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Political Steering Theory in the Era of ‘Top-Level Design’: The Unexpected Implications of Campus Football in Xi Jinping’s China

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ABSTRACT

Political steering theory has gained prominence amid the shift in Chinese politics towards ‘top-level design’ under the leadership of Xi Jinping. No study has yet used the example of Chinese football to test the extent to which political steering theory is helpful in understanding Chinese policy-making and implementation under the leadership of Xi Jinping. This study aims to reconceptualize political steering theory by examining the unexpected implications of campus football in Xi Jinping’s China, highlighting the importance of formally subordinate actors in shaping policy outcomes. Given the post-hoc character of political steering theory, the method of process tracing was chosen for this article. Despite the emphasis in the literature on hierarchization and (re)centralization, and the corresponding focus on ‘top-down’ steering in the Xi Jinping era, a case study of Chinese football shows that formally subordinate socio-economic actors, such as Chinese parents in this case, can (still) attempt to steer higher-level party-state actors. Previous attempts to theorize such ‘bottom-up’ (counter)steering and corresponding shifts from ‘top-down’ steering to multi-level governance have failed to address existing deficiencies. The article therefore proposes a reference-dependent revision of political steering theory, which places the respective action orientations of actors at the centre of interaction-oriented policy research.

KEYWORDS

Political steering;
top-level design; Xi
Jinping; Chinese football;
campus football

Introduction and the Method

Understanding political decision-making in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is one of the most difficult and arduous undertakings in contemporary China research.¹ Despite the large number of existing empirical studies, the sheer complexity of political conditions and interactions in the PRC makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to draw a holistic picture of policy-making and implementation processes in the

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country and to assess with certainty the continuities, adjustments and profound changes that have taken place in this context.

Alongside attempts to typologize or systematize the Chinese policy process, there is a need to trace, understand, and explain the causal mechanisms underlying the behavioural reactions and interactions of Chinese political actors in a theory-driven manner. For many researchers, Chinese politics under the leadership of Xi Jinping represents a fundamental shift from previous administrations in the PRC, requiring a revision of, or alternative perspectives to, existing conceptual and theoretical approaches.² One of these alternative approaches is the application of *political steering theory*, as proposed by Schubert and Alpermann.³

An argument for using this theory, which in its original form represents a rigid state-centred ‘top-down’ perspective,⁴ is that since Xi Jinping took office as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, there has been a streamlined hierarchization and (re)centralization of political decision-making processes in the PRC, which has decisively changed the hierarchical actor constellations and modes of interaction within the Chinese political system.⁵

Some researchers point in particular to the ‘top-down’ mobilization of far-reaching anti-corruption and disciplinary campaigns and the creation of new high-level governing bodies such as the ‘Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms’, which became the ‘Central Comprehensively Deepening Reforms Commission’ in March 2018,⁶ to argue for an institutional change towards ‘top-level design’ in China.⁷

This notion of ‘top-level design’ is a normative conception of the best possible policy-making process in the PRC. It envisages the (re)centralization and hierarchization of the Chinese political system to ensure the holistic consideration, assessment, monitoring and resolution of perceived challenges and problems, so that political steering capacities can be effectively concentrated in China’s political centre and the desired reform and development goals of the country’s highest-ranking political actors can be achieved as comprehensively and quickly as possible.⁸

This literature informs my research interest, which is to retrospectively trace, understand and explain the hierarchical interactions between Chinese political and socio-economic actors regarding the policy field of Chinese football in the Xi Jinping era. Accordingly, the following research question was formulated: Are the high-level party-state actors in the PRC under Xi Jinping’s leadership always able to steer the formally subordinate, non-administrative, socio-economic actors in the policy field of Chinese football in a ‘top-down’ manner?

The policy field of Chinese football – the sport also known as ‘soccer’ – is of considerable relevance, as the reform and development of football in the PRC has become a high priority for the Chinese political centre in the Xi Jinping era, especially compared to many other sporting disciplines. Building on the elaborations of Schubert and Alpermann, it is argued in this context, following Fligstein and McAdam,⁹ that ‘a selected policy field and its implementation arena’ is a ‘strategic action field’ that ‘delimit[s] a social space in which state actors interact with [each other and] a multitude of non-state (i.e. corporate, collective and individual) actors, striving to set up political alliances that often cut across the state-society divide.’¹⁰ A comprehensive strategy for the development of Chinese football was launched between

2014 and 2016.¹¹ The key document, the ‘Overall Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme’, hereafter referred to as the ‘Overall Football Reform’, was approved by the newly established ‘Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms’ in February 2015, one month before the public announcement of the official reform programme by the State Council of the PRC, underlining the importance that China’s political centre attaches to the reform and development of football in the Xi Jinping era.

Official documents describe the development of football as an ‘indispensable requirement’ for building China into a ‘powerful sports nation’.¹² This transformation is seen as ‘a symbolic undertaking for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’.¹³ It is revealing that this explanation explicitly refers to the key concept of the ‘Chinese Dream’, which, in contrast to the ‘American Dream’, is not only primarily aimed at the economic comfort of an envisioned middle class, but also has strong nationalist undertones.¹⁴ From the perspective of the Chinese political centre, the reform and development of football in China, and in particular the Chinese national teams, should be an expression of the country’s re-emergence as a world-leading nation in all respects.

The fact that the PRC does not yet seem to be regarded as a ‘powerful sports nation’ by the Chinese political centre is somewhat surprising, given the international achievements of Chinese athletes in other sporting disciplines and their performance as hosts of mega-sports events such as the Olympic Games in recent decades.¹⁵ It attests to the dominant position of football among all sports, which is clearly perceived as the world’s most popular and best-known sport, as measured by a number of indicators (number of national associations, global practice, cumulative viewership of major international competitions, global online and offline media reach, and levels of commercialization). It is precisely in this sport that the Chinese national teams do not perform particularly well. While the Chinese women’s national football team has performed reasonably well in international tournaments (over the past 20 years, it has averaged 13th place in the world rankings compiled by world football’s governing body FIFA), the Chinese men’s team has consistently underperformed in international competitions (over the past 30 years, it has averaged 73rd place).

The political prioritization and resulting developments in Chinese football have led to increased public and scholarly interest in the topic in recent years.¹⁶ However, no study has yet used the example of Chinese football to test the extent to which the theory of political steering is helpful in understanding and explaining Chinese politics under the leadership of Xi Jinping.

Given the post-hoc character of political steering theory, the method of process tracing was chosen for this article.¹⁷ As this qualitative research method aims at reproducing the causal relationships in political processes and behaviours, it is considered appropriate to accomplish this task. In this study, the deductive path of a particular case-centred method called ‘explaining-outcome process tracing’ was chosen to reconstruct the underlying causal mechanisms in the policy field of Chinese football through a within-case analysis.¹⁸ This backward-looking detailed explanation of an object of investigation is referred to by Mayntz as ‘causal reconstruction’ in the context of interaction-oriented policy research.¹⁹ The case-specific empirical observations were then used to discuss possible implications and to review the ‘sufficiency’

of the theoretical perspective applied.²⁰ In this context, ‘sufficiency’ is ‘defined as an explanation that accounts for all of the important aspects of an outcome with no redundant parts being present.’²¹

The data are mainly based on an extensive document analysis and 22 guideline-based expert interviews. Experts are defined as individuals who were actively participating in the decision-making processes and in responsive behaviour, who have an intrinsic interest in these actor-centred behavioural interactions, or who have a special relationship with the interacting actors involved.²² Interviewees included Chinese and foreign journalists, football federation representatives, professional and youth coaches, academics studying Chinese football, organized football supporters in China, and entrepreneurs in the Chinese sports industry, including people whose children play football in China. Due to the travel restrictions and other precautionary measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic during the study period, both in the PRC and in Europe (where I am based), and the associated uncertainty about the feasibility of face-to-face expert interviews on the ground, which require some predictable lead time, it was decided that this research would rely primarily on extensive document analysis, and that the expert interviews conducted via WeChat, Teams, and Zoom would be only supplementary in nature.

Chinese Politics before and during Xi Jinping’s Leadership

Since the 1980s, policy-making in the PRC has been characterized by increasing fragmentation and decentralization, a process often referred to as ‘fragmented’ or ‘decentralized authoritarianism.’²³ Despite these tendencies, however, there have been not only ‘bottom-up’ but also ‘top-down’ processes that have shaped policy-making and implementation in the PRC. Heilmann, for instance, distinguished between a ‘normal’ and a ‘crisis mode’ of Chinese politics in order to provide a context-specific understanding of the relationship between the Chinese political centre and other subordinate actors.²⁴ In the so-called normal mode, the central party and state leaders set general guidelines for national policy, and subordinate administrative and socio-economic actors apply these guidelines flexibly according to local conditions. The consequence of this approach is that policy decisions ‘are reached after protracted processes of compromise’ and ‘[t]he party center’s capacity to enforce national rules vis-à-vis [subordinate actors] is limited.’²⁵ The so-called crisis mode, on the other hand, is ‘characterized by extensive centralization, personalization, and ideologization of the decision-making process’ and ‘rule by decree’,²⁶ triggered by ‘[f]eelings of urgency’ on the part of central political actors.²⁷ Until the Xi Jinping era, the ‘crisis mode’ could always be overcome and there was a return to the ‘normal mode’. Such a contextually oscillating interplay of central-local relations has not only fostered enormous social and economic transformations in the PRC in recent decades, but has also led to an ‘unstoppable erosion of the [CCP]’s internal organization’ and a weakening of the hierarchical coordination and political steering capacities of the party headquarters, as well as the governability of formally subordinate administrative and socio-economic actors in the PRC, leading to a perception of crisis.²⁸

From today’s perspective, Xi Jinping’s assumption of office marks a turning point. Since then, scholars have argued that there has been a streamlined hierarchization

and (re)centralization of political decision-making processes in the PRC in order to overcome the perceived governing crisis of the Chinese political centre and to underline the CCP's claim to preserve its exclusive centralist leadership.²⁹ For some researchers, these efforts by the Chinese political centre represent a fundamental shift within the PRC towards 'top-level design'.³⁰

These changes are designed to effectively concentrate political steering capacities in China's political centre so that the desired reform and development objectives of the country's most senior political actors can be achieved as comprehensively and quickly as possible. Thus, it is often argued that institutional transformations in the Xi Jinping era have been instrumental in ensuring that Chinese politics now follows a more vertical, 'top-down' policy implementation logic in order to enforce policies prescribed by the Chinese political centre at all levels.³¹ In particular, the implementation of sweeping anti-corruption campaigns and the emergence of new high-level governing bodies appear to have decisively changed the hierarchical actor constellations and modes of interaction.³² In other words, under Xi Jinping's leadership, the 'crisis mode' of Chinese politics seems to have evolved into the 'new normal', in which greater emphasis is placed on compliance with the policy directives, instructions and guidelines from the Chinese political centre.

Such a concentration of political steering resources and instruments at the highest political levels in the PRC suggests, on the one hand, that the Chinese central party-state will react much more decisively and assertively to deviant behaviour by subordinate administrative and socio-economic actors that does not conform to its action orientations. On the other hand, it can be expected that such institutional changes will lead formally subordinate actors to make even greater efforts to behave in a way that conforms to the norms and expectations of the Chinese political centre, either in order to be rewarded for doing so and/or to circumvent and avoid sanctioning 'top-down' measures.

Political Steering Theory

The theory of political steering was developed primarily by Renate Mayntz in collaboration with Fritz W. Scharpf in order to reconstruct and understand the social coordination efforts of political actors.³³ Mayntz defines political steering 'as the deliberate political attempt to steer, guide or direct (parts of) society, including the economy'.³⁴

In its original form, it is a pure 'top-down' approach, where formally superordinate steering subjects attempt to steer the behaviour of hierarchically subordinate steering objects in order to solve perceived problems. Political steering theory is thus subject to a 'problem-solving bias', based on the assumption that formally superordinate political actors are primarily concerned with solving social and, in particular, socio-economic problems in order to promote the common good and serve the public interest.³⁵ Historically, this normative preoccupation of political steering 'can be traced back to classical antiquity, where both Plato and Aristotle developed conceptions of the philosopher-king or monarch, intent on serving the well-being of his subjects. From here a line can be drawn to modern theories of state function, still operative in the backdrop of planning theory'.³⁶

Traditionally, it is assumed that the formal hierarchical structure of governing determines which actor steers whose behaviour. Mayntz, for instance, suggests that especially in actor-centred juxtapositions there is a superordinate steering subject, which is 'typically the government, the state or some public authority',³⁷ and a hierarchically subordinate steering object, such as local state jurisdictions and bureaucracies, business enterprises, and social collective actors. Political steering theory is thus not only actor-centred, but also 'state-centered and [therefore] employs a top-down perspective'.³⁸ On the basis of this formal categorization of hierarchically superordinate and subordinate actors, Mayntz suggests that the 'steering capacity' (Steuerungskapazität) of the steering subjects and the 'governability' (Steuerbarkeit) of the steering objects can be systematically examined.³⁹

In recent decades, however, the initially rigid, state-centred, 'top-down' approach of political steering has been criticized for its lack of explanatory power with regard to the behaviour and relevance of formally subordinate actors in political decision-making processes. For example, the empirically established deficits of 'top-down' steering in implementation research and in studies of social movements, which focus primarily on protests against decisions made by superordinate political actors, have been instrumental in introducing a 'bottom-up' perspective into the theory of political steering.⁴⁰ The rejection of a rather one-sided 'top-down' perspective thus means that both the reciprocal vertical and horizontal forms of social coordination in political decision-making processes can be subsumed under the term 'governance',⁴¹ which is a key conceptual approach in current national and transnational political science research.

However, as this article is interested in hierarchical interactions and seeks to answer the central question of whether high-ranking party-state actors in the PRC under the leadership of Xi Jinping are always able to steer formally subordinate socio-economic actors in the policy field of Chinese football in a 'top-down' fashion, political steering efforts are examined in the light of Mayntz's original 'top-down' reflections. For this reason, only the hierarchical modes of steering in Schubert and Alpermann's typology were considered in the analysis of the respective case study.⁴² There, a distinction is made between vertical 'hard' and 'soft' (semi-)hierarchical forms of steering. While 'hard' steering involves authoritative decision-making by superordinate actors that is implemented through 'command and control', 'soft' steering is understood as a discursive practice that is ultimately meant to lead to 'self-enforced' implementation by the subordinate actors.⁴³

Attempts at political steering by actors are not always successful, but can also fail. Mayntz therefore makes a strict categorical distinction between the responsive 'steering action' (Steuerungshandlung) of actors and the ultimate 'steering effect' (Steuerungseffekt).⁴⁴ An essential factor that constitutes a steering action and thus conditions the generation of a particular steering effect is, for example, the use of a specific *steering instrument* by the steering subject.⁴⁵ Steering instruments are seen as means that can be used by actors in a targeted manner to solve perceived problems. A distinction can be made between 'positive' and 'negative' steering instruments.⁴⁶ While positive steering instruments are incentives that are intended to encourage, motivate or stimulate actors to change their behaviour by rewarding them, negative

steering instruments are sanctions by which steering subjects attempt to force steering objects to conform to their preconceived norms and expectations.

The possible selection, application and corresponding effectiveness of a steering instrument may depend on the *steering resources* available to the respective actors.⁴⁷ For example, Mayntz and Scharpf distinguish between financial, legal, human, technical and natural resources that are provided to, or withheld from, certain actors.⁴⁸ Consequently, the institutionally allocated and assigned steering resources can define the absolute availability and relative effectiveness of the respective steering instruments.

The next section applies these theoretical reflections to the policy field of Chinese football in order to examine the hierarchical interactions between Chinese political and socio-economic actors.

Case Study: Campus Football and Chinese Parents

One of the biggest obstacles facing the reform and development of Chinese football is that, despite the huge population of the PRC and the corresponding pool of potential football talent in the country, the actual number of Chinese youngsters who play football on a regular basis is relatively small.⁴⁹ Particularly at a young age, regular football practice is very important for the development of a player's football skills. The lack of football practice among young Chinese talents often means that they are unable to reach their full potential, which in the long run has a negative impact on the international competitiveness of Chinese national teams.

The development of China's national football teams is considered important by the central party-state authorities in the Xi Jinping era, as their successful sporting performances are expected to 'enhance collective honour and national pride' in the PRC.⁵⁰ Official documents describe football as 'loved by the great masses', and accordingly, success in national football is seen as 'an ardent expectation of the people', capable of 'promoting the spirit of patriotism and collectivism' and 'enhancing China's image' in the world.⁵¹ These are words that recall the 'nationalization of the masses' that George L. Mosse famously described for the case of early twentieth-century Germany, in which sport was an important element.⁵² In addition, by promoting football in the country, Chinese central party-state actors aim to establish certain norms in Chinese society, such as instilling 'team spirit', creating a 'sense of rules' and fostering 'core socialist values' among Chinese youth.⁵³ China's central party-state authorities are therefore keen to significantly increase the number of Chinese kids and teenagers who play football on a regular basis.

All efforts to develop Chinese youth football are subsumed under the term 'campus football', for which the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) is responsible for organizing and supervising.⁵⁴ A special feature of this youth football development strategy is that young Chinese players are to be trained and developed not primarily in the youth teams of amateur and professional football clubs, as is the case in almost all European and other 'developed football countries', but in educational establishments such as kindergartens, schools and universities.⁵⁵ This approach was presumably chosen because of the heavy workload placed on children by the Chinese education system. In this context, the Chinese central party-state actors expect that

campus football activities will not only increase the popularity and practice of football in the PRC, but also improve the health condition of many Chinese young people by increasing their physical fitness while reducing their academic burden.⁵⁶

As a result, a number of 'soft' political steering actions have been taken by central government agencies in the PRC to encourage the development of campus football in the country. For example, it has been announced that football will be included in the compulsory content of physical education classes in all primary and secondary schools in China, and that the overall proportion of football lessons will be increased.⁵⁷ Moreover, so-called schools with campus football characteristics have been established, which 'are entitled to political support from the relevant local authorities in terms of teaching, training and competition, enrolment, funding and conditional guarantees for campus football'.⁵⁸ To be designated as a 'school with campus football characteristics', schools must meet a number of criteria, such as having a sports budget of at least 10% of the school's annual budget, offering at least one football lesson per week and having at least 50% of students participating in football activities.⁵⁹ Such 'top-down' arrangements can be interpreted as an attempt to change the social context of action of subordinate actors in a way that is more conducive to the development of Chinese youth football.

In addition, admission policies at higher educational establishments in the PRC have been adjusted to make it easier for students with special football talents to gain access to coveted study places at Chinese universities.⁶⁰ For example, it has been decided that the sporting excellence of Chinese high-school students who are talented footballers will be included in the score of the National Higher Education Entrance Examination in China, also known as *Gaokao*, and could even lead to a partial or full exemption from the entrance examination when applying to certain Chinese universities.⁶¹

For this purpose, the MoE, together with the Chinese Football Association, has introduced its own 'grading system' to identify and rank outstanding football talent among Chinese students.⁶² Depending on the score obtained through the application of this grading system, students receive advantages when applying to a number of renowned Chinese universities, such as Fudan, Zhejiang and Xiamen Universities.⁶³ According to Wang Dengfeng, then director of the 'National Youth Campus Football Work Leading Group', the latter 'soft' political steering action in particular is expected to create an incentive that will 'greatly motivate students at the high school level to play football, and will also extend to the primary and middle school levels, affecting children's motivation to play football'.⁶⁴ The central party-state authorities in the PRC have thus leveraged their legislative political steering resources to establish a positive political steering instrument within the Chinese education system, rewarding high-performing footballers among Chinese students with the opportunity to obtain higher and more prestigious educational qualifications.

However, all this did not stop many Chinese parents from voicing their strong opposition to the implementation of these 'soft' political steering measures. They criticized, for instance, the fact that football was to become a compulsory part of physical education in all primary and secondary schools in the PRC, which they saw as a generalized 'one-size-fits-all' approach that did not take into account the individual interests of their children.⁶⁵ They also regretted that the favourable admission policies

for football talents to higher educational establishments cemented an 'examination-oriented education' that does not reduce the academic burden on Chinese students, but on the contrary, increases it.⁶⁶ For many Chinese parents, playing football or other sports is seen as a distraction from their children's academic studies, a waste of time in the highly competitive Chinese society, and likely to reduce their future career opportunities.⁶⁷ Many Chinese parents also see football as a dangerous sport with a high risk of injury for their children.⁶⁸

In response to parents' concerns, central party-state agencies in the PRC have taken various measures, such as introducing an insurance mechanism to cover sports accidents and injuries in campus football competitions.⁶⁹ At the same time, however, the Chinese political centre strives to generate, establish and consolidate certain norms and expectations in Chinese society through propaganda in order to align 'public opinion' as much as possible with its political reform and development goals. For example, an official MoE document states that relevant departments should 'pro-actively respond to the concerns and suggestions of all parties in society regarding campus football [while] spreading the good voice of campus football and telling good stories about campus football, [...] promoting healthy values and creating a healthy football culture' in China.⁷⁰ This discursive practice can be described as a 'soft' political steering approach.

Today, there are serious doubts about the extent to which the 'soft' political steering actions aimed at encouraging more Chinese young people to play football regularly have been successful. According to a 2020 MoE announcement, more than 27,000 'schools with campus football characteristics' have been established in the PRC, and nearly 20 million students are offered at least one football lesson per week.⁷¹ However, this claim is difficult to verify, especially as 'at least one football lesson per week' does not give a precise indication of the intensity and quality of training provided. Some observers have gone so far as to declare such measures 'a flop' in the development of Chinese youth football.⁷²

Discussion

Implications of the Case Study Findings

The case study illustrates that, despite the institutional changes towards 'top-level design' described in the literature, formally subordinate actors do not always seek to behave in accordance with the norms and expectations of high-ranking party-state actors in the PRC, but occasionally reject these political steering measures and even publicly oppose them if they do not correspond to their own action orientations.

Responsive measures like the aforementioned introduction of an insurance mechanism may seem surprising, as it is often argued that the institutional changes in the Xi Jinping era have greatly reduced the scope for political participation of subordinate, non-administrative socio-economic actors.⁷³ For instance, Qiaoan and Teets argue that '[a]fter Xi came to power in 2012, political control became more centralized, ideological discipline increased, and the state became less open to citizen participation in any form. These new developments suggest that the Chinese government has become less responsive.'⁷⁴ Contrary to this assumption, the case study at least

shows that the responsiveness of the Chinese political centre to subordinate socio-economic actors has not come to a complete halt. In fact, it could be argued that the reconfiguration of the Chinese political system in the Xi Jinping era has led to an even greater obligation for actors in the Chinese political centre to respond to particular norms and expectations of non-administrative socio-economic actors in the PRC, in order 'to partially compensate for the lack of bottom-up initiatives taken by local governments'.⁷⁵

At the same time, the case study shows how central party-state actors attempt to instil certain norms and expectations in Chinese society through propaganda work in order to align 'public opinion' as much as possible with their political reform and development goals, as exemplified by the MoE's statements.⁷⁶ It can therefore be argued that the Chinese central party-state instrumentalizes its political steering resources not only to deliberately manage and disseminate information, but also to establish specific norms and expectations in Chinese society to which it then wants to give a response. Again, football is a good illustration, as the 'Overall Football Reform' claims to 'adhere to the people-oriented approach' in popularizing football in the PRC, suggesting that the norms and expectations of the Chinese people are paramount for the Chinese party-state.⁷⁷ However, this case study also reveals that the Chinese political centre, with Xi Jinping 'at its core', seeks to 'orient the people' in order to provide pre-defined answers to what are described as particular social needs and demands.

Based on these considerations, a fundamental distinction should be made between two types of responsiveness. In the relevant literature, responsiveness is often understood as the fact that a specific actor, usually a higher-level administrative actor, addresses the norms and expectations of another actor, mostly a lower-level administrative or non-administrative social or economic actor.⁷⁸ However, from the theoretical perspective of political steering, responsiveness can also be interpreted as the behavioural reaction of a particular actor to the deviant behaviour of another actor, who then attempts to bring this deviant behaviour back into line with its action orientations. In this respect, the ongoing development of campus football is a very revealing research topic, as it covers both interpretations of the term 'responsiveness'.

Sufficiency of Political Steering Theory

The case-specific empirical observations in this article provide an insight into the sufficiency of political steering theory. It can be argued that the rigid 'top-down' approach of political steering is no longer tenable. Formally subordinate socio-economic actors, such as Chinese parents, may also attempt to steer superordinate political actors. As mentioned above, this one-sided, rigid, 'top-down' perspective of political steering has been rejected before. Schubert and Alpermann, for instance, use the term 'counter-steering' to refer to the resistance to political steering attempts by formally subordinate actors in the Chinese policy-making process.⁷⁹ In this context, Mayntz refers to a theoretical 'shift away from hierarchical modes of government to a more cooperative style of policy-making and a higher regard for different forms of social self-organization (or self-government)',⁸⁰ which can be observed especially in some European countries since the 1970s. As a result, '[b]oth in practice and in theory, the

paradigm of governance superseded the paradigm of steering [and] political steering became one of the several modes of governance'.⁸¹

In fact, the accentuated shift from 'top-down' political steering to multi-level governance has not only revealed some new analytical weaknesses, but also failed to address existing ones.

First, Mayntz argues that the shift from political steering to governance has rendered obsolete the clear distinction between the steering subject and the steering object.⁸² Consequently, the analytical starting point for a systematic investigation of the 'steering capacity' of steering subjects and the 'governability' of steering objects is no longer given. Although political steering theory has not been able to sufficiently close the gap between steering capacity and governability in the past,⁸³ the change of perspective towards governance studies further complicates the unambiguous attribution of steering subject and steering object in actor-centred constellations, which was given in the previous 'top-down' approaches.⁸⁴

Second, the theoretical shift from political steering to governance has not eliminated the underlying 'problem-solving bias'.⁸⁵ Thus, both theoretical approaches assume that political actors are primarily concerned with solving social and economic problems and promoting the common good, without pursuing other goals and interests. Or, as Mayntz puts it, '[i]n all stages of its development, [political steering and] governance theory [have] been based on the assumption that policy development is basically concerned with the solution of societal, and especially socio-economic problems. This is in stark contrast to an approach that would highlight, in the Weberian tradition, processes of domination, and power relations. The tacit assumption that the policy process is about problem solving means that a number of highly salient issues in political theory is neglected by [political steering and] governance theory'.⁸⁶

Adaptation of Political Steering Theory

In the absence of convincing explanatory approaches, I propose a reference-dependent revision of political steering theory that places the respective action orientations of actors more prominently at the centre of the analysis. Accordingly, it is argued that a political steering action involves a behavioural response by an actor aimed at changing the perceived non-compliant behaviour (and underlying action orientation) of another actor in a particular 'direction' so that it (again) conforms to a preconceived *normative frame of reference*.⁸⁷ With the help of their instrumentalized political steering resources, actors thus attempt to (re)direct (negatively) perceived behavioural deviations from their norms and expectations in such a way that they (again) correspond to their respective action orientations. When referring to 'negative' deviations from a normative frame of reference, there must of course also be 'positive' ones, which are not covered in this article. For instance, the social psychology literature shows that there is a fundamental asymmetry in (inter)subjective perceptions and corresponding emotional and behavioural reactions to positive and negative deviations from a normative reference point, with negative perceptual discrepancies being more pronounced than corresponding positive ones.⁸⁸ In line with these considerations, it is argued that political steering actions are behavioural reactions of actors

to perceived (negative) deviations from a normative frame of reference in which political actors are directly or indirectly involved and which aim at minimizing or even completely eliminating the previously sensed discrepancy between the normative preconceptions and correspondingly derived expectations of compliant behaviour of the actors and the misbehaviour of other actors interpreted in relation to these particular action orientations.

Through this reference-dependent revision, the analytical deficits of the transition from political steering to governance theories could be addressed and even partially remedied.

To begin with, in actor-centred constellations, the attribution of actors as steering subjects and/or steering objects depends on the *interaction setting* in which who has deviated from whose given normative frame of reference and who then attempts to minimize or eliminate the perceived (negative) behavioural deviation of whom. The clear distinction between the steering subject and steering object is therefore not blurred or abolished by this adaptation, as Mayntz argues with regard to the theoretical shift towards governance studies,⁸⁹ but it depends on the respective interaction setting which actor seeks to steer whose behaviour. Thus, steering subjects can also be steering objects and vice versa. In other words, the mere fact that a given actor holds a higher position in a hierarchically constituted political system does not automatically mean that this actor is also the steering subject.

This would provide the analytical starting point for a systematic examination of actor-based steering capacity and governability. From this perspective, the relationship between steering capacity and governability depends on whether the respective steering subject is able to change the behaviour of the steering object in such a way that it (again) conforms to its preconceived action orientation. And, conversely, whether the steering object is able to respond to this political steering attempt by the steering subject in such a way that it hinders, prevents or even counter-steers it, so that the behaviour of the steering subject corresponds to its normative frame of reference. Thus, in addition to the political steering instruments of the steering subjects, the respective steering objects also seem to have *steering resistance instruments* at their disposal in order to ward off or evade these political steering efforts of the steering subjects and/or to strive for counter-steering in order to change the behaviour of the steering subjects in such a way that it (again) conforms to the normative preconceptions of the steering object.⁹⁰ Through their initial political steering actions, steering subjects can thus become objects of steering themselves. For this reason, both the steering subjects and the steering objects must carefully weigh up the possible consequences and effects they can expect from their behavioural reactions, which constitute the given institutional setting that is the stimulating social context of action. The steering capacity of steering subjects and the governability of steering objects are consequently mutually dependent.⁹¹

Furthermore, the 'problem-solving bias' that underlies political steering theory could also be addressed by such a reference-dependent revision. Accordingly, it could be argued that the responsive political steering actions of actors do not necessarily have to be limited to a particular normative starting point, such as solving a specific problem in order to maximize the well-being of a group of people, such as the citizens of a country,⁹² but can relate to any normative preconception. Against this

backdrop, it is argued that the identification of a problem *per se* depends on the respective action orientations of the actors and the associated perceived (negative) deviations from these normative frames of reference. In other words, the behavioural context determines which specific action orientation is retrieved by interacting actors, in relation to which the behaviour of other actors is interpreted and evaluated, and to which the corresponding responsive behaviour of the steering subject is aligned.

This reinterpretation of political steering theory implies that, depending on the interaction setting of the actors under consideration, any normative frame of reference, including the concept of power as well as the legitimization, consolidation and retention of power, can be addressed and placed at the centre of the analysis. In this way, the concept of power itself can be understood as an action orientation of the actors, in relation to which behaviour is judged in a particular manner and, as a result, political steering attempts can be made.

Limitations of the Revised Approach to Political Steering

The proposed reference-dependent revision of political steering theory also has its limitations. Not every observed (negative) deviation from a normative frame of reference leads to a corresponding behavioural reaction on the part of the actors. This could lead to a 'selection' or 'confirmation bias', as researchers may, on the basis of these reflections, choose case studies where this hypothetical causal relationship exists and disregard those where no behavioural response occurred. Future research should therefore examine more closely the specific circumstances under which actors do or do not respond to (negative) deviations from their action orientations with political steering actions. One reason for a lack of response could be that the actors concerned were unaware of the corresponding misconduct of other actors, which was interpreted by the researcher in relation to their traced norms and expectations. Another reason could be that they were aware of the misconduct of other actors, but for strategic reasons did not undertake any political steering action, for instance because counter-steering measures or other negative/sanctioning consequences were expected and/or because their own steering capacity was considered too limited and therefore not promising. Fischer, Gohli, and Habich-Sobieggalla introduce the concept of 'no steering' in this context, 'which pertains to the option of political leaders to refrain from steering entirely [...] because they believe that policy goals are easier or more efficiently achieved by leaving decisions to' other actors.⁹³ It is also possible that the actors concerned simply did not consider the perceived misbehaviour of other actors to be important or relevant enough, that the experienced (negative) deviations from the normative frame of reference were not sharp enough, that inertia set in or that other priorities prevailed at the time.

Another limitation of both the original theoretical perspective of political steering and the proposed reference-dependent revision is that the emotions of the relevant actors underlying the interactions in the case study are not taken into consideration. A major difficulty in incorporating emotions into interaction-oriented policy research is that empirical data demonstrating the emotionality of these actors cannot be collected and accessed retrospectively. However, it would be desirable for political science research, for instance, to take up the promising explanatory approaches of social

and political psychology even more thoroughly in order to be able to theorize emotions better in this respect.⁹⁴

A further limitation of both the original and the proposed revision of political steering theory is not so much conceptual, but rather due to its historical origins and specifications in relation to social self-organisation in state-affiliated corporatist sectors in Germany and Europe, where it has been applied to the study of interactions between different political, societal and economic actors in pluralistic societies and liberal-democratic legal systems. The consequence of this normative starting point may be that the application of this perspective to the PRC in the Xi Jinping era, and the corresponding interpretation of empirical data, could lead to a distorted picture of political conditions, relations and interactions in the country that largely glosses over and downplays the policy-making processes in the Leninist party-state with its authoritarian claim to leadership by the Chinese political centre. That said, a strong counter-trend can be observed in recent years in the increasingly polarized public debates in many parts of the world, where China is often portrayed as a major systemic adversary and even an enemy of, for instance, the European Union and/or the United States.

The very different possibilities of interpretation demonstrate that careful consideration and continuous reflection on language, semantics and historicity remain particularly important and necessary in order to create as nuanced and differentiated a picture as possible of the processes of policy-making and implementation in contemporary China. This is precisely why, for instance, from the perspective of political steering, the different modes of steering should not be referred to as 'soft' and 'hard' steering, as these are value-judgmental categories that can lead to confusion and misunderstanding. For example, the communicative, rhetorical and discursive steering practices in campus football described as 'soft' could be perceived as 'hard' by some affected parties and observers. It is therefore necessary to define more precisely the different steering modes and what these different categories encompass and constitute. It is therefore proposed to refer to 'hard' steering as 'direct' steering and 'soft' steering as 'indirect' steering, as shown in Table 1. While 'direct steering' represents an intervention by an actor that is primarily directed against the perceived misconduct of another actor, 'indirect steering' is first and foremost directed against an action orientation of another actor on the basis of which the perceived misconduct takes place. Both modes of political steering can lead to profound institutional and behavioural changes.

Conclusion

This article examined, in the policy field of Chinese football, whether high-level party-state actors in the PRC, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, are always able to steer formally subordinate, non-administrative socio-economic actors in a 'top-down' manner. The interactions between the actors studied illustrate that, despite the political steering efforts of high-ranking party-state actors, formally subordinate actors in the PRC, as in this case many Chinese parents, do not always strive to behave in accordance with the norms and expectations of superordinate actors, but occasionally reject these political steering actions and even publicly oppose them if they do not correspond to their own action orientations. As a result, the political steering efforts

Table 1. Steering modes and instruments that can be used by actors to achieve compliance with preconceived normative frames of reference.

Steering modes	Direct steering	Indirect steering
	An intervention by an actor that is primarily directed against the perceived misconduct of another actor → Enforced conformity or synchronization of the behaviour of the steering object with the normative frame of reference of the steering subject	An intervention by an actor that is primarily directed against a normative frame of reference of another actor on the basis of which the perceived misconduct takes place → Enforced conformity or synchronization of the normative frame of reference of the steering object with that of the steering subject
Steering (resistance) instruments	Positive steering instruments Rewards used by steering subjects to encourage, motivate or stimulate steering objects to change their behaviour so that it conforms (again) to the steering subject's normative frame of reference Negative steering instruments Sanctions used by steering subjects to force or coerce steering objects to change their behaviour so that it conforms (again) to the steering subject's normative frame of reference	Communicative, rhetorical and discursive practices Steering subjects use communicative, rhetorical and discursive practices so that the steering object(s) adopt the desired normative frame of reference of the steering subject Changing the stimulating social context of action Actors change the stimulating social context of action, in which mostly other actors operate or interact with each other, so that they are more likely to adopt certain norms and display corresponding behaviours that comply with the normative frame of reference of the respective steering subject

of the MoE and other high-level party-state authorities in the PRC to popularize football and increase football practice among Chinese youth under the banner of ‘campus football’ have had only limited success.

The case-specific empirical observations provide insight into the sufficiency of the political steering theory. The rigid ‘top-down’ approach of political steering is no longer tenable, since formally subordinate actors can also attempt to steer superordinate actors. This one-sided ‘top-down’ perspective has already been rejected. As a result, political steering has been subsumed under the term governance. However, such a shift from ‘top-down’ steering to multi-level governance has not only revealed new analytical weaknesses, but also failed to address existing ones. Since there are still no convincing explanatory approaches in this context, a reference-dependent revision is proposed that places the respective action orientations of the actors even more at the centre of the analysis.

The article does not have the pretension of formulating an ‘integrative theoretical framework’,⁹⁵ but rather attempts to theorize the crisis- and problem-specific behavioural reactions and interactions by, with and between actors in the PRC under the leadership of Xi Jinping, based on a case study in a very specific policy field, football, which has been the subject of a whole series of reform programmes.

Its line of reasoning could also be extended to larger contexts. For instance, official documents such as the CCP’s ‘Third Historical Resolution’ note that there was a perceived discrepancy between what the Chinese political centre, led by Xi Jinping, considered to be the best possible policy-making process for the PRC, namely ‘top-level design’, and the relatively decentralized and fragmented reality of China’s policy process, leading to the crisis-driven response of the country’s highest-ranking political actors over the past decade.⁹⁶ In this case, too, there were behavioural deviations from the normative frames of reference of the actors at the Chinese political centre, which led to political steering actions such as the implementation of

disciplinary campaigns and the establishment of new high-level actors in response to the perceived incongruence between the CCP's normative ideal-typical centralist leadership claim and the *de facto* highly fragmented and decentralized policy-making practice in the PRC.

The same document states to 'strengthen the top-level design of foreign affairs work'.⁹⁷ Institutional changes within the PRC thus appear to have an impact on the interactions between Chinese and foreign actors as well.⁹⁸ While political steering theory has been applied in recent years to study Chinese policy-making and implementation in different policy fields, foreign policy interactions have been largely neglected, with a few exceptions.⁹⁹ Future research could explore behavioural reactions and interactions by, with and between actors in the PRC by applying the reference-dependent approach to political steering theory proposed in this article to various fields of policy.

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