

National elite volleyball player selections policies in China and The United States

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Abstract: This study comparatively examines elite volleyball player selection policies in China and the United States, exploring their similarities, differences and the institutional drivers behind such variations. Adopting a qualitative research approach, it conducts semi-structured interviews with six retired elite players and two senior coaches from both countries and applies thematic analysis to code and interpret the collected narrative data. The findings indicate that both nations prioritize physical fitness and technical skills as core selection criteria, but present distinct talent pathway structures. China operates a government-led dual-track system under the whole-nation system with strict age thresholds, while the US relies predominantly on collegiate athletic leagues with academic performance requirements and lacks a well-established domestic professional league. Respondents from both sides respectively appeal for pathway integration and domestic league construction, offering empirical insights for optimizing elite volleyball talent cultivation systems.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

According to a study [1], volleyball was first invented in the United States in 1895 and was introduced to China in 1905 and grew rapidly from Guangzhou and Chinese Hong Kong, also with the development of the times, volleyball has continued to grow in China, with the Chinese women's volleyball team winning many more Olympic volleyball titles. Then, a study pointed out [2] that volleyball in China has developed into an independent and mature system. Moreover, as one article [3] points out, volleyball has only started to develop rapidly in the last few years despite being invented in the United States. The document [4] noted that the American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA) is the largest coaching aggregation league. An article [5] also states that the US national men's and women's volleyball teams have won multiple Olympic championships. The rules for selecting elite volleyball talent are different in each of the two countries that have excelled in volleyball.

On the one hand, China's selection policy for elite volleyball talent is mainly through institutions under the "elite sport" [6] model. A study [1] points out that the selection model for volleyball in China takes place under the government's leadership, generally through three systems, the gymnasium, the education system and the public system in which elite volleyball talent is selected.

Furthermore, a study [7] pointed out that ‘In China, the Sports Schools, Sports Technique Institutes (STI) and the National Teams Centre (NTC) make up the structure of the elite athlete development system.’ More, a study [8] details the athlete selection programme developed in China in 1963, where China set up schools for training professional athletes at all levels, which were cascaded to the national team.

On the other hand, the United States of America recruits elite volleyball talent from school volleyball teams in the education system. One article [9] points out that the success of American volleyball is due to its promotion of college volleyball, the introduction of extensive volleyball education in schools and tournaments, the development of a large number of elite volleyball players and the selection of talent through schools. Meanwhile, another article [10] points out that the United States already has a sophisticated selection system that uses multiple disciplines to analyse and combine various data on athletes to select. More, a document [11] shows that the US uses professional plans to support the selection and training of elite athletes. Furthermore, an article [12] suggests that the US is using psychological programs to intervene in selecting athletes.

1.2 Research rationale

Based on previous studies, a definitive conclusion has been formed on elite volleyball policy in China and the USA. However, most of them lack evidence and methodology and are more subjective. Moreover, with the development of the times, there needs to be more research and analysis on elite volleyball selection policies. Furthermore, the volleyball selection policy study needs to be more comprehensive; the policy should include selection channels, physical criteria, and psychological factors. Therefore, a new study of elite volleyball selection policies in two more mature countries in volleyball development – China and the United States – is essential.

1.3 Research question

How are national elite volleyball player selections policies around China and US similar and different?

What are the reasons for this?

1.4 Purpose of study

This study aims to construct an analysis and comparison of recent elite volleyball selection policies in the United States and China and to explore how to develop a better elite volleyball selection policy through a qualitative research study. More importantly, through volleyball, we analyse and compare the core differences and similarities between Chinese and American policies on elite athletic selection.

1.5 Significance of study

This study will provide a realistic picture of the current state of elite volleyball talent development policies in China and the United States, corroborate previous research, and fill in the gaps in the latest volleyball policy research while exploring a better and more scientific selection policy for elite volleyball talent to meet the growing needs of competitive volleyball. At the same time, through volleyball, the differences and commonalities between elite sports in China and the United States will be shown to support objective data for future research.

2. Literature Review

Since the twentieth century, elite sport has become a sporting policy that countries strive to develop. One article [13] suggests that the elite sports model is a virtuous cycle that brings national prestige while stimulating national prestige sporting excellence. There has also been a gradual increase in research on elite sports policies. Several theories have been proposed for comparing elite sports policies. A study [14] focused on developing an elite sports model, and another study [15] discussed trends in management approaches to global elite sport development models. More, a study [13] explores the aims of elite sports and development concerning individual countries. Also, one study [16] explored the impact of elite sports systems by modelling data to compare elite sports systems and policies in different countries.

For many years, comparisons have been made between the Chinese and American models of elite sport development, with the American model considered to be ‘minimal government intervention’ [15]. In contrast, the Chinese model of elite sport is called *juguotizhi*, a management system with a high degree of centralised power [17]. Elite sport policy is seen as China’s highest priority strategy. Accordingly, China has established a systematic management hierarchy and has strategically concentrated state efforts to help elite sport development by providing substantial annual financial subsidies and good training conditions [6]. Moreover, the success of the Chinese women’s volleyball team has, to some extent, become an ideological stimulus for the rapid development of elite sports policies [18].

Somewhat differently, virtually no federal department is responsible for developing elite sports in the United States, and only three policies [14] have influenced elite sport policy in the United States:

- 1) In the 1992 Act on professional baseball, the federal government saw elite sport and the development of professional athletes as a policy.

- 2) In the 1972 Act on Education, regulations were made to employ sports in schools, indirectly influencing elite sports in the USA.

- 3) In 1996, the federal government passed an act granting the US Olympic Committee the power to administer elite sport policy as a non-governmental organisation.

Moreover, an article points out that volleyball was invented in the United States and has gained mass participation. Elite sports policies for volleyball in the US are being explored [19].

However, most previous studies have analysed the characteristics of elite sports policies by analysing the performance, financial budgets, and overall elite policy support of elite sports programmes in China and the USA. Furthermore, relatively few studies analyse elite selection policies for specific projects. In short, the literature [19] relating to volleyball strongly suggests that an analysis of the selection processes of volleyball players in China and the United States allows for the characterisation of elite sports policies through the selection policies of their two vigorous sports.

Previous research on elite volleyball selection policies has revolved around two components.

2.1 Elite player pathway policy

Previous research [14] has pointed out that selection policies for elite sports (including volleyball) are at the heart of China’s elite sports policy. The selection policy starts already at the age of six and establishes a ladder that grows with age. Children between six and nine are selected to train at various city or district sports schools. Through the selection of coaches, those with potential continue to train semi-professionally. After a period of training, they are selected for the various provincial youth sports teams and become members of the various provincial adult sports teams after a brutal elimination process. After that, there is a chance to be selected for the national team or part of the Olympic team. In the process, children are paid to attend sports school training.

Becoming provincial athletes or national and Olympic team members comes with a fixed salary and bonuses for their achievements. Meanwhile, another article [20] points out that China established a strategy for elite sports selection from amateur to full-time as early as 1956 and built many sports facilities and venues to support training.

Then, another previous study analysed the elite selection model in American rugby, where potential elite athletes train in high school and college leagues until they are identified by scouts and signed to a rugby club, and where players train for cultural studies and work to secure a living before entering a commercial league. An earlier study [14] confirmed that elite sports selection policies in the US must be clarified. Except for a few sports leagues with their systems, elite volleyball selection policies are primarily based on the selection from US high schools as well as college varsity teams, and volleyball varsity teams have cultural requirements for athletes, and that athletes have to find their training opportunities and facilities when there is no competition, as well as sports that do not compete in school competitions can only be recruited from existing sports teams. Nevertheless, as a newer paper notes, the US volleyball selection pathway primarily comprises schools [21]. It is worth mentioning a study [22] that once again proves that college volleyball teams are responsible for the elite selection policy of volleyball in the United States.

2.2 Selection criteria

Recent evidence suggests that China's elite volleyball selection policy relies heavily on seven-point criteria, including 'Sports ability, Competitive ability, Physical Fitness, Psychological quality, Proprioception, Interest, Qualities of Will.' [10]. However, this is evidenced in one early article [23] where the Chinese elite sports system adopted psychological factors as one of the selection criteria. Nevertheless, the extent to which the study [14] pointed out that China's elite selection criteria depend on athlete's achievement has remained controversial. Slightly different from the Chinese criteria, the review of mental qualities is essential in the US elite volleyball selection policy [12]. Furthermore, psychological factors are also included as an essential part of the elite sport development programme in the USA [11].

Much research has been conducted extensively on elite sport policy, but much less is known about policy selection progress. A large number of studies, for example, study [14] and document [13], have attempted to explore the relationship between elite sport and national development by discussing the context of national development in conjunction with the analysis of fiscal budgets, government regulatory documents. It is also worth mentioning that one study [15] analysed trends in the management methods of elite sports. On the other hand, the selection processes and policies of elite sports have often been passed over or summarised in general terms in the studies mentioned above without analysing how the policies of elite sports unfold in the different sports. Moreover, there has been minimal discussion about players' and coaches' opinions on elite sport policy. The methodology of the above studies mostly used literature review and analysis, analysing and comparing many government documents and interviewing several policy administrators. At the same time, its limitation was the omission of information from the perspective of athletes and coaches as the core stakeholders of their policies, whose few sources provided information on their involvement in elite sports programmes and no lack of evidence on the concrete implementation process of the policies.

It is also worth emphasising that the role of selection in elite sports, especially in volleyball, is more studied in basketball and football. According to the literature above, the Chinese women's volleyball team represents a spirit, while the United States is where volleyball originated. However, recent studies on volleyball talent selection have become increasingly scarce and are based on older government documents that need to be more representative of the latest policy developments. In the

few articles that have analysed the selection pathways of volleyball in China and the USA, there needs to be more evidence on the players, coaches and those who implement the policies.

In addition, this is a common problem in volleyball elite selection. According to the previous study, most need to be more comprehensive, i.e. do not combine the selection pathway documents and requirements of volleyball governing bodies with the analysis of coaches and athletes first. First, mostly lacking interviews with elite athletes, the sample selected needed more representative. Secondly, it ignores how coaches specifically implement the selection process. Much of the research that has been conducted focuses on the physical and psychological criteria used in selecting elite volleyball players, neglecting the links with national policy, coaches and players themselves. Also, the limitations of gender are increasingly apparent. One limitation is that in previous studies, the factors influencing the selection of elite volleyball players by gender have often been overlooked. It has yet to be established whether there are differences in the volleyball selection process between elite athletes of different genders. Indeed, it is undeniable that the existing literature on elite sport development policies and management systems in China and the USA has produced more effective research, clearly articulating the theoretical policy framework in a national context. This provides a reasonable basis for studying sport-specific elite athletic selection policies.

This study will provide an overview of the selection of elite volleyball players in China and the United States. This study elaborates on and summarizes the specific selection pathways and criteria from the perspective of elite male and female athletes and coaches in both countries, thereby constructing a complete selection system and its operational process.

3. Methodology

3.1 Philosophical underpinning

Although there has been increasing research on elite sports systems in recent years, there needs to be more research on selection policies for athletes or even elite athletes [24].

Discussions about athlete selection policies have been ongoing; in the case of elite athlete selection policy in volleyball, which has existed for some time, one article examined the factors influencing athlete selection policy at the subjective level from the coaches' perspective. Meanwhile, the policy for elite volleyball players from the perspective of athletes and coaches is subjective, based on various factors and empirical selection processes. One study [25] argues that constructivism is an essential foundation for qualitative research, which explores the context and function of phenomena by observing, describing and exploring the experiences of individuals and groups. Therefore, considering the differences in individual perceptions, a subjective (constructive) ontology would be a reasonable basis for this study. In addition, subjective epistemology (constructivism/interpretivism) will help examine how ideas shape and influence reality and will be helpful for the actual beneficiaries and implementers of the policy of selection of elite volleyball players.

3.2 Research approach

Given that this study is based on subjective ontology and is dedicated to confirming the commonalities and differences between the selection policies of elite athletes in China and the United States by understanding the subjective perceptions of elite volleyball players on selection policies, it is advantageous to use a qualitative research methodology.

In addition, one study [26] noted that interviews have become a critical qualitative research method. Therefore, the selection of interviews or online interviews will likely facilitate the depth of

the study and confirm through interviews how recent elite volleyball talent selection policies will have a conflicting or contradictory impact on athletes. One study [27] noted that semi-structured interviews can promote flexibility in data acquisition. This study will utilize semi-structured interviews using a standard set of questions combined with some supporting questions. It seeks to understand the selection pathways and criteria and incorporate the athletes' and coaches' experiences of elite volleyball players in China and the United States to provide an in-depth representation of how selection policies affect the development of elite sports systems.

According to the previous literature review, volleyball is an essential and robust sport in China and the United States, two countries with high sports development. Using volleyball as an example, interviews with athletes and coaches can reflect the current status of elite sports selection policies in different national contexts and support future research on developing elite sports systems.

However, this study also has limitations. The data collected through the interview method will carry the interviewees' subjective opinions. In contrast, six athletes and two coaches will be interviewed in this study, with a sample size of eight. They need to more fully illustrate the current status of recent selection policies for elite athletes in China and the United States. At the same time, because the interviewees are retired, there is a specific time lag in the data collected, and the study does not consider the gender factor; only two elite volleyball players from China and the U.S. Different genders may have different selection policies.

3.3 Data collection procedure

A study states that reliable research methods determine the validity and reliability of social science research. Unlike questionnaires, interviews, as a qualitative research method for obtaining non-numerical data, allow for an in-depth investigation of people's views and experiences [28]. This study provides an in-depth understanding of the views of volleyball players and coaches in China and the United States on selection policies. It conducts a comparative analysis to provide theoretical support for the development system of elite sports in the two countries. The research sample population of this study is characterized by a high degree of specialization, and at the same time, the depth of obtaining narrative data is required, so using interviews to obtain data for this study is more suitable.

The sample for this study was drawn from six elite volleyball players from China and the United States and two coaches who coached in higher-level leagues and had selection experience. The interviews for this study provided insight into each coach and athlete through fixed questions and randomized questions incorporating the content of the interviews to collect narrative data from the interviews (Table 1, Table 2).

Table 1. Interview questions – players

No.	Interview question
1	How long have you been playing volleyball?
2	What are some of selection pathways you have gone through in your volleyball experiences?
3	Do you know about your country's elite volleyball player selection policy?
4	Have you gone through the selection process for volleyball players and what is the general process and requirement?
5	What do you think about your country's elite volleyball player selection policy?

Table 2. Interview questions – coaches

No.	Interview question
1	How long have you been coaching volleyball?
2	What process have you gone through in your coaching experience?
3	What kind of selection criteria are in place when you make an elite volleyball player selection?
4	What is the selection pathway for elite volleyball players in your own country?
5	What do you think about your country's elite volleyball player selection policy?

3.4 Data analysis

One study points to the thematic approach to research, a flexible method of analyzing qualitative data [29]. While this study obtains data by interviewing elite Chinese and American volleyball players, the interviews are more in-depth, so the use of thematic analysis can effectively and flexibly analyze and summarize the content of the interviews to sort out the real thoughts and experiences of the interviewees.

In a previous study [30], it was suggested that thematic analysis has incredible strengths in psychological research and facilitates the formation of research on policy development. Also, one study [31] noted that the use of thematic analysis offers a great deal of flexibility in the analysis of qualitative data and is beneficial for the policy or practice-oriented research in sports, offering the potential for detailed, complex, interpretive analysis.

While this study obtains data by interviewing elite Chinese and American volleyball players, the interviews are more in-depth. Therefore, the use of thematic analysis can effectively and flexibly analyze and summarize the content of the interviews to sort out the actual thoughts as well as experiences of the interviewees. Based on previous research [29], this study will follow six steps: familiarizing with the data, organizing the initial coding, finding and organizing themes, defining and categorizing themes, and producing a report for thematic analysis by Nvivo.

3.5 Recruitment and location of interviewees

Respondents for this study were recruited through an information network among players by contacting elite volleyball players in China and the United States to find respondents who met the criteria, i.e., elite athletes and who would not have a potential conflict of interest in participating in this study. Also, this study found respondents with experience in American and Chinese high-level volleyball leagues that would better assist in collecting data on elite volleyball selection policies in China and the United States.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Regarding the ethical relevance of this study, four aspects will be considered in this study. The first aspect is the excellence of the study. The planned research consists of researchers with a background related to volleyball players. This background will better facilitate the communication of professional issues during the interviews. The interviewees have all played and coached in high-level Chinese and American volleyball leagues, which will ensure a high level of experimental data.

The second aspect is to ensure the authenticity of the experimental results. Regardless of whether the experimental results are favourable or not, we must ensure the authenticity of the data.

Then, in the third aspect, cooperation and potential benefits will be considered and exclude coaches and athletes with whom any selection organizations are working.

Finally, security will be considered in this study, i.e., an anonymous open data agreement will be signed with the experimental participants to ensure the privacy of the experimental data and the security of the research participant's wishes for the respondents. The study will protect the privacy of the respondents based on the security and confidentiality regulations of the high-level volleyball leagues in China and the U.S.A. The respondents' identities are all the ex-athletes and ex-coaches from China and U.S.A.

4. Result

According to the data after the thematic analysis, China's volleyball policy is centred around two pathways, the first is the professional athlete pathway, and the second is the college system pathway; for the professional athlete pathway, the selection policy provides athletes with a job with a good salary and benefit guarantee, but once an athlete is selected into the system, he or she can no longer enter the university system pathway to play volleyball. In contrast, the selection policy provides athletes with preferential enrollment for the college system pathway.

In the same way as China's policy, college league pathways in the U.S. also have preferential enrollment policies for talented volleyball players, but in a different way that may offer a certain number of scholarships. However, after graduation, they can participate in the professional volleyball leagues of other countries and the recently organized American professional league.

It is worth mentioning that there has yet to be an established pathway for professional volleyball players in the U.S. Although the National Volleyball Training Program has been held since 2021, most of the interviewees shared the same opinion that the current U.S. professional leagues are still not systematic, and the highest level of volleyball in the U.S. continues to be the U.S. Collegiate League volleyball tournament, and that the National Volleyball Training Program is more of an opportunity to give all people an opportunity to be drafted.

Regarding selection criteria, China's professional athlete's path of selection standards is more stringent on physical fitness, volleyball skills, and age has this strict requirement. At the same time, the coaches will also account for a specific dominant factor. The selection criteria of the Chinese college system, on the other hand, considers the player's willingness to play in the college. Similar to the Chinese professional athlete pathway and college system pathway, the U.S. national training camp program and college volleyball league competitions use physical fitness and volleyball skills as the main selection criteria. However, the U.S. college volleyball leagues also consider a player's academic performance as one of the indicators.

The criteria for selecting elite volleyball players in China and the United States are roughly the same, with physical fitness and volleyball skills being the core selection factors. However, the paths are different. According to the interviews, China's elite volleyball player selection path is divided into two separate paths, the professional athlete path and the college system path, which results in the two paths needing to be connected and the scope of selection being narrower. This reason may also be the result of China's elite sport development system, 'juguotizhi' [17], where volleyball, as an essential sport in China's elite sport development, is promoted by turning volleyball players into a profession. The elite athlete selection path in the U.S. relies more on the American College Football League. At the same time, there are higher requirements for athletes' academic performance, which is helpful for the personal development of elite athletes. However, there is no mature professional volleyball league within the U.S., which causes many elite athletes in the U.S. to participate in professional volleyball leagues abroad.

It is worth noting that, according to the data from the interviews, Chinese elite volleyball players hope that the selection path of Chinese elite volleyball players can no longer be divided so that the selection path of professional volleyball teams and the selection path of college volleyball can be

connected, which will be conducive to better expanding the scope of the selection and improving the competitive level of Chinese volleyball, and also better promote the personal development of Chinese elite volleyball players, who can be able to use volleyball as a career and also get a good education. At the same time, it can also better promote the personal development of Chinese elite volleyball players, who can get a good education while playing volleyball as a career. In addition, U.S. respondents hope that the U.S. can establish a U.S. professional volleyball league so that more outstanding U.S. athletes can participate in domestic professional volleyball competitions, through volleyball, as a job that they like to work and reduce the loss of U.S. elite volleyball players to go to foreign professional league matches.

5. Discussion

Firstly, the interview data in this study confirms previous research [2] that China already has a very mature selection system for professional elite volleyball players and is well stabilized in the ‘elite sports model’ [6] operation. Moreover, the data of this study also confirms the research [8]; the Chinese government did set up many schools to serve professional athletes at all levels; as indicated in the data of this study, elite volleyball players can train in the city training school when they are in high school. Also, this study confirms the model of elite sports in China [14], where selection is made through the establishment of teams at all levels. Notably, this study identified a pathway divergence in China’s elite volleyball player selection policy, i.e., some elite volleyball players chose to play in the academy system, which led to the loss of players from China’s professional volleyball player pathway.

Secondly, this study adds to some of the previous research gaps regarding elite sport and elite volleyball development policies in the U.S. According to the data in this study, the U.S. achieved a national volleyball training program in 2021, this data challenges the reliance on collegiate leagues for the development of elite sport in the U.S. [14], and with the U.S. pursuing a national Team development training program [32] in 2021, the U.S. is attempting to create a national volleyball training program in the U.S. that is more efficient than the national program. With the implementation of the National Volleyball Training Program in the United States in 2021, the United States is attempting to create a professional volleyball league to reshape the situation where college volleyball league play is the highest level of volleyball in the United States.

The reason for the differences in elite volleyball player selection policies between China and the United States stems from the differences in the elite sport development system, which, as one study points out, is ‘minimal government intervention’ [15], while the development of elite sports in China is ‘juguotizhi’ under the intervention of the Chinese government [17]. The pathway of professional volleyball players in China is guided and run by the General Administration of Sport of China, which is a kind of governmental behaviour. So it will result in elite volleyball divergence in the athlete selection pathway. According to the interview data, the elite volleyball player selection pathway in the United States still relies mainly on the American Collegiate Conference volleyball tournament. However, in 2021 the United States also began to implement a professional national volleyball training program and a national professional league, which proves that the United States elite volleyball athlete development policy is again close to the direction of professionalization in China. More often than not, respondents from China also had elite volleyball player development paths that led them to return to China after playing in professional leagues abroad. This demonstrates that China’s elite volleyball player selection paths are gradually opening up and integrating.

For the selection criteria of elite volleyball players, this study confirms previous research by comparing the selection criteria of different elite volleyball player selection pathways in China and

the U.S. [10]. However, there is a significant difference between the selection criteria in China and the U.S., i.e., the U.S. has an inevitable requirement for the players' cultural achievement, which also reflects the difference in the development policies of the elite sports in the two countries.

While previous studies [14] and research [13] have explored the development of elite sport in China and the United States by analyzing policy documents as well as national budgets, this article explores the specific processes of selection policies for elite volleyball in China and the United States from the perspectives of the coaches and athletes and the policy implementers. Stakeholder perspectives were added to address the limitations of the data from previous studies.

However, this article still has many limitations; most of the interviewees have retired, and there is a certain lag in the experimental data collected, and given the small sample size, although the sample selected one elite volleyball player from each of China and the United States, this study could not better reflect the influence of the gender factor on the selection policy for elite volleyball players in China and the United States. This study used a qualitative research method, and the experimental conclusions drawn were narrower than they were.

6. Conclusion

This article collected data from the perspective of coaches and athletes through the qualitative research method of interviews and compared the similarities and differences of the selection policies of elite volleyball players in China and the U.S.A. by looking at the two aspects of the selection paths and the selection criteria, to make the data and theoretical support for the future research on the selection policies, and at the same time, this article discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the selection paths of the elite athletes in China and the U.S.A., which will help future development of a better selection path for elite athletes.

The conclusions of this article are exploratory, based on a total of eight interviewers in China and the United States, and found that the Chinese elite volleyball player selection policy has the phenomenon of pathway differentiation, which reveals the selection policy of elite volleyball players in the United States, as well as the problem that the United States still does not have a complete professional volleyball league system in the country. The characteristics of elite volleyball player selection policies in the two countries are summarized through comparative analysis, paving the way for future research on elite volleyball player selection policies. Finally, an excellent elite athlete selection policy still needs to go through much research and practice, and this study hopes to be helpful for the future elite athlete selection policy.

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