

4 Giving ‘prominence to politics’

African sportsmen visit China in the early Cultural Revolution

Amanda Shuman

‘Every Tanzanian is eager to visit your country and see for himself the progress, achievements and aspirations of the Chinese people following Revolution . . . I hope your people appreciated and enjoyed the performance of our players although they have been defeated’.

– T. Edward John Mwangosi, delegation leader for the Tanzanian national football team, following the team’s visit to Shanghai.
July 6, 1966 (Mwangosi, 1966)

When the Tanzanian football team arrived in Beijing on 25 June 1966, they came at a key moment: the opening stages of what would become the three most chaotic years of China’s decade-long Cultural Revolution. Launched officially in May, the first purge of top leaders in Beijing as ‘anti-party revisionists’ followed shortly thereafter (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006, pp. 37–38). The visiting Tanzanians may have been unaware as to what was happening as they were chaperoned around Beijing in buses, but other foreigners noted numerous big-character posters and demonstrations (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006, pp. 60–61).¹ In August, Mao proclaimed his support for the Red Guards (rebel youth groups), who began ransacking peoples’ homes and destroying books, museums, temples and historic sites. The football delegation from Mali and the gymnastics delegation from United Arab Republic (Egypt) arrived in late August to a situation that was rapidly spiralling out of control. By the time the Congolese football team visited in October, the Red Guards were attacking individuals, and public security was a real concern.

What were these sports delegations from Africa actually up to in China, and why were they there to begin with? This chapter investigates how the leadership used sports delegation visits to foster better relations and assess political solidarities, while also attempting to build a positive image of China in their minds and project it as a successful socialist model particularly suited for decolonised African nations. Sports diplomacy has been a part of foreign policy efforts in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since the 1950s. In the 1960s, visits aimed to extend Chinese soft power, and sports leaders and elite athletes acted as diplomats on behalf of the state (Shuman, forthcoming). The official Chinese media in the

Mao years also frequently featured sports competitions and delegation visits in order to teach the public about China's position in the world and who its 'friends' were. Official rhetoric, as Julia Strauss has argued, was not simply 'empty words', but rather a method of legitimating the Chinese state's policies and attempting to 'attract, persuade, mobilize or consolidate support within' (Strauss, 2009, p. 779). There was thus little difference between public diplomacy and official propaganda.²

Over the course of 1965 and 1966, Chinese politics promoted a revolutionary, militant version of Mao Zedong Thought that began to influence sports delegation visits. This radicalisation of politics at home, alongside continuing anti-US and anti-Soviet foreign policies and political coups in Indonesia and Ghana, caused China to become increasingly isolated internationally.³ Declassified reports on sports delegations sent from Africa to China between June and October 1966 reflect the growing tension between radical ideology and foreign affairs work during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution. Replete with references to Mao and Mao Zedong Thought, and the ostensible admiration Africans had for both, the discussion of sports activities is almost completely absent. Efforts to build 'friendship' with visiting sports teams through joint practices, social activities, open discussion and 'finding things in common' (Brady, 2003, p. 14)⁴ – all typical features of cultural delegation visits sent to China – waned as domestic politics began to undermine foreign affairs work.⁵

The 1966 visits, to be sure, included some of the usual delegation activities reported on in official media: 'friendly' competitions, banquets, sightseeing and meetings with top leaders. The declassified reports, however, indicate that visits also served as litmus tests for determining the solidarity of respective guests on specific policy issues. Moreover, they show how Chinese leaders strove tirelessly to incorporate the radicalised ideology of Mao Zedong Thought as frequently as possible into their own work under the slogans to 'put politics in command' and 'give prominence to politics'. Less important than the veracity of the alleged opinions and verbatim comments purportedly made by African guests during these visits is what Chinese officials chose to record. What reports highlight indicates how these sports visits served as conduits for building relations and national image, pushing official political agendas and worldviews, and shoring up support for increasingly radical Chinese policies.⁶ Distributed to leaders in the State Sports Commission and Foreign Ministry, official reports also helped those involved in delegation work prove to a slim but powerful group of superiors that a visit had been successful. Report authors made every effort to demonstrate that their own political work followed Mao Zedong Thought, while giving the impression that African guests not only admired Chinese achievements made under Mao, but also hoped their own countries would emulate the Chinese model. Recorded comments were meant to prove that, despite occasional differences of opinion, most Africans held a favourable image of China and that they supported Chinese policies. In sum, the visits suggested that African patronage for the Cultural Revolution was on the rise.

The rise of Chinese sports diplomacy in the 1950s and 1960s

For several decades prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, there had been an official desire in China to see athletes represent the nation through their athletic success on the world stage.⁷ The PRC leadership, however, was the first to heavily invest in sport for its broader foreign and domestic policy goals. Sports development in the Mao years (1949–1976) was closely connected to the oscillations of official understandings of China's place in the world. In the 1950s, as the PRC battled with the Republic of China (ROC-Taiwan) for international recognition, sport became a prominent site for legitimising the new socialist state and solidifying its place within the Soviet-led socialist world. Under the broader official policy of 'leaning to one side',⁸ Chinese leaders focused on 'learning from the Soviet Union' and the socialist bloc. This included adopting Soviet-inspired sports programmes in China (Shuman, 2014, pp. 46–51), as well as numerous sports delegations and exchanges, all of which were touted in official media as proof of growing friendship and solidarity between 'fraternal countries' (Shuman, 2014, pp. 99–112).

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders understood their nation as belonging to a global community made up of other nations and peoples with similar historical backgrounds, all engaged in a struggle against colonialism and imperialism – a community often described in secondary literature as the 'Third World' (Cook, 2010, pp. 288–289; Dirlik, 2004, p. 135). This was especially true after the 1955 Bandung conference, but the origins of this understanding predate the founding of the PRC (Cook, 2010, p. 289). Bandung, however, gave voice to an emergent global community of recently decolonised and Third World nations, helping forge solidarities among participants by building what Christopher Lee (2010) has called a 'community of feeling' (p. 25). United primarily (and sometimes only) through a sense of a shared historical struggle against imperialism and colonialism, leaders of participating nations sought to create new organisations for themselves, such as the Non-Aligned Movement and the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) (Lee, 2010, pp. 25–26; Westad, 2011, p. 106). The PRC leadership professed an early interest in these developments; Premier Zhou Enlai argued in his closing speech at Bandung that cooperation was possible and achievements could be made simply 'because we peoples of the Asian and African countries share the same fate and the same desires' (HPPPPDA, 1955). In the late 1950s, as Sino-Soviet relations grew tense, the Chinese government invested more heavily in building relations with newly independent African states and in supporting various national liberation movements (Ogunsanwo, 1974, pp. 15–60). This included sending official delegations on visits to African countries (especially Egypt and Algeria) and paying African delegations to come to China to engage in 'people's diplomacy' (Brady, 2003, pp. 2–4), a form of public diplomacy that emphasised personal contact and gift giving.

Sino-Soviet relations meanwhile deteriorated further after 1960 and culminated in a split. PRC leaders had come to believe that China, as the greatest

underdeveloped nation in the world that had already undergone a social revolution, should lead the rest of the world's revolutionary movements (Schurmann, 1968, p. 29, 37–43). In their analysis, the Soviets had abandoned the international socialist movement and forgotten about oppressed peoples around the world. While Soviet leaders prioritised an anti-capitalist revolution, Chinese leaders emphasised an anti-imperialist world revolution (Friedman, 2015, p. 2). As the two sides competed for influence in the Third World, sport played a role in PRC efforts to get more involved in burgeoning African-Asian solidarity movements. The state-sponsored development of elite competitive sport in China in the 1960s existed almost solely for propagating the Party's alternative socialist path within the global community – especially to recently decolonised nations in Africa and Asia.

Between 1961 and 1965, Chinese influence in the AAPSO reached its height (Amer, 1972, p. 10), and by July 1965 the PRC had established diplomatic relations with 20 African nations (Larkin, 1971, pp. 66–67).⁹ Official sport visits and other cultural exchanges, which often occurred after the signing of cultural cooperation agreements with individual nations (Ogunsanwo, 1974, p. 84), helped foster diplomatic relations at a time when prominent international organisations like the United Nations did not recognise the PRC. But Chinese leaders also clearly believed that such delegations could and did promote an optimistic image of China and Chinese socialism in the international community. Moreover, because they knew surprisingly little about some African countries (Friedman, 2015, p. 51),¹⁰ visits quickly became an avenue for acquiring basic knowledge on new allies. Information gathered during a visit also helped boost Chinese foreign propaganda during this period, which delegation members sometimes helped distribute (Üngör, 2009, p. 196, 236).¹¹

Sports delegation visits and competitions became sites where PRC leaders sought to foster affective relations with new 'friends', while also demonstrating Chinese superiority in sport. The Chinese ping-pong team's visit to Africa in 1962, for example, involved a combination of sports and non-sports activities to generate goodwill and shared sentiment (Shuman, forthcoming). The first Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO), held in Jakarta in 1963 and co-sponsored by China and Indonesia, garnered media attention worldwide; more than 2,200 athletes from 51 nations participated in this Olympics-like mega-event. China sent the largest delegation and took home the most medals, and played a prominent role in the subsequent establishment of a permanent GANEFO organisation (Shuman, 2014, p. 273).

Putting 'politics in command' and marketing Mao Zedong Thought to Africans

Shifts and disputes in Chinese high politics in 1964–1965 led to progressively more militarised and politicised elite sports programmes. Liu Shaoqi, then in line to succeed Mao, and Zhou Enlai became the main advocates for speeding up the development of an elite cadre of athletes that would dominate international

elite sport.¹² Attention to strengthening sports techniques and methods diminished over the course of 1965 in favour of a heavier emphasis on politics as the exclusive factor guiding training. Mao was on a mission to remove his rivals at the top and began to push more radical leftist policies – including publicly commenting that everyone should read a speech written by ping-pong player Xu Yinsheng that encouraged athletes to challenge their leaders and coaches. A perfect complement to Mao's own agenda to overturn the current leadership by encouraging youth to challenge their elders, over the next few months Xu's speech became required reading for everyone involved in the world of sport (Griffin, 2014, p. 138). The demands on sports leaders to carry out political thought work became much more explicit and intense throughout 1965, under the formulation that athletic training needed to put 'politics in command' (Shuman, 2014, pp. 367–370).

In the second half of 1965, as Mao spoke of China leading world revolution (Barnouin and Yu, 1998, p. 46), Chinese elite sport sustained a direct blow. On 30 September, Indonesian president and GANEFO founder Sukarno was overthrown, and the new government did not support the GANEFO movement. Without one of the two primary supporting countries, the movement struggled to regain the momentum it had lost. For the PRC, which had formally resigned its position in the Olympic committee in 1958 and officially split from the Soviet Union in 1962, this also left few options for participation in international sports competitions.

The radical, militant strand in Chinese politics led by Mao intensified in mid-1966 with the start of the Cultural Revolution. Anti-US rhetoric had always been prolific, but at the Eleventh Plenum in August, the PRC leadership placed the Soviet Union right behind US imperialism as the most threatening 'common enemy' (Barnouin and Yu, 1998, p. 47) and spoke as if war was imminent. Yet even as these events threatened domestic stability, foreign affairs work remained unscathed. Despite the purge of Liu and Deng Xiaoping from the top ranks, the Foreign Ministry remained in the hands of its top leaders, Chen Yi and Zhou Enlai. Both firmly believed that domestic affairs should be kept separate from the daily handling of foreign affairs. For this reason, sports delegation visits seemingly functioned in the same way they had for years: as opportunities to build relations, shore up foreign support for Chinese policies, and showcase Chinese socialist achievements to foreign guests. Chen, Zhou and Vice Premier He Long, who was also head of the State Sports Commission, continued to meet with visiting delegations.¹³ Stripped-down accounts of visits frequently appeared in the Chinese media purporting 'friendly' competition, cordial exchanges and foreign support of Chinese policies. Official documents also contain many similar boilerplate statements, but the nuance and details found within declassified internal reports on sports delegations from Tanzania, Mali, Egypt and Congo (Brazzaville) suggest that the Chinese leadership trusted some allies more than others. They also show how PRC leaders continued to work hard at improving China's international image through 'people-to-people' diplomacy,¹⁴ while evidencing the influence of Mao Zedong Thought and Cultural Revolution rhetoric.

Trusted friends: the Tanzanian football delegation

This influence was already present by the time the Tanzanian football team arrived for their short visit in June. The official State Sports Commission announcement for the visit, distributed to local sports committees, called for carrying out 'friendly' work by giving 'prominence to politics' with Mao Zedong Thought in command (ZRBTYW, 1966a).¹⁵ Although the announcement itself is vague on what precisely that would entail, couched in such terms it is clear that sports activities like joint practices, skills exchanges and exhibition matches – all hallmarks of earlier sports delegation visits – were increasingly becoming an afterthought to shoring up support for radical Chinese policies.

How Chinese officials dealt with specific guests closely mirrored existing relations, and the Tanzanian football team's visit in June 1966 is one example of how a sports delegation was supposed to help strengthen 'friendship'. Sino-Tanzanian relations had grown rapidly over the previous two years and were at their best when this delegation arrived. This was the result of a combination of ideology, economic aid and overlapping foreign policy goals. Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere's declaration in 1963 that he was prepared to die in order to remove the humiliation of colonialism (Lal, 2012, p. 58), for example, resembles the CCP's historical narrative on the century of humiliation (beginning with the opium wars and ending with the establishment of the PRC). Both Tanzanian and Chinese leaders employed language that stressed a shared historical struggle against colonialism. Under Nyerere's leadership, Tanzania had also begun to adopt a socialist programme that emphasised self-reliance and hard work, and valorised the rural – all of which sounded a lot like Mao Zedong Thought. Leaders of the Tanzania African National Union advocated that the country learn from the Chinese model of development (Lal, 2012, p. 71). Nyerere complimented Chinese frugality and austerity, arguing that if Tanzania wanted to eliminate poverty its people needed to act the same (Lal, 2012, pp. 72–73). By late 1965, Chinese and Tanzanian leaders were already in preliminary discussions to build the TAZARA railway (Lal, 2012, p. 74),¹⁶ and in 1966 the Chinese media published Nyerere's speeches on self-reliance prolifically (NCNA, 1966a, 1966b).

Tanzania's role in the mid-1960s as a haven for exiled African liberation movements also benefitted China's anti-imperialist mission in the Third World. These movements received arms and military training from the Soviet Union, China and the Eastern bloc (Lal, 2012, pp. 63–65). Nyerere worried about his own country's security following the revolution in Zanzibar and the deterioration of Tanzania's relations with Western countries, but he must have anticipated Chinese political and economic support when Tanzania became the first commonwealth country to sever relations with Britain in 1965 (Lal, 2012, p. 68). Although he publicly denied in June that Tanzania had 'gone communist' (Nyerere, 1968, p. 204), it is clear that Tanzania was unquestionably China's 'friend'.

The official State Sports Commission announcement for the football team's visit in June thus noted that although this was the first sports delegation from 'our friend [Tanzania] in the struggle against imperialism', the relationship was already cordial (ZRBTYW, 1966a). The announcement encouraged local officials

to widely publicise the visit and freely discuss Chinese political positions on Vietnam, the Soviet Union and the United States with their guests. In practice, this meant that the leadership had little fear that these foreign guests would disagree with Chinese policies or practices, and any special requests could generally be fulfilled. The focus of the visit would be on cultivating personal relations between all parties involved, while impressing them with Chinese socialist achievements under the guidance of Mao Zedong Thought.

The 22-person Tanzanian delegation arrived in Beijing on 25 June, met with He Long on 28 June [Figure 4.1], and then left from Shanghai on 6 July. The Chinese media noted that the team was 'warmly welcomed' at the airport and a reception held the following day (NCNA, 1966c, 1966d). The first 'friendly match' drew more than 60,000 spectators at Beijing workers' stadium, where, despite the Tanzanian players showing 'clever dribbling' and a 'strong fighting spirit in their attacks on the Chinese goal', the Chinese national team beat them by a score of 10–14 through 'a fast short-passing game' and 'good team work' (NCNA, 1966e). The Tanzanians went on to lose their remaining two matches to Liaoning and Shanghai teams. In contrast to the media, internal reports do not discuss any sports activities in much detail, but they do indicate rowdiness during matches. A report from Shanghai noted that a 'rough style of play [with] lots of dangerous moves' had caused the referees to feel 'uncomfortable' (STYW, 1966a). The Tanzanian team leader took partial responsibility and promised to



Figure 4.1 28 June 1966, Vice Premier He Long meets the Tanzanian national football team.

Source: Zhongguo tiyu nianjian bianji weiyuanhui (ed.), *Zhonghua tiyu nianjian 1966–1972* (ZTNBW, 1983).

chat with his players, but along with the team captain, he also complained about 'unfair' referees (STYW, 1966a).¹⁷

What the internal Chinese reports highlight most are activities meant to imprint Tanzanian guests with a favourable image of China by introducing them to PRC history and demonstrating the nation's socialist achievements under Mao. The Chinese side was also clearly marketing its own model of success to these Africans, and a paternalistic undertone marked activities off the playing field. The official reports described the Tanzanian delegation as a friendly group that, despite 'not understanding [China]' was eager and willing to learn (TYWGWJGJ, 1966a). Their visit to Beijing's Museum of Revolution became an opportunity to discuss the Taiwan issue (the PRC's claim to the territory then occupied by the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek) and revolutionary martyrs (TYWGWJGJ, 1966a), while in Shanghai the whole team watched the film *Tunnel Warfare* (STYW, 1966a). Reports diligently recorded positive comments made by the Tanzanian guests. A visit to the People's Hall prompted one player to comment that prior to coming to China, he had only heard about the building and had not believed it was real; now having seen it with his own eyes, he was convinced that the Chinese were 'hardworking people' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966a). Particularly appealing to Tanzanians was that Chinese industry had developed quickly and practised a policy of self-reliance. During a car factory tour in Shanghai, the Tanzanian delegation leader, T. Edward John Mwangosi, asked three times whether or not European engineers had helped, and 'he seemed not to totally believe' that Chinese people had made everything (TYWGWJGJ, 1966a). But following the visit, claims the report, he concluded that Chinese cars were better than those made in England, Italy and the United States, and he wanted to import them to his country (TYWGWJGJ, 1966a). The leader was also apparently impressed that in just 16 years China had changed so much that it no longer had petty thieves, beggars or unemployment – all of which he noted were still serious problems in Tanzania (TYWGWJGJ, 1966a). When touring a Shanghai factory for the blind, deaf and mute, he was so awe-struck by the visit – which included, among other things, a blind person reading from a braille version of Mao's *Selected Works* – that he claimed he wanted to 'learn from' China and have others from his country visit so that they could see similar Chinese factories (STYW, 1966a).

Religion was rarely on the agenda for sports delegation visits, but Chinese officials promptly filled a request from Mwangosi to see a church. During this church tour, the leader asked to know more about policies on freedom of faith. He was told that in China every religion received mutual respect (the intricacies of how this worked within the Party system were conveniently left out). The report dutifully recorded his candid response – that in his country, religion caused lots of conflict and was 'a big headache' (STYW, 1966a). So was his post-tour comment that 'in our country, foreign missionaries tell us that not many people believe in Chinese communism' but that now he could 'see that this is [the missionaries'] propaganda' (STYW, 1966a). In this case, the voluntary church tour provided the Chinese side with intelligence on what Tanzanians might find less-than-satisfactory in their own country, and suggested that such tours might be useful in future

delegation visits. The chance to discuss religion had led to a perhaps unexpected outcome: portraying socialist China favourably in the minds of these guests.

The broader repercussions of the Tanzanian visit are difficult to assess, but guests left with a positive impression of Chinese socialism and Sino-Tanzanian relations became even more affable. In early July, Tanzania publicly condemned the US bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong (NCNA, 1966f) and received a \$2.1 million credit from China to start a joint shipping line (Larkin, 1971, pp. 94–95). By the end of the month, Nyerere cited China as a good example of self-reliance and praised the help of Chinese experts, and with a 16 million pound commitment from China, construction began on a new textile mill (Larkin, 1971, p. 97). Mwangosi's note sent to the Shanghai Sports Committee on the last day of the visit (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) perfectly encapsulated the 'friendly' yet paternalistic relations between the Chinese and Tanzanian leadership in mid-1966. He effusively praised what he had seen in China, remarking that visits and exchanges strengthened the bonds between the two countries 'day by day' (Mwangosi, 1966).

Ambivalent allies: the Egyptian gymnastics squad and the football team from Mali

The Egyptian gymnastics squad and the football team from Mali both arrived in August, just as the Central Cultural Revolution Group gained power (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006, pp. 92–93). The declassified reports outline similar efforts to promote a confident image of socialist China, but in contrast to the Tanzanian delegation, they also indicate that officials treated these guests with a degree of uncertainty. This reflected the PRC leadership's dissatisfaction with (or even lack of trust in) the leadership within each country.

The nine-person Egyptian gymnastics team led by A. D. Touny required careful attentiveness. Sino-Egyptian relations had always been problematic because President Nasser refused to take sides in the Sino-Soviet dispute, but they worsened in August 1965 when he decided to exchange political solidarities for Soviet aid (Friedman, 2015, pp. 132–134).¹⁸ Egypt similarly attempted to maintain a neutral role in the world of sport. Following the establishment of the GANEFO organisation in late 1963, the executive committee had named Touny as GANEFO vice president of Africa (Connolly, 2012, p. 1317), and Cairo was chosen to host the Second Games (Shuman, 2014, p. 321).¹⁹ Touny was also Egypt's representative to the IOC, and he constantly found himself defending his position to both. In June 1964, the IOC executive board gave Touny an ultimatum of 'two years to make proof that the GANEFO . . . would develop in an Olympic manner' and if it did not, then he would have to choose one side (IOCA, 1964a). A follow-up letter sent by the IOC chancellor Otto Mayer directly to Touny was less conciliatory: his activities 'seemed irreconcilable with the Olympic Movement and Principles' (IOCA, 1964b). Irritated with Touny's neutralist stance, the IOC leadership would never approve of the openly political GANEFO – two years was just buying time.

In response to these threats, Touny told Chinese leaders in late 1964 that his government faced difficulties in building the facilities for the second GANEFO. He insisted that the issue was financial, not political, and that the Games would still be held in Cairo (CFMA, 1964b), but Chinese intelligence had already determined this was just an excuse and suggested another country in Africa be chosen as a backup (CFMA, 1964a). Touny played both sides as long as he could, but in December 1965, IOC President Brundage urged him in a private letter to disassociate himself from GANEFO (IOCA, 1965). It was soon clear which side he chose. The State Sports Commission's announcement for the gymnastics delegation visit noted that Egypt had stopped preparations for the second GANEFO, and Touny was accused of 'colluding with the Soviet revisionists [and] destroying the GANEFO's anti-imperialist struggle' (ZRBTYW, 1966b). This did not mean that the visit merited less attention. On the contrary, the announcement stated Egypt was 'a big country' and that the status of its leaders was 'high' (ZRBTYW, 1966b). In this less-than-ideal situation, however, certain topics were to be avoided while still following official protocols. The number one work goal was to advocate Mao Zedong Thought and expand Chinese influence, followed by expounding PRC positions on the US and Vietnam, propagandising self-reliance in socialist construction, and highlighting the Cultural Revolution. This also included, ironically given the circumstances, the boilerplate statement to stress Chinese sports achievements under the GANEFO spirit of 'furthering friendship, mutual advancement, developing together, united against imperialism' (ZRBTYW, 1966b).

The Egyptian gymnastics squad arrived 12 August in Beijing and, over the course of two weeks, gave exhibitions in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. PRC leaders used the visit as an opportunity to assess the status of Sino-Egyptian political solidarities on a number of issues. As predicted, GANEFO discussion brought frustration. Touny continually refused to discuss economic problems that had supposedly led to Cairo's withdrawal from hosting the second GANEFO, although he suspiciously wanted to know whether the Asian GANEFO was still planned for later in the year in Cambodia (TYWGWJGJ, 1966b).²⁰ Touny later said the Soviets had suggested Egypt 'postpone' holding the second GANEFO, adding that Egypt would equally participate in both the Olympics and GANEFO (TYWGWJGJ, 1966e).²¹ The Chinese side reemphasised to Touny that the 'GANEFO must develop independently' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966e).

As far as other foreign policy issues were concerned, the two sides could not agree on much. The same day that the delegation arrived, Beijing had held a rally welcoming anyone who had withdrawn from an international conference to ban the atomic and hydrogen bombs (NCNA, 1966g). An official sports delegation report from the next day noted that Egyptian players and coaches wanted to know why China and the United States could not have friendly contact, and they believed that a (nuclear) bomb was no good no matter who had it (TYWGWJGJ, 1966b). Although the Chinese leadership ostensibly supported a peaceful, no-bomb resolution, the country had conducted nuclear tests since October 1964. In one report, the coach and manager reflected optimistically that the Soviet Union provided aid to their country and to Vietnam (TYWGWJGJ, 1966c). Touny's thank you

speech at the Shanghai banquet, noted yet another report, was ambiguous. He had refused to cite 'U.S. imperialism' as the enemy in Vietnam, and 'when speaking of revisionism, [he] . . . did not mention the new Soviet communist leadership' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966e). For the Chinese, the US was the primary enemy, and the Soviet 'revisionists' colluded with them. Political solidarity with these Egyptian leaders was shaky at best.

Malian president Modibo Keita had also attempted to remain neutral in the Sino-Soviet dispute (Mazov, 2010, p. 230), even while both countries fought to win him over. There was a pro-China contingent in the leadership, and Malian-Chinese relations were generally good (Mazov, 2010, p. 230), but Keita never committed to the Chinese socialist model (Diagouraga, 2005, p. 87–88). Paging through Mali's official newspaper *L'Essor* in 1966 confirms this refusal to choose a side, even as PRC leaders ratcheted up their efforts by providing (often non-monetary) aid. In May, for example, Mali received a Chinese cultural delegation and subsequently signed a 'plan of execution' for cultural accords – an event that made the front page of the paper (*L'Essor*, 1966a, 1966b). Two weeks later, Mali signed a similar agreement with the Soviet Union (*L'Essor*, 1966c). Another article noted a donation of scientific teaching materials from the Chinese Ministry of Education, adding that Chinese expertise and exchanges had been 'numerous and fruitful' for introducing 'modern methods of agriculture' and benefitting a range of industries (*L'Essor*, 1966d). PRC leaders expected in return that Mali would, at the very least, publicly support Chinese political positions. This often worked. In July, for example, China gave Mali \$4 million in foreign currency (Larkin, 1971, pp. 94–95), and *L'Essor* condemned the US bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong (NCNA, 1966h).

The announcement for the Malian football team's visit in mid-August likewise reflected the PRC leadership's frustration with the Malian leadership, yet willingness to remain 'friends' with these guests in order to strengthen China's international position. It hopefully noted Mali's continued GANEFO participation, as well as recent Chinese sports delegation visits sent to the country, while also blaming US imperialism and Soviet revisionism for an increasingly tense situation in Mali. The country's policies on cultural activities had been wavering for several years, it claimed, because internal authorities did not have 'a lot of resolve to eradicate imperialist power' (ZRBTYW, 1966c).

The team arrived on 24 August and left on 10 September, but as far as foreign policy was concerned, the visit was mostly unsuccessful. According to the first report, Malian leaders still supported GANEFO and, although the delegation leader Bengoro Coulibaly agreed Egypt's IOC position was problematic, he continued to believe holding the success of a second Games would 'shake the hegemony of the IOC' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966f). He promised that Mali would work hard to get more African nations to participate in GANEFO and claimed that Mali's hosting of the 1969 African Games meant it could now 'control all of African sport' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966f). The second report was less enthusiastic. Chen Yi met with Coulibaly and assessed him as 'friendly, but not too warm' and full of 'empty talk' on anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism that avoided discussion

of the GANEFO (TYWGWJGJ, 1966g). He also refused to take an open stance against the IOC. Nevertheless, Chen believed Coulibaly was genuinely interested in understanding China's communes – and in receiving Chinese aid in the form of sports equipment and cadres to prepare for the 1969 African Games (TYWGWJGJ, 1966g). It is unclear whether such a request was fulfilled. Mali was an ambivalent political ally in the international arena, including in sport, and the visit failed to change this.

Selling Chinese socialism and revering Mao

While discussions of foreign policy sometimes fell flat, local officials worked tirelessly to convince all visitors of the efficacy of Chinese socialism under Mao Zedong Thought. The agenda often included sports, cultural and sightseeing activities, as well as visits to non-sports institutions. The purpose was to showcase socialist achievements that would educate and impress guests, and then record their purported comments. Some of these comments seem plausible. For example, the Egyptian gymnastics coach expressed his disappointment that China could not participate in the world championships because its team was 'undoubtedly' one of the three strongest in the world (TYWGWJGJ, 1966b). Visiting sports facilities in Beijing, he said that although he had been to many countries, he had never seen such a good gymnastics institute (TYWGWJGJ, 1966c). He also wanted to know how Chinese gymnastics had improved so rapidly in a short period. In another case, after the Chinese national football team beat the visiting Malian team 4:0, delegation leader Coulibaly commended the Chinese performance and stated that he wanted to learn more about the team's speed, cooperation and ability to pass the ball accurately (TYWGWJGJ, 1966h). Subsequent reports do not contain such flattery, presumably because the Malian team only lost the first match. In fact, their defeat of the Shanghai team 4:1 merited the shortest sports commentary of the whole visit: 'the Mali team played relatively well; the Shanghai team's play was not ideal' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966k).

More often than not, however, reports are full of effusive, exaggerated comments praising the successes of Chinese socialism and Mao Zedong Thought – in sport and across society. Reports also frequently included comments that would prove these guests aspired for their own countries to emulate the Chinese model. Self-reliance was an especially salient theme. After a visit to Beijing's No. 3 Cotton Factory, Coulibaly commented that through self-reliance, 'China will certainly prosper' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966h), while the delegation secretary noted that Chinese experts had already helped Mali 'construct our factories, [and they] also taught us how to do it ourselves' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966h). The delegation also saw a ping-pong factory in Guangzhou, where Coulibaly commented that of all the factories he had seen in China, this one best demonstrated self-reliance under Mao Zedong Thought and gave Mali a model path for industry (TYWGWJGJ, 1966i). After visiting the Shanghai Industrial Exhibition, he stated that in 10 years 'China will certainly produce all the things it needs' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966k). Admiration for China's rural policies was also apparently high. Egyptian delegation leader Touny,

allegedly impressed by what he saw at the Malu People's Commune in Shanghai, claimed that he 'really believed in the commune system', while lamenting that his country's economy was going in the direction of capitalism (TYWGWJGJ, 1966e). He hoped that in the future, Egypt could send some rural youth to China to work and live. Coulibaly, upon visiting the same commune, concluded that Mali needed to learn from the successful experience of China, especially 'how to organize and educate small farmers' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966j). Reports also recorded unfavourable comments made by guests about their countries in order to make Chinese policies seem even better. While Touny purportedly attributed the quality of Chinese sport to Mao Zedong Thought, some Egyptian gymnasts complained that their own coach did not take part in practice and grumbled that their training was not 'scientific' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966c). The Egyptian manager did not believe politics mattered in sport, but some of the Egyptian athletes apparently thought that Chinese athletes were successful because they read Mao's *Selected Works* (TYWGWJGJ, 1966c).

Another theme throughout reports was that athletes in particular valued Mao and Mao Zedong Thought. After visiting the Museum of the Chinese Revolution in Beijing, one Tanzanian football player requested Mao badges so he could express his 'love of Chairman Mao' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966a). The whole Mali football team bought images of Mao and wanted copies of the *Selected Works* to take with them (TYWGWJGJ, 1966i). One Egyptian gymnast, after leaving Shanghai where the delegation visited the Children's Palace and youth amateur sports schools (STYW, 1966b), felt that it was a 'good thing' that 'Chinese children learned from Mao Zedong Thought', and he requested several copies of *Selected Works* to take with him (TYWGWJGJ, 1966d).

Although many of these inflated comments seem dubious at best, the act of recording them served an important purpose of proving to the leadership, especially in the Foreign Ministry, that sports delegation work had 'put politics in command' and successfully raised China's image. Sometimes this was patently obvious. One report claims that Touny, after seeing the Shanghai Industrial Exhibition, asked how an 'opium-smoking, indolent people' could make such great achievements in just 16 years (TYWGWJGJ, 1966d). In response, the Chinese guide explained that 'under the leadership of Mao and the Party, the Chinese people overthrew the three big mountains [of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism²²] [and] liberated the People's unlimited creative ability' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966d). The coach then supposedly stated that the Chinese people should be 'proud' of such an impressive change in becoming an industrial country that produced so many things (TYWGWJGJ, 1966d).

Another purpose of recording foreign comments in reports was to use them for the official media, which in some cases seems to have directly lifted positive quotes from these reports while ignoring deleterious ones. Visits became platforms for demonstrating to the Chinese public that Africans admired Chinese successes under Mao, the righteousness of Mao Zedong Thought and the Cultural Revolution, and supported China's role in leading a world revolution. An article in *Sports News*, for example, stated that the Tanzanian delegation leader

had visited the Shanghai Industrial Exhibition and enthusiastically praised China's 'great achievements in construction'. These were the result of Mao's leadership and 'complete dependence on the Chinese people's own strength' (i.e. self-reliance) (Tiyu bao, 1966). A *People's Daily* article from the Malian visit contains a montage of gushing quotes all attributed to Coulibaly. The first praises Mao Zedong Thought as the 'incalculable common wealth of the world's proletarian revolution', while the next claims that the 'Cultural Revolution is unprecedented in the history of mankind', and without it, there 'cannot be a true socialist country' (RMRB, 1966a). In just two sentences, the article had justified the Chinese Cultural Revolution to the public as both a domestic necessity and as leading a world revolution. *L'Essor* also published a *Xinhua* article about the Malian football team's 'friendly match' in Shanghai (L'Essor, 1966e) directly above an article twice its length in which Coulibaly 'praises Mao Zedong Thought' (L'Essor, 1966f). The latter elaborated on the same quotes from *People's Daily*, included positive statements made by other delegation members, and stated that they had also bought portraits of Mao and Lin Biao 'with joy' (L'Essor, 1966f).

Comrades during chaos: the football team from Congo (Brazzaville)

Between mid-September and December 1966, the situation in the Foreign Ministry and State Sports Commission deteriorated rapidly. The Foreign Ministry had received two letters in late August, including one from Tanzania, criticising the 'bourgeois' habits of Chinese embassies that contrasted with Cultural Revolution principles (Ma, 2004, pp. 73–74). Chen Yi forwarded the letters to Mao, who responded on 9 September to get 'revolutionized, or it will be very dangerous' (Ma, 2004, pp. 73–74). The resulting instructions, which the Foreign Ministry sent to Chinese embassies and institutions abroad and implemented itself a week later, called for an overhaul. A campaign began to criticise, expose, and 'revolutionise' foreign affairs work (Ma, 2004, p. 75), and by October, the CCP Central Committee declared that the most important mission of embassies abroad was to disseminate Mao Zedong Thought (Ma, 2004, p. 152).

The Congo (Brazzaville) football team's visit in October and November clearly indicates how these changes influenced both the ideological rhetoric of delegation visits and the bureaucratic handling of foreign visitors. The State Sports Commission announcement aptly reflected the fact that the Cultural Revolution had changed the 'subjective and objective conditions' of delegation work (ZRBTYW, 1966d). As with other 'friendly' delegations, it noted upfront that Congo (Brazzaville) upheld the struggle against US imperialism in Vietnam, and that despite the country's political instability, its leadership continued to build its relations with China. Yet in contrast to visits just two months prior, this visit had an 'extremely important political responsibility' to 'broadcast to the whole world the far-reaching significance of Mao Zedong Thought and the Cultural Revolution' (ZRBTYW, 1966d). Every subsequent report began with a quotation from Mao and lavishly praised Mao Zedong Thought.

Although the reports indicate attempts to maintain the status quo, they are unduly immersed in Cultural Revolution rhetoric and dripping in paternalistic language about Mao's world revolution. As with the Tanzanian football delegation in June, a report described the Congolese team as wanting to learn from Chinese successes – in this case, they were especially interested in sport, medicine and self-reliance (TYWGWJGJ, 1966m). The delegation leader attributed China's achievements to Mao Zedong Thought, but he added that the significance of Mao's works and quotations 'goes beyond China [and] will enable the whole world to be liberated' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966m). There is little discussion about foreign policy in reports, and the delegation leader seemed to always be praising Mao and Mao Zedong Thought, which he hoped would help his country.²³ And when he ventured to ask for financial assistance and sports equipment (TYWGWJGJ, 1966o), the report is unclear on whether or not the request could be fulfilled.

Reports also indicate a rapidly deteriorating situation on the ground. The announcement had noted that class struggle had become 'extremely intense and complicated', prompting the need to place great importance on security (ZRBTYW, 1966d). By the time of the visit a few weeks later, the situation was already worse. The Foreign Ministry was rapidly losing its battle to remain autonomous, and the leadership of the State Sports Commission was under attack (Lu, 2016, pp. 570–571). The magazine *New Sport*, already reduced in preceding months to Cultural Revolution rhetoric, ceased publication. On 5 November, 30,000 spectators packed into a Shanghai stadium decorated with large images and banners bearing Mao's quotations to watch the match between the Congolese football team and the Shanghai workers' team (STYW, 1966c; NCNA, 1966i). When the Congolese won, the Red Guards publicly criticised the Shanghai team for having not properly studied Mao's *Selected Works* all because the Shanghai team stated that they 'allowed the visitors to win 3 to 1' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966o). A more appropriate declaration, according to Red Guards, was that the Congolese had 'played well [and with] indomitable courage' (TYWGWJGJ, 1966o). The Congolese, the report noted, were just happy for their unexpected victory.

Top leaders and athletes in the State Sports Commission and Foreign Ministry were criticised or arrested in November and December (Griffin, 2014, p. 142; Lu, 2016, pp. 570–571). The Chinese sent a delegation to the Asian GANEFO held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in November 1966, but this became the last major participation in the world of elite sport before the three most radical years of the Cultural Revolution. The fact that the event took place at all was largely the result of Chinese support to continue the GANEFO and close relations between Cambodian and Chinese leaders at the time (Jeldres, 2012), although the Chinese delegation's leader, who was also vice-chair of the State Sports Commission, was banned from attending (Lu, 2016, p. 571). Chinese political interests and athletes dominated the event: the main theme was the struggle against US imperialism (RMRB, 1966b), and when Chinese athletes set world, national, and GANEFO records, the media attributed it to Mao Zedong Thought (RMRB, 1966c, 1966d). The domestic political situation had changed so dramatically in China that elite sports training soon came to a halt. Zhou Enlai continued to argue that foreign affairs work be kept

separate from domestic policy, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. By early 1967, He Long and Chen Yi were both under attack (Lu, 2016, p. 572; Ma, 2004, pp. 107–110). In the space of two months, sports delegation visits had become of no use to those still in power, and they soon ceased for the remainder of the decade.²⁴

Conclusion

Sports delegations visiting China from Tanzania, Mali, Egypt and Congo in 1966 shared many of the same goals and characteristics. As declassified reports demonstrate, visits were entirely political and rarely discussed actual sport. They tended to follow what was a common format already in existence, with a series of non-sports activities that aimed to cultivate relations, determine allegiances and build China's image in the minds of guests. The political content of these visits was highly charged and the relationships of individual countries with China meant that the leadership did not always evaluate guests equally. Comments purportedly made by foreign guests in these reports should not be taken at face value, but they were also not empty words. Visit activities aimed to foster a utopian socialist imaginary, based on the Chinese model, in the minds of African guests, and to convince the leadership that sports delegation work was successful – that Chinese socialism was making headway with Africans. Moreover, such comments aimed to prove to a domestic audience the righteousness of PRC policies. China, under the tutelage of Mao Zedong Thought, was the exclusive political model to follow.

Sports delegation visits had always promoted Chinese socialism as morally and politically superior, regardless of whether China actually possessed any specific athletic advantage. In hindsight, the visits in 1966 constituted just a tiny piece of a much larger official project to shape a new domestic worldview based on Mao's assertion that China was leading a world revolution. These efforts clearly met some success: over the next few years, Red Guard newspapers and groups developed a rhetoric using the same discursive language (Scarlett, 2013, pp. 39–40).

Lastly, these visits reflected the increasing difficulty of de-linking foreign affairs from domestic policy under the calls to put 'politics in command' and give 'prominence to politics'. The intensity of the Cultural Revolution was obvious in China by summer 1966, but it had not yet changed foreign affairs work. The Congolese visit in October, by contrast, showed how quickly the situation had changed. The battle between domestic policy and foreign affairs that had become a source of conflict between Chinese leaders at the highest levels eventually led to the demise of sports delegation work. The extreme radicalism that began in late 1966 soon isolated China in most of its foreign relationships and put a temporary halt to all elite sports activities for the remainder of the decade.

Notes

- 1 Posters initially criticised the leadership in schools and universities.
- 2 Melissen (2011) suggests that there is a separation between the two when he argues that propaganda is not open for dialogue while diplomacy is precisely about dialogue (p. 5). Chinese sports delegation visits in the early 1960s suggest, however, that public diplomacy with dialogue was possible alongside propaganda.

- 3 China had diplomatic relations with 50 countries at the time the Cultural Revolution was launched, but relations with the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union remained unfriendly following the earlier Sino-Soviet split, and relations with others had begun to deteriorate rapidly (such as those with Indonesia following the September 1965 coup, and Ghana following the February 1966 coup), and other nations had already suspended relations (such as Burundi in 1965 and the Central African Republic in 1966). See Ma (2004, p. 152) and Larkin (1971, pp. 66–67).
- 4 This was part of a language system to say ‘pleasing things’ in order to cultivate *gan-qing* (emotions, feelings or sentiment) with foreign guests.
- 5 My research on declassified official reports from 1950s Soviet and socialist bloc sports delegation visits to China, as well as the Japanese women’s volleyball team’s visit to China in late 1964, indicates that at least until early 1965 there was always a balance of sports exchange – in the form of exhibition matches, joint practice sessions and technical skills exchange, for example – with efforts to build common sentiment between hosts and guests over non-sports issues. During the Japanese team’s visit, for example, the coach Hirobumi Daimatsu was praised for his coaching style and admonished for his political stance, and yet he was treated respectfully in reports with few attempts to push a Chinese political agenda on him. See Shuman (2014, pp. 333–358).
- 6 The content found in these reports was related to larger Chinese Communist Party political narratives, which were often ‘exaggerated, manipulated, or even imagined’, and must therefore be understood in the context of official political discourse at the specific moment in time they were created (Scarlett, 2012, pp. 15–16).
- 7 Both Andrew Morris (2004) and Xu Guoqi (2008) have looked at how Chinese interest in international sport in the first decades of the 20th century stemmed from a wish to raise national image in the world.
- 8 This policy accepted the Soviet Union as the leader of the international socialist movement and provided for a Sino-Soviet alliance in foreign affairs, and it included Soviet assistance to numerous Chinese domestic policies related to the arts, culture, education and sciences (Bernstein and Li, 2011; Li and Shen, 2011, p. 118; Lüthi, 2008, pp. 31–33).
- 9 Relations with Burundi had already been suspended, however, by early 1965.
- 10 In April 1961, Mao admitted to a visiting delegation from Africa and Asia that China did not have a ‘clear understanding of African history, geography and the present situation’ in Africa. Quoted in Li, 2005, p. 62. The Institute of African-Asian Studies (under the Central Party External Ministry and Chinese Academy for Social Sciences) was only founded in July 1961 (Li, 2005, p. 63).
- 11 Üngör (2009) calls the period from the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution a ‘golden age’ for Chinese foreign propaganda, such as Radio Peking and the Foreign Languages Press (pp. 315–318).
- 12 These changes were reflected in, for example, the invitation and subsequent visit of the Japanese women’s volleyball team to China immediately following their gold medal win in Tokyo. Coach Daimatsu’s training methods, based on a militarised ‘spirit’, fell in line with Chinese sports policies in 1964 to follow the model of the People’s Liberation Army, by starting from politics and actual combat in order to improve overall (Shuman, 2014, p. 336).
- 13 Many former Chinese elite athletes from this period have fond memories of Zhou, who frequently met with them at events or upon their departure or arrival at the airport.
- 14 ‘People-to-people’ diplomacy has long been a common tactic of the PRC’s foreign affairs work, and Zhou Enlai in particular urged his staff to ‘Establish good will, understand the situation, propagandize, influence one’s opponent, win friends and win hearts’ (Brady, 2003, pp. 1, 98–99).
- 15 The phrase ‘to give prominence to politics’ (*tuchu zhengzhi*) appears three times in this document.
- 16 A preliminary survey had already been carried out in 1965. This was following the refusal of other donors – including the World Bank and United Nations – to provide support for the project (Monson, 2009, p. 6).

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- 17 The team captain further complained that Chinese cleats were 'weapons' because they easily hurt people when falling down.
- 18 Friedman notes that in order to keep foreign aid, President Nasser also often catered to both the US and the Soviet Union, which Chinese leaders found deplorable. Nevertheless, the Chinese had tried to keep things in balance by offering Egypt \$80 million in interest-free credit in December 1964 for industrial equipment and machinery (pp. 132–133). But Friedman concludes that Egypt 'never represented . . . a true political comrade-in-arms in the world revolution due to the perceived class nature of the regime and its neutralist stance going back to the late 1950s. Instead, the Chinese invoked [President] Nasser as a cautionary tale about dependence on foreign aid' (p. 134).
- 19 Beijing was chosen as a backup site.
- 20 Touny likely only wanted to know more about the Asian GANEFO in order to provide the IOC with an update on it.
- 21 The Chinese person accompanying Touny told him that there was no problem in 'carrying out the struggle' in the international federations, but reemphasised that the 'GANEFO must develop independently' (TYWGWJG7, 1966e).
- 22 The 'three big mountains' was a phrase occasionally used by Mao in the past. See Mao (1957).
- 23 It is impossible to reconstruct how individual athletes or the coach felt; however, the leader decided his athletes were to discuss only sports issues and not talk politics with the Chinese side (TYWGWJGJ, 1966n).
- 24 The lack of entries in the official sports yearbook's chronicle of events (which always includes delegation visits) makes this blatantly clear. See ZTNBW (1983, pp. 9–11).

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