

## **Sport and Conflicts of Politics: Case Study of 'Hu Na Incident'**

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### **Abstract**

Sport, as a form of state soft power, was deliberately employed by political leaders to fulfill subtle and seemingly impossible diplomatic tasks at a certain critical moment. Nowadays sport still has an indissoluble bond with politics. On the one hand, sport is expected to be a means of developing foreign relations or carrying out political struggle; on the other hand, sport cannot get rid of the influence of states, blocs and various political forces. Taking 'Hu Na Incident' as a case study, this paper describes the incident occurred in 1982-1983 from the perspective of history; analyzes how this sport event became a diplomatic dispute between China and U.S.; reveals the complex link between 'Hu Na Incident' and Sino-U.S. relations; tries to provide a reference to today's sports diplomacy strategy.

**Keywords:** Sport, Politics, 'Hu Na Incident', Sino-U.S. relations

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กีฬาและความขัดแย้งทางการเมือง:  
กรณีศึกษา "เหตุการณ์หนุ่"

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บทคัดย่อ

กีฬาในฐานะรูปแบบหนึ่งของอำนาจอ่อนของรัฐได้เคยถูกใช้โดยไตร่ตรองไว้ก่อนโดยผู้นำทางการเมืองเพื่อให้บรรลุภารกิจทางการเมืองที่ต้องอาศัยชั้นเชิงและดูเหมือนจะเป็นไปไม่ได้ในนาที่วิกฤตครั้งหนึ่งในอดีต ปัจจุบันนี้ กีฬาก็ยังคงมีพันนาการที่แนบแน่นกับการเมืองอยู่ในด้านหนึ่ง กีฬาถูกคาดหวังให้เป็นวิธีการหนึ่งในการพัฒนาความสัมพันธ์ต่างประเทศ หรือการเอาชนะในการต่อสู้ทางการเมือง แต่ในอีกด้านหนึ่ง กีฬาก็ไม่สามารถรอดพ้นจากอิทธิพลของรัฐ กลุ่มสมาชิกพรรคการเมือง และพลังทางการเมืองทั้งหลายได้ โดยใช้ "เหตุการณ์หนุ่" เป็นกรณีศึกษา บทความนี้บรรยายเหตุการณ์ที่เกิดขึ้นในระหว่างปี ค.ศ. 1982-1983 จากมุมมองของประวัติศาสตร์ วิเคราะห์ว่าการแข่งขันกีฬาค้างนี้กลายเป็นข้อพิพาททางการเมืองระหว่างประเทศจีนและสหรัฐอเมริกาได้อย่างไร แสดงให้เห็นความเชื่อมโยงอันซับซ้อนระหว่าง "เหตุการณ์หนุ่" และความสัมพันธ์จีน-สหรัฐอเมริกา และพยายามให้การอ้างอิงถึงกลยุทธ์การทูตกีฬาในปัจจุบันนี้

คำสำคัญ: กีฬา การเมือง “เหตุการณ์หนุ่” ความสัมพันธ์จีน-สหรัฐอเมริกา

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## Introduction

Sport is a global popular culture which can transcend national borders. It is almost a truism that contemporary sport has been embedded in the global political economy, as well as in the development of the modern international state system. Perhaps one remarkable manifestation of sport's 'politicizing tendency' (as cited in Qiao & Xu, 2009) is the XXIX Olympiad at Beijing in 2008. The People's Republic of China (PRC) turned this sporting mega-event into the celebration of a Chinese renaissance and the harmonization of world civilizations under the theme slogan 'One World, One Dream'. Though the significance of sport for nation-states has been increasingly acknowledged, its specific socio-political meanings for countries at different stages of socioeconomic development and with different political and strategic objectives remain understudied in the social sciences (Roche, 2000).

Sport, as a form of state soft power, was deliberately employed by political leaders to fulfill subtle and seemingly impossible diplomatic tasks at a certain critical moment. Thus it is no accident that the famous 'ping pong diplomacy' that helped break the ice in Sino-U.S. relations took place in 1971, with the PRC's entry into the United Nations (Xin, 2006). When U.S. President Nixon at last came to Beijing to hold a summit meeting with Chairman Mao in 1972, the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai commented that 'the small ball' (ping pong) eventually moved the 'big ball' (the globe).

However, 'Hu Na Incident' was occurred in 1982, happened against a totally different historical background from that of 'Ping Pong diplomacy'. Although it is still in the Cold War Era, the normalization of Sino-U.S. diplomatic relations had been fulfilled in 1979. PRC's developmental course had also been shifted from Maoist 'continuous revolutions' to Deng Xiaoping's 'four modernizations' through reform and opening-up since 1978. Since the 1970s, Chinese athletes had been getting actively involved in the state-sanctioned 'cultural diplomacy', serving as China's cultural envoys to visit many foreign countries. Under these circumstances, Hu Na, a teenage female Chinese tennis athlete, suddenly left the Chinese national team and disappeared when she participated in the Fed Cup at Santa Clara, California, U.S. in 1982. Furthermore, Hu Na applied for 'political asylum' to the U.S. authorities afterwards and her application was approved in 1983, causing a diplomatic crisis between PRC and U.S.

Taking 'Hu Na Incident' as a case study, this paper describes the incident in detail; analyzes how this sport event became a diplomatic dispute between PRC and US; reveals the complex link between 'Hu Na Incident' and Sino-U.S. relations; tries to provide a reference to today's public diplomacy strategy.

## **'Hu Na Incident'**

July, 1982, as one of the Chinese tennis team, 18-years old Hu Na participated in the Twentieth Fed Cup at Santa Clara, California, U.S.

July 20<sup>th</sup>, Hu Na suddenly left her team away and disappeared afterwards.

July 21<sup>st</sup>, officials of Chinese Embassy in U.S. and the leader of Chinese tennis team negotiated with U.S. government and related organizations respectively.

July 24<sup>th</sup>, Chinese tennis team issued a written statement to ITF (International Tennis Federation) and USPTA (United States Professional Tennis Association). The statement expressed deeply regret on Hu Na's missing and asked USPTA to ensure Chinese athletes' safety and find Hu Na as soon as possible.

July 26<sup>th</sup>, Hu Na's requirement for 'political asylum' in U.S. was announced. It is said that the reason for asylum is "some parties concerned always forced Hu Na to join the Communist Party of China."

August 2<sup>nd</sup>, Chinese Foreign Ministry warned U.S. that the Sino-U.S. relations would be adversely affected if U.S. refused to return Hu Na.

August 3<sup>rd</sup>, U.S. State Council claimed that U.S. would deal with this incident in accordance with the laws of U.S.

August 14<sup>th</sup>, 15 members of U.S. House of Representatives jointly submitted a motion to grant asylum to Hu Na.

August 20<sup>th</sup>, the motion passed in the House and Senate.

October 13<sup>th</sup>, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agreed to give Hu Na a work permit.

December 7<sup>th</sup>, U.S. State Council approved Hu Na's requirement for 'political asylum'.

January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1983, the U.S. President Ronald Wilson Reagan expressed no objection to granting asylum to Hu Na except for waiting for the approval of the U.S. Department of Justice.

April 4<sup>th</sup>, the U.S. Department of Justice announced that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services had agreed to grant asylum to Hu Na. The legal basis for this decision is the Federal Refugee Act of 1980. On the same day, the spokesman for Chinese Embassy in U.S. published a statement to express vehement protest and indicated that 'Hu Na incident' had seriously damaged the bilateral relation and U.S. should take full responsibility for that.

April 5<sup>th</sup>, Qi Huaiyuan, head of the Information Department of Chinese Foreign Ministry, made serious representations to U.S. on 'Hu Na Incident' during a press conference.

At the same day, Hughes, the spokesman for U.S. State Council, denied that Hu Na had been coerced into requiring 'political asylum'. Hughes also hoped this incident would not cause any damage to Sino-U.S. relations.

April 6<sup>th</sup>, Han Xu, China's deputy foreign minister, summoned the U.S. ambassador Arthur William Hummel and delivered a note to the ambassador to protest against U.S. government for deliberately creating 'Hu Na Incident'.

April 7<sup>th</sup>, Ding Gu, director of foreign liaison bureau of ministry of culture of PRC met Chas Freeman, deputy chief of mission at U.S. embassy in Beijing. On behalf of the Chinese ministry of culture, Ding Gu Solemnly declared that PRC had stopped to execute all the Sino-U.S. cultural exchange items made according to the Sino-US cultural agreement (for Year 1982-1983) from then on. Meanwhile All-China Sports Federation decided to stop Sino-U.S. bilateral sports exchanges in 1983, and boycott the 10 sporting events held in U.S. during the same year. At this point, 'Hu Na Incident' came to an end.

## **Political factors of 'Hu Na Incident'**

Politics refers to activities and policies (both national and international) made by certain social classes or strata, political parties, social groups or social forces. The cause of 'Hu Na Incident' is a Chinese athlete missing in U.S., how come it evolved into a diplomatic crisis at last? This author believes that 'Hu Na Incident' contains profound political factors which are mainly reflected in the following two aspects.

### **1. 'Political Asylum'**

According to Wikipedia (the free encyclopedia), asylum is an ancient juridical notion, under which a person persecuted for political opinions or religious beliefs in his or her own country may be protected by another sovereign authority, a foreign country. So if a country's citizens flee to other countries for political reasons and ask for granted residence, it could be looked as the request for 'political asylum'. We can say a country's exercising the right of asylum also means a confrontation with another country's jurisdiction.

Whether to grant foreigners to 'political asylum' is based primarily on domestic legislation. For 'Hu Na Incident', U.S. cited the Refugee Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-212). The Act defined a refugee as any person who is outside their country of residence or nationality, or without nationality, and is unable or unwilling to return to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. (Deborah, 1981). In accordance with the provisions of the act, applicants for

'Political Asylum' can not only obtain permanent residency in the U.S., but also U.S. citizenship. Despite its outstanding humanitarian concept, the Refugee Act of 1980 did not make accurate and authoritative definition of the word 'persecution'.

As Hu Na (2009) herself said when interviewed by a journalist of Cankaoxiaoxi (a Chinese newspaper sponsored by Xinhua News Agency), "the incident occurred in 1983 was all about the willing to be professional. I was too young, too naive and immature at that time..." (p.116). Before the incident Hu Na had won the National champion, Asian champion and the world youth championship, but at that time Chinese athletes still rarely had the opportunity to participate in international competitions, not to mention participating in qualifying and professional game. Besides, Hu Na was born in a sports family; she had been training and highly valued by the Chinese sports authorities, had never been persecuted. Because of her outstanding achievement in tennis, the state gave her such honors as pace-setter in the new Long March of Sichuan province, the labor model of Sichuan province etc (Tao, 1999).

In summary, persecution is not the real reason for Hu Na's application for 'Political asylum'. 'Political asylum' was Hu Na's best means to achieve her purpose of going abroad. It is the broad definition of the word 'persecution', the preferential treatment of refugee made Hu Na take this risk to achieve her dream of being a professional tennis player.

## **2. Reactions of Both Sides**

'Hu Na Incident' was highly concerned about by leaders of PRC and U.S. from the very beginning.

Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping mentioned 'Hu Na Incident' several times on major diplomatic occasions.

August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1982, when the August 17 communiqué (the third Joint Communiqué of the People's Republic of China and the United States of America) was issued, Deng Xiaoping mentioned 'Hu Na Incident' to U.S. Ambassador Arthur Hummel. Deng urged U.S. government to deal with this incident from the overall interest of bilateral relations and to "plug the loopholes of Sino-U.S. relations."

September 8<sup>th</sup>, as Gong (1996) states, Deng mentioned 'Hu Na Incident' again when meeting with former U.S. President Richard Nixon. Deng said, "Recently, we have a tennis player who stays in U.S. Some U.S. newspapers also say she was lured away by American. If this matter cannot be resolved, how dare we send people to U.S. for communication in the future..." (p116).

February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1983, Deng mentioned 'Hu Na Incident' once again when Shultz, the U.S. Secretary of State visited China. Deng said that 'Hu Na Incident' was a dangerous

precedent and there would be a chain reaction which could ultimately lead to major issues affecting bilateral relations (Chinese Communist Party Literature Research Center, 1998). After announcing granting 'political asylum' to Hu Na, some senior politicians in U.S. also expressed their views on the incident.

April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1983, Henry Alfred Kissinger, the former U.S. Secretary of State said that the Reagan administration's decision was consistent with U.S. law and its traditional spirit. He believed that event could temporarily have an adverse impact, but would not make people forget the common interests of China and U.S. (Tao, 1999).

April 9<sup>th</sup>, as Liu (1995) states, Vice-President George H.W. Bush also declared that "U.S. will not yield because it is opposed by others. It is inappropriate to challenge U.S. on this incident..." (p117). But he also believed that the Sino-U.S. relations were of fundamental importance and should be able to weather the crisis caused by 'Hu Na Incident'.

Of course, there were different views of the incident in the United States. On April 12<sup>th</sup>, House Speaker O'Neill told reporters that he didn't agree with the Reagan administration to grant political asylum to Hu Na (Liu, 1995).

Thus, the emergence and development of 'Hu Na Incident' couldn't avoid political impact and reflected the political conflict between China and U.S. In a sense, this is a political contest between China and U.S., its political significance is far greater than the incident itself.

## **'Hu Na Incident' and Sino-U.S. relations**

August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1983, in his meeting with U.S. visitors, Deng Xiaoping pointed out that 'Hu Na Incident' could be used to observe Sino-U.S. relations although it was an isolated problem (Tao, 1999). In this part, this author will reveal the complex link between 'Hu Na Incident' and Sino-U.S. relations.

### **1. Sino-U.S. relations in the early 1980s**

In the 1970s, the Soviet Union sought global expansion, so the normalization of Sino-U.S. relations was fulfilled because of common strategic interests of both countries. Differences between the two countries in terms of ideology, social system and cultural values were tolerated or diluted temporarily with rapid development of bilateral exchanges in terms of economy, culture, science and technology. During the 1980s, the international situation underwent some changes. Firstly, President Reagan succeeded Jimmy Carter, who was seen as having led the country into the double miasma of a major economic crisis and a global crisis of confidence in the United States. Reagan implemented a tough policy

toward the Soviet Union under the banner of 'Revive American power abroad' (as cited in George Friedman, 2009). Secondly, the Soviet Union's policy towards China began to change. Because of losing its strategic initiative gradually, the Soviet Union also sought to improve the Sino-Soviet relations. Subtle changes of the strategic triangle of China, America and Soviet made it possible for Chinese government to adjust its foreign policy. With more emphasis on the principle of independence, China changed its pro-American tilt in foreign policy. At the same time, U.S. no longer considered the Sino-U.S. strategic relation as the overriding important relation due to the weakening of the Soviet threat. Year 1982 and 1983 can be described as 'troubled times' of Sino-U.S. relations. With China's opening up and deepening of Sino-US relations, differences between the two countries were also becoming evident increasingly. In addition to 'Hu Na Incident', there are such Sino-U.S. conflicts as Sino-U.S. textile trade negotiations, the Huguang Railway bonds case (In September 1982, the federal district court in Alabama, U.S. claimed that the Chinese government should compensate \$ 43 million for "the Huguang railway bonds", saying that if the Chinese government ignored the decision, U.S. courts will seizure of property in the United States to enforce the judgment.), 'Pan American World Airways' restarting the route to Taiwan, etc(Tao, 1999). Actually, the Sino-U.S. relations were in a tense stalemate at that time.

## **2. Significance of the incident in the history of Sino-U.S. relations**

### **2.1 Raising 'Human Rights' issues for the first time**

'Hu Na Incident' is the first event involving 'political asylum' after the two countries established diplomatic relations. The right of asylum was first announced by the French bourgeoisie in the French Revolution of 1789 as one of the principles of democracy and was later formalized in the 1793 French Constitution. After being confirmed by Universal Declaration of Human Rights approved by the UN General Assembly in 1948, the right of asylum became a common universal rule. Thus 'Hu Na Incident' put forward the 'Human Rights' issue for the first time in the history of Sino-U.S. relations.

'Human Rights' issues, with 'what is a basic human right' at the core, have been a disputed issue of Sino-US relations because of the differences in social systems, ideologies and cultural values(Tao, 1999). This author believes that 'Hu Na Incident' marks the Sino-U.S. relations entered a new stage of development. With the incident, 'Human Rights' issues emerged and have been gradually evolving into an important factor in Sino-U.S. relations. After that incident, U.S. accused China of human rights violations in the 'family planning system', the issue of Tibet etc (Liu, 1995). But these issues were far less important than common interests of China and U. S. at that time, and China's economic and political



reforms in the 1980s found more common interests for both sides. So 'Human Rights' issues' hazards of damaging Sino-U.S. relations were temporarily under control.

## 2.2 Reflecting sports' political functions

Sports activities can serve the diplomatic as a means to improve relations or carry out political struggles between states. This author believes that 'Hu Na Incident' just reflects the emergence of crisis in Sino-U.S. relations and political wrangling between the two sides.

Because of its hidden political overtones, sport has become a particular means to solve some difficult and sensitive political issues. The famous 'ping pong diplomacy' were chosen to break the ice in Sino-U.S. relations in 1970s for the flexibility of sports diplomacy. 'Hu Na Incident', which originated in the sports community and later evolved into a diplomatic crisis between China and the U.S., can be seen as a political struggle in form of sports. As sport is popular and can arouse general concern, U.S. firstly selected 'Hu Na incident' to create international public opinion against China. As Xin<sup>2006</sup> states, "In many ways, Chinese athletes are expected to be agents of representing China's reformed national identity on the world stage, both symbolically and physically..." (p93). So China hit back, but handled the incident with an emphasis on an integration of principle and flexibility.

'Hu Na Incident', after all, is only a means of political contest between the two countries. It should serve the political interests of the countries. The final outcome of the incident is just the Chinese government announced the cessation of a period of Sino-U.S. sports, cultural bilateral exchanges. The exchanges and cooperation in economy, trade, military, science and technology and technology transfer were almost not affected. Besides, just ten days after U.S. announced the agreement to Hu Na's asylum request, Hu Dingyi, the Chinese Consul General in San Francisco, said at a press conference that the cultural exchange program could be restored if both sides acted carefully and honestly (Tao, 1999). The incident subsided at last and indicated that Sino-U.S. relations were about to enter a relatively stable period of development. It is also obvious that the political leaders of both countries still attached importance to Sino-U.S. relations and looked at it with long-term strategic perspective.

## Conclusion

Sports activities started in the ideal and practice of calling for peace, enhancing exchanges, deepening trust and understanding in the process of development of human civilization. This is also the root of synergy between sports and politics. It has become a

feature of modern sports activities that nation-states and various political forces involve in sports activities with different motives and take sports as a means of developing international relations. 'Hu Na Incident', an important diplomatic crisis originated from a sport event, verified that there is a close link between sport and politics. The incident occurred in a period of ups and downs of Sino-U.S. relations, originated in the Sino-U.S. differences on political issues. During the process of development, China and U.S. respectively indicated their own position, and subsided the incident ultimately in the hope of stabilizing the overall situation of Sino-U.S. relations.

The internationality of sports makes it inevitably affected by the alternation of international politics; the influence of grand sports meetings, a country's need for international prestige and coherence, and the need of development for sports itself make sports possible to become a political tool and to realize political purposes. Sports' pseudo-war status was especially noticeable during the Cold War, a period during which the United States and the Soviet Union sought to be the world's preeminent geopolitical nation. In today's globalized world, the politicization of sport still exists; sport can also be a political tool of the different ethnic groups or political forces even in the developed countries. As involved in politics, sports also affect the national and international politics. So 'Hu Na Incident' still has the practical reference value to current Sino-U.S. relations and today's sports diplomacy strategy.

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