

# Topdown: an Innovative Choice for the Reform and Development of Chinese Football

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**Abstract:** During the post-Olympic period, the reform of China's sports industry will be a strategic shift from the establishment of a major sports country to that of a world sports power. However, the dynamic and efficiency of the development of Chinese football industry have been reduced directly by difficulties encountered in the deepening reform of professionalization of football such as poor management system, unbalanced operation mode and inadequate training of reserves. Therefore, a future trend for the growth of Chinese football industry will be reflected by its striving for a breakthrough in terms of major fields and crucial links through strengthening the topdown in football reform.

**Key words:** Football; Reform and development; Topdown

## 1 Introduction

With China's comprehensive reform and opening-up, Chinese football industry has been witnessed enormous changes. Before 1994, the system in support of the growth of Chinese football was usually called "specialized system". And the tone of "achievement-in-one-go" set at the "Hongshankou Conference" in Beijing in 1992 marked the beginning of the exploration of professionalized path by Chinese football industry. The tremendous achievements and much experience from the seventeen-year reform aimed at professional football have provided experience for the professionalized reform of other sporting events and contributed favorably to the overall promotion and deepening of sports reform in China. However, at the same time, since Chinese football reform has been limited to the superficial change of "taking stopgap measures (as the doctor who only gives medical or surgical care to the head when it aches and the foot when it hurts)" over recent years, it has hit a development bottleneck, in addition, the original way and path of reform have been widely questioned and criticized. The complexity and difficulty of Chinese football reform call for fresh ideas and approaches. With the application of the philosophy of "topdown" of engineering as well as the scientific planning from the perspective of scientific development, it will be a constructive attempt to follow the path of reform in a systematic manner, from the highest end to the lowest end, and from the general to the specific.

## 2 Problems and Bottlenecks in Chinese Football Reform

During the seventeen-year professionalization of Chinese football, there was still anomie despite the highly impressive achievements, such as the market decline of football games, declining in social credibility, damage to the public image of football games and personnel, serious shrinkage in the training of young reserves, football fraud, corrupt refereeing and violence on the football field, which produced a negative effect on football games typically in the following three regards:

### 2.1 Poor management system

During the early period of Chinese football league, the traditional management system of football league served exactly as an escort for the development of Chinese football league. However, with the continuous improvement of market economy system, the development of professional football system began to display its hysteresis effects, and there was increasing conflict between them. Due to the "governmental and non-governmental nature" of Chinese football administration, the governmental bodies had to pay for such similar negative issues. Chinese Football Association is regarded as a "quasi-official" administrative agency, and its personnel are exactly the government employees affiliated with the Football Administration Center, that is the so-called "two signs, same staff". When the reason was identified for the negative effect produced on the society by the problems of professionalized reform of Chinese football, governments had to take the political risks which tended to appear at the forefront, the responsibility for problems of the society was shifted onto the administrative agencies of governments, and Chinese Football Association failed to carry out its duties and responsibilities imposed by law and thus the chaotic management, which all caused the credibility of governmental agencies of China to be severely questioned; on the other hand, the inadequacy in management system for the professionalized reform of football frustrated the personnel of professional

football, which not only brought the professionalized reform to a standstill but also caused corruption to spread; with the gradual exposure and rapid spreading of scandals such as "football fraud", "corrupt refereeing" and "football corruption", both sportsmanship and the development of football games met the unprecedented challenges. They not only caused damage to the public image of Chinese football, but also exerted an adverse effect on the improvement of football players. Currently, Chinese football has suffered a sharp decline in world rankings, and even in Asia, it has dropped from the "first-rate" to "second-rate or third-rate".

### **2.2 Unbalanced operation mode**

The professionalization of competitive sports needs to be managed in accordance with the laws of both market economy and the development of sports itself so as to establish the operational mechanism of self-adjustment, self-creation and self-development, and thus a virtuous circle for the development of competitive sports. However, the practice of the professionalized reform of Chinese football over ten-old years proves that there has been no development mode following the virtuous circle yet, and that there has been non-professionalized operation in terms of the operation mode as well as a serious imbalance between the inputs and the outputs. There has been no real market operation for the professionalization of Chinese football, the current system has failed to establish a smooth platform for football's capital; it is difficult for the real professionalized capital operation to steer clear of the policy obstacles which restrict to a certain extent the development of capital, and the game played between the rights and the capital is still in progress, which are the very plight of the development of Chinese professional football. In particular, after the entry into the era of "Chinese Super League", many clubs had to invest more in software and hardware in order to meet the standards set by Chinese Football Association for the admission to "Chinese Super League"; in addition, the occurrence of "fraud, gambling and corruption" in the league and the uncontrollable salary of players threw club management into disorder and increased the operational cost, thus resulting in the capital withdrawals of many sponsors and clubs from the football industry and even the severe crisis of "streaking" and "crash" in the league. Compared with the present situation in which even small clubs overseas can earn a good income, in the overall context of the existing "professionalization" of Chinese football industry, since a majority of clubs are supported by large state-owned enterprises, not only the uncontrollable operational cost of some clubs deprives such clubs themselves of their abilities to make a fortune, but the enterprises of state-owned nature which support such clubs have to input more capital to recover the loss of clubs, thus incurring heavy losses of money and the phenomenon of inadequate "professionalization" for professional football operation.

### **2.3 Inadequate training of reserves**

China suffers a poor training of young football players, with a temporary shortage of reserves. In China, the number of young football participants was dropping year by year, the number from 1990 to 1995 was 650,000, the number from 1996 to 2000 was 610,000, it dropped drastically to 180,000 from 2000 to 2005, and it indicated a trend towards severe shrinkage from 2006 to 2008. The occurrence of this phenomenon not only rests with the sports industry itself but involves multiple fields such as the educational system, the families, the society and culture. The problems above are essentially attributed to the problems of political system in which the development of productive forces is severely constrained by the superstructure. According to a recent questionnaire survey conducted by China (Hainan) Reform and Development Institute on hundreds of domestic experts and scholars, 81.36% of experts regard that the emphasis of reform shall be laid on administrative systems during "The 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015)". The football issue not only involves its own system but also shows the overall feature of system reform of the whole nation. For such crucial and thorny issues at "a deep end", there will surely be no appreciable effect if the reform is limited to the superficial change of "taking stopgap measures (as the doctor who only gives medical or surgical care to the head when it aches and the foot when it hurts)". WANG Tongshan, director of Institute of Quantitative & Technical Economics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has analyzed to conclude that the specific reform in China has produced a positive effect through commencing by each particular project, since deepening reform is required to be continued, consideration shall be given in an overall manner in order that the integrated effect of specific reforms is better than that of two reforms. It indicates that the deepening reform of Chinese football will surely be extraordinarily complicated and difficult, and the harsh reality requires the reform and development of football to be planned scientifically from the very perspective of scientific development concept. Confronted with the reality of a backward football industry in China, it is urgently expected that the backwardness of football industry should be changed by deepening reform as soon as possible. China's leaders were also much concerned with the development of the football

games, for example, President Hu Jintao and Vice President Xi Jinping delivered significant speeches on different occasions to show their concern for the development of football games; State Councilor Liu Yandong instructed that "football activities on campus should be well organized from childhood for the youth"; in April 2010, General Administration of Sport of China and Ministry of Education jointly issued the *Circular on the Organization of Campus Football Activities for the Youth Nationwide* which was a notice issued specifically for a sporting event by two government departments at ministry level in the history of the PRC.

### **3 Exploration and Research into the Professionalized Reform of Chinese Football**

In terms of the various problems in professionalization, the exploration and research related to the deepening reform of professionalization of football has never been stopped. One agreement is that each point of view holds that the professionalized path chosen for Chinese football is correct and the opportunity for implementation is timely, that is, "we have seized the opportunity to integrate Chinese football system with world football system" <sup>[1]</sup>. And the focus of disagreement is mainly reflected by the differing orientation towards the path chosen for the reform in terms of the various problems in the professionalization of football

#### **3.1 Orientation towards "Full Marketization"**

This kind of orientation holds that the path to full marketization shall be followed for the professionalized reform of football. This view holds that "since the football administration has the double organizational features of sports administration and non-governmental organization, this contradiction makes it difficult to predict the orientation of the development of football management system, therefore the management process itself represents obvious short-term planning and lacks long-term planning and orientation of strategic operations" <sup>[2]</sup>. Therefore, "the function of public services of sports administration of governments shall be marketized for socialization by transferring power to the society in an orderly manner, and the previous direct, administrative and participatory management system on the part of the government shall be removed gradually" <sup>[3]</sup>, and "it shall be shifted timely to the indirect and legal management which relies largely upon economic approaches" <sup>[3]</sup>. In terms of the project management of football games, the role of the government "shall be coordination rather than control, be strengthened policy guidance and macro-control rather than direct intervention in specific matters, and be shifted from a 'paddling-style' government to a 'steering-style' government" <sup>[4]</sup>. Though taking account of the structural defects of the existing sports system, such orientation remains unable to get rid of shortsighted behaviors in the process of reform. Under the general principle of protecting one's own interests, it tries to implement natural deployment and selection by means of the market because it fails to "harm oneself through self-revolution" and "share profit with others". Though respecting the laws of market, this orientation of reform ignores the mercenary nature of market. Furthermore, full marketization needs to be ensured by established systems and laws, and considerable regulatory vacuum will be left in case of the implementation of full marketization in the current circumstances. And it will be difficult to rely solely upon Chinese Football Association or General Administration of Sport as the facilitator of "fully marketized reform"

#### **3.2 Orientation towards "Conditional Marketization"**

Based on the nationwide system, this orientation carries out the marketization of football conditionally. This view holds that the great success achieved by China at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games fully shows that nationwide system has the incomparable advantage in developing the sports of China, as one of the multiple sporting events, football can not dispense with nationwide system normally. Taking the football games for the youth as example, "during the early period of professionalized reform of football, the inheritance of the reserve-training system of the original nationwide system was ignored, and the task of training young reserves was shifted simply to the market and the society, which resulted in the rapid shrinkage of the original training system and the loss of the most important channel through which young reserves were normally trained for Chinese football industry" <sup>[5]</sup>. In view of this, this orientation holds that "the football games for the youth which serve as public benefit activity shall be dominated by the government and managed by the supervisory authorities, and policy support, operational guidance and financial input shall be provided" <sup>[6]</sup>. This orientation puts great emphasis on the dominant and guiding role of government agencies in important matters, and thus it complies with the actual conditions of China. And the role of government in market has been increasingly emphasized even in countries and regions with an established marketization. However, blind spots tend to appear due to the overlap and absence of government agencies in terms of managerial competence. For example,

in terms of the "campus football promotion scheme" proposed for the training of young football reserves, though the orientation was rather precise, due to the overlap and differing orientations between Chinese Football Association and the educational system in terms of managerial competence and this scheme (for the educational system, campus football was a point while for Chinese Football Association it was a crucial surface), the implementation was not so smooth and the environment for implementation was rather awkward. Such reality that approaches are determined by duties makes it difficult for Chinese Football Association to give full play within schools. In addition, Chinese Football Association has to understand and respect the decisions made by educational authorities on balancing the relationship between sporting events and other aspects such as moral, intellectual, aesthetics and labor education, and even has to turn to "nonfeasance". The analysis indicates that a further observation is required indeed for whether the second orientation can play the basic role of building a "pyramid".

The special phenomenon of football is taken account of from the perspective of a smaller system by the two orientations above, in spite of the highly positive motivation, the system-related structural conflict can not be get rid of during the implementation. On the one hand, it reflects the complexity and difficulty of various issues at the critical stage of reform; on the other hand, it makes us examine the issue of Chinese football from various perspectives. The research into the two types of orientations of football development and reform indicates that professional football is the "baby" to whom the nationwide system gives birth, and a life-supporting system (the new institutional system) orientated towards the market rather than the gold medals shall be immediately established for this baby. The reform shall be a "topdown" process of a system, however, if the system design at macro- and mid-levels is missing, Chinese football reform will end in nothing but be broken into pieces, anomie and disorder.

#### **4 Concept and connotation of "Topdown"**

The successful hosting of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games marks that Chinese sports industry has been forging ahead from a major sports country "aiming to improve competitive sports and scores with nationwide resources" to the objective of a world sports power "aiming to develop competitive sports and mass sports equally". As the most influential sporting event in the world, football was an important symbol of a major sports country, and it will play a vital role in the building of "a world sports power". As a breakthrough of Chinese sports reform, the earliest integration of football with market economy not only enabled football industry to experience the efficiency and cruelty of market economy but also strengthened the decision and motivation for deepening reform of football. At the Central Economic Work Conference 2011, the CPC Central Committee proposed a strengthened topdown for the reform, aiming to make a breakthrough in terms of major fields and crucial links. The conceptualization of topdown by the CPC Central Committee has provided a path for the football reform at a crucial stage, which is of great practical significance and far-reaching historical significance for the promotion of the reform and development of the sports industry as a whole.

Topdown is a design philosophy derived from the fields of natural sciences or large-scale engineering technology. Using the system theory, it aims at a specific design object from the overall conception and strategic design at the high-end, emphasizes the close combination of planning design and real requirements, the precise orientation of the design object, structural optimization, functional coordination, and resource integration, and serves as a design method which simplifies, concretizes and stylizes the complicated objects. And its path to implementation is from the global to the local, from the upper to the lower, and from the root to the branches. Topdown requires the structure, functions, hierarchy and standards of the design object to be taken account of in an overall manner and defined precisely from the systematic and overall points of view, and it emphasizes the technical and precise architecture from vision to reality, therefore, it is the "blueprint" unfolded between intentions and practice.

The connotations of topdown are reflected in the following aspects: the first is the holistic strategy. After the determination of the core or ultimate objective according to the task requirements, all the sub-systems and sub-task units of "topdown" will target purely and simply at the core objective, and the overall effect expected of topdown will be produced when the technical criteria and tasks of each link are properly completed; the second is meticulous rational thinking. "Topdown" is the design conducted "from top to bottom" and from the high-end, however, this kind of "top" is not a groundless architecture, it originates and abstracts from practice, and the key to its success is to draw up the precise and controllable "blueprint" between vision and reality and between possibility and feasibility, thus

controlling the achievement of objectives; and the third is its emphasis on execution. The execution process of "topdown" reflects the strategies of refined management and overall quality management, in which process the execution, details and the interaction and connection between links are emphasized.

After the philosophy of "topdown" was proposed, its application went beyond the field of engineering design soon. It was widely used in the fields such as information science, military science, sociology and pedagogy and became an important mode of thinking for the formulation of development strategies in multiple fields. Throughout the international community, "topdown" has been emphasized for long, because the status of topdown has a direct effect on whether the "commanding heights" can be seized or maintained in terms of each sector. The reason why the U.S. troops can keep their leading role in the military field for long is closely related to their emphasis on "topdown". The characteristics such as the "atmosphere of exploratory, innovative, pluralistic, scrollable and creative culture" displayed in the process of topdown implementation enables the U.S. troops to be the world-class military superpower. In China, similar research achievements have been applied to fields such as e-government and tertiary education management. However, its application to sports fields, in particular, to the management of a certain sporting event (for example, football) has still been some pioneering work.

## 5 Conclusions

There are two types of logic for reform: one starts from the superficial of an issue and deepens gradually; the other starts from the top and aims to solve basic problems. During the thirty-old years of reform and opening-up in China, remarkable achievements have been made by using the first logic of reform. However, there have also been deep-seated structural issues which must be faced and solved at this stage of reform. At the Central Economic Work Conference 2011, the CPC Central Committee proposed a strengthened topdown for the reform, aiming to make a breakthrough in terms of major fields and crucial links. It indicated that the second logic of reform, namely, the "topdown", would dominate the future basic modes of Chinese reform at a crucial stage. The issues encountered in Chinese football reform display global characteristics of system reform of the whole country. For such crucial and thorny issues at "a deep end", there is no precedent to follow for how to perform deepening reform from the perspective of "topdown", rather than through "exploring the way carefully", but the pre-conditions require the following factors to be specified: (1) The main body of "topdown" for Chinese football will go beyond the scope of sports

The topdown of reform refers essentially to the overall coordination of reform. A review of China's reform indicates that the emphasis consists in giving the grass-roots unit their full play to creativity, which is characterized largely by bottom-up. With the deepening reform, at the crucial stage, when all issues are increasingly referred to the upper management and reliant upon the overall coordination of the upper management, the "topdown" will surely come naturally. And it seems rather significant to specify the main body of the top. In terms of an analysis of hierarchical relationship, football is a point of Chinese sports industry while Chinese sports is only a local part of the multiple sectors of China, however, the uniqueness of football determines that its top has gone beyond the scope of sports, namely, the topdown of football reform needs a higher main framework for universal guidance and coordination so that the effect can be maximized. The main body of the top shall obviously be neither the Chinese Football Association nor the General Administration of Sport, and it shall be affiliated with the administrative department, namely at the State Council level. (2) The objective of "topdown" for Chinese football shall be subject to the strategy of a world sports power, and the "shortsighted" behaviors shall be avoided by all means

With the enormous contribution made by the previous nationwide system to the strategy of a major sports country, the successful hosting of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games marks that the strategy of Chinese sports industry has been transferring from a major sports country to a world sports power. The idea for the past development of Chinese football was based on the strategies above, and great efforts were made to develop the national team of which the improvement of performance within a short period of time was expected to encourage the Chinese people who would be commonly motivated to participate in sports to provide constant reserves for the national team. But the uniqueness of football games determined that the improvement of performance must rely upon the support of a solid mass foundation, for this reason, the shortsighted behavior not only resulted in the failure to improve the performance of competitive football games but also put mass football games, especially football games for the youth in a vicious circle of severe shrinkage. Past lessons must be absorbed for the "topdown" of future football reform, and the objectives of football reform and development must act closely in concert with the overall arrangement of building a world sports power. The reform shall be future-oriented at the same

time of improvement and popularization, the organization of mass football activities, especially those for the youth shall have priority, and positive football culture and social climate shall be developed, so that Chinese football industry could be well-grounded in a natural manner.

(3)The path to the "topdown" for Chinese football will aim at the global and the breakthrough in key areas

Football is not only a simple sporting event, it becomes the world's No. 1 sporting event because it integrates several factors such as politics, economy, culture, education and society and it involves and influences multiple aspects, therefore the factors above shall be connected and taken into account in an overall manner and carefully designed from the perspective of the interests of the nation and the majority of people. With continuous concern for the politics, new concepts and breakthrough in terms of management system reform are mainly expected to provide an escort for the development of professional football; the *Guidance on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry* issued by the State Council shall be implemented actively to promote the integration of the professional football market and the real market economy and thus its establishment; and the educational unit shall raise awareness and expand channels for clearing the "bottleneck" of training professional football reserves when training decent citizens. Just as the other fields, it is rather complicated and difficult for the deepening reform of Chinese football. However, it is an inevitable choice for the reform at the crucial stage, and we enjoy full confidence in spite of the difficulties. The unique political system can provide the "topdown" implementation of football with a strong political guarantee, the tremendous economic achievements from the thirty-odd years of reform and opening-up can provide it with much experience, and the preliminary results of the current cultural system reform can also provide it with reference. And a successful "topdown" implementation can contribute uniquely to the reform and development of Chinese football as well as the building of a harmonious society.

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