
”Friendly competition”: Promoting Chinese socialism to Africans through sport, 1962-1972

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Abstract (in French and English)

This paper examines sports exchanges between China and various African nations in the ten years between 1962 and 1972. Sports delegation visits and exchanges served as sites for visible displays of the Afro-Asian movement’s spirit and ideals. Officially showcased to the public as ”friendly” competitions or exhibition matches, these sports exchanges often included more than these main events. In addition to technical skills exchanges, Chinese athletes in African countries made visits to important cultural and historic sites to express their shared historical struggles against colonialism and imperialism. Meanwhile, African athletes and sports leaders sent to China received a heavy dose of Chinese socialism in the form of cultural performances, meetings with Chinese leaders, and visits to various cultural and historic sites, top sports facilities, peoples’ communes, and factories. The promotion of Afro-Asian solidarity could, however, be contradictory: on the one hand Chinese leaders emphasized to their visitors a united, equal, and shared struggle. On the other hand, these exchanges explicitly promoted Chinese socialism and China as a leader on the world stage. I begin with the first major Chinese sports delegation visit to several African countries in 1962, a contingent of ping pong athletes, before then moving on to several visits by African sports teams to China at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. I end by connecting these earlier years to the Afro-Asian table tennis tournament held in Beijing in 1971, and the advent of the official Chinese policy of ”friendship first, competition second.” Using Chinese declassified official reports, periodicals, and other primary sources, I show how Chinese leaders made efforts to spread their own political agenda through the world of sport, suggesting a close interplay between Chinese domestic and international goals.

Keywords: China, Africa

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