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## **WHERE GOOD INTENTIONS FAIL: THE LIMITS OF SPORT DIPLOMACY WITH THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF XI JINPING**

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### **Abstract**

Sport diplomatic relations between high-ranking party-state actors in the People's Republic of China and foreign actors in sport have intensified significantly in recent years. The Chinese political centre under the leadership of Xi Jinping wants to transform the country into a "powerful sports nation" (体育强国, *tiyu qiangguo*). At the same time, China is seen as an important (future) market by many international actors in sport. The purpose of this research article is to retrospectively trace, understand and explain the interactions between Chinese political and foreign socio-economic actors with regard to the policy field of sport in the Xi Jinping era. Drawing on the interaction-oriented policy research of Renate Mayntz and Fritz W. Scharpf, it is argued that the analytical concept of political steering is suitable for examining such reactions and interactions between actors. The case-centred qualitative research method of "explaining-outcome process tracing" was chosen for this study to investigate interactions between the Chinese party-state and the German Football Association with regard to the thematic focus on Tibet.

**Keywords:** China, Sport Diplomacy, Political Steering, Xi Jinping, DFB, Tibet.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND METHOD

After Xi Jinping took office as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, and as President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2013, political reform and development efforts in Chinese sports have increased significantly. Between 2014 and 2016, for example, a far-reaching strategy for the development of national football was launched, comprising four so-called comprehensive reform programmes.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, after the successful bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, enormous political efforts were made to establish and develop winter sports in the country.<sup>2</sup> In the wake of these political endeavours by high-ranking party-state actors in China to transform the country into a “powerful sports nation” (体育强国, *tiyu qiangguo*),<sup>3</sup> and the fact that the PRC is seen as an important (future) market by many international stakeholders in sport,<sup>4</sup> relations and interactions between various Chinese and foreign sporting authorities have intensified considerably in recent years.

These developments in the Xi Jinping era, however, have been accompanied by a series of emotionally charged and contentious interactions between Chinese political and foreign sport actors that have attracted a relatively high level of attention both inside and outside the PRC in recent years. Some of these incidents were being quickly censored by Chinese regulatory authorities, such as the sexual assault allegations on the Weibo account of former tennis star Peng Shuai against a retired Chinese vice-premier.<sup>5</sup> Other sport-related political conflicts on the international stage with the PRC were, in turn, largely aired publicly, such as when Daryl Morey, the then general manager of the NBA team Houston Rockets, voiced his support for the Hong Kong protests in a tweet in 2019,<sup>6</sup> or when internationally well-known football players, such as former German international Mesut Özil, have publicly criticised the treatment of the Uyghurs, a Muslim minority group in China, leading to prompt responses from central party-

- 1 State Council of the PRC, “国务院关于加快发展体育产业促进体育消费的若干意见” (The State Council's Opinion on How to Accelerate the Development of the Sports Industry to Promote Sports Consumption, *guowuyuan guanyu jiaokuai fazhan tiyu chanye cujin tiyu xiaofei de ruogan yijian*), 2014, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-10/20/content\\_9152.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-10/20/content_9152.htm). State Council of the PRC, “中国足球改革发展总体方案” (The Overall Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme, *zhongguo zuqiu gaige fazhan zongti fang'an*), 2015, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-03/16/content\\_9537.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-03/16/content_9537.htm). National Development and Reform Commission of the PRC, “中国足球中长期发展规划 (2016—2050年)” (The Medium- and Long-Term Development Plan of Chinese Football (2016-2050), *zhongguo zuqiu zhong chang qi fazhan guihua (2016-2050 nian)*), 2016a, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-04/11/content\\_5062954.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-04/11/content_5062954.htm). National Development and Reform Commission of the PRC, “全国足球场地设施建设规划 (2016—2020年)” (The National Construction Plan for Football Pitches and Facilities (2016-2020), *quanguo zuqiu changdi sheshi jianshe guihua (2016—2020 nian)*), 2016b, [https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fggz/fzzlgh/gjjzxgh/201706/t20170614\\_1196795.html](https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fggz/fzzlgh/gjjzxgh/201706/t20170614_1196795.html).
- 2 State Council of the PRC, “冰雪运动发展规划 (2016—2025年)” (Ice and Snow Sports Development Plan (2016-2025), *bingxue yundong fazhan guihua (2016—2025 nian)*), 2016c, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-11/25/content\\_5137611.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-11/25/content_5137611.htm).
- 3 State Council of the PRC, “国务院办公厅关于印发体育强国建设纲要的通知” (Notice of the General Office of the State Council on the Issuance of the Outline for the Construction of a Powerful Sports Nation, *guowuyuan bangong ting guanyu yinfazhan tiyu qiangguo jianshe gangyao de tongzhi*), 2019, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2019-09/02/content\\_5426485.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2019-09/02/content_5426485.htm).
- 4 Karim Lakhani, Sascha L. Schmidt, Michael Norris and Kerry Herman, “Bayern Munich in China”, *Harvard Business School Case*, 617-025, November 2016.
- 5 Paul Mozur, Muye Xiao, Jeff Kao and Gray Beltran, “Beijing Silenced Peng Shuai in 20 Minutes, Then Spent Weeks on Damage Control”, *The New York Times*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/08/world/asia/peng-shuai-china-censorship.html>.
- 6 Christopher J. Escobar, “The Billion Dollar Tweet: Assessing the Impact of the Fallout Between the NBA and China”, *The Sports Lawyers Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2021).

state actors in China.<sup>7</sup>

The research interest of this article is to retrospectively trace, understand and explain exactly such interactions between Chinese political and foreign socio-economic actors with regard to the policy field of Chinese sport in the Xi Jinping era. In this context, the selected policy field is considered a “strategic action field” that “delimit[s] a social space in which state actors interact with a multitude of non-state (i.e., corporate, collective and individual) actors, striving to set up political alliances that often cut across the state-society divide”.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on the interaction-oriented policy research of Renate Mayntz and Fritz W. Scharpf,<sup>9</sup> it is argued that the analytical concept of political steering is suitable for examining such formal hierarchical reactions and interactions between actors.<sup>10</sup> For this purpose, a specific case study was selected to examine the interactions between high-level Chinese political actors and the German Football Association (DFB) after a football cooperation agreement between the PRC and Germany was initiated at the highest diplomatic level.<sup>11</sup> This particular case study was chosen because 1) it involves “top-down” political steering actions on the part of Chinese party-state actors, 2) Chinese football is a policy field that has received a higher political priority than most other sporting disciplines in China after Xi Jinping assumed office as General Secretary of the CCP, and 3) there was sufficient publicly available and accessible material to conduct an empirical study.

The case-centred qualitative research method of “explaining-outcome process tracing” was chosen for this study as it aims at reproducing the causal relationships in political processes and behaviours through a *within-case analysis*.<sup>12</sup> Due to travel restrictions and other preventive measures and regulations to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in both the PRC and Europe (where I am based), and the corresponding uncertainty about the feasibility of face-to-face expert interviews on the ground, which require some predictable lead time, it was decided that this research would rely mainly on an extensive document analysis and supplementary expert interviews. The four comprehensive football reforms were translated and analysed in detail. The expert interviews had to be conducted by telephone or via digital communication channels such as Zoom meetings, as it was not possible to carry out the empirical fieldwork in the PRC during the study period. Experts are considered to be individuals who have been actively participating in the decision-making processes and responsive behaviour, who have an intrinsic interest in these actor-centred behavioural interactions, or who have a special

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7 Chris Buckley, “An Arsenal Star Criticized China’s Detention Camps. Fury Soon Followed”, *The New York Times*, 14 December, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/14/world/asia/mesut-ozil-arsenal-china.html>.

8 Gunter Schubert and Björn Alpermann, “Studying the Chinese policy process in the era of ‘top-level design’: The contribution of ‘political steering’ theory”, *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 24, no. 2 (2019): 211, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11366-018-09594-8>. See also: Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

9 Renate Mayntz and Fritz W. Scharpf, *Gesellschaftliche Selbstregulung und politische Steuerung* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag, 1995).

10 Renate Mayntz, “Steering”, in *Handbook on Theories of Governance*, eds. Christopher Ansell and Jacob Torfing (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016). Schubert and Alpermann, “Studying the Chinese policy process in the era of ‘top-level design’: The contribution of ‘political steering’ theory”.

11 DFB stands for the German designation “Deutscher Fußball-Bund” (German Football Association).

12 Derek Beach and Rasmus B. Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (University of Michigan Press, 2013). Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

relationship with the interacting actors involved.<sup>13</sup>

Researchers have an ethical obligation to protect the well-being of their interviewees. For reasons of research ethics, it was decided to anonymise the names of the experts interviewed (only their professional designation is mentioned), as their statements could have negative personal and occupational consequences for them. Chinese football is not *per se* a sensitive research topic. However, this research article deals with attempts at political steering by central governing agencies in the PRC in relation to the thematic focus on Tibet, which is considered sensitive by many researchers, international actors in sport, as well as by the Chinese party-state itself.

## 2. SPORT DIPLOMACY AND THE PRC

The link between sport and politics is a frequently addressed and recurring topic, particularly in the research literature on football.<sup>14</sup> Although international sports organisations such as the International Olympic Committee or the Fédération internationale de Football Association often emphasise that sport and politics should not be “mixed”, studies have repeatedly demonstrated that sporting activities and (major) sports events frequently serve as a projection screen for political ideas and representations.<sup>15</sup> The intertwining of sport, policy and politics has contributed to the development of the research discipline of sport diplomacy in recent decades.<sup>16</sup>

Sport diplomacy is a relatively young research discipline that deals with a very old phenomenon. Stuart Murray’s work represents one of the first comprehensive and compelling conceptualisations of sport diplomacy as an academic field of research.<sup>17</sup> Murray explains that “sports diplomacy is a new term which describes and reconceptualises an old practice: the use of sport to realise goals, minimise friction and – generally – bring strangers closer together”.<sup>18</sup> Sport diplomacy, then, is a deliberate attempt to use sport, athletes and sporting events by state and non-state actors to address foreign actors and audiences with the intention of strengthening international relations and/or overcoming conflicts that have arisen through dialogue, preferably with an outcome that is (more) in line with one’s own normative (pre-)

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13 Oliver Treib, “Methodische Spezifika der Policy-Forschung”, in *Lehrbuch der Politikfeldanalyse*, eds. Klaus Schubert and Nils C. Bandelow (München: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2014).

14 Alan Tomlinson and Christopher Young, *National identity and global sports events: Culture, Politics, and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2006). Paul Darby, *Africa, football and FIFA: Politics, colonialism and resistance* (London: Routledge, 2013). Jean-Michel De Waele, et. al., *The Palgrave International Handbook of Football and Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Martin J. Power, et. al., “Football and politics: the politics of football”, *Managing Sport and Leisure* 25, no. 1-2 (2020): 1-5, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2020.1723437>.

15 Wolfram Manzenreiter and Georg Spitaler, *Governance, Citizenship and the New European Football Championships: The European Spectacle* (London: Routledge, 2011). Stefan Rinke and Kay Schiller, *The FIFA World Cup 1930-2010: Politics, Commerce, Spectacle and Identities* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014). Başak Alpan, Alexandra Schwel and Albrecht Sonntag, *The European Football Championship: Mega-Event and Vanity Fair* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

16 Barrie Houlihan, *Sport, Policy and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1997). Richard Parrish, “The politics of sports regulation in the European Union”, *Journal of European Public Policy* 10, no. 2 (2003): 246-262, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350176032000059026>.

17 Stuart Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2018).

18 Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 3.

conceptions, or at least to establish and deepen an understanding of the problem or position of the other side.<sup>19</sup>

Especially when conventional forms of public diplomacy have failed and have not led to the desired outcomes and changes, sport-diplomatic means have often been resorted to.<sup>20</sup> However, it can be noted that the interactions between the various international actors that take place within the framework of sport diplomacy can also have the opposite effect to the intended goals and expectations and, for example, trigger and/or exacerbate international conflicts instead of defusing and resolving them. In the literature, international sport diplomacy is therefore seen as having “two halves”,<sup>21</sup> which, in addition to the benefits, also entails dangers, even if these risks (and costs) are considered to be “generally low, but significant”.<sup>22</sup>

A well-known example of sport diplomacy often associated with the PRC is “ping-pong diplomacy” (乒乓外交, *pingpang waijiao*). In the early 1970s, during the Cold War, personal contacts and exchanges between table tennis players from the PRC and the United States at an international tournament in Japan paved the way for a political rapprochement between the two countries.<sup>23</sup> Such diplomatic efforts are retrospectively attributed by Murray to “traditional sports diplomacy”, characterised as “sporadic, opportunistic and, arguably, somewhat clumsy”, taking place at short notice before, during or just after a major sporting event.<sup>24</sup> Murray contrasts this traditional approach with the “modern” or “new” sport diplomacy of the 21st century, which is defined “as the *conscious, strategic and regular* use of sport, sportspeople, sporting events and non-state sporting actors by [foreign ministries] and their diplomatic staffs [...] to create collaborative, long-term and mutually beneficial partnerships which, ideally, ‘maximize people-to-people links, development, cultural, trade, investment, education and tourism opportunities’ for governments”.<sup>25</sup>

From the perspective of the literature on international sport diplomacy, two aspects stand out with regard to China: 1) Chinese stadium diplomacy, especially in Africa, and 2) the immense domestic and foreign investments of Chinese companies in international sport markets, most

19 Steven J. Jackson, “The contested terrain of sport diplomacy in a globalizing world”, *International Area Studies Review* 16, no. 3 (2013): 274-284, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2233865913498867>. Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman, “Mapping the relationship between international sport and diplomacy”, *Sport in Society* 17, no. 9 (2014): 1098-1118, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2013.856616>. Stuart Murray, “Sports diplomacy in the Australian context: Theory into strategy”, *Politics & Policy* 45, no. 5 (2017): 841-861, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/polp.12218>.

20 J. Simon Rofe, *Sport and Diplomacy: Games Within Games* (Manchester University Press, 2018).

21 Stuart Murray, “The two halves of sports-diplomacy”, *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 23, no. 3 (2012): 576-592, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2012.706544>.

22 Richard Parrish and Thierry Zintz, “EU Sport Diplomacy: Background and Context”, in *Promoting a Strategic Approach to EU Sport Diplomacy*, eds. Richard Parrish, Antoine Duval, Silvija Mitevaska, Carmen Perez-Gonzalez, Vanja Smokvina, Albrecht Sonntag, Thierry Zintz and Andrea Cattaneo (University of Rijeka, European Commission Representation in Croatia, 2022), 16.

23 Ruth Eckstein, “Ping pong diplomacy: A view from behind the scenes”, *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 2, no. 3 (1993): 327-342. Hong Zhaohui and Sun Yi, “The Butterfly Effect and the Making of ‘Ping-Pong Diplomacy’”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 9, no. 25 (2000): 429-448. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, “Beyond Ping-Pong diplomacy: China and human rights”, *World Policy Journal* 17, no. 4 (2000): 61-66, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07402775-2001-1003>. Nicholas Griffin, *Ping-Pong Diplomacy: The Secret History behind the Game that Changed the World* (New York: Scribner, 2014).

24 Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 61.

25 Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 94.

notably in European football. Over the past 60 years, Chinese party-state and socio-economic actors have made significant investments in the construction of sports stadiums overseas, especially on the African continent. Such investments not only promote the development of sport in the respective countries, but also a positive image of the PRC abroad, and are also a means of tapping into the natural resources there, as well as securing diplomatic recognition of the “one China principle”.<sup>26</sup> It can also be observed in the recent past that the political reform and development efforts in Chinese sport in the Xi Jinping era and the associated commercialisation tendencies, especially in Chinese football, have led to an intensification of sport diplomatic relations between the PRC and other countries, such as the German federal government.<sup>27</sup>

The next section introduces the concept of political steering, which can be applied very well to sport-diplomatic interactions between actors, as this case involves the study of deliberate attempts at behavioural changes on the part of political actors.

### 3. POLITICAL STEERING

The conceptual approach of political steering was mainly elaborated and developed by Renate Mayntz in collaboration with Fritz W. Scharpf.<sup>28</sup> Mayntz defines political steering with reference to interaction-oriented policy research “as the deliberate political attempt to steer, guide or direct (parts of) society, including the economy”.<sup>29</sup> The interpretation of the term “steering” in this context is therefore limited to the social coordination efforts of political actors who, within an institutionalised hierarchy of governing, undertake responsive steering actions in order to achieve conformity of conduct with their respective preconceived normative action orientations.<sup>30</sup> A political steering attempt thus involves a behavioural response by an actor, mostly aimed at steering the behaviour of another actor, which is perceived as non-compliant,

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26 Yu Junwei, “China’s foreign policy in sport: The primacy of national security and territorial integrity concerning the Taiwan question”, *The China Quarterly* 194 (2008): 294–308. Rachel Will, “China’s stadium diplomacy”, *World Policy Journal* 29, no. 2 (2012): 36–44. Zhang Qingmin, “Sports diplomacy: The Chinese experience and perspective”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 8, no. 3–4 (2013): 211–233, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-12341257>. Hugh Vondracek, “China’s Stadium Diplomacy and its Determinants: a typological investigation of soft power”, *Journal of China and International Relations* 7, no. 1 (2019): 62–86. Itamar Dubinsky, “China’s Stadium Diplomacy in Africa”, *Journal of Global Sport Management* (2021): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2021.1885101>.

27 Federal Government of Germany, “Fußballkooperation mit China”, November 25, 2016, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/fussballkooperation-mit-china-392758>.

28 Renate Mayntz, “Politische Steuerung und gesellschaftliche Steuerungsprobleme: Anmerkungen zu einem theoretischen Paradigma”, in *Jahrbuch zur Staats- und Verwaltungswissenschaft* 1 (1987): 89–110. Renate Mayntz, “Politische Steuerung: Aufstieg, Niedergang und Transformation einer Theorie”, in *Politische Theorien in der Ära der Transformation*, eds. Klaus von Beyme and Claus Offe (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996). Renate Mayntz, *Soziale Dynamik und politische Steuerung: Theoretische und methodologische Überlegungen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag, 1997). Renate Mayntz, “Governance Theory als fortentwickelte Steuerungstheorie?”, *MPfG Working Paper 04/1* (Köln: Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung, 2004). Renate Mayntz, “Governance theory als fortentwickelte Steuerungstheorie”, in *Über Governance: Institutionen und Prozesse politischer Regelung*, ed. Renate Mayntz (Campus Verlag: Frankfurt, 2009). Fritz W. Scharpf, “Politische Steuerung und politische Institutionen”, in *Macht und Ohnmacht politischer Institutionen*, ed. Hans-Hermann Hartwich (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989). Mayntz and Scharpf, *Gesellschaftliche Selbstregelung und politische Steuerung*. Renate Mayntz and Fritz W. Scharpf, “Politische Steuerung—Heute?”, *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 34, no.3 (2005): 236–243, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-2005-0305>.

29 Mayntz, “Steering”, 260.

30 Mayntz and Scharpf, *Gesellschaftliche Selbstregelung und politische Steuerung*. Fritz W. Scharpf, *Games Real Actors Play: Actor-Centered Institutionalism in Policy Research* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).



in a particular “direction” so that it (again) conforms to its normative (pre-)conception.<sup>31</sup>

In such studies, it is often considered that the formal hierarchical structure of governing determines which actor steers whose behaviour. For example, Mayntz points out that, especially in actor-centred juxtapositions, there is a superordinate steering subject, which is “typically the government, the state or some public authority”, and a hierarchically subordinate steering object such as local state jurisdictions and bureaucracies, corporate business enterprises and social collective actors.<sup>32</sup> The concept of political steering is thus not only actor-centred, but also “state-centered and employs [therefore] a top-down perspective”.<sup>33</sup>

Some recent studies depart from this strict “top-down” approach. Schubert and Alpermann, for instance, who explicitly apply the concept of political steering to the PRC, refer to the governance debate and therefore consider not only “vertical” but also “horizontal” forms of social coordination.<sup>34</sup> Already in recent decades, the relatively rigid state-centred “top-down” approach of political steering has been criticised for its lack of explanatory power with respect to the behaviour and relevance of formally subordinate actors in political decision-making processes, especially in implementation research and in studies on social movements.<sup>35</sup> However, since this study is exclusively concerned with hierarchical “top-down” steering attempts by high-ranking party-state actors in China in the sense of Mayntz’s original theoretical reflections,<sup>36</sup> only the hierarchical steering modes of Schubert and Alpermann’s typology are considered here.<sup>37</sup>

Schubert and Alpermann make a distinction between vertical “hard” and “soft” (semi-) hierarchical modes of steering.<sup>38</sup> While “hard” steering involves authoritative decision-making by superordinate actors that is implemented through “command and control”, “soft” steering is understood as a discursive practice that is ultimately meant to lead to “self-enforced” implementation by the subordinate actors. Another mode of steering that is relevant to this study, which Schubert and Alpermann take up with reference to governance studies,<sup>39</sup> and apply to the PRC, is “meta-steering” or “steering of steering”, where by steering one actor, another actor is steered.<sup>40</sup> Or, as Schubert and Alpermann put it: “‘meta-steering’ is the mode

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31 Mayntz, “Politische Steuerung und gesellschaftliche Steuerungsprobleme: Anmerkungen zu einem theoretischen Paradigma”, 90.

32 Mayntz, “Steering”, 260.

33 Mayntz, “Steering”, 260.

34 Schubert and Alpermann, “Studying the Chinese policy process in the era of ‘top-level design’: The contribution of ‘political steering’ theory”.

35 Mayntz, “Politische Steuerung: Aufstieg, Niedergang und Transformation einer Theorie”. Niklas Luhmann, “Limits of steering,” *Theory, culture & society* 14, no. 1 (1997): 41-57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327697014001003>.

36 Mayntz, “Steering”.

37 Schubert and Alpermann, “Studying the Chinese policy process in the era of ‘top-level design’: The contribution of ‘political steering’ theory”.

38 Schubert and Alpermann, “Studying the Chinese policy process in the era of ‘top-level design’: The contribution of ‘political steering’ theory”.

39 Bob Jessop, “Multi-level Governance and Multi-level Metagovernance: Changes in the European Union as Integral Moments in the Transformation and Reorientation of Contemporary Statehood”, in *Multi-level Governance*, eds. Ian Bache and Matthew Flinders (Oxford University Press, 2004).

40 Schubert and Alpermann, “Studying the Chinese policy process in the era of ‘top-level design’: The contribution of ‘political steering’ theory”, 207, 210.

by which all steering is steered by the [Chinese] political center".<sup>41</sup>

Political steering attempts by actors are not always successful, but can also fail. Mayntz therefore makes a strict categorical distinction between the responsive "steering action" (Steuerungshandlung) of actors and the ultimate "steering effect" (Steuerungswirkung).<sup>42</sup> An essential factor that constitutes a responsive steering action and thus conditions the realisation of a particular steering effect is, for example, the use of a specific *steering instrument* by the steering subject.<sup>43</sup> Steering instruments are means that can be used by actors in a targeted and strategic manner to change the behaviour (or normative action orientation) of the steering object(s) in such a way so that it (again) corresponds to a preconceived norm or expectation of the steering subject.

The possible selection, application and corresponding effectiveness of a steering instrument may depend on the *steering resources* available to the respective actors.<sup>44</sup> Mayntz and Scharpf, for example, distinguish between financial, legal, human, technical and natural resources provided to or withheld from certain actors by the existing environmental and socially constructed institutional settings.<sup>45</sup> The formal categorical attributions of actors, such as whether or not they are considered to be part of the official hierarchically organised administrative structures of a political system, can therefore be decisive in determining which steering resources are available to the respective actors and can be instrumentalised accordingly.<sup>46</sup>

After discussing the conceptual perspective of political steering, the next step is to apply these theoretical considerations to the object of investigation of the interactions between high-level party-state actors in the PRC and international actors in sport.

#### 4. DFB AND THE TIBET FLAG SCANDAL

The economic potential that the Chinese market offers for business operations has aroused the zeal of international actors in sport in recent years. In particular, the political reform and development efforts in Chinese football in the Xi Jinping era and the accompanying increased commercial activities seem to have attracted the interest of business-oriented international

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41 Schubert and Alpermann, "Studying the Chinese policy process in the era of 'top-level design': The contribution of 'political steering' theory", 210.

42 Mayntz, "Politische Steuerung und gesellschaftliche Steuerungsprobleme: Anmerkungen zu einem theoretischen Paradigma", 91 ff.

43 Mayntz, "Politische Steuerung und gesellschaftliche Steuerungsprobleme: Anmerkungen zu einem theoretischen Paradigma". Mayntz, "Politische Steuerung: Aufstieg, Niedergang und Transformation einer Theorie". Renate Mayntz, "Von der Steuerungstheorie zu Global Governance", in *Governance in einer sich wandelnden Welt*, eds. Gunnar Folke Schuppert and Michael Zürn, PVS Sonderheft 41, (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008). Mayntz and Scharpf, *Gesellschaftliche Selbstregulung und politische Steuerung*.

44 Renate Mayntz, "Die gesellschaftliche Dynamik als theoretische Herausforderung", in *Soziologie und gesellschaftliche Entwicklung: Verhandlungen des 22. Deutschen Soziologentages in Dortmund 1984*, ed. Burkart Lutz (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 1985). Mayntz and Scharpf, *Gesellschaftliche Selbstregulung und politische Steuerung*.

45 Mayntz, "Die gesellschaftliche Dynamik als theoretische Herausforderung".

46 Scharpf, *Games Real Actors Play: Actor-Centered Institutionalism in Policy Research*. Mayntz, "Von der Steuerungstheorie zu Global Governance".

football leagues, clubs, agents and players. Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, former football player and then chairman of the board of FC Bayern München AG, for example, stated in an interview a few years ago: “When the government of China is starting such an ambitious development program, you do not have to be a prophet to foresee that football will be the dominant sport in China for the foreseeable future”.<sup>47</sup>

In contrast to the international football actors mentioned above, it is often considered that national football federations are not primarily profit-oriented, but that their activities are mainly focused on the selection and promotion of talents so that they can successfully participate in international football tournaments.<sup>48</sup> However, in recent years, cooperation efforts between national football associations and the PRC have increased significantly.<sup>49</sup> One of these national football federations that has expanded its operational dealings with China is the DFB.

With over seven million members, the DFB is one of the largest national sports associations in the world.<sup>50</sup> In its function, it organises and coordinates, among other things, the German national football teams that represent Germany in international competitions against other national selections. The German national football teams, especially the men’s teams, are very popular in the PRC. In 2014, a survey among some 16,000 Chinese football fans found that respondents considered the German men’s national team to be the most popular football team at national level in China.<sup>51</sup> The DFB therefore seemed to be in a rather favourable position compared to many other international football actors to expand its operational business activities in the PRC in a relatively straightforward manner.

#### 4.1. ENTERING THE SPORT DIPLOMATIC ARENA

This assumption seemed to be promptly confirmed. In 2016, high-ranking political representatives of the PRC and the German Federal Government signed a far-reaching

47 Lakhani, Schmidt, Norris and Herman, “Bayern Munich in China”.

48 Ilker Gündoğan and Albrecht Sonntag, “Chinese football in the era of Xi Jinping: What do supporters think?”, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47, no. 1 (2018): 103-141.

49 Pu Yang, “French Football Federation Deputy CEO: we want long-term partnerships in China”, *Yutang Sports*, June 17, 2016, [http://en.ytports.cn/news-2651.html?cid=len=19style=searchaction=newindex\\_newslistpage=33eid=newsListstr=associationorder=1](http://en.ytports.cn/news-2651.html?cid=len=19style=searchaction=newindex_newslistpage=33eid=newsListstr=associationorder=1). George Dudley, “FFF and LFP open new shared office in Beijing”, *SportsPro*, February 16, 2017, <https://www.sportspromedia.com/news/french-soccer-expands-its-presence-in-china>. Du Jiajing, “发展青训，中国与阿根廷足球合作计划启动。” (Development of youth training, China-Argentina football cooperation plan launched, fazhan qing xun, zhongguo yu agenting zuqiu hezuo jihua qidong) 懒熊体育 (*Lanxiong Sports*), April 8, 2018, <http://www.lanxionsports.com/posts/view/id/9898.html>. Royal Dutch Football Association, “KNVB renews cooperation agreement with Chinese Football Association”, July 24, 2019, <https://www.knvb.com/news/knvb/international-projects/973/knvb-renews-cooperation-agreement-chinese-football-association>. Royal Spanish Football Federation, “La RFEF acuerda con China asesoramiento y formación para desarrollar el fútbol en el país asiático durante los próximos 10 años”, June 9, 2020, <https://www.rfef.es/noticias/rfef-acuerda-china-asesoramiento-y-formacion-desarrollar-futbol-pais-asiatico-durante>.

50 DFB, “2020: Mehr Mitglieder, weniger Vereine und Mannschaften”, June 15, 2020a, <https://www.dfb.de/news/detail/2020-mehr-mitglieder-weniger-vereine-und-mannschaften-216498/>.

51 Song Jiajia and Simon Chadwick, “Study reveals Chinese football fans favour English clubs and German team”, *Coventry University*, February 5, 2014, <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/primary-news/research-reveals-chinese-football-fans-favour-english-clubs-and-german-national-team/>.

memorandum of understanding on cooperation in football.<sup>52</sup> As part of this cooperation, an official agreement was signed between the DFB and the German Football League (DFL) with the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Chinese Football Association (CFA) on the development of "campus football" (校园足球, *xiaoyuan zuqiu*) in China.<sup>53</sup> Campus football is an umbrella term for various initiatives to promote youth football in the PRC, the organisation and supervision of which is mainly the responsibility of the Chinese MoE.<sup>54</sup>

The objective of the football cooperation, according to the official announcement of the German Federal Government, is to strengthen the already existing mutual exchange and relations between the two countries.<sup>55</sup> The development of Chinese football is to be supported, for example, through the training of players, coaches and referees as well as through the transfer of know-how in the organisation of football leagues.<sup>56</sup> According to the DFB website, one of the key elements of this cooperation is the development of a football curriculum for schools and universities as part of the campus football scheme and the corresponding training of staff.<sup>57</sup>

It is not clear who exactly was the initiator of this international football cooperation. The official website of the German Federal Government states that the cooperation between the two countries in football stems from a proposal made by Chancellor Angela Merkel to President Xi Jinping during her state visit to the PRC in June 2016.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, according to the DFB website, the Chinese ambassador to Germany and the CFA approached the DFB as early as 2014 after a meeting between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to seek support for the development of Chinese football.<sup>59</sup>

After the official signing of the documents, then DFB President Reinhard Grindel noted that "the fact that the German-Chinese agreement is also accompanied at such a high-ranking political level shows that it has a very great significance".<sup>60</sup> Friedrich Curtius, the DFB General Secretary at the time, added: "We are entering a bit of uncharted territory with the signing of the agreement. Normally, partnerships of this kind take place between two football associations, but this time there is a political framing. This is another reason why the agreement has a special significance for the DFB. As World Cup winners as well as Olympic champions in women's football, we are absolutely in a position to help a big country like China to build up and develop football structures".<sup>61</sup> Christian Seifert, managing director of the DFL and in this function also Vice-President of the DFB, held the view that "both sides will benefit

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52 Federal Government of Germany, "Fußballkooperation mit China".

53 The German designation for German Football League is "Deutsche Fußball Liga".

54 State Council of the PRC, "中国足球改革发展总体方案" (The Overall Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme, *zhongguo zuqiu gaige fazhan zongti fang'an*)

55 Federal Government of Germany, "Fußballkooperation mit China".

56 Federal Government of Germany, "Fußballkooperation mit China".

57 DFB, "Große Kooperation mit China", December 23, 2016a, <https://www.dfb.de/internationales/news-detail/grosse-kooperation-mit-china-159690/full/1/>.

58 Federal Government of Germany, "Fußballkooperation mit China".

59 DFB, "DFB unterstützt Fußball in China", October 6, 2015, [https://www.dfb.de/news/detail/dfb-unterstuetzt-fussball-in-china-132141/?no\\_cache=1](https://www.dfb.de/news/detail/dfb-unterstuetzt-fussball-in-china-132141/?no_cache=1).

60 DFB, "Deutschland und China signieren weitreichendes Fußballabkommen", November 25, 2016b, [https://www.dfb.de/news/detail/deutschland-und-china-signieren-weitreichendes-fussballabkommen-158428/?no\\_cache=1](https://www.dfb.de/news/detail/deutschland-und-china-signieren-weitreichendes-fussballabkommen-158428/?no_cache=1).

61 DFB, "Deutschland und China signieren weitreichendes Fußballabkommen".

from this partnership".<sup>62</sup>

On the part of the Chinese delegation, Liu Yandong, then Vice Premier of the PRC, also expressed her confidence in this cooperation: "We hope that China and Germany will establish a stable and lasting strategic partnership in football, strengthen exchanges between the national teams and professional football clubs of the two countries, work together to expand and strengthen the mutually beneficial and win-win cooperation of the football industry between the two countries, and improve the exchange and cooperation mechanism between the youth football of the two countries. I believe that with the joint efforts of both sides, Sino-German football cooperation will definitely achieve fruitful results, which will not only benefit the people of both countries, but also contribute to the development of football in the world".<sup>63</sup>

One year after the signing of the official cooperation agreement between the two countries, the Chinese-German Football Summit took place in Frankfurt in June 2017. In addition to high-ranking representatives of the DFB, the DFL and a number of German professional football clubs, around 100 guests from China attended the event.<sup>64</sup> Friedrich Curtius stated that the first Chinese-German football summit represented a "milestone" in the football partnership between the two countries. "The purpose of the summit was to provide a forum for both sides to get to know each other more closely and to strengthen ties but also to develop specific measures for promoting football in China", explained Curtius.<sup>65</sup> Christian Seifert noted that the Sino-German football cooperation "is the most far-reaching football alliance between a European country and China, thus giving it a special dimension. [...] Both sides stand to benefit from it. For DFL and Bundesliga, it provides an opportunity of gaining a better understanding of the Chinese football market. In addition, it became evident over the two days of the summit that German [football] clubs have already stepped up their activities in China substantially".<sup>66</sup> One month after the hosting of the football summit in Frankfurt, the G20 summit took place in Hamburg. The Chinese delegation led by President Xi Jinping arrived in Germany a few days before the summit and, as part of their state visit, attended a football match between a Chinese and a German U12 youth team in Berlin together with then Chancellor Angela Merkel and representatives of the DFB and the DFL.<sup>67</sup> On this occasion, the representatives of the DFB and the DFL informed President Xi and Chancellor Merkel about the status of the various joint Sino-German football projects.<sup>68</sup> During the briefing, Chancellor Merkel recalled her state visit to the PRC in 2014 and the extraordinary popularity of the German men's national football team that she experienced there. She explained what great ambassadors the German footballers were for the country in the PRC: "There was only one thing there every second - Germany, Die Mannschaft".<sup>69</sup>

62 DFB, "Deutschland und China signieren weitreichendes Fußballabkommen".

63 Hu Xiaobing and Shen Zhonghao, "刘延东：中德足球合作前景广阔", (Liu Yandong: China-Germany football cooperation has a bright future, liuyandong: zhong de zuqiu hezuo qianjing guangkuo) 新华社 (*Xinhua News Agency*), 26 November, 2016, [http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2016-11/26/c\\_1119996514.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2016-11/26/c_1119996514.htm).

64 Bundesliga, "First Chinese-German Football Summit held in Frankfurt", June, 2017, <https://www.bundesliga.com/en/news/Bundesliga/first-chinese-german-football-summit-held-in-frankfurt-446245.jsp>.

65 Bundesliga, "First Chinese-German Football Summit held in Frankfurt", Bundesliga, "First Chinese-German Football Summit held in Frankfurt".

66 Bundesliga, "First Chinese-German Football Summit held in Frankfurt".

67 DFB, "DFB und DFL: Austausch mit Merkel und Xi in Berlin", July 5, 2017a, <https://www.dfb.de/news/detail/dfb-und-dfl-austausch-mit-merkel-und-xi-in-berlin-170310/>.

68 DFB, "DFB und DFL: Austausch mit Merkel und Xi in Berlin".

69 DFB, "China: Große Kooperation", October 10, 2019a, <https://www.dfb.de/internationales/internationale->

In an official press release, Chancellor Merkel stated: “Between Europe and Asia, we want to continue working on new lighthouse projects in the area of people-to-people exchanges. This applies in particular to the areas of culture, education, youth, think tanks, media, tourism, football and cooperation at local level”.<sup>70</sup> President Xi pointed out that “football cooperation between China and Germany is progressing continuously and deeply. Improving [Chinese] football is a systematic project, and China is willing to strengthen comprehensive exchanges and cooperation with the German side in the field of football. I am convinced that with the joint efforts of both sides, Sino-German football cooperation will definitely bear more fruits, and produce major achievements”.<sup>71</sup>

#### 4.2. CHINESE U20 MEN'S NATIONAL TEAM IN GERMANY

It was announced in 2017 that, as part of the Sino-German football cooperation, the DFB and the CFA had reached an agreement that the Chinese U20 men's national team would come to Germany to prepare for the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.<sup>72</sup> The Chinese national youth team was to play regularly against teams from the Regionalliga Southwest, one of the five regional fourth-tier leagues in Germany managed by the DFB. The Regionalliga Southwest was chosen mainly because a total of 19 teams compete in this league competition and thus one team would always be available on match days as a sparring partner for the Chinese U20 national team. In return, the German football clubs that played against the Chinese national selection were to receive a reward of around €15,000.<sup>73</sup> Friedrich Curtius stated after the signing of the cooperation agreement with the CFA that “[t]he matches are friendlies in their nature, but we will make sure they are competitive. I am sure that the Chinese team will get something out of every match. I can assure the Chinese team that every player who comes to Germany will experience a very professional attitude and treatment during the matches”.<sup>74</sup>

Some German football clubs from the Regionalliga Southwest, however, refused to play against the Chinese U20 men's national team.<sup>75</sup> For example, the club management of SV Waldhof Mannheim announced in a press release that they are saying “No” to the matches

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beziehungen/china/.

- 70 Federal Government of Germany, “Pressestatements von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und dem chinesischen Staatspräsidenten Xi Jinping”, July 5, 2017, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-und-dem-chinesischen-staatspraesidenten-xi-jinping-844138>.
- 71 Shang, Yang and Hao, Weiwei, “习近平同德国总理默克尔共同观看中德青少年足球友谊赛”, (Xi Jinping and German Chancellor Angela Merkel watch a friendly football match between Chinese and German youths, xijinping tong deguo zongli mokeer gongtong guankan zhong de qingshaonian zuqiu youyisai) 新华社 (*Xinhua News Agency*), July 6, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-07/06/c\\_1121270812.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-07/06/c_1121270812.htm).
- 72 Yue, Dongxing, Bing Gong and Daojin Zheng, “中国男足U20选拔队将参加德国第四级联赛”, (Chinese men's U20 selection team to play in German fourth tier league, zhongguo nan zu U20 xuanba dui jiang canjia deguo di si ji liansai) 新华社 (*Xinhua News Agency*), 16 August, 2017, <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2017-08-16/docifykcirz2357787.shtml>.
- 73 Michael Ebert and Martin Gruener, “Regionalliga Südwest: Team Nummer 20 kommt aus China”, *Kicker*, June 21, 2017, [https://www.kicker.de/regionalliga-suedwest\\_team-nummer-20-kommt-aus-china-700120/artikel](https://www.kicker.de/regionalliga-suedwest_team-nummer-20-kommt-aus-china-700120/artikel).
- 74 Yue, Dongxing, Bing Gong and Daojin Zheng, “中国男足U20选拔队将参加德国第四级联赛”, (Chinese men's U20 selection team to play in German fourth tier league, zhongguo nan zu U20 xuanba dui jiang canjia deguo di si ji liansai).
- 75 Sebastian Fischer, “Drei Klubs verweigern Spiele gegen Chinas U20”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 12, 2017a, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/sport/regionalliga-gegen-uhl-worms-und-chinas-u20-1.3584752>.

against China's U20 national team planned by the DFB.<sup>76</sup> Markus Kompp, the managing director of SV Waldhof Mannheim, explained that he had "already expressed his concerns to the [DFB] during the first phone call and asked for clarification of detailed questions in advance. A written consent to participate has not been given. Even if such a game offers a good marketing opportunity, one should not completely lose the regional reference. There are more important problems in the Regionalliga and with the clubs, which in our opinion should be clarified as a matter of priority".<sup>77</sup> Kompp is referring here to a dispute between some German fourth-division football clubs and the DFB, because the champions of the five regional fourth-tier leagues in Germany cannot be promoted directly to the next higher league, but have to go through a relegation process, at the hurdle of which SV Waldhof Mannheim had failed the previous season. In addition, organised football supporters from several German football clubs have joined forces and expressed their concerns about the hosting of matches between the teams of the Regionalliga Southwest and the Chinese U20 men's national football team in an open letter to the responsible DFB officials.<sup>78</sup>

Reinhard Grindel, the DFB president at the time, responded to such reactions from German football clubs and supporters that they "did not understand what [the cooperation] was all about".<sup>79</sup> It was about lucrative friendly matches for all football actors involved and offered a financial incentive for the German fourth-division clubs.<sup>80</sup> Already after the official cooperation agreement was signed, the then DFB General Secretary Friedrich Curtius assured the then CFA Deputy Director Zhang Jian that matches with other football clubs would be arranged if some German teams in the Regionalliga Southwest refused to play against the Chinese national selection so that "this gap would be filled".<sup>81</sup>

#### **4.3. CONTENTIOUS INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE CHINESE PARTY-STATE AND THE DFB**

The Chinese U20 men's national team arrived in Germany in November 2017 to play their first matches against teams from the Regionalliga Southwest. For the Chinese authorities, the friendly matches in Germany were considered an excellent opportunity to expose the Chinese youth national players to a high level of football competition. Lin Xiaohua, a member of the CFA executive committee, for instance, stated that "the CFA hopes to use this opportunity to build a platform for young players to learn from the valuable experience of German football and to improve their skills by playing against high-level teams, which will in turn promote the

76 *SV Waldhof Mannheim 07*, "SV Waldhof sagt ‚Nein‘ zum Spiel gegen Chinas U20", Facebook Page of SV Waldhof Mannheim, June 23, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/sv.waldhof.mannheim/posts/sv-waldhof-sagt-nein-zum-spiel-gegen-chinas-u20der-sv-waldhof-hat-die-meldung-un/10154478650366510/>.

77 *SV Waldhof Mannheim 07*, "SV Waldhof sagt ‚Nein‘ zum Spiel gegen Chinas U20".

78 *ProWaldhof*, "Offener Brief an Herrn Ronny Zimmermann, Vizepräsident des Deutschen Fußball-Bundes", July 7, 2017, <https://www.pro-waldhof.de/8537/offener-brief-an-herrn-ronny-zimmermann-vizepraesident-des-deutschen-fussball-bundes>.

79 *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, "Merkel und Chinas Präsident Xi Jinping als Fußballfans", July 5, 2017, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/sport/fussball-merkel-und-chinas-praesident-xi-jinping-als-fussballfans-dpa.urn-newsml-dpa-com-20090101-170705-99-124199>.

80 *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, "Merkel und Chinas Präsident Xi Jinping als Fußballfans".

81 Yue, Dongxing, Bing Gong and Daojin Zheng, "中国男足U20选拔队将参加德国第四级联赛", (Chinese men's U20 selection team to play in German fourth tier league, zhongguo nan zu U20 xuanba dui jiang canjia deguo di si ji liansai).

overall development of Chinese football”.<sup>82</sup>

However, the first match already saw contentious interactions between the various actors, which subsequently caused lasting damage to the Sino-German football cooperation. Shortly after the kick-off of the match between TSV Schott Mainz and the Chinese U20 men's national team, six activists placed Tibetan flags on the sidelines of the football pitch.<sup>83</sup> Tibet's status is disputed under international law. The Tibetan government in exile considers itself independent and refers to the occupation of Tibet in 1949/50 by Chinese military forces. From the perspective of the Chinese party-state, Tibet is an inseparable part of the territory and sovereignty of the PRC.

After the Tibetan flags had been hoisted, one person from the Chinese delegation gesticulated wildly and all Chinese football players immediately left the pitch, so that the game had to be interrupted.<sup>84</sup> There was a small scuffle when a person tried to snatch a Tibet flag from the protesters. The Chinese team refused to continue to play the match as long as the perceived political provocations continued.<sup>85</sup> After a while, one of the activists said that they could provoke a stoppage of the match here, but they did not want to deprive other people of the pleasure of football. They folded their flags and the match continued.<sup>86</sup>

The Chinese national selection lost the game against the then second-last team of the league table in the Regionalliga Southwest with 0-3. The result of the match, however, was only of secondary concern, if at all, to the involved actors and observers of this event. Sun Jihai, the coach of the Chinese team, for example, stated that he “was expecting people to talk about football, but now it's something else”.<sup>87</sup>

It was reported that the political activists on the sidelines were members of the Tibet Initiative Deutschland e.V. in Berlin and Tibetans in exile who reside in Germany.<sup>88</sup> In an open letter to Chancellor Merkel, Wolfgang Grader chairman and Nadine Baumann managing director of the Tibet Initiative Deutschland e.V. stated that their members “were merely exercising their right to freedom of expression. [...] We urge you [Chancellor Merkel] to make it clear that the federal government will not tolerate any behaviour that goes beyond the law, even from Chinese guests, and that freedom of expression is a valuable asset that you will defend and not negotiate”.<sup>89</sup>

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82 Wang Xi, “中国足协U20选拔队出征未来一年赴德集训”, (CFA U20 selection to travel to Germany for training in the coming year, *zhongguo xuzie U20 xuanba dui chuzheng weilai yi nian fu de jixun*) 中新社北京 (*China News Agency Beijing*), November 7, 2017, <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2017-11-07/doc-ifynmvuq9254582.shtml>.

83 Christian Helms, “Eklat um Chinas U20 in der Regionalliga: Unter falscher Flagge”, *Der Spiegel*, November 19, 2017, <https://www.spiegel.de/sport/fussball/fussball-eklat-um-chinas-u20-in-der-regionalliga-unter-falscher-flagge-a-1179011.html>.

84 Helms, “Eklat um Chinas U20 in der Regionalliga: Unter falscher Flagge”.

85 Helms, “Eklat um Chinas U20 in der Regionalliga: Unter falscher Flagge”.

86 Helms, “Eklat um Chinas U20 in der Regionalliga: Unter falscher Flagge”.

87 *Guancha*, “中国U20德国比赛现“藏独”旗帜，中国队员离场抗议”，(Chinese U20 match in Germany shows “Tibetan independence” flag, Chinese players leave the pitch in protest, *hongguo U20 deguo bisai xian “cangdu” qizhi*, *zhongguo duiyuan li chang kangyi*) 观察 (*The Observer*), November 20, 2017, [https://www.guancha.cn/sports/2017\\_11\\_20\\_435652.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/sports/2017_11_20_435652.shtml).

88 Sebastian Fischer, “Chinas Fahnen-Flucht”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 19, 2017b, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/sport/chinas-u20-in-deutschland-chinas-fahnen-flucht-1.3755479>.

89 *Tibet Initiative Deutschland e.V.*, “Offener Brief der Tibet Initiative Deutschland e.V. an Bundeskanzlerin Merkel



Many German media representatives and the DFB itself also referred to the existing rights of freedom of expression in Germany.<sup>90</sup> Immediately after the match, for instance, DFB Vice-President Ronny Zimmermann stated: "We [the DFB] cannot prohibit the protests, there is the right to freedom of expression [in Germany]. But we also want to be good hosts. In that respect, we are not happy about these incidents".<sup>91</sup> Zimmermann also emphasised: "We [the DFB] had repeatedly pointed out to our interlocutors on the Chinese side in the run-up to the games that they were taking place within the framework of the freedom of expression that applies in Germany. We are of the opinion that this also includes the hanging of such a flag in the stadium".<sup>92</sup> However, the DFB's official press release did not mention freedom of expression.<sup>93</sup> It was merely noted that the friendly matches of the Chinese U20 men's national team in Germany are only "one of numerous joint undertakings" within the framework of the Sino-German football cooperation.<sup>94</sup>

Prior to this official press release by the DFB, the Chinese Foreign Ministry had issued a statement on this incident.<sup>95</sup> At a regular press conference, a spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that "Tibet-related issues involve China's core interests and the national feelings of the Chinese people. As we all know, Tibet has been Chinese territory since ancient times. China is firmly opposed to any country, organisation or individual providing support to the anti-China separatist activities of Tibetan independence in any form and for any reason. I must emphasise here that mutual respect is the proper way for a host to treat its guests. Moreover, respect is mutual among all countries".<sup>96</sup> This statement illustrates that the DFB's behaviour represented a strong deviation from the normative action orientation prevalent in China's political centre, according to which Tibet is an integral part of the Chinese territory and therefore such protests should not be tolerated.

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zum Abbruch der Freundschaftsspiele gegen die China U20", November 27, 2017, <https://www.tibet-initiative.de/offener-brief-an-die-bundeskanzlerin-zum-abbruch-der-freundschaftsspiele-gegen-die-china-u20/>.

- 90 Christoph Cöln, "Und dann greift der dunkel gekleidete Chinese die Tibeterin an", *Die Welt*, November 19, 2017, <https://www.welt.de/sport/fussball/article170740315/Und-dann-greift-der-dunkel-gekleidete-Chinese-die-Tibeterin-an.html>. Christian Helms, "Eklat um Chinas U20 in der Regionalliga: Unter falscher Flagge". *Kicker*, "DFB-Präsident appelliert an Chinesen: Grindel zu China-Protest: ‚Meinungsfreiheit gilt‘", November 21, 2017a, [https://www.kicker.de/grindel-zu-china-protest\\_meinungsfreiheit-gilt-711225/artikel](https://www.kicker.de/grindel-zu-china-protest_meinungsfreiheit-gilt-711225/artikel). Christian Spiller, "China und der DFB: Auswärtssieg für Tibet", *Die Zeit*, November 24, 2017, <https://www.zeit.de/sport/2017-11/china-u20-dfb-tibet/komplettansicht>. Peter Sturm, "Chinas U 20 lernt Meinungsfreiheit kennen: Wer auf diese Weise ‚Respekt‘ einfordert, handelt respektlos". *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 20, 2017, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/sport/chinas-u-20-lernt-meinungsfreiheit-kennen-respektlos-15301808.html>. Markus Völker, "You'll never Wok alone: Jetzt mischt auch der DFB im Tibet-Konflikt um die U20-Nationalelf Chinas mit – als Hüter der Meinungsfreiheit. Echt jetzt?", *Die Tageszeitung*, November 22, 2017, <https://taz.de/Kolumne-Pressschlag/!5465784/>.
- 91 *Deutsche Welle*, "Chinas Führung reagiert auf Tibet-Eklat", November 20, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/de/chinas-f%C3%BChrung-reagiert-auf-tibet-eklat/a-41456999>.
- 92 *Kicker*, "Zwischenfall beim Spiel bei Schott Mainz: Unterbrechung bei Testpremiere von Chinas U 20", November 18, 2017b, <https://www.kicker.de/unterbrechung-bei-testpremiere-von-chinas-u-20-710965/artikel>.
- 93 DFB, "Chinas U 20: Freundschaftsspiele bis zur Winterpause ausgesetzt", November 24, 2017b, <https://www.dfb.de/news/detail/chinas-u-20-freundschaftsspiele-bis-zur-winterpause-ausgesetzt-178605/>.
- 94 DFB, "Chinas U 20: Freundschaftsspiele bis zur Winterpause ausgesetzt".
- 95 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "2017年11月20日外交部发言人陆慷主持例行记者会", (Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang hosts regular press conference on November 20, 2017, 2017 nian 11 yue 20 ri wajijiao bu fayan ren lu kang zhuchi li xing zijhe hui) November 20, 2017, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceae/chn/wjbfyrth/t1512312.htm>.
- 96 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "2017年11月20日外交部发言人陆慷主持例行记者会".

Several actors from the PRC reacted with anger to the DFB's handling of the Tibet demonstrators and the comments made by German media representatives. For example, the Chinese newspaper *People's Daily* commented these interactions during the football match that "no political provocation[s] [are] allowed in sports".<sup>97</sup> It is noted that "the Chinese men's U20 selection team encountered a series of unsportsmanlike interference in a friendly match in Germany. In what should have been a relaxed and friendly football match, there were 'Tibetan independence' flags. What is even more incredible is that the legitimate actions of Chinese players and spectators in defence of national interests were interpreted by some German media representatives as 'infringing on freedom of expression' and 'preventing democratic rights'. The responsible DFB official even absurdly threatened that the 'Tibetan independence' flag would continue to be displayed in the stadium. Where is the flavour of friendship in a friendly match? Who can tolerate the transformation of a sporting arena into a platform for political provocation that attacks the sovereignty of a country?".<sup>98</sup>

Some German media representatives were also explicitly addressed and criticised in this commentary: "Unfortunately, instead of reflecting on the situation, some German media [representatives] have been putting the blame on the victims and accusing the Chinese side of protesting. The German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* said that it was disrespectful of China to demand respect in this way. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* even wrote: 'This kind of support for 'Tibetan independence' on the [football] pitch is freedom of expression in Germany and is recognised by the German constitution'. These words, which are full of ignorance and prejudice, completely deny the fact that freedom of expression has a bottom line in any country and are completely devoid of an objective and fair position. Anyone with a discerning eye can see that they are engaging in self-contradictory sophistry. Is freedom of expression allowed to pass in Germany today in support of the Nazis?". Accordingly, the article points out that such political provocations by groups and individuals using, for example, Nazi symbols such as gestures and flags at matches against German football teams have previously been sanctioned with fines by the UEFA, the governing body of European football.<sup>99</sup> The Chinese journalists therefore suggest that "[i]n the light of these facts, the German media, which boasts of its so-called 'freedom of expression', is slapping itself in the face".<sup>100</sup>

After the Tibet incident, the CFA had announced in an official press release that the Chinese U20 selection team would return to China.<sup>101</sup> A spokesperson of the CFA explained that "the CFA had sent the U20 men's national football team to Germany for training and competition in order to strengthen the exchange and cooperation between China and Germany and to select talents for the Tokyo Olympics. The CFA believes that sporting events should not be interfered with by non-sporting factors and that the occurrence of such a matter is neither in line with the basic principles of developing friendly relationships between the two countries nor with the relevant FIFA regulations. After repeated consultations, the [DFB] has indicated that it is unable to control the occurrence of such incidents and the CFA regrets this, but the

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97 Feng Li and Wang Qian, "人民日报钟声：体育赛场容不得政治挑衅", (People's Daily Opinion: No political provocation allowed in sports, renmin ribao zhong sheng: Tiyu saichang rong bude zhengzhi tiaoxin) 人民日报 (*People's Daily*), November 27, 2017, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1127/c1003-29668304.html>.

98 Feng Li and Wang Qian, "人民日报钟声：体育赛场容不得政治挑衅".

99 Feng Li and Wang Qian, "人民日报钟声：体育赛场容不得政治挑衅".

100 Feng Li and Wang Qian, "人民日报钟声：体育赛场容不得政治挑衅".

101 CFA, "中国U20男子足球队启程回国", (China U20 men's football team departs for home, zhongguo U20 nanzi zuqiu dui qicheng huiguo) November 26, 2017a, <http://www.thecfa.cn/nzu20xw/20171126/22474.html>.

core interests of the country cannot be compromised for any reason. The CFA has therefore decided to discontinue its cooperation with the U20 programme and has arranged for the team to return to China. The CFA will sum up the lessons learned and continue to vigorously promote international exchanges and cooperation to continuously improve the standard of football in China".<sup>102</sup>

The DFB, however, did not benefit from these international cooperation efforts of the CFA in the following years. In a financial report of the DFB for the year 2018, it is noted that the football federation's operational China activities "contrary to planning, the expenses have not been offset by any significant revenue to date, which means that the DFB's commitment must be reviewed on an ongoing basis".<sup>103</sup> Between the years 2017 and 2019, a loss of almost one million euros was made with the football association's so-called China activities and projects.<sup>104</sup> The absence of these expected financial revenues can already be seen as a political steering action, which represents the "hard" mode of steering. Not receiving anticipated financial earnings as a sanctioning measure can also be understood as a warning to other international football actors who have entered into business relationships with Chinese political and socio-economic actors to behave in accordance with the norms and expectations of the Chinese political centre, especially when it comes to perceived sensitive political issues such as Tibet, Taiwan, Hongkong or Xinjiang.

In addition, as a result of the Tibet incident involving the DFB, it can be noted that other German football actors either faced difficulties in concluding contract negotiations that had already begun, such as the DFL trying to sell the Bundesliga's media and broadcasting rights to the PRC, or were threatened with the termination of existing cooperation agreements and lucrative contracts, as was apparently the case with some Bundesliga clubs, if the DFB did not apologise for its behaviour.<sup>105</sup> A former DFL employee explained in an expert interview, for example, that due to the negative impact of the Tibet flag scandal involving the DFB, many negotiations and existing cooperation agreements in football between German and Chinese actors were "put on hold". As a result, some Bundesliga clubs were alarmed and quite nervous and joined forces with the DFL to talk to the DFB about this issue. It was also explained that it was quite common for contracts between Chinese and foreign football partners to contain a "political (exit) clause", allowing the Chinese side to unilaterally terminate the contract in case of political controversy or repercussions. German football actors such as the DFL and several Bundesliga clubs therefore seem to have put pressure on the DFB to apologise to its Chinese cooperation partners in order to allow the respective German football actors to continue to access and penetrate the lucrative Chinese market.

These concerted "hard" political steering efforts by Chinese business enterprises can be interpreted as an expression of compliant behaviour towards the norms and expectations of the Chinese political centre, as public criticism by central party-state agencies in the PRC,

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102 CFA, "中国U20男子足球队启程回国".

103 DFB, "DFB Finanzbericht 2018", July 18, 2019b, [https://www.dfb.de/fileadmin/\\_dfbdam/203369-Finanzbericht\\_DFB\\_2018\\_RZ\\_lay2\\_einzel.pdf](https://www.dfb.de/fileadmin/_dfbdam/203369-Finanzbericht_DFB_2018_RZ_lay2_einzel.pdf).

104 DFB, "DFB Finanzbericht 2019" July 3, 2020b, [https://www.dfb.de/fileadmin/\\_dfbdam/224318-Finanzbericht\\_DFB\\_2019\\_final.pdf](https://www.dfb.de/fileadmin/_dfbdam/224318-Finanzbericht_DFB_2019_final.pdf).

105 *WirtschaftsWoche*, "Unklare Hintergründe einer DFB-Reise nach China" March 8, 2018, <https://www.wiwo.de/unternehmen/dienstleister/deutscher-fussballbund-unklare-hintergruende-einer-dfb-reise-nach-china/21048238.html>.

such as the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, implicitly signalled to formally subordinate Chinese entrepreneurs which football cooperation partners were desired, and which were not. It can therefore be argued that the reaction of Chinese socio-economic actors to public criticism from high-ranking party-state actors illustrates the conformist striving of formally subordinate actors in the PRC with the normative action orientations of the Chinese political centre. The case study thus shows that, by means of communicative and discursive practices, which constitute the “soft” mode of steering,<sup>106</sup> Chinese economic actors can be consciously or unconsciously instrumentalised by central party-state authorities in China to exert a sanctioning effect on certain foreign actors, with the aim of steering these deviant behaviours in a particular “direction”, so that it (again) corresponds to the normative action orientation of the Chinese political centre.<sup>107</sup> As Chinese entrepreneurs introduced “hard” steering measures and thus exerted financial pressure on German football actors close to the DFB, such as the DFL and some influential Bundesliga clubs seeking financial gains, these foreign football actors could in turn be instrumentalised to put pressure on the DFB to comply with the norms and expectations of the Chinese central party-state and apologise for its behaviour. It therefore seems appropriate to refer to “meta-steering” or “steering of steering” in this context.<sup>108</sup>

When it comes to the steering effect, there are different, partly contradictory statements from various actors. According to German media reports,<sup>109</sup> the DFB has apologised to its Chinese cooperation partners, but the DFB denies this.<sup>110</sup> Due to these conflicting statements, it is therefore not possible to make a final judgement on whether these “hard” political steering actions were successful or not. What is certain, however, is that after the Tibet incident, the DFB was not able to maintain its financial revenues through the China cooperation, while other German football actors such as the DFL resumed and expanded their China-related business activities after a relatively short period of time.<sup>111</sup>

#### **4. CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS OF SPORT DIPLOMACY WITH THE PRC**

The case study presented in this research article highlights the limits of sport diplomacy between the DFB and the Chinese party-state. Instead of bringing the various Chinese and German football actors closer together, defusing and at best resolving existing conflicts between the two countries, and promoting mutual understanding of the respective positions of the two countries, the Sino-German football cooperation initiated by the highest diplomatic levels of both countries has achieved exactly the opposite. Neither the foreign policy goals

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106 Schubert and Alpermann, “Studying the Chinese policy process in the era of ‘top-level design’: The contribution of ‘political steering’ theory”. See also: Gerhard Göhler, Ulrike Höppner and Sybille De La Rosa, *Weiche Steuerung: Studien zur Steuerung durch diskursive Praktiken, Argumente und Symbole* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2009).

107 Mayntz, “Politische Steuerung und gesellschaftliche Steuerungsprobleme: Anmerkungen zu einem theoretischen Paradigma”, 90.

108 Schubert and Alpermann, “Studying the Chinese policy process in the era of ‘top-level design’: The contribution of ‘political steering’ theory”, 207.

109 *WirtschaftsWoche*, “Unklare Hintergründe einer DFB-Reise nach China”.

110 DFB, “DFB korrigiert Falschmeldung der WirtschaftsWoche”, March 9, 2018, <https://www.dfb.de/news/detail/dfb-korrigiert-falschmeldung-der-wirtschaftswoche-182895/>.

111 DFL, “Medienrechte für China vergeben: PP Sports und Bundesliga International schließen Kooperation über fünf Jahre”, July 9, 2018, <https://www.dfl.de/de/aktuelles/medienrechte-fuer-china-vergeben-pp-sports-und-bundesliga-international-schliessen-kooperation/>.

intended by the football cooperation nor the sport-specific development initiatives of the two countries could be realised. In addition, the DFB has not been able to benefit financially from this exclusive cooperation with the Chinese party-state actors, although there were corresponding expectations on the part of the DFB. Due to contentious interactions and subsequent political steering actions following the Tibet flag scandal at a friendly match of the Chinese U20 men's national football team in Germany, the collaboration between the DFB and its Chinese cooperation partners was discontinued.

The decision to end this cooperation was not made by mutual agreement, but came unilaterally from the Chinese side, even if the DFB announced it otherwise on its website.<sup>112</sup> The CFA responded to this public announcement by the DFB, calling it a "release of false information on the official website of the [DFB]".<sup>113</sup> A spokesperson of the CFA stated that then "DFB General Secretary Friedrich Curtius was not invited by the CFA to China recently. The CFA did not contact him during his stay in China, and the content of the statement of the [DFB] was not the result of consultations between the two sides. The CFA regrets that the German side has published inaccurate information".<sup>114</sup> Earlier, Chinese media representatives had reported that a DFB delegation had travelled to the PRC to discuss the further course of Sino-German football cooperation following the Tibet flag scandal.<sup>115</sup> An employee of the DFB confirmed in an expert interview that the DFB delegation led by Curtius was not received by the CFA despite their journey to Beijing.

The case study illustrates that sport itself has become an arena for playing out political conflicts. In this case, the use of sport as a tool to overcome and mediate divisions between different societal and state actors failed because the DFB displayed behaviour that was perceived as unacceptable by high-level party-state actors from the PRC. Beyond this case study, there are a number of other contentious interactions between Chinese political and international actors in sport that have not yet been examined by sport diplomacy research,<sup>116</sup> and could therefore be a future research topic. In this context, the conceptual approach of political steering might provide an alternative to the concept of "soft power", which is prevalent in the relevant literature on sport diplomacy, in order to examine the interactions between different actors aimed at changing the behaviour (or normative action orientations) of other actors. In conclusion, it can be said that research on sport diplomacy cannot only demonstrate how the deliberate use of sport can strengthen international relations, especially when it comes to addressing particularly "estranged relations between peoples, nations and states",

112 DFB, „Freundschaftsspiele mit chinesischer U 20 werden nicht fortgesetzt,“ December 22, 2017c, <https://www.dfb.de/news/detail/freundschaftsspiele-mit-chinesischer-u-20-werden-nicht-fortgesetzt-180109/>.

113 CFA, „中国足协发言人就德国足协官网发布不实消息接受采访,“ (CFA spokesperson interviewed on the release of false news on the official website of the German Football Association, zhongguo zuxie fayan ren jiu deguo zuxie guanwang fabu bu shi xiaoxi jieshou caifang) December 27, 2017b, <http://www.thecca.cn/xhwx/20171227/22626.html>.

114 CFA, „中国足协发言人就德国足协官网发布不实消息接受采访“.

115 Zhang, Yan „德国足协来中国献上一计只为把U20国足请回去,“ (German football federation came to China to offer a plan just to bring back the U20 national football team, deguozuxie lai zhongguo xianshang yi ji zhi wei ba U20 guo zu qing huiqu) 环球时报 (*Global Times*), December 12, 2017, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2017-12-12/doc-ifypnqvn3393524.shtml>. Sohu, „有钱就是爷? 德球队曾对中德U20合作装逼我们撤了以后立马怂了,“ (Money is the master? The German team had pretended to the Sino-German U20 cooperation we withdrew immediately after the wimp, you qian jiushi ye? de qiu dui ceng dui zhong de U20 hezuo zhuang bi women chele yihou lima songle) December 12, 2017, [https://www.sohu.com/a/209879890\\_550934](https://www.sohu.com/a/209879890_550934).

116 See introduction section.

but also that corresponding interactions between different actors at the international level can shed light on how far this “estrangement” has already progressed, leaving the actors involved rather perplexed.<sup>117</sup>

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117 Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*.

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