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# The Concerning in Post-baseball Gambling Scandal of 1997 with Political Debates toward Sports Relation between China and Taiwan

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## Abstract

This paper examined political debates and concerning of various actors toward sports relation between China and Taiwan in post-baseball gambling scandal of 1997 period when some Taiwanese professional sport players and clubs migrated to China. The paper finally reports that there are different tendencies toward implementation of relevant policies in open and managerial perspective among government and different political parties although having agreed sports interaction is necessary between Taiwan and China. Thus, the comprising and negotiating related matters between actors will remain an important component in Taiwan's politics for the future.

Key words: Sports Relation, Actors.

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## Introduction

Having had political struggles with China for decades, the development of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) dominated central government in Taiwan has complex implications for sport policies, more specifically, the cross-strait sport policy (Liu, 2003; Su, 2004). Issues such as that of the ‘Two Chinas’ in the Olympic Movement have made sport one of the significant areas of power struggle in international society after 1949 between the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC, China) (Chan, 1985, 2002; Liu, 2007; Xu, 2006). Whilst the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) gained power in 2000, this does not mean that the political tensions have reduced. On the contrary, political ‘conflicts’ have continued to emerge. In this vein, cross-strait sport policy, an element of policy in which government has largely failed to negotiate with China, is seen as a ‘stagnant’ policy area. Nevertheless, between citizens, interaction of sports people and business is lively, and the political stance of both sides is quietly ignored when possible.

Baseball has been a very popular sport in Taiwan since its introduction during the Japanese occupation from 1895 (Lin & Lee, 2007). Along with profound shifts in Taiwan’s internal political, economic, and social structures, development of baseball has been bound up with the complex and often turbulent history of Taiwanese society, which underwent political, economic and social upheaval. In 1990, baseball became the first professional sport in Taiwan. A professional baseball league, Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL), was launched and was in 1997 joined by a rival league, Taiwan Major League (TML). In the years, which followed three major sets of events, namely 1997 bribery and gambling scandal, 2001 Baseball World Cup, and 2003 merger, exercised a profound impact on the development of the professional baseball system. Among the above three events, the occurrence of 1997 scandal had a major effect on public interest and support, and attendances declined dramatically, threatening the very survival of the professional game on the island. Interestingly, this scandal not only troubled the local dynamics of the professional baseball system, directly and indirectly, also provoked the escalation of the controversy concerning the nature of the state’s (sport) policy towards to China. Within this particular context, we will use this specific case to illustrate the relationship between sport development and sport policy and government’s underlying political debates.

## **Political Debates toward Sports Relation between China and Taiwan after 1997**

As the China Times Eagles scandal leaked out in 1997, professional baseball involving stake-money and gambling went into decline, a consequence of public mistrust about their conduct, and subsequent decline in fans' attendance and so on (Lee, 2005). Thus, there was no way for former players, such as Kuo and Chang, who were convicted of being involved in the gambling scandal, to keep to stay in Taiwan's 'baseball community' though they were released on bail later. Having accepted reluctant 'exile by Taiwan', interestingly, both of them moved to China to re-inaugurate their baseball careers. According to Chen (2001), such a migration of these 'pioneers' have directly or indirectly influenced on the development of China's baseball when the Ministry of Sport in China announced the establishment of a new 'professional' baseball league in 2002. Surprisingly and interestingly, both of these two players are greatly devoted themselves to integrate into PRC sport,

Kuo doubles as the Tianjin Lions' pitching coach for the new professional baseball league and the China national team later on while, Chang, who won a silver medal for Taiwan at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, was named as a manager of the PRC national team as well (Wilson, 2002).

In effect, China's main consideration for setting up a professional baseball league was focused on the Olympic Games 2008 in Beijing rather than commerce. Yu has supported this and pointed out that,

Baseball does not enjoy as large a popularity as soccer or basketball in China, but the 2008 Olympics in Beijing has forced the government to improve its baseball standard level, in order for it to be competitive in 2008 (Yu, 2002).

The result of the migration to China of baseball players (exiled by the CPBL) and of professional basketball clubs (after the collapse of Chinese Basketball Association in 2000) has been to once more raised political arguments about sports exchange between the DPP government and lawmakers from opposite parties. For instance, the KMT lawmakers Lee and Chen suggested that the government should adopt a 'suitably open' sports policy of cooperation with China when Taiwan's professional sport industry was in difficulties. They pointed out,

Taiwan has not had professional basketball games for two years, when can Taiwan's clubs [players] go to China to play...the government should loosen restrictions of relevant sports policy and let Taiwan's players or clubs play on China's sports stage (Chen, 2001: 370-371, translated by one of the authors).

And;

Sport exchange is meaningful for the government...the sport exchange policy has to be reevaluated since citizens recognize sport is difficult to develop, such as with the occurrence of the gambling crisis in professional baseball in Taiwan and perhaps moving to China is a crucial way to secure sport (Lee, 2001: 370-371, translated by one of the authors).

The Minister for the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), Tsai, responded to this pressure, indicating that,

According to current related policy, the government allows clubs and individual athletes to attend China's sport market under the authority of associated government departments...yes, they can go whether as clubs or individuals. However, the government would not compromise political disputes such as China recognizing Taiwan as a local province and so on. Sport clubs or athletes should know what the government insists is behind China's political intention of lure and threats (Tsai, 2001: 370-371, translated by one of the authors).

Indeed, the 'Statute Governing Regulations Between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area' dictates that Taiwan's organizations, institutions and individuals are not allowed to involve themselves in Mainland China organizations, institutions or individuals without permission from the supervising government departments (Mainland Affairs Council, 2003). Ironically, since the early 1990s there have been many skilled Taiwanese baseball coaches working for Tianjin and Beijing teams and four basketball players participating in China's national league without any permission from the National Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (NCPFS)<sup>i</sup> (Tsai, 2001).

Despite the political debates between Taiwan and China, earlier government statistics showed that over 10,000 visitors came to Taiwan from the mainland for cultural, technological and economic, exchanges and athletic exchanges have also been increasing (Government

Information Office, 2000). Recognizing the ambivalent nature of the government's attitude, its formal, and its practical actions, together with the recession of Taiwan's professional sports in particular after the gambling scandal in professional baseball, the People First Party (PFP) lawmaker Cheng (the most famous basketball player in Taiwan) appealed to the government to take note of this, suggesting that,

Taiwan should cooperate with China to promote sport in Taiwan and argued that the NCPFS had been very conservative on the cross-strait exchange issue (Tsai, 2001).

And;

Sports activities are growing in China. I would completely support cross-strait sports cooperation, under the condition that it would not downgrade Taiwan's national dignity. The NCPFS should propose how to promote sport in Taiwan and draw up a complete blueprint with China, rather than just regulate cross-strait sport exchanges (*Taipei Times*, 2001).

Tsai further points out, "The NCPFS, Taiwan's highest governmental governing body in charge of sports affairs, however has ignored the trend of cross-strait sports exchanges and been unable to establish guidelines for conducting these exchanges" (Tsai, 2001). As regard with issue in relation to that the first Taiwan-based team (Sina) to join the China's national basketball league, to some extent, the NCPFS did not really oppose to as it argued that,

The NCPFS has not been in placing long enough to conduct these exchanges. The NCPFS was only established about three years ago, but we have tried our best to catch up. New regulations will allow Taiwanese athletes to participate in commercial competitions in China, for example basketball league (*Taipei Times*, 2001).

Later in the Legislative Yuan, Lawmaker Cheng again made an appeal there and recognized that the Sina's case was not unique, and that there would be more professional athletes (baseball players for instance) seeking a career in China. He urged that the government should deal with this in a sensitive manner directly and properly rather than ignoring it. He pointed out,

Taiwan's capacity is too small to satisfy the needs of athletes in terms of its market size. We have to expand our sports market and join in the Asian area. Therefore, it is

unreasonable to ignore China's market. Actually, in addition to Taiwan, Japanese and South Korean players have also tried to develop their sport careers in China. This is an easy logic: under the tendency of globalization, people are unable to resist it. Human resources and capital will flow to the biggest market...Taiwan, with its specific political context and lack of understanding of sports industry, has gradually lost the opportunity to join China's sports market. This is very negative for Taiwan's sports development in the future (Cheng, 2002: 219, translated by one of the authors).

The Executive Yuan underlined this point, indicating that,

If the government allowed an 'overall open' policy to be implemented, the impacts would be serious...in addition, political relationship between Taiwan and China are more complicated than can be imagined...in order to prevent offending against temporary related laws and regulations such as 'The Regulation of Relations Between Taiwan and China', 'Sports Exchange Between Taiwan and China Regulations', and to consider Taiwan's sports development, the current policy is still limited when sport clubs and individual athletes plan to go to China (The Executive Yuan, 2003: 220-222, translated by one of the authors).

The chief message to be extracted in the preceding paragraphs have reviewed political debates of sports matters, more precisely, the process of Taiwan's attitudes in relation to sports relation toward China in the period of post 1997 professional baseball scandal. It represents a good example of political struggles among actors with various interests in sport. Of significance beyond the strategic relations and interaction of stakeholders in the governance network and their impact on relevant policy, are wider effects of the gambling crisis. Whilst the gambling scandal has not only troubled the local dynamics of the professional baseball system, to some extent, also provoked the escalation of the controversy concerning the nature of the state's (sport) policy towards to China. What is important to emphasize here is that the government always seeks to maintain its legitimacy and authority when considering the best way to deal with a particular problem as well as seeking to protect the interests of citizens (Richards & Smith, 2002). At the time other actors were also pursuing their own (individual or collective) interests. Specifically the DPP's position on the critical issue of 'Taiwan Independence' (a phrase used by the government as a campaign slogan) (Brown, 2004) is such that, compared with KMT or even the PFP, the DPP government is more likely to be cautious of any possible prospect of

cross-strait sport exchange which was based on the premise of ‘reciprocity’ between two sides (National Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 2003). Thus, although in some ways there is a battle between the states, lawmakers, and players (clubs) etc, often, states are in a strong position because of their administrative power (resources), and decisions are mainly made by the national government (Richards & Smith, 2002). Nevertheless, despite its formal power, the Taiwanese state machinery has not always been effective in ‘policing’ the implementation of its own regulations. Viewed in this light, the above mentioned issue will remain an important component in Taiwan’s politics for the foreseeable future. Thus, the state represents “a strategic terrain where these have to be established in struggles, the outcomes of which are always uncertain [contingent]” (Girginov, 2001: 175).

## Conclusion

The cross-strait sports relation after 1997, has stimulated interest in relation to Taiwan’s professional baseball gambling crisis, given that the state was faced with a range of constraints and opportunities, to which it often responded with relevant policy ‘solutions’ when dealing with the China. Indeed, international sport gained symbolic importance as the issue of the ‘Two Chinas’ manifested itself in the sports domain, with both sides seeking to claim legitimacy in representing the ‘interests of China’ during the KMT ruling period. Nevertheless, as the DPP gained power from 2000, sport was utilized as an important facet of claims to nationhood, and national pride on the part of the Taiwanese [One China, One Taiwan], intensified with the ongoing troubled relationship with China. The national political, economic, social and ethnic structures have been influenced by international policy and vice versa. Thus, the change of structural context has reflected on the construction of national politics, and more specifically on sporting politics. The development of state policy in relation to Taiwan’s political identity shifted from viewing Taiwan as an integral part of China, to a tension between this view and a policy of promoting Taiwan as an independent political entity. With the emergence of the DPP and its subsequent coming to power in 2000, this policy tension became the major defining difference between the two major parties.

As for the above claim, the state’s role as the lead agency in the field and as a prominent contributor to relevant debates on Taiwan-China, it is likely that the rest of the system will gradually adopt the state’s brand of governance (Weiss, 2000). However, as has already been

illustrated, it is likely to understand that key actors such as lawmakers, governmental officials did not really oppose the launch of a sports relation toward China, but they were concerned about the impacts it may have. The sports relation between Taiwan and China, it was felt, should be regulated with rules in relation to issues such as national identity, political ideology/values and so on. Therefore, issues on debating sports relation in related to Taiwan and China will continue between proponents and opposition.

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## 中文摘要

本研究以 1997 年職棒賭博事件爆發後期，臺灣職業（棒球、籃球）運動個人及隊伍前往中國發展所引致之政治效應為例，探討相關行動參與者對於台灣與中國之間運動關係互動的態度意向。研究發現政府及不同政黨皆同意台灣與中國之間運動關係應該有所互動交流，唯因政黨政治意向差異，在相關政策之開放程度及實施管理層面上，看法歧異，未來仍需磨合之時間與空間。

關鍵字：運動關係、行動參與者。

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<sup>i</sup> National Council on Physical Fitness and Sports has changed its English official title to Sports Affairs Council, Executive Yuan in 2007.