 era, was concurrently also strengthened by *a* truth that is produced by itself. Interestingly, the requirement of political quality rather than athletic achievement in the new knowledge concerning Chinese sport heroes, to a degree, saves the faces of Chinese sportsmen, who have been outperformed by the Chinese sport heroines in the Olympics.

In return, given the consistency between the political trends in Chinese society and *the* truth of the new political (reforming) connotations of national sport hero(in)es, the government utilises its dominant power over discourse to ensure that this 'appropriate' discourse is well implemented for reproducing and reinforcing the aforementioned truth. This is to say, the implementation of the constructive power of a discourse is facilitated and controlled by wielding power over discourses, which, in the Chinese case, is monopolised by the government. Therefore, while there are orthodox sport hero(in)es from sports that are still controlled by the GAS, Yao Ming and Li Na, whose successes are the consequence of routes that are unorthodox in the Zhuanye system, are presented as sport heroes by the government-run media for the 'additional/political meanings' associated with their heroic status, which challenges the traditional Zhuanye system but are, nonetheless, politically correct.

In other words, to paraphrase Foucault, through discourse, we know about the hero, through the power of discourse, we create and re-create hero, and through power over discourse, a certain type of hero emerges, for 'we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth' (Foucault, 1980b: 93).

V Conclusion

As previously demonstrated, outstanding performances and ideological correctness have been the traditional cornerstones of the construction of the status of Chinese

sport hero(in)es. Nonetheless, there has been an alteration to the criteria employed to justify their status in the post-2008 era.

This trend (particularly the changes involved) reflects a transformation of the roles and tasks assigned to Chinese elite sport after the Beijing 2008 Olympics.

Furthermore, the reconstruction of the image of Chinese sport hero(in)es is in line with, and is strongly endorsed by, China's reform, which has continuously been highlighted by the communist government.

The construction of Li Na and Yao Ming's heroic status embraces the traditional narrative of outstanding performance but with less emphasis on Olympic success. However, the portrayal of the two also contains new features. While acknowledging her athletic achievement, the portrayal of Li Na is located in a political rather than a nationalist account to which Li Na was herself not even sure if she subscribes (Zhong, 2013). Yao, although renowned for his basketball talent, was associated with cultural, if not diplomatic, connotations in his NBA career and then with political significance after taking over the CBA.

At the discursive level, it could be argued that this account offers a more-balanced emphasis on the athletic achievement and individual traits of elite athletes, and also balances the gender differences. Such a trend in Chinese elite sport discourse, on the one hand, retains the traditional emphasis on performance, but values it less than before. On the other hand, it also reframes knowledge related to the direction of elite sport development in China after the 2008 Olympics while reflecting the continued dominant power over sport of the Chinese government.

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