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China Soccer Observatory

China's Football Dream

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Domestic Policy

The development of football in China under Xi Jinping



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[Tien-Chin Tan](#) and [Alan Bairner](#).

Why does Xi Jinping, the President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), emphasise the importance of football? Is it because he played football in his youth and decided to make the game a priority for his country? Or does football have a unique function in his eyes? Since China's reform and opening-up, all Chinese leaders have shown a fondness for football, albeit to varying degrees. But none have taken the game as seriously as Xi, who has publicly announced his three World Cup dreams: 'qualifying for the World Cup', 'hosting the World Cup' and 'winning a World Cup title'. To achieve Xi's football dreams, the Chinese government has designated the development of football as an important political goal. Its efforts have a coherent focus.

Seven departments, under the aegis of the PRC State Council, have together formed the Control, Ethics and Disciplinary Committee of the National Football Leagues (CEDCNFL), which functions as a specialised organisation to tackle gambling and criminal involvement in football. The aim is to eradicate the deviant activities of match-fixing, gambling and gang manipulation, which have plagued Chinese

professional football since its foundation. Those seven departments are: the State General Administration of Sports (GAS), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), the **Ministry of Justice (MOJ)**, the **People's Bank of China (PBC)**, the State Administration of Taxation (SAT) and the State Administration for Industry and Commerce (SAIC).

The responsibilities of developing 'campus football' were handed over from the School Football Office (SFO) of the Chinese Football Association (CFA) to the Ministry of Education (MOE). In 2015, the MOE, together with the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Finance (MOF), the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP), the GAS and the Communist Youth League of China (CYL), formed the National Youth Campus Football Leading Group Office (NYLGO). The Minister of the MOE serves as its leader while the Director-**General of the MOE's Department of Physical, Health and Arts Education**, [Wang Dengfeng](#), works concurrently as the office chief. The policy objective of the NYLGO is to have 85,000 on-campus football fields by 2020 and 50,000 football-featured schools by 2025.

Leading officials of the State Council persuaded corporations to sponsor the CFA to develop football. The most noteworthy investors are Wang Jianlin, chairman of the Dalian Wanda Group (DWG), and Xu Jiayin, board chairperson of the Evergrande **Real Estate Group (EREG)**. DWG has not only propped up China's efforts in revitalising football, but also secured a deal to acquire a 100 percent equity stake in Infront Sports & Media (a long-term partner of [FIFA](#)), thereby helping Xi to realise his **three World Cup dreams**. Meanwhile, the EREG has replicated the '[Evergrande Mode](#)' in Chinese football, which has seen improvements in the identification and cultivation of talent and the full support of professional football clubs for China's national football team. All of these initiatives are intended to have long-term influence on the country's football development.

Attempts have also been made to make football the bellwether sport for the country. Thus, to strengthen the ties between football and the relevant industries and to gain wider support for football, the State Council issued *Several Opinions of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry to Promote Sports Consumption (Opinions)* on 20 October, 2014. The [*Opinions*](#) **announced that ‘to make football a potential industry and to develop it both in width and depth, planning shall be made for the mid-to-long-term development and facility improvement for football, which lags behind other sports, and greatly promoting campus and social football.’**

To achieve [*Xi’s three World Cup dreams*](#), the Chinese sport, educational and industrial systems have taken upon themselves the important mission to elevate elite football. But in reality, the three systems have experienced conflicting interests and **other problems. Under China’s ‘Olympic Strategy’, the football talent reserve has** seriously diminished, creating a talent gap. Professional football clubs are unwilling to invest in their reserve squads, leading to a serious lack of backup players. The power relations between the educational and sport systems have been strained. Campus football, the goal of which is to popularise football, has been unable to connect with the elite system under the GAS. Coaching staff at the local level are generally understaffed and under-trained. And finally, there have been conflicts of interest between football club owners and the CFA.

In fact, the development of football in China is not limited to the elite level. The game also plays an **important role in improving young people’s physical ability,** encouraging economic growth, enhancing international influence and increasing **patriotism. Behind China’s all-out** support for campus football, new generations of football talent are being produced. In addition, thanks to increased physical activity, youth fitness can be improved, paving the way for a growing talent pool for the **football industry. According to Xi’s vision, football is not only an important sport, it** is also an important political tool.

As a result, the development of football in China is unlikely to adopt the US or European model. Despite recent calls for a separation between ‘government and organization’ in football, the [CFA](#), the Chinese Super League Company (CSLC) and the [CSL](#) are still unable to unshackle themselves from the leadership and governance of the Communist Party of China (CPC). After all, China is an authoritarian one-party state where the CPC enjoys absolute rule. It is more so under Xi Jinping’s regime, which has recently proposed constitutional changes to abolish presidential term limits. In such circumstances, the future of Xi’s football dream remains uncertain.

**Xi's Soccer Dream: Defining characteristics,
unintended consequences**



Jonathan Sullivan.

Manifestations of Xi Jinping's "Soccer Dream" (中國足球夢) have generated substantial attention outside of China. One might even get the impression that China and the Chinese government have only just discovered the game. Yet Xi's efforts are merely the latest attempt to reform the organization and infrastructure of the sport. In fact, the Chinese government has been trying to reform Chinese soccer since the early 1950s. And the ambition has always been the same: to have a national team to make the country proud.

That ambition unequivocally underpins the latest iteration of China's football reforms. What has changed is that the government now has multiple ambitions for football, and different mechanisms for pursuing them. In addition to a strong national

team the Chinese government is seeking influence in global governance of the game, overseas acquisitions with strategic value, and a strong Chinese Super League as a symbol of modernity and as a lifestyle product. For a country with a long history of **investing in football, the futility of the men's national team appears to be a rebuke to** earlier reform efforts. Elite sport did not escape the devastation and chaos of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, and the football architecture was decimated like many sectors of the economy and society. But 40 years into the **reform era (a decade longer than Mao's rule), the dream of a men's national team to make the country proud is as far away as ever.** (The women's team meanwhile is a regional and sometimes world power).

Clearly a different reform strategy was needed. There are two distinguishing **components of Xi's reform effort: the coalescing of the bureaucratic apparatus, and the marshalling of private investment. The current reforms are a "team effort",** involving not just the Chinese Football Association (CFA) and the General Administration of Sport, but also the Ministries of Education and Finance, the National Development and Reform Commission, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, and the Communist Youth League. The **State Council (the equivalent of China's Cabinet) has assumed responsibility** for the coordination of relevant departments as they try to flesh out and implement the **government's [ambitious development plans](#).**

Xi set out his intentions and modus operandi in 2008, when the Control, Ethics and Disciplinary Committee of National Football Leagues was founded under his direction to address the match fixing, bribing, gambling and organized crime involvement in elite soccer that caused the former Jia-A League to be wound up and threatened the young Chinese Super League that replaced it. The Committee was led by the General Administration of Sport and composed of the Ministries of **Public Security, Civil Affairs, and Justice, People's Bank of China, and the State Administrations of Taxation and Industry and Commerce.** In short, an institutional

team effort signalling the gravity of the problems then facing Chinese football and **Xi's determination to mobilize institutional capital (financial, political and human) to fix them. The work of the different organizational parts of Xi's reform are overseen** by the Leading Small Group for Soccer Reform (足球改革领导小组) led by Liu Yandong (刘延东). Liu is a long-time member of the Politburo and she is a convenient conduit for channelling Xi Jinping's wishes to the CFA. **Liu, who holds the health portfolio, set out her own position on football in 2009, stated that 'raising the profile of the Chinese football is a significant part of the construction of a global sports power.'** **The goals of Xi's then-nascent reforms she said were to 'boost the healthy development of the sports industry, satisfy the spiritual and cultural demands of the people, and enhance China's soft power'.**

A second distinguishing component is the enlistment of private investors and the extent to which they have responded to encouragement from the top. Elite football development and investment in the grassroots requires substantial sums of money, and there has been a concerted effort to share the financial burden with private business (in addition to state owned enterprises, provincial and local governments). In 2011 the State Council convened a conference on how to attract private investors **into football. Dalian Wanda Group president, and one of China's wealthiest entrepreneurs, Wang Jian-Lin subsequently agreed to a strategic partnership with the CFA and a RMB 500 million investment. Wanda Plaza, the commercial property development arm of Wanda Group, paid RMB 200 million for the title sponsorship of the CSL from 2011-13. Resurrecting an earlier CFA policy of sending talented young Chinese players overseas to train, Wanda funded the studies of "[Chinese Football Stars of Hope](#)", having signed a deal to use the facilities and expertise of La Liga clubs Atletico Madrid, Valencia and Villarreal.**

Wang has subsequently been invited to consult for the CFA and has used his wealth and connections to increase Chinese influence in global football governance. In 2016 Wanda Group became a FIFA commercial partner, and Wang facilitated a meeting

between FIFA boss [Gianni Infantino and Xi Jinping](#), at which they discussed Xi's ambition for China to host the FIFA World Cup. Although Wanda has signalled a [substantial sell-off of assets](#) in recent days to reduce debt, Wang's participation in Xi's football reforms is important financially and symbolically. Wang had previously been closely involved in Chinese football a decade earlier, to the extent that he financed the Dalian Wanda club that won five Jia-A titles between 1994 and 2000. Wang famously pulled out in 2000 because of the corruption afflicting the sport, from referees to CFA officials, and did not return until 2011. Wang said his return was **due to 'Xi's direction, social demand and my passion'**. Wang is far from the only entrepreneur to be enticed into the football revolution. Evergrande Real Estate Group president Xu Jiaying bought the Guangzhou club in 2010 following its relegation for match-fixing. **Xu's investment quickly paid** off on the pitch: the team was promoted in 2011 and has gone on to win six consecutive CSL titles. It paid off financially too; Xu sold a 40% stake to Alibaba for many times his original investment. Evergrande is the most successful and lucrative club in the CSL. Evergrande signed **a deal with Real Madrid to help establish the world's biggest football academy, and** pledged RMB 100 million to youth development over ten years. Alibaba, Suning, Fosun, Sina and many other private companies heavily involved in different aspects of the football industry.

In Wang, Xu and other entrepreneurs' enthusiastic embrace of the "soccer dream" there is a suspicion of courting favour with Xi Jinping. But there are also more prosaically strategic incentives, such as facilitating the acquisition of land for development and integrating football into existing entertainment, real estate and other commercial businesses. But whereas the Chinese government ultimately prioritizes development of the national team, investors and owner have their own **ambitions. One of the unforeseen consequences is that clubs' spending on transfer** fees and wages has rapidly spiralled out of control, to the extent of outspending the English Premier League in the last transfer window. It is not just privately owned clubs that have been on a spending spree: the two [most expensive imports](#) in CSL

history, the Brazil internationals Hulk and Oscar, play for a team owned by Shanghai International Port Group which in turn is majority owned by the Shanghai government. As I discussed [here](#), the government has recently issued drastic new rules to curb spending during the current transfer window. There are good reasons for doing so.

While China is experiencing an economic slowdown and an ongoing anti-corruption campaign, the astonishing sums paid for foreign players could easily become a cause of social discontent (as it was in the 1990s albeit with much smaller amounts), **especially when players perform poorly or behave badly. The potential for ‘social contradictions’ to arise and manifest in riots or protests (which the government is mindful could turn into anti-government protests) is good reason to care about the optics.** The Argentinian Carlos Tevez for instance, [earns £600000 a week](#) while **underwhelming for Shanghai Shenhua (China’s per capita GDP is around \$8000).** More sensitive still is the suspicion that football acquisitions, including player purchases, were being used to move capital offshore, avoid currency exchange restrictions and other potentially problematic financial manoeuvres. The margin **between marquee foreign players’ nominal market value and the actual transfer fees that have been paid look less like a “China premium” (the extra funds needed to attract top players to the less illustrious CSL) than a potential financial manoeuvre.**

For teams in the top half of the CSL the end of big money foreign player transfers (in **the short term) doesn’t really matter because they** already have their quota of marquee foreigners (new rules limit teams to fielding 3 foreigners in a match). But it may consolidate the differences between teams like SIPG and Evergrande that have their foreign stars in place already and others like Tianjin Quanjian that would like to sign a star foreigner but are now effectively unable to do so. That may not be positive for the league over the longer term, but policy in the reform era has always been flexible and there will be further changes to the regulations. Striking a balance

among all the competing ambitions and interests is not easy, but there is no doubt that emphasis on Xi's "football dream" will continue into his second term.

China's Depoliticization of Sport May Make a U-Turn



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[Ping Wu.](#)

When *Fancy Bears* hackers started publishing the names and medical records of athletes granted Therapeutic Use Exemptions (TUE) by the World Anti-Doping Agency on 13 September 2016, most of the named athletes were American or British. The news about *Fancy Bears'* hacking was rapidly disseminated on social media in China. Given that no Chinese athlete was named by the hackers, the news was well received in China. What is interesting is the immediate reactions of most Chinese netizens who had read the story. The most common comments were along the lines of **"Shame on you, drug cheats!"** and **"No wonder Great Britain beat us in the medal table at the Rio Olympics."** Chinese netizens' criticism of Great Britain, however, also revealed quite clearly their bitter disappointment with China's Olympic performance in Rio.

Sport has long been one of the handiest tools for realising political goals and fueling nationalistic feelings in China. However, there has been a subtle but nevertheless unmistakable downplaying of political importance of elite sport (竞技体育) since

China overtook the USA to top the medal table at the Beijing Olympics in 2008. On one hand, the national sports authority, the General Administration of Sport of China (GASC), and China's state-run mass media have both created new official discourses to draw more public attention to Sport-for-All (大众体育). On the other hand, top-class Chinese athletes have been regarded more and more often as entertainment celebrities rather than revered sports heroes by Chinese youth.

China's coverage of Rio 2016 on both traditional and new media platforms had an unprecedentedly light-hearted and festival atmosphere in the first week of competition. Those good-looking and physically tuned Chinese athletes were constantly thrust into the limelight, no matter whether or not they had won any medal. Then Fu Yuanhui, a female swimmer who had a refreshingly entertaining and honest approach to media interviews, became the sweetheart of the whole nation. However, the tone started to change when China was overtaken by Great Britain in the medal table.

Many Chinese did not believe that Great Britain could hold on to the second place in the medal table until the final day of competition. The very last gold medal that China **won in Rio came in women's** volleyball, *the* sport which is an indispensable part of Chinese collective memory of struggle for national revival (民族复兴). China was **world champion and Olympic champion in women's volleyball five times in a row** between 1981 and 1986, and the Chinese government launched a political campaign **to promote the 'Fighting Spirit of the Women's Volleyball Team (女排精神)' at the** time. The greatest player in this legendary team, Lang Ping, is the head coach who led the Chinese team to win the Olympic champion title again in Rio, having coached the US at the Beijing Games. Lang Ping and her players suffered three defeats in the group stage and then put up a fearless and fierce fight against Brazil, the defending champion, in the quarter-final. After 5 sets full of high drama, China saw off the heartbroken host team. It was this particular victory that triggered a sharp rise of heavily nationalistic rhetoric in mass media coverage of and social media comments

on China's performance at the Rio Olympics. When China won the gold medal there were calls for 'a return of the Fighting Spirit of the Women's Volleyball Team' everywhere on both traditional and new media platforms in China, and Lang Ping was worshiped as a great national heroine again.

Neither the enthusiastic celebration of China's victory in women's volleyball nor the spree of ill-judged comments on Great Britain's TUE cases can really distract public attention from China's disappointing performance at Rio 2016. Beneath all the disappointments lies a perception taken for granted: China should have been second in the medal table of Rio 2016 and China should be second, AT LEAST, in any Olympic medal table. The drastic change of tone observed in the media coverage of and online comments on China's Olympic performance in Rio has made it clear that Chinese people will welcome any downplaying of political importance of elite sport on the premise that China is an Olympic superpower only second to the most powerful nation, both politically and economically, in the world, i.e. the USA. Such a perception is a direct result of the persistent governmental promotion of the Chinese Dream (中国梦) discourse. This is officially designed and underpinned by a rather blatant form of nationalism, although, ironically, downplaying the political importance of elite sport is also a government initiative aiming to build Chinese people's confidence in their country as a rising economic and political superpower rather than just a sporting one.

China's sporting authority has made no comment at all on the TUE cases leaked by the *Fancy Bears*. The GASC officials know the reasons for Great Britain's Olympic victory in Rio far better than the general public who are fed filtered and distorted information. China's Olympic journey from Athens to London between 2004 and 2012 is very similar to the one Great Britain had from Beijing to Rio between 2008 and 2016. Host nations' home advantage does not start and end at their home Olympics. But then 'second Games syndrome' kicks in, which China suffered from in Rio, and Great Britain will likely suffer at the 2020 Tokyo Games. Therefore, although

China lost to Great Britain in Rio, Great Britain will not be the biggest concern for China in 2020. Rather, it is the host nation of the next Summer Olympics that will **cast a much heavier shadow on China's Olympic performance in 2020 if home advantage works in the same pattern.** In fact, Japan already took a big jump upwards in the Olympic medal table: from eleventh place at London 2012 to sixth place at Rio 2016.

Considering the problematic history of Sino-Japanese relations, the Chinese government and Chinese people simply could not countenance what happened in Rio to happen again at the Tokyo Olympics in 2020. It is embarrassing for China to have lost to Great Britain in Rio, while it would be totally unbearable for China to lose **to Japan in the medal table at the Olympics held on Japanese soil. China's Olympic performance at Tokyo 2020 is likely to be heavily political.** Therefore, it is highly **likely that China's depoliticization of sport will soon make a U-turn.**

Emerging challenges for Chinese soccer clubs



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[Anders Kornum Thomassen.](#)

China has emerged as a major player in the international soccer industry. Huge transfers and record-breaking salaries have come to characterise the game in China in the eyes of the international soccer community. Examples of the enormous transfers include Brazilians Oscar and Hulk from Chelsea FC and Zenit St. Petersburg to Shanghai SIPG for a combined fee totalling more than 130 million dollars and the signing of Argentinian star Carlos Tevez by Shanghai Shenhua. Such transfer activity [demonstrates the economic power](#) of Chinese soccer clubs. The transfer of Carlos Tevez made him the best-paid player in world soccer when he signed his contract in late December 2016. The huge transfers, combined with ambitious statements from both the Chinese FA (CFA) and the Chinese government have made China impossible to ignore for those with an [interest in the sport](#). In spite of these developments, Chinese soccer clubs have begun to face significant challenges.

In January 2017, the CFA adopted a sudden rule change, mandating clubs to field a Chinese player [under the age of 23](#). A [further statement](#) declared that in future the

number of Chinese u-23-players will have to match the number of foreign players fielded. The second complication arose in May and June 2017, when an extra tax on foreign transfers was implemented by the CFA, [stating](#) that fees paid on foreign players would have to be matched by a 100% levy that would go toward domestic soccer development. This rule was eventually revised slightly to cover fees of foreign players who had been bought for a sum greater than 5.8 million euros. Finally, and perhaps more worrying for Chinese soccer in general, it seems that many Chinese soccer clubs from the top tiers of the Chinese league system may be experiencing difficulties paying transfer fees as well as player salaries. This has led to the CFA to issuing [warnings](#) that any difficulty with financial matters might lead to exclusion.

These problems have prompted the CFA to look more closely at the balance sheets of the top Chinese clubs and to publish criteria on balancing incomes and outgoings at top clubs. The new regime essentially [decreed](#) that the clubs must balance their books or face possible expulsion from the league system. Why have these rule changes been made and what are the consequences? It appears that the CFA needed to ensure game-time and development opportunities for the most promising Chinese players. This makes sense in light of [previous statements](#) by the government and CFA regarding improving the national squad. However, the fact that the rule changes were implemented almost immediately and without warning, caused several challenges for the clubs. Transfers that were extremely close to being finalised were taken off the table and many clubs were left with too many foreigners in their squads. This meant some squads [had to part ways](#) with at least one of their foreign players, often crucial members of the team. Looking back at the process, a more sympathetic way of introducing the new rule would have been preferable, but in order to ensure the development of domestic talents, the new rule makes sense.

The newly introduced tax on big-money transfers will cause a barrier for future prominent transfers. Clearly, it would be unwise for the Chinese clubs that are already paying above market price for the transfers of their foreign stars to make any

big-money signings that will include a significant additional payments. The effect of the extra tax became clear during the 2017 summer window where [no transfers came close](#) to the massive transfers of the previous windows. Because of the difficulties the Chinese clubs now face in their pursuit of big foreign stars it will certainly be more difficult for players already in Chinese soccer to depart, should they wish to do so. It will simply be bad business for the Chinese clubs to let go of their star-players, as a potential replacement would be incredibly expensive. An example of this was **Guangzhou Evergrande's, ultimately futile, reluctance to release their Brazilian star-midfielder Paulinho.**

Another possible consequence of the added tax and new rules on Chinese u-23 players is an increase in valuation of the best Chinese players. [The clubs will seek to keep hold of their Chinese stars](#) in order to create the best possible team while staying within the boundaries set by the new rules. Finally, the rumoured economic problems within the clubs might be the most serious. If these rumours turn out to be true, the spate of expensive foreign signings witnessed will not be repeated. It is a well-known that the huge salaries are one of the biggest reasons for international top-class players to go to China – and if these salaries are no longer possible, the players will go elsewhere. These potential economic problems also cause a real threat to the foundation and [reputation of Chinese soccer](#), which is why the CFA has announced that any club with serious financial difficulties will face an exclusion from the Chinese soccer system.

No more “superstars” for CSL, and that’s a good thing



[Jonathan Sullivan.](#)

The Chinese Super League summer transfer window opened on June 19, 2017, but there is none of the excited speculation that surrounded the previous few iterations. In the previous two seasons, news of a disgruntled Cristiano Ronaldo, a Wayne Rooney ready to leave Man Utd for a retirement home, or a Diego Costa rendered **superfluous by the Chelsea manager’s text message, would cause hyperactivity** in CSL club boardrooms and frenzied speculation in the press. Eager to attract foreign stars, CSL clubs have paid well over market price transfer fees and provided astonishing remuneration packages to a range of aging talents (Tevez, Lavezzi, Ba, Pato), one-time **prospects who didn’t quite make it to the very top (Witsel, Guarin, Hernanes, Teixeira)** and Premier League journeymen (Ighalo, Pelle, Jelavic, Mikel). The spending spree has also delivered some top players at the peak of their powers (Oscar, Hulk, Jackson Martinez), but it is unlikely they will be joined by any high-profile peers this summer.

The football authorities had been vaguely threatening to reign in CSL clubs' overheated spending since the last transfer window in January, when CSL clubs outspent their counterparts in the notoriously spendthrift Premier League. Rules were adopted to encourage clubs to invest in youth development programmes, regulate the number of foreign players on squads and on the pitch, and stipulate a minimum number of Chinese Under-23 players. And earlier this month the Chinese Football Association got very specific about transfer fees. Per the latest regulations issued by the Chinese FA on June 14 (and [reiterated](#) directly to CSL clubs by the League on June 20), the rules governing the summer 2017 CSL transfer window impose drastic restrictions. First, if a single foreign player costs *under* 45m RMB (~ 6 million Euros), or a Chinese player costs *under* 20m RMB (around 3 million Euros), **the club must pay an equal amount, as an additional contribution, into the club's** existing youth development fund. Second, and more significant, if a foreign player costs *over* 45m RMB, or a Chinese player costs *over* 20m RMB, the club must pay an equal amount into the Chinese Football Development Fund. In effect, transfer fees will double overnight.

For the moment, these new regulations almost certainly end CSL clubs' competition for "A-list" foreigners. A player like Diego Costa, a combative striker near the peak of his powers, might represent decent value for a CSL club at the rumoured valuation of £75 million. But not now the outlay would be £150 million (before taking a hypothetical remuneration package into consideration). CSL clubs are loss-making, but many of them are backed by cash-rich companies, so theoretically big money transfers could still happen in this window. And Chinese businesses are adept at finding room for manoeuvre in restrictive environments. **I don't think they will** though, because more than just the regulation itself, it is the now-unequivocal message from on high that clubs need to reign in their spending.

Naturally, the government would like to see CSL clubs winning the Asian Champions League or doing well in the World Club Championship (which a hypothetical

superstar signing like Diego Costa might help facilitate), but there are greater priorities. Prime among all priorities is for the Party to stay in control and avoid anything that might cause **‘social contradictions’ or other negative reactions in society.**

The broader context to club’s extravagant spending is a slowing economy, growing inequality and an ongoing anti-corruption campaign that has brought down thousands of Party officials. Conspicuous spending is a taboo for public figures. Across Chinese society there is a huge amount of anger around inequality, injustice & corruption, and the Party (sensibly) wants to keep a lid on conspicuous manifestations thereof. One example is capital flight: Party officials and other well-off Chinese are suspected of secreting billions outside the country in real estate and whatnot, which raises the uncomfortable spectre of football investments becoming a way of getting money out of China.

The government has multiple strategic goals relating to football, and the strength of the CSL (as might be advanced by the recruitment of expensive foreigners) is a relatively minor one. The government wants China to be a major player in the global soccer industry (another form of engagement and influence); it wants to develop a national team that can compete on the international stage without embarrassing the country and sometimes deliver successes like qualifying for international tournaments; it wants a strong domestic **league ‘product’ for its consumption, entertainment and ‘middle class’ value; and it wants to develop grassroots infrastructure to promote soccer as a healthy activity not just for the ultimate good of the national team but to stave off the coming obesity and public health epidemic.**

Policymaking in China is a process. It is flexible, experimental and reactive. The policy regulating soccer activity today will likely change in the future. But a period of consolidation, minus the distraction of another influx of foreign stars, may be a good thing for the CSL. The authorities and clubs need to figure out what regulations

work best for all concerned, including fans, the development of Chinese players and the quality of the on-field product. There is a concern that the CSL is a two-speed league with some exceptional foreigner talent amid a morass of players who would struggle in the lower leagues in Europe.

Furthermore, for various reasons, high-**profile, high cost “A-List” foreign players** have often flopped in China (from pioneers like Nicolas Anelka to the recent travails of Carlos Tevez). On the other hand, the most successful foreign imports are relatively **unknown Brazilians like Guangzhou Evergrande’s Elkeson and Ricardo Goulart, top scorers and MVPs in the last 3 years.** Elkeson was bought for £4million from Botafago and Ricardo Goulart was £10 million from Cruzeiro (a record fee for CSL in 2015, but **exceptional value in the grand scheme of things**). **This season’s revelation also fits** this mould: Paulinho, another £10 million purchase for Evergrande. An underwhelming performer at Spurs, Paulinho has been such a standout figure in CSL he is [rumoured](#) to be **on Barcelona’s radar**.

For a growing league like CSL, the value in *performance* lies in the kind of foreigner **players you can pick up for fees near or under the CFA’s new threshold.** Under the current regulations scouting mid-level talent and keeping existing superstars happy and locked down are key. No doubt the super-agents who negotiated astronomical **packages for Tevez, Pelle et al are aware of the CSL’s effective self-imposed** superstar transfer ban.

Can the Foreign Player Restriction and U-23 Rule improve Chinese football?



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[Shuo Yang](#) and [Alan Bairner](#).

In 2017, China Football Association (CFA) policy-makers launched new foreign player restrictions, rules for U-23 squads and a transfer expenditure cap. In the current season of the Chinese Super League (CSL), clubs are forced to select at least one domestic U-23 player in the starting eleven. As for overseas players, a maximum of three are allowed to appear on the pitch, while the total number of their appearances in matches must not exceed those of U-23 players. The transfer expenditure cap requires clubs to spend no more than ¥45m (around £5.1m) in a single transfer for foreign players, and ¥20m (around £2.2m) for domestic players. If they breach these limits, clubs are charged an adjustment fee which equals the excess amount. The foreign player restriction and expenditure cap were implemented in response to CSL clubs' large investments acquiring foreign players over the past few seasons, while

the U-23 rules are aimed at allowing more domestic Chinese players to participate in high-level matches at a comparatively young age. It is hoped, this in turn will improve **domestic players and enhance the Chinese national team's performance.**

The reactions in China to these regulations range from resentment to admiration. To assess these newly-launched rules, this chapter takes an in-depth look at their influence on the transfer market, the sale of broadcasting rights, sponsorship, and the competitive performance of CSL clubs, as well as that of the national team. We conclude by considering alternative proposals to those enshrined in the new rules.

Fewer Foreign Players and Lower Expenditure

The CFA has imposed restrictions on foreign players since the formation of the professional football league in 1994. Prior to 2008 (except for the years 2003-2006), clubs were allowed to field three foreign players; during 2003-2006, the number was reduced to two. Table 1 shows the restriction of foreign players since 2009 when each CSL club was permitted for the first time to put four foreign players on the pitch (three unrestricted foreign players and one from an Asian country). As is shown in the table, the total number of foreign players in the CSL decreased significantly in 2018, following the restriction on foreign player quotas and expenditure.

Table 1: Restriction and Total Number of Foreign Players in CSL 2009-2018

Year	Foreign Players	Restriction for Foreign Players
2009	92	5 for registration, 4 on the field
2010	107	5 for registration, 4 on the field
2011	137	7 for registration, 4 on the field
2012	102	7 for registration, 4 on the field

2013	116	7 for registration, 4 on the field
2014	82	5 for registration, 4 on the field
2015	92	5 for registration, 4 on the field
2016	83	5 for registration, 4 on the field
2017	97	5 for registration, 3 on the field
2018	65	4 for registration, 3 on the field

Source: TRANSFERMARKET and CFA website

In terms of transfer spending, the situation is quite similar. Transfer expenditure of CSL clubs increased exponentially between 2014 and 2017. As is shown in Figure 1, the total market value of all CSL players in 2009 season was just over £28.8m. This was lower than the squad value of Burnley FC in the 2009-2010 season, which was £34.6m and ranked lowest of all 20 English Premier League teams at that point. However, the combined value of all players in CSL rose to over £438m by 2017. This was only slightly lower than the squad value of Arsenal (£449.1m) which, in 2017, was positioned sixth in the Premier League and twelfth highest amongst all European football clubs.



Figure 1: Number of Players in CSL and the Total Market Value: 2009-2018 (Source: TRANSFERMARKET Website)

In contrast to their earlier strategy of acquiring fading stars or obscure talents, Chinese clubs have been recruiting leading players from European leagues over the past few years. Table 2 shows the 15 most expensive player transfers in the history of Chinese professional soccer up to the 2018 season. Only two of these are domestic players, while the remainder are all world-class players in the twilight years of their careers.

Table 2: Top 15 Transfer Records of Chinese Professional Soccer (1994-2018)

Ranking	Player	Position	Season	Nationality	Transfer Fee
1	Oscar	Midfield	2016	Brazil	£54.00m
2	Hulk	Forward	2016	Brazil	£50.22m
3	Alex Teixeira	Midfield	2016	Brazil	£45.00m
4	Jackson Martinez	Forward	2016	Colombia	£37.80m
5	Cédric Bakambu	Forward	2018	DR Congo	£36.00m
6	Carrasco	Forward	2018	Belgium	£27.00m

6	Anthony Modeste	Forward	2017	France	£26.10m
7	Ramires	Midfield	2016	Brazil	£25.20m
8	Odion Ighalo	Forward	2017	Nigeria	£20.97m
9	Chengdong Zhang	Defence	2017	China	£18.39m
10	Axel Witsel	Midfield	2017	Belgium	£18.00m
11	Elkeson	Forward	2016	Brazil	£16.65m
12	Alexandre Pato	Forward	2017	Brazil	£16.20m
13	Gervinho	Forward	2016	Cote d'Ivoire	£16.20m
14	Yuhao Zhao	Midfield	2016	China	£16.02m
15	Nico Gaitan	Forward	2018	Argentina	£15.83m

Source: TRANSFERMARKET and CFA Official Websites

However, the winter transfer window of the 2017 season was to be the CSL's last spending carnival. As is shown in Table 2, 12 out of 15 transfers were made in seasons 2016 and 2017, including the top four biggest deals in the history of the CSL. With the enforcement of expenditure restrictions, CSL clubs now find it almost impossible to acquire top players in the global football market where leading players can secure high salaries and high transfer fees. As a result, clubs have been forced to consider other recruitment strategies.

Some clubs offer foreign players huge endorsement fees for products of their owners' companies, which are not considered as club expenditure. Some pay third-party companies to make buyouts of certain foreign players, so they can join as free agents. As for the transfer of domestic players, especially the U-23s, more and more clubs tend to trade their players, instead of paying high fees. Furthermore, CSL club owners are reputed to use non-football related business to complete certain deals. In a recent transfer deal, FC Guoan paid only ¥20m – which is exactly the transfer

fee cap imposed by the CFA - for Chi Zhong-Guo, who has been selected for the national team several times. In comparison, FC Huaxia paid ¥150m last year for another national team squad member Zhang Cheng-Dong. FC Shenxin appealed to the CFA concerning Chi Zhong-Guo's **unreasonable transfer fee, because they** would have received a higher compensation payment from a higher fee as one of the **player's former clubs. However**, the CFA declared the transfer to be totally compliant with its regulations, which seemed to be its only possible course of action that would prevent a stream of other appeals. In fact, almost all CSL domestic player transfers fees in 2018 have been below the transfer fee cap, at least according to official club sources.

In conclusion, the new rules are reducing both the number of foreign players and the transfer expenditure, but they are also forcing clubs to find loopholes in the system, which in turn increase under-the-table deals, not to mention creating a difficult environment for players when they become 24 years old.

Less Broadcasting Income and Fewer Sponsors

The improving regulatory environment and expanding market demand have had a significantly positive effect on the commercial exploitation of the CSL. The broadcasting rights fee of the CSL was ¥10 million in 2014 and rose to more than **¥ 70 million in 2015. In September 2015, TI'AO DONGLI Sports Communications** (TDSC), which is owned by a state-backed investment firm China Media Capital, outbid several media companies and acquired the all-media exclusive broadcast rights for the Chinese Super League between 2016 and 2020 at a price of ¥8 billion (approximate £900m). This is the biggest such deal in the entire history of Asian professional sports to date. According to the fee sharing rules, the CFA will take 10% of the total fee, while the rest will be distributed equally among the 16 CSL clubs. Each of the clubs will get more than ¥64 million every season for the next five years if they remain in the top league.

Besides the selling of broadcasting rights, there are also three types of sponsors in the league. China PINGAN, which owns the naming rights of the league from 2018 until 2022, pays ¥200m per year. The second-level sponsors, which are also called official commercial partners, include companies in various fields. The third-level sponsors are equipment suppliers such as TAG HEUER and ABSEN LED. The sponsorship fees paid by these companies [range](#) from ¥15m per year to ¥50m per year. Table 3 illustrates the three levels of CSL sponsors in recent years, as well as the value and length of each contract.

Table 3: Sponsors of Chinese Super League in recent seasons

Type	Sponsor	Length	Sponsorship fee
Naming	China PINGAN	2018-2022	¥ 200m/year
Commercial Partner	NIKE	2009-2019	\$15 m/year
	FORD	2014-2017	¥ 40 m/year
	JD	2014-2018	¥ 35 m/year
	SHELL	2017-2020	¥ 50 m/year
	DHL	2018-2020	¥ 20 m/year
	LAOSHAN	2017-2021	¥ 40 m/year
	REDBULL	2016-2017	¥ 20 m/year
	YANGHE	2017	¥ 20 m/year
	DONGPENG	2018	¥ 30-40 m/year
	EAST IC	2017-2019	¥ 18m/year
	JINRITOUTIAO	2017-2020	¥ 20 m/year
Equipment Supplier	TAG HEUER	2016-2019	¥ 40 m/year
	ABSEN	2018	LED Board Provider and ¥ 20 m/year

Source: Official website of CSL and CFA

The commercial element of the league, therefore, had been developing well until the **CFA's announcement of the U-23** and foreign quota rules, after which TDSC called to renegotiate the broadcast rights deal as they believed that these rules would hamper its ability to recoup its investment in media rights. In the end, the deal was extended from five years to ten years, with an extra fee of ¥3 billion. The average broadcast fee per annum has been reduced from ¥1.6 billion in the initial deal to ¥1.1 billion, which means every club in CSL will receive at least ¥20m less from [broadcasting](#) over the next few seasons. In addition, sponsors including REDBULL, YANGHE, JD and FORD, chose not to extend their sponsorship contracts at the end of 2017, and have clearly [expressed](#) their view that the new policies could have a negative influence on the commercial value of the CSL. Obviously, the devaluation of broadcasting rights and sponsorship will hurt the financial stability of all CSL clubs. **And yet, such stability is ostensibly the CFA's primary goal in promulgating its foreign player restriction rules.**

Influence on Club and National Team Performance

The performance of CSL clubs in the Asian Champions League (ACL) has improved dramatically since the beginning of the transfer spending boom. As is shown in Table 4, four CSL clubs entered the top 200 world football club rankings in 2016. In comparison, none had featured as recently as 2011. FC Guangzhou has won the ACL title twice, in 2013 and 2015. Moreover, there was more than one CSL club in the quarter-finals of the ACL in both the 2016 and 2017 seasons. This is clearly an **outcome of CSL clubs' acquisition of top players.**

Table 4 International Ranking of Chinese Football Clubs in 2011 and 2016 (top 5 clubs)

July, 2011			July, 2016		
Club	Ranking	Points	Club	Ranking	Points
FC Shandong	241	2739	FC Guangzhou	39	7957
FC Tianjin	366	1792	FC SIPG	86	5420
FC Hangzhou	383	1637	FC Suning	136	4313
FC Guangzhou	421	1480	FC Shandong	139	4296
FC Guoan	458	1351	FC Shenhua	219	3274

Source: Club World Ranking Website

However, with the enforcement of foreign player restriction and U-23 rules, **CSL clubs' performance in the 2018 ACL has inevitably been affected. There is no U-23 restriction in the ACL and clubs can also field an extra foreign player (born in an Asian country).** Thus, CSL clubs competing in the ACL could either buy an extra (Asian) foreign player who only plays ACL matches, or send one more domestic player on to the pitch. In addition, many U-23 players who can play in CSL matches under the age protection rules could be replaced by more experienced domestic players in **ACL matches. All these changes have had a negative influence on the CSL clubs' performance in the ACL.** FC Shenhua did not survive the group stage, while FC Tianjin were the only CSL club in the quarter-finals, meaning that this was by far the **worst season for CSL clubs' performance in the ACL since 2013.**

As for national team performance, things are not improving as the CFA had hoped. The world ranking of the Chinese national team has been rising since 2014, when it was ranked 97th. In 2017, it was ranked 71st, which was its highest position since 2004. However, after two consecutive huge losses to Wales (0-6) and the Czech Republic (1-4) in 2018, the team's [world ranking](#) fell to 73rd. We cannot claim with absolute certainty that the new rules have had a negative influence on national team performance, but the short-term effect is not positive.

Considered strategy or political intervention?

Based on the evidence and taking into account the history and current condition of **Chinese football, we argue that the CFA's transfer and U-23 policies** are not the result of calm calculation and full investigation aimed at enhancing the financial stability of CSL clubs, the international performance of the clubs and the standing of the **national team as stated. Instead, they are focused on how the CFA's political goal – improving national team performance – can be realised as quickly as possible.** This is more of a political intervention than a realistic strategy for league improvement.

Officials in the CFA are using the CSL as their laboratory for all kinds of policies and its intervention has already caused problems such as the devaluation of broadcasting rights and an increase in under-the-table deals in the transfer market; all without resultant improvement of club or national team performance.

Policy makers in CFA should introduce certain adjustments to gradually increase foreign player quotas in the CFL, instead of cutting the current quota and forcing CSL clubs to field U-23 players. In this way, the quality of matches in the CSL, together with its competitiveness, economic value and global influence, could be improved. In addition, Chinese players would be forced to participate in a more competitive domestic and global football player market that could enhance the talent supply within Chinese football and thereby the performance of the national team.

The national anthem dilemma: Contextualising political dissent of football fans in Hong Kong



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[Tobias Zuser](#).

[International media](#) have taken an unusual interest in both friendly and qualifying games of Hong Kong's football team, though, the attention was limited to just those few minutes prior to kick-off. Once the "March of the Volunteers", China's national anthem, sounded through the stadium, roughly one third of the spectators would join into a cacophony of booing and jeering, recorded by the surrounding crowd of accredited journalists. What started as a cynical voicing of dissent in the aftermath of the Umbrella Movement – for the first time collectively practiced during the World Cup qualifying games in June of 2015, has since then become a fixed ritual at every single home game, with no indication of losing its momentum any time soon. Neither warnings by [FIFA](#) or the [AFC](#), nor the subsequent monetary fines could put an end to this practice, eventually triggering a political reaction from Beijing.

On November 4th, 2017, the National People's Congress Standing Committee **amended the annex of Hong Kong's Basic Law by formulating a clause that requires** the solemn observation of both national flag and anthem. Before this new legislation can be enforced, the local parliament still needs to pass a separate bill, a process that is expected to take at least several months. Meanwhile, the booing of the anthem continues, with growing anticipation for a legal showdown once the law is in place. Distorting a national anthem is widely regarded as an offensive breach in sporting etiquette, but the case of Hong Kong suggests another dimension of a cultural-legal complexity. Despite not being an actual nation-state, Hong Kong obtained both FIFA and IOC membership during its colonial period, facilitating the occasional paradox of a nation that would have to play against itself. When China and Hong Kong faced each other during the World Cup qualifiers in 2015, only one anthem had to be played before kick-off, while the opposing fan groups were both dressed in red and could hardly be distinguished on the TV screen. Arguably, the **anthem's role for self-identification** has also remained rather limited, with the vast majority of Hong Kong citizens refraining from singing the lyrics altogether, no matter what **the occasion**. **When the Mandarin "March of the Volunteers" replaced the English "God Save the Queen" in 1997, it certainly offered a powerful symbol for** the transfer of sovereignty, but it also gained little relevance in a predominantly Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong.

Nonetheless, the act of booing your own anthem remains a rare case within the current sporting landscape and renders the disciplinary paternalism of governing bodies a bit more controversial than usual. Interestingly, this ritual can only be observed at football games, although there are plenty of other occasions every year at which the Chinese national anthem appears. The traditionally sold-out **exhibition games of the Chinese national women's volleyball team that attract a** bigger crowd than the average football match, are usually observed by an audience that offers passionate support throughout the day and will only enter into a state of silence for the duration of the anthem. Of course, the football stadium is often

categorised as a “third space” in which it is easier (and often even more effective) to perform political dissent, but these conclusions often happen without acknowledging the role of fan culture. In the case of Hong Kong, local football has largely disappeared from mainstream media discourses, which also remained ignorant towards the revival of local fandom in recent years.

The professionalisation of domestic football clubs has attracted a new generation of supporters to the local game, who increasingly seek inspiration from other fan groups abroad, including Japan, Malaysia, and China. The last few years have also seen the introduction of new chants both in the league and at international games, and there has been an increasing effort to adopt more Cantonese songs instead of generic English banter. This indigenisation process also increasingly involved the **subcultural formation of “trolling”, which has been thriving on popular online** platforms such as HK Golden or LIHKG, and eventually made its way into football stadiums by materialising online memes as stuffed toys and replicating cursing slangs next to the pitch. Nonetheless, although most of these organised groups do have clear political tendencies, they generally refrain from public calls for dissent or protest. This means that the booing of the anthem should not be seen as a political movement encroaching the domain of sport, as it is often portrayed in media. Instead, it has been embedded in practices of an emerging fan culture in which dissenting voices make up a significant proportion. With the absence of coordinated action, it is difficult to predict its persistence, and meanwhile, there has been growing concern among fans how the booing might adversely affect the development of local football, as shown by the growing tension between football fans and journalists during match days.

Many might still think that Hong Kong football has been trapped in its own **insignificance but forcing a change in the city’s constitution could as well be** understood as a sign of its lingering **importance. The shared passion for the “beautiful**

game”, both in Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, might for the time-being be more unifying than the national anthem itself.

A Back-pass to Mao?: Regulating (Post-)Post-Socialist Football in China



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[Joshua I. Newman](#), [Hanhan Xue](#) and [Haozhou Pu](#).

Academics, journalists, and market analysts have made one thing clear: the business and culture of football in China is rapidly changing. The radical transformation of the sport has in large part been brought about by considerable investment in a number of key areas.

Player development

According to the *Associated Press* **at the start of 2017 China had 13,381 “special football schools”**—training academies that are typically attached to public primary **and middle schools and exist with the expressed purpose of increasing the nation’s** footballing talent pool. The government has also promised that by 2020 the nation will maintain over 100,000 publically-accessible football playing pitches, or roughly one per every 10,000 citizens.

The import of celebrity footballing labour

Many Chinese Super League (CSL) teams now spend in excess of US\$25 million to lure to international players away from top European clubs, with Shanghai SIPG spending in excess of US\$10 million per international player in 2017.

Domestic and overseas clubs and football-related brands

According to Xinhua News Agency, revenues for the CSL grew from US\$17.53 million in 2012 to US\$223 million in 2016—with net profits increasing from US\$9.5 million to US\$80 million over the same period. According to a report by *Bloomberg*, Chinese investors have spent over \$2 billion on investing European Football from 2015 to the end of 2016. Some of the high-profile investments including the acquisition of a majority stake in Italian club Inter Milan by Suning Holdings Group (who also owns the CSL team Jiangsu Suning F.C. and EPL broadcasting right holder (2019-2012) – PPTV) for \$307 million; the \$821million acquisition deal of another Italian football club AC Milan by Sino-Europe Sports; and the purchase of minority stake of the EPL team Manchester City for a deal worth \$400 million.

Technical expertise

At the national team level, following the success of the 2002 national team—who **under the direction Serbian Bora Milutinovic qualified for that year's World Cup**—the Chinese Football Association (CFA) has frequently employed top international coaches to steward the national team (Arie Haan 2002-2004, Vladimir Petrovic 2007-2008, Jose Antonio Camacho 2011-2013, Alain Perrin 2014-2016, Marcello Lippi 2016-present). Marcello Lippi—who led Italy to the World Cup championship in 2006—was enlisted at a salary of approximately US\$25 million per year. In the CSL, sponsors and team owners subsidize high salaries for foreign managers—totalling over US\$80 million for the 16 teams in 2016.

On the surface, these various shifts in capital allocation would suggest that the CFA—in conjunction with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the CSL—is **reformulating the world’s oldest footballing nation in the image of its European counterparts**: significant capital investments in labour, major marketing and global branding initiatives, expanded media rights and ticket revenues, international partnerships, and the creation of a vast network of in- and out-flowing capital from which the sport can be further opened up (*kai fang*) to, and marketised by, the global political economy.

Football in Post-Socialist China

Thus, it might be enough to say that these transformations are illustrative of what many commentators have suggested is a shift away from traditional socialist orthodoxies in favour of a more market-oriented, **some might say ‘post-socialist,’** approach to football provision and commercialisation. Unlike the more commonly **used phrase “socialism with Chinese characteristics”**—which is often favourably evoked by the CCP to refer to the uniquely hybridized form of Marxist socialism that evolved most significantly following the founding of the CCP in 1921 and then gained traction after the Second Chinese Civil War (c. 1945-1949) and through the Cultural Revolution of Chairman Mao (c. 1966-1976)—**“post-socialism” is often used by** historians and social critics seeking to demarcate a period where Marxist principles were widely abandoned in favour of increased privatisation, decentralization, globalisation, and pro-capitalist Dengist reforms.

While there is much to debate regarding the specificities of post-socialism, there is little debate that this transition—these reforms and ideological shifts—has brought about considerable changes to the national sport culture and sport economy. **Despite the nation’s notorious lack of success in international football, General Secretary Xi Jinping has explicitly stated the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) intention to 1) develop the domestic professional football league, 2) grow the sport’s popularity among the masses, 3) increase youth participation, 4) develop the national**

team to be the best in Asia, and 5) aggressively bid for and eventually host a men's FIFA World Cup. As the government outlined in the 50-point *Chinese Football Reform and Development Program* document released in 2015: **"Since Comrade Xi Jinping become General Secretary in the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, he has placed the development of football on the agenda in order to build China as a great sports nation"** (Chinese State Council [CSC], 2015, authors' translation). In the document, government intermediaries also outline how they will utilise a blended approach of central organisation and market-base competition to foster both the economic and social benefits of football development:

A combination of a national system and market mechanism. Using the superiority of the socialist system. Joining forces to integrate resources. Fully make use of the market mechanism. Inspire vitality. The creation of a fair and honest environment in order to promote the protection of equal competition. (Chinese State Council [CSC], 2015, authors' translation)

In the years that followed this 2015 edict, the business of football has burgeoned. Once insolvent CSL franchises are now valued at as much as US\$282 million, with perennial table- and market-leader Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao annually bringing in over US\$50 million in total revenues. Attendance at CSL matches increased by 50% from 2010 to 2016, and the league is now one of the top five most-attended leagues in the world.

Regulating Football: A Back-pass to Mao?

However, this market-based growth has also produced new machinations of central governance and regulatory initiatives intended to, as one might put it, put the socialism back in (post-)socialist Chinese football. In response to criticisms of excessive spending on foreign players, money laundering, prospective financial loss, and sport-based plutocratic leveraging, the government has recently enacted a

number of measures to more closely regulate the football industry in China. These measures primarily include:

- Restricting player transfers by imposing a 100% tax on loss-making football clubs that spend more than 45 million RMB (5.2 million GBP) per player in signing foreign players and 20 million RMB (2.3 million GBP) per player on domestic players
- Increasing resources and investment in Chinese youth players:
 - All clubs should spend no less than 15% of its overall expenditure on youth players training)
 - Loss-making football clubs that spend less than 45 million RMB (5.2 million GBP) per player in signing foreign players and 20 million RMB **(2.3 million GBP) per player on domestic players must set up a “youth training account” and invest funds equivalent to the transfer fees into the account**
 - Each CSL and second-division team will be required to have the same number of Chinese under-23 football players as foreign players in the match-day roster
- Limiting the number of foreign players (at the beginning of 2017 each club was allowed to have up to five foreign players in their squads while this number will be reduced to four [foreign goalies are not allowed to be in the squad] in a new regulation proposal released in August 2017)

So as is often the case in the global political economy more generally—and particularly as exemplified in by the declarations on offer by the Xi Jinping administration during the recent 19th National Congress of the CCP—football in China seems to be cycling away from the opening-up, or *kai fang*, practices that have defined **the sport’s ascent in recent years and toward an insular, regulatory, and**

centralised approach that has often defined the nation's socialist polity and economic structure during the Mao era and beyond. This has included reigning in maverick football entrepreneurs, **recapturing control of the sport's administrative processes,** and redeveloping the outcomes sought by football toward a stronger State and Party-building (as opposed to market or private) modality. By refocusing State resources into public facilities, the development of State sport-actors, China-based programs, and growing the domestic labor pool and labor economy, the CCP and CFA have charted a new course—perhaps a post-market footballing order—**from which the world's largest and oldest footballing nation** might galvanise its wealth of human capital towards greater participation and thus improved public health, a stronger position within the realm of sporting geopolitics, and improved results on the pitch at the World Cup.

Is China on a collision course **with world football's governing** body?



Image credit: CC by [Wikipedia Commons](#).

[Simon Chadwick](#).

Trent Sainsbury may not realise it, but [he recently became the epicentre](#) of a seismic shift in global football governance. The Australian is a 25-year-old defender who had been playing for Chinese Super League side Jiangsu Suning. In January, 2017, he **signed for Italy's Inter Milan** on a short-term loan deal. This looks like a relatively innocuous move – but it was not. Inter and Jiangsu are both owned by Suning, [a Chinese electrical retailer](#) (in Inter's case the company purchased a 70% stake [in the club last year](#)). In other words, Suning own both the buying and the “selling” club. This immediately raises questions about conflicts of interest, although it is not just a China-related issue. The likes of Red Bull and the Pozzo family are also owners [of multiple football clubs](#). However, China's ongoing football revolution seems to be premised upon taking control of and exercising influence over football's global

supply chains. [There have been widely reported rumours](#) that Suning is also seeking to buy a high-profile player representation agency.

Conflict zone

World football seems to be heading in the direction of multiple conflicts of interest which authorities have been slow to address. In some parts of the world, there are clear club ownership rules. [In England an investor with more than a 10% ownership](#) stake in one club cannot own more than 9.9% of another. Under UEFA rules, an investor cannot own a controlling stake in two teams which qualify for the same competition. Globally, the rules are neither as well developed nor as rigorously enforced. **And it's not just Suning which is keen on multiple ownerships;** businessman [Jiang Lizhang owns Spain's Granada](#) and China's Chongqing Lifan. But China is testing the boundaries of football governance elsewhere too. There are [suspicions among observers](#) that outward Chinese investment in overseas clubs is sometimes heavily linked to the state – particularly given President Xi Jinping's [stated ambition](#) to turn China into a football powerhouse. This raises a broader concern about multiple ownership and conflicts of interest. Indeed, [reliable reports indicate that the English Premier League](#) has hired investigators to examine **China's portfolio of English club acquisitions** for connections to the government. Standards of governance within China are often opaque, an issue compounded when **the state is involved, and the country's investors are moving capital across** international boundaries.

Ideally, FIFA should intervene to provide guidance and leadership. The problem is, **football's world governing body appears to be rather in thrall to China at the moment.** The organisation's scandals of recent years have mired it in financial difficulty, something [Chinese property group Wanda admits it took advantage of](#) when **securing a lucrative deal to become one of FIFA's main long-term sponsors.** In 2016, the company also [acquired Infront Sports and Media](#), a Swiss-based company which

manages media and marketing rights for international sports organisations. One of its biggest clients is FIFA.

Network operators

So, as one Chinese company (Suning) highlights weaknesses in football's ownership and labour market rules, another (Wanda) is aligning itself with world football's governing body. One might be inclined to see the two as unrelated; however, China is hugely ambitious and [highly adept at capitalising on its network of influence](#). These networks are inevitably never more than one or two degrees of separation away from the Chinese state, which is crucial in our understanding of the governance challenges that football now faces. For further evidence of those challenges, consider the case of Beijing Guoan. As 2017 began, the Chinese Super League club was a perennial underachiever. Now, it is [one of the world's most valuable clubs](#). **Previously owned by the conglomerate Citic, a 64% stake in "The Imperial Guards" was** [acquired by property developer Sinobo Land](#). This has valued the club at US\$800m, about the same as Italian giant AC Milan. It remains unclear what the precise nature of relations are, or have been, between Citic, Sinobo and the Chinese government. It is worth bearing mind, however, [the words of Scott Kennedy](#), China expert at the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), who has a clear view on how the state intervenes in business:

Chinese bureaucrats believe that they have the right to intervene in their country's economy whenever they want ... to promote certain industries ... Officials believe that they don't have to defend or explain their decisions in real time ... being opaque preserves their discretion to make changes on the fly.

This may be one reason why Beijing Guoan has just ascended into a position among **world football's elite; a demonstration of state ambition as much as it is an investment opportunity.** If this becomes viewed as a case of market manipulation, then it represents a challenge to the governance of football as China seeks to rapidly

position itself as a member of the game's upper echelons. This ambition is clear in China's voracious appetite for overseas player signings. Fans have looked on in exasperation and awe as [China's biggest clubs have hoovered up talent](#) for greatly inflated transfer fees and salaries. The common refrain is that the Chinese have more money than sense; that [the spending bubble will burst](#). Yet China has used this strategy in other industries to undermine competitors. [Fortune magazine observed](#): “[The country] divides and weakens rivals by appealing to their greed.” So, is China's inflation of transfer fees and salaries a deliberate ploy to draw high-quality playing resources away from European rivals, as well as inflicting financial pressure?

They wouldn't be the first. England's Premier League has [hardly been innocent](#) of skewing market values with massive bids for players, but this has been accidental rather than intentional. If covert Chinese state intervention in football is real, then it is of profound significance for global football governance. Inter Milan fans are no doubt looking forward to Sainsbury starring for the Italian giants. However, right now, China and its investors are the ones that are turning in match-winning performances. Football governance is being pushed to its limits by China; and like a flat-footed defender, world football is struggling to work out how to respond.

Marketing and Commercial Development

Xi Jinping's vision for Chinese football



Image credit: [CC](#) by [b cheng](#)/flickr.

[Simon Chadwick](#).

In 2014 President Xi Jinping announced his vision for the Chinese sports industry: to create a domestic economy worth \$850 billion by 2025. The vision is epic in scale: the most generous estimates of the current *global industry* are around **Xi's target for China**. Since November 2014, the world's attention has focused on the development of football in China, which is hardly surprising given Xi's proclamation that the sport should drive the country towards its sporting goals. China has embarked on a high-profile programme of football-related acquisitions, from high profile stars to play in the Chinese Super League (CSL) to investing in European football clubs such as Atletico Madrid and Manchester City.

Football though, is a means to an end for China, not necessarily an end in itself. In Great Britain, where the sport economy has been estimated to account for 1.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Premier League (PL) football makes a significant contribution to this figure. Indeed, a recent study found the PL generates £2.4bn in taxes per annum, as well as sustaining more than 103,000 jobs and adding around

£3.4bn contribution to GDP. Economically and industrially, it therefore makes sense for China to actively engage in football as a key driver in the pursuit of its vision. The aspirational Chinese sport economy extends way beyond this, and the last two years have represented what some people have **referred to as ‘the start of a five-year golden period for sport’**.

Already, this period has seen Chinese sportswear brands (like 361 and Anta) beginning to flourish, new online sports services being established (such as Lazy Bear), properties such as Ironman Triathlon being acquired by the Wanda Corporation, and sponsorship deals being signed (Ali E-**Auto’s deal with the FIFA World Club Championship** being one example). Although China re-entered the global sporting arena three decades ago and staged the summer Olympic Games in 2008, this latest focus on sport marks a more deliberate, strategic attempt to utilise sport for a number of purposes. Economics and industry aside, China also sees sport as a means through which to exert soft power influence around the world.

This is why football has come to symbolize Xi’s vision for sport, as it has a seductive appeal across the world. Moreover, China is already well-versed in the use of football as an instrument of soft-power. **The country’s use of stadium diplomacy** in Africa, most potently symbolized by its construction of venues for the 2011 African Cup of Nations in Angola, is one previous example of this. At the same time, China appears somewhat paradoxically to be in the midst of both a health and fitness boom, and an obesity epidemic. Investing in sport has helped to crystallise the agenda around both **of these issues. Similarly, China’s predisposition towards entertainment and its** deepening love for social media is providing opportunities for sport to generate content that users crave.

The diverse nature of China’s vision for sport appears to be reflected in the similarly diverse nature of the country’s organisations now investing in sport, both domestically and overseas. Domestically, real estate corporations have shown a

particular interest in sports investment opportunities. Arguably the most significant reason for this is that real estate and property companies are effectively dependent on the state for planning permission. At the same time, in China there is intense competition for land particularly in urban areas. Being seen to publicly support the **state's pursuit of its sporting vision is therefore one way of navigating through the red-tape** thereby easing the route towards successfully securing planning permission. It also provides a competitive advantage when companies are bidding to **secure use of land. It is surely no coincidence that Chinese football's most successful** recent club (Guangzhou Evergrande) is owned by a real estate corporation (Evergrande).

Real estate management seems to be much less of an issue for Chinese investors in overseas sports properties, which explains why other types of corporations have been in the vanguard of recent activity, most notably European football club acquisitions. **Upon securing a 20% stake in Atletico Madrid, Wanda's owner** explained how Madrid and football would become a hub in a global entertainment axis stretching from Beijing through the Spanish capital to Los Angeles. Wanda now owns AMC, the cinema business, as well as Legendary Studios in Hollywood, while the company may also considering a bid for Paramount Studios in L.A. Given **Wanda's additional ownership of Infront Sports and Media, and Ironman Triathlon,** it suggests that Wang sees sport as an entertainment product which forms part of a vertically integrated global business empire.

Wanda's strategy is not dissimilar to that of Suning, which owns both the Chinese Super League's Jiangsu club and Italian Serie A's Inter Milan. Stories continue to circulate that Suning is bidding to acquire player agency Stellar (which, among **others, represents Real Madrid's Gareth Bale).** One might ask why a high-street store chain seems intent on creating an integrated football supply-chain business. The answer is probably similar to Wanda – Suning is seeking to create a vertically integrated global business. Suning.com is one of Chinese largest e-commerce

platforms, while its stores sell electrical items such as computers, televisions and so forth. **Strategically, Suning's rapid, decisive** moves into football indicate that the business seems intent on creating, managing and distributing the content that fans and consumers can access via the equipment they can buy in Suning stores.

China Media Capital (CMC) is probably best known in football for its £265 million **purchase of a 13% stake in English club Manchester City. City's existing ownership structure (the club was bought by Abu Dhabi's ruling family in 2008), implies that** Chinese investment in the club has a geo-political and strategic dimension to it. **Given Abu Dhabi's oil reserves, which one assumes China would like to gain access to, the tie-up seems logical. In return, one suspects that the Gulf state's interests in** East Asia will be better served, possibly by Etihad Airways gaining access to new routes in China. The relationship seems even more logical given that CMC is a **state-backed firm, effectively an organisation that represents China's investment interests** abroad. At one level, CMC is therefore something akin to a sports sovereign wealth fund, which has been set-up to engage in long-term, revenue-generating investment opportunities. At another level, the firm appears to have been tasked with identifying properties in which to invest that are likely to have a significant impact **upon China's** soft power relationships.

Two years in, China's pursuit of Xi Jinping's vision is up and running. However, after an initial period of intense activity, observers are looking to what happens next. Already, there has been unrest in China among football fans angry about the **continuing lack of success for China's national football teams. At the same time, fans of football clubs from Milan to Manchester are asking 'what plans do the Chinese have for us?'** The next period of China's great sports project faces some key challenges and demands our attention.

Who is the Chinese soccer consumer and why do Chinese watch soccer?



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [See-ming Lee](#) /Flickr.

[Sascha L. Schmidt.](#)

Although China is still a developing soccer market, it is attractive. Currently, 237 million Chinese consider soccer their “favorite sport”; and, at 308 million, even more Chinese consumers watch soccer “at least once a week”. Interestingly, the potential size of the Chinese soccer market is about nine times greater than the well-developed German market and it already surpasses consumption of traditional Chinese sports such as badminton, table tennis, or volleyball. In addition, further potential to develop sport, and particularly soccer, is evidenced by the fact that 414 million Chinese people currently do not watch sports at all. To better understand and define the ‘typical’ Chinese soccer consumer and his/her consumption behaviour, [we conducted a country-representative consumer survey in collaboration with Nielsen Sports](#). We then compared this consumer behaviour to better known soccer consumption behaviours in countries like Germany, the US, Korea and Japan. Overall, 5,000 people participated in the survey. Their opinions are representative for a population of 1.899 billion people in Asia, Europe, and the USA.

From our findings, we developed a sketch of the typical Chinese soccer consumer. We define the Chinese soccer consumer as one who watches soccer at least once a week. Based on this definition, the typical consumer can be characterised along three dimensions: socio-demographics, media consumption and spending behaviour, and esports interest.

1. Socio-demographics

The typical Chinese soccer consumer is a 40-year-old middle-class male. Nearly three-quarters of current Chinese soccer consumers are male (73%). The average consumer is 40 years of age. And, in terms of education and income, the typical consumer is most likely to be a member of the rapidly growing middle class in China.

2. Media consumption and spending behaviour

Although only a few Chinese soccer consumers play soccer themselves – less than 7% play at least a few minutes a week – their sport media consumption is relatively high. The typical Chinese soccer consumer spends approximately three of his seven hours of total sports consumption per week watching soccer.

In addition, 44% of Chinese soccer consumers use social media to follow sports content. They are most interested in stars and follow them primarily via Wechat (27%), Weibo (19%), and Renren (14%). Overall, sport media consumption translates **into consumer annual spending of €15,68 per consumer, on average. Interestingly,** more than 50% of the spending is on merchandising items.

3. Esports interest

Compared to the entire Chinese sample, the typical Chinese soccer consumer is significantly more likely to be (at least slightly) interested in esports (42%). Fifteen percent of these soccer consumers watch esports at least once a week – 10% more than among the full Chinese sample. For Chinese soccer consumers who named an

esports title (55%), League of Legends was listed most (55%), followed by Counter-Strike: Global Offensive and World of Warcraft (9% each).

The typical Chinese soccer consumer watches 7 hours and plays 8 hours of esports in an average week. For these consumers, Youku, at 48%, is the most widespread streaming provider, followed by Douyu (42%).

Chinese consumers want to understand the game

We also analysed the reasons why Chinese watch soccer and found that for Chinese soccer consumers, “experiencing drama” and “gaining knowledge” are most decisive for watching soccer. Chinese soccer consumers are attracted to drama and derive pleasurable stress from closely contested games. Of the top five decisive factors named by Chinese consumers for watching soccer, three are related to experiencing drama. Drama reflects the motive that sport spectators feel positive stress and arousal from the uncertainty of the outcome of a sporting event. Their excitement is often triggered by anxious uncertainty regarding the expected game and/or tournament outcome. When watching soccer, it is also very important for Chinese consumers to acquire knowledge about the specifics of the game. In this case, knowledge concerns the need to acquire information associated with soccer rules, specific playing strategies and techniques, and/or with particular soccer players and teams.

We found that Chinese consumers’ knowledge about the sport, early exposure, and the people around them most impact their likelihood of watching soccer. For example, those surveyed who do not watch soccer reason their disinterest with a lack of understanding of **the game’s rules. Almost every other Chinese respondent mentioned that he or she, “[did not] understand the rules” of soccer.** The second most cited reason to not to follow soccer is that he/she did not grow up with soccer (37%); this reason is closely followed by **friends’ lack of interest in soccer (28%).** These

findings correspond to the Chinese soccer consumers' hunger for more knowledge to become connoisseurs of the game.

>>> [Download the report here: Dancing With the Dragon: The Quest For The Chinese Football Consumer.](#)

Corporate Social Responsibility and Chinese Professional Football



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [Ivan Walsh](#)/Flickr.

[Eric C. Schwarz](#) and [Dongfeng Liu](#).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) continues to be an important concept and a major part of strategic plans for sport organisations around the world. However, it is a concept that is relatively new in the context of professional sport in China. One reason is because CSR is a western concept that has only emerged in the Chinese market in the past quarter-century alongside the establishment of an increased market economy. Prior to the 1990s, modelled on the former Soviet Union system, sport in China was mainly government funded with the primary goal of winning gold medals and glory for the country. The situation began to change in 1994 when Chinese football became the first sport to become professionalised. This was followed by similar reforms in basketball, volleyball, table tennis and Chinese Chess. Professional football in China witnessed its worst CSR crisis within its relatively short history of professionalisation. In 2012, fifty-nine people, including former top officials of the Chinese football association, club managers, referees, and former national team players, were sentenced by Chinese courts for accepting bribes and fixing matches in a series of investigations.

This has led to a growing interest in and awareness of CSR issues in professional football from media and public debate. Research conducted by academics of Shanghai University of Sport and Victoria University in Melbourne sought to understand community expectations of CSR in professional football clubs by Chinese citizens. The ultimate goals were to determine whether community expectations of CSR in China are different as compared to those of Western nations, and to explore if there were related concepts unique to the Chinese population. To start, using academic literature and a panel of experts, a questionnaire was developed to measure community expectations of CSR by professional football clubs across 39 items that were categorised into eight factors: community involvement, CSR to employees, CSR to spectators, economic and financial responsibility, environmental responsibility, philanthropic activities, public health, and youth education. Each of the 39 items was measured on a five-point Likert scale from most important to least important.

Data were collected from residents of Shanghai in July 2015 across multiple public places in the city (e.g., shopping malls, retail outlets, and university campuses) at different times of day and multiple days of the week. The results demonstrated that seven of the eight factors studied did have a significant effect on community perceptions of CSR in Chinese professional football. In exploring community expectation based on importance, the results showed that community members in China value the responsibility to spectators, youth educational initiatives, and responsibility to employees as the most important factors, followed by financial responsibility and health initiatives. Environmental initiatives and philanthropic activities were seen as the least important factors. The one factor that was disproved was community involvement. Due to the cultural differences between Western nations and China as well as other factors such as Chinese urban sprawl evidenced in cities such as Shanghai and major Chinese city size, there is a limited ability for community involvement on a grand scale. In addition, concepts including social

inclusion, gender equity, and racial equity are relatively new concepts to Chinese society. With further development in these areas, there should be an increase in community involvement.

The research also identified specific areas Chinese residents felt Chinese professional football clubs need to be more actively engaged in, such as the **development of grassroots football, local players' development**, and local job creation. It would seem that this is a significant area of CSR that Chinese professional football club management should evaluate further and determine how to implement positive change in those areas. Chinese residents also reported that they believed Chinese professional football should make improvements in the areas of health promotion, role modelling for youth, finances, and game experience. In the area of health promotion, community members believe Chinese professional football teams are not playing an important role in promoting healthy lifestyles, especially in terms of youth health initiatives. In addition, the perception is that teams and players could play a greater role in preventing juvenile delinquency in the community. Team owners and managers need to review their community relations programs and add specific initiatives in these areas.

In terms of finances, community members still feel that Chinese professional football teams lack financial transparency in their operations, and community members are concerned that the games may not be being contested fairly and without payoffs. This is most likely related to leftover feelings from the previous match-fixing and organised gambling scandals over the past decade. However, significant strides have been taken by the management of the various teams, as well as the Chinese Football Association, to turn the page from past and be more transparent in their operations. Continuing in this positive direction should change the negative perceptions of the community towards this previous lack of integrity. The game day experience of spectators was also a great concern for community members. Whether those who responded to the survey had attended games in the

past or had heard about the game day experience via word-of-mouth or social media, it is apparent the message being received by the community is that the experiences at games are not meeting expectations of a professional football organisation, especially in the area of food service. It seems that facility operations, event management, and team officials need to address this concern to ensure better quality food options are provided on game days. They also need to review all other experiential aspects of events to ensure optimal levels of satisfaction by spectators.

While this research was a limited study involving a small sample size within one city, it does uncover the evolving importance of CSR in Chinese society and some of the major concerns Chinese residents have regarding their expectations for Chinese professional football. This information is valuable to Chinese professional football leagues as it allows them to gain a better understanding of the emerging needs and interests of their community members, as well as changes they may need to implement to their management and operational structures.

Chinese Football: An industry built through present futures, clouds, and garlic?



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [Daniel Cukier](#)/Flickr.

[David Cockayne.](#)

When we think of China and football recent well-publicised developments come to mind. These might include: Investments from China's private sector in European clubs; President Xi's various statements of footballing intent; or the substantial fees paid by Chinese football clubs for foreign players in an attempt to raise the profile of the domestic Chinese leagues. There are however signs of a strategic effort being made by China's emerging private sector to help sustain and drive China's infant football industry, and not in ways you might think. A good example of this is technology giant Alibaba.

For most people, Alibaba is a business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce firm founded by Jack Ma with the original aim of helping local Chinese firms develop cross-border trade. The success of their Initial Public Offering (IPO) on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) in 2014, and the annual Alibaba ' Singles Day ' consumer extravaganza has propelled the organisation into the international spotlight. Alibaba

is however much more than an e-commerce firm. Their mission is to “make it easy to do business” and their various service-based products are embedded in a dedication to cloud-computing on a global scale. Alibaba has therefore evolved to be less of a B2B firm, and more of a Consumer-to-Business (C2B) organisation that harnesses organic consumer demand to produce business opportunities for firms small and large, local and international.

Amongst several other service provisions, Alibaba have a dedicated sports group – Alisports – that since its inception has partnered with various international sports organisations including the International Olympic Committee (IOC); and World Rugby. **Alisports is the embodiment of Alibaba’s mission. Through their cloud-technology their goal is to drive the commercialisation of eSports and provide a digital commercial infrastructure for the Chinese consumption of sport locally and overseas (i.e. through ticketing services; fan engagement; performance analytics; sponsor services etc). China’s emerging football industry is a key part of this plan.** For this to be successful Alisports needs resources, expertise, and consumer trust. **On the surface, they have the technology, and if the recent ‘ Singles Day’ retail event** is a measure of marketing expertise and consumer trust then they have that too. But what all of this suggests to me is that they have a far greater secret ingredient, something not too obvious at first glance.

On March 30th 2017, Alibaba gave the world a glimpse of ‘Garlic as a Service’ (GaaS). In the [video release](#) GaaS is explained as the uniting of technology, nature, and humans in the production of a disruptive technology at Alibaba Cloud that is green, environmentally safe, and effective. This disruptive technology stems from the belief in plant neurobiology that **‘plants can think’ and do so through analogous structures** activated during photosynthesis. They suggest that during this natural occurrence, garlic exhibits the capability to process complex algorithms at a speed and effectiveness that exceeds **any human operated system. These ‘plant thoughts’ give** insight into data processing, organisation, security and communication. Solar power

is used to power the photosynthesis process, and water apparently improves performance. By tapping into nature, GaaS is said to offer solutions and insight that **will help drive Alibaba's cloud-based systems and their associated products – such as those surrounding football – in ways that are not limited by human imagination.**

The point of my article is not to debate plant neurobiology. It is also not to debate **whether or not Alibaba released an April Fool's joke a day too soon. From my perspective, 'GaaS' is a cleverly engineered marketing effort that also provides** nuanced insight into the social mechanisms of Chinese markets. On the one hand the effort represents a classic marketing communications narrative. It uses combinations **of lay and technical language, mostly the latter, to project expertise. The 'scientific'** feel to the communication presents an intertextuality that provides a feeling of authority and safety – **"it's science, so it must be true". The production also makes reference to several of Alibaba's core cloud services, and uses humour to create engagement throughout, and at the end.**

GaaS could also however **be evidence of what Jens Beckert calls 'imagined futures and fictional expectations'.** Beckert theorises that imagined futures and fictional expectations of future actions have the power to mobilise and drive modern economic transactions in the present. He argues that collectively held images of how futures may or may not materialise are essential market drivers as they free market actors from paralysing doubt allowing them to commit resources, time and efforts in the present. This is nothing new. Traditionally we use past data and history to base **rational economic forecasts as means of determining future outcomes. Alibaba's** GaaS example is however slightly different. Rather than using history, I argue that it creates an imagined future that results in a series of fictional expectations. As a result, Alibaba send a clear message to the broader Chinese economy that Alibaba is a firm built on expertise and innovation. This image is transferred to all its products and services, including those being designed and trialled in Chinese football. These **'present futures' are a form of temporal horizon in the present that represents the**

way economic actors – such as Alibaba – want the world to be in the future. The imagined future is not performative – i.e. the vision is not a self-fulfilling prophecy – but significant in that it activates economic efforts in the present irrespective of whether or not the imagined future is ever realised.

So, what do fictional expectations and imagined futures mean for Chinese football today? Currently the emergence of football in China as a commercial industry continues to invite scepticism from the West due to its past failings. That said, **President Xi's vision to both host and win a future World-Cup, and Alibaba's** commitment to a Chinese economy – including a thriving football industry – built around innovative cloud technologies is evidence that perhaps China is less concerned with reflecting on its past as a means to future success, and more concerned with equipping the nation with a positive image of the future as a means of driving investment and activity in the present.

Benchmarking the Chinese Soccer Market: What makes it so special?

Dennis-Julian Gottschlich and Sascha Schmidt.

The Chinese soccer consumer watches, plays, and spends considerably less than soccer consumers in the other markets. However, the market itself is very attractive since it offers huge growth potential. In our recent study [“Dancing with the Dragon – The Quest for the Chinese Soccer Consumer”](#), we analyzed commonalities and differences among China, Germany, the United States, South Korea, and Japan. We first conducted a country-representative consumer survey in collaboration with Nielsen Sports. Then, we then compared this consumer behaviour to better known soccer consumption behaviours in countries like Germany, the US, Korea and Japan. Overall, 5,000 people participated in the survey; their opinions are representative of a population of 1.899 billion people in Asia, Europe, and the USA.

Our analysis of the Chinese soccer market reveals unique characteristics. Let’s have a closer look at ten insights from our research: Chinese soccer consumers...

1. ...are primarily male

Of all participants, Chinese respondents reveal the largest gender gap in favor of male soccer consumers. In contrast, German respondents reveal the highest share of female soccer consumers.

2. ...are slightly younger

Soccer consumers in China and the USA tend, on average, to be slightly younger than soccer fans in more advanced soccer markets such as Germany and Japan. Forty-six percent of soccer consumers in China and 59% in the USA are 34 years old or younger. In contrast, in Germany only 37% of the soccer consumers are 34 years old or younger.

3. ...have comparable education and income to other markets

In terms of education and income, the Chinese soccer consumer is comparable to more advanced football markets. Interestingly, in the USA, 63% of the soccer consumers belong to a high-income class.

4. ...have the lowest soccer consumption level

At about three hours per week, Chinese soccer consumers reveal the lowest average football consumption in our sample. They watch significantly less soccer than, for example, the German soccer consumers. However, considering the total amount of weekly sport consumption in China and Germany, consumer behavior does not differ significantly from each other.

5. ...don't play soccer very often

Chinese soccer consumers play significantly less soccer than their peers in all other markets except Japan. Interestingly, a large share of US soccer consumers, almost every second, plays soccer on a weekly basis. This is even higher than the Germans!

6. ...spend less money

Chinese soccer consumers spend significantly less money on sport consumption compared to the other four markets investigated. The average German soccer consumer, in contrast, currently spends €177.52 per year – almost 12 times more than Chinese soccer consumers do. Interestingly, in all examined countries except China (where over 50% spend is on merchandise / Fig. 1), spending on tickets makes up the largest category.

ANNUAL SPENDING OF CHINESE FOOTBALL CONSUMERS IN CHINA BY CATEGORY (%)



Figure 2

7. ...focus on stars in their media consumption

In terms of using social media to follow sports, the Chinese are comparable to German soccer consumers (44% vs. 43%). However, Chinese soccer consumers primarily follow sports stars on social media, whereas German soccer consumers read sport news on social media. In the US, soccer consumers hold the highest social media affinity for sports content; nearly 80% use social media channels to seek sports-related information.

8. ...like drama

Experiencing drama is the primary driver for watching soccer in China (see Fig. 2). Like other developing markets, especially in China and the USA, knowledge acquisition is also an important driver of soccer consumption. Other factors such as the skill of the players and the possibility of escaping daily routine are likewise prominent among the investigated countries.

MOTIVES FOR WATCHING FOOTBALL IN COMPARISON



Figure 3

9. ...cheer for their stars rather than their teams

In China, soccer consumers tend to support and identify with their favorite star. Almost 50% of the Chinese soccer consumers selected a favorite player, but only 32% named a favorite soccer team to identify with. This is the lowest ratio in our sample next to the USA. In all other investigated countries, soccer consumers tend to follow a favorite player rather than a favorite team (see Fig. 3).



Figure 4

10. ...look at players' personality

Across all markets, the personality of the player is the key factor for perceiving the favorite player as role model. The key driver for a favorite player to become a role model in all other countries **investigated is, besides common interest, the player's** behavior off the pitch, this includes showing social engagement and following a glamorous and spectacular lifestyle (see Fig. 4). In China, by contrast, off-pitch behavior is not a top determinant for role model selection.

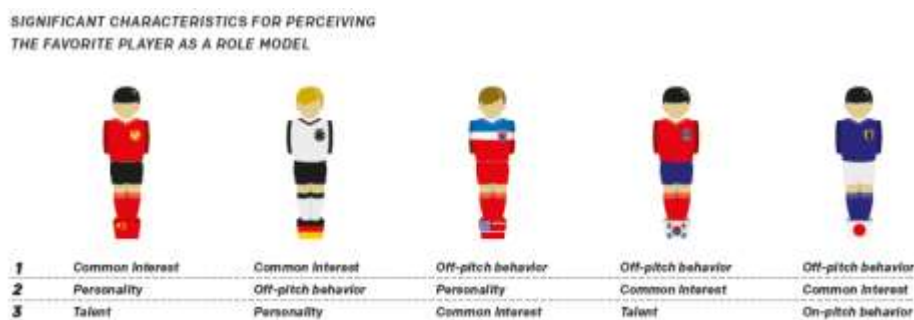


Figure 5

European soccer clubs: How to be successful in the Chinese market



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[Sascha L. Schmidt](#).

It is a no-brainer; the Chinese soccer market offers huge growth potential for European soccer clubs. But Chinese consumer behaviour is very different to what we have come to expect from consumers in Western soccer markets. For example, 90% of Chinese Internet users are mobile users. Delivering scalable digital solutions that offer a seamless digital omni-channel experience to the fan are pivotal. Therefore, professional soccer clubs who want to be successful in China and truly reach out to the Chinese soccer fan require digital adeptness that can cope with the pace of innovation and quality of the mobile experience in China. Based on our representative market research, we derive five insights that will help foreign soccer clubs meet this objective.

Start educating!

An interested and educated soccer audience sets the basis for making the Chinese soccer market even more attractive for foreign soccer clubs. Our survey results show that Chinese consumers crave knowledge about soccer rules, playing strategies,

tactics, teams, and players, which offer clubs many potential touch points with existing and new soccer fans. Opportunities for knowledge transfers from European soccer clubs and associations to China are manifold. The support of grassroots initiatives such as soccer schools held by Borussia Dortmund or Bayern Munich, for example, have been an important initial step. However, induced knowledge spill-overs from soccer clubs in established markets to better serve and educate the Chinese soccer consumer via digital platforms are the next frontier. And pairing these efforts with initiative of local (government) organisations would be indispensable.

Star focus!

In China, soccer consumers have a stronger identification with their favourite players than with their favourite team. Accordingly, winning over soccer fans in China requires strong brand ambassadors with celebrity status that can bring a soccer **club's brand and values close to the consumer base. Although global superstars from European soccer leagues are among Chinese consumers' favourites, the demand for domestic Chinese players is rising as well. According to our research, a player's** influence on fans is strongest when he is perceived as a role model. Accordingly, it is important to pick the right player for each target segment (e.g., females, youngsters) to achieve best possible market penetration. For the Chinese sport fan, **favourite players that exhibit an appealing personality, including having a "cool" and charismatic manner, being likeable and personable, and having a down-to-earth attitude, qualify as role models.**

Active involvement!

The importance of brand equity of soccer players is growing even more rapidly in **today's age of social media platforms. Chinese soccer fans are not just passive consumers, but very keen on expressing their opinion by sharing, liking, and commenting. By actively involving the fans, soccer clubs demonstrate to fans that they value their opinion – an important criterion to achieve fan loyalty. Entering**

China means capitalising on Chinese social media platforms like Wechat, Renren, Weibo. Video content is key, and platforms such as Youku and Weipai offer a great opportunity for soccer clubs to leverage personal insights into the life of the players with, for instance, home stories. Since social media networks and ecommerce platforms like Tencent constitute a complex landscape, especially for non-Chinese soccer clubs, and standardised key performance indicators for channel efficiency are currently scarce, it is decisive to carefully select and adapt their presence on different online channels to achieve best possible market penetration.

Leverage eSports!

The worlds of eSports and soccer have common ground in China – 46 million Chinese already watch both soccer and eSports at least once a week. Although eSports provides a promising bridge for blending the world of soccer and digital experiences, it is not primarily about converting eSports fans into soccer fans. **Instead, exposing the club's brand to a young, digital, and active eSports community** is key. For soccer clubs, verging into eSports is a ready-made touch point to experience and learn first-hand from changing consumption patterns that are shaped **by fans' connectivity and live reactions.**

Fuelled by a network-based community, the eSports scene puts strong emphasis on authenticity and rising talent from within the audience. Here, the use of eSports stars as influencers and promoters of non-endemic brands like soccer clubs can be helpful in establishing credibility in the eSports community. Although the market for eSports stars is still dispersed in China, eSports players as brand ambassadors for soccer clubs are a promising future asset. Given the very international eSports rosters, high player turnovers, and hardly developed talent systems, chances for foreign soccer clubs to find a right (Asian) brand ambassador are very promising.

Become virtual!

We found that 56% of the Chinese soccer consumers think that in the near future virtual reality (VR) will become relevant for them in sports – with 40% even thinking about buying a device in the next year. VR bars where fans can test and experience the exciting digital worlds are popping up in Shanghai and Beijing – a great opportunity to bring a soccer game close to the fans. A virtual fan experience, such **as replicas of a team's locker room, training sessions, fitness exercises, etc., which** are guided by holograms of soccer champions and re-live the deciding goal in the World Cup, could set the spark for children and adults to engage in soccer. In addition, theme parks are currently booming in China, and soccer-themed fun parks are a great chance to let the Chinese submerge themselves in the world of soccer. Here especially digital solutions that offer fans an immersive experience could make the difference in bringing young Chinese onto the soccer pitch.

The Sports Industry: The Next Big Thing in China?



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[Dongfeng Liu](#).

Whilst only three to five years ago from 2017, confidence in the Chinese sports sector was still fragile after a damaging football corruption scandal, today the landscape is much improved. Indeed, the past few years have witnessed unprecedented investment in the sports sector in China. Wang Jianlin and Jack Ma, the two men who took turns topping **China's rich list, have been leading the way in investment in sport** with each splashing out billions of dollars on sport properties. The financial muscle of the Chinese top flight professional football league and the recent eyebrow-raising spend on player transfer has now put the clubs across Europe on high [alert](#). In short, the perception of the sports industry in China has changed from **almost “nothing” into the “next big thing” over a relatively short space of time**. So, what has led to this seemingly sudden investment fever in sport? Will China become the nouveau Eldorado of sport business?

This rise of sport business in China has been widely attributed to strong top-down government promotion with a series of high profile policies released from the central

government. Among other things, a national strategic policy titled “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption” (the Decree hereafter), issued by China’s State Council on October 20, 2014, was widely cited as a milestone leading to the take-off of sports business.

There is a bigger picture behind the birth of this policy document. Since the current **leadership took office in 2012, China has entered, in President Xi’s words, a stage of “new normal”, meaning it can no longer maintain the double digit economic growth** it once enjoyed. Faced with the enormous challenges of economic slowdown and restructuring, the central government has to look to new areas of growth. Among a small number of other sectors, sport was selected as one of these new areas of potential growth given its potential, as evidenced by experiences of the developed economies. This is the first time that sport was recognized by the highest level of **China’s government as an important industry sector. Ambitious goals and some** concrete measures also make the Decree an eye-catching piece of legislation. It predicted that Chinese sport business would develop into a market worth RMB 5 trillion (equivalent to approximately USD 815 billion), with an annual GVA of RMB 1.7 trillion or roughly between 1.2% and 1.5% of national GDP by 2025.

On March 16, 2015, less than half a year after the aforementioned legislation, the Decree was matched by another high profile strategic plan, namely the Overall Reform Plan to Boost the Development of Soccer in China (the Soccer Plan hereafter). **The Soccer Plan was approved by China’s central reform group, a core decision-making body chaired by President Xi. While it’s no secret that Xi is a soccer fan himself, there is a danger of oversimplifying to attribute a national strategy of China to its political leader’s personal hobby. In many ways this Soccer Plan can be** seen as a follow-up plan to the previous Decree, as a coherent strategy to promote the development of sport and industry. Unlike in the west, all sport governing bodies in China, such as China Football Association (CFA), are quasi-governmental organizations. It is widely believed that this centralized system from the old planned

economy era is the major obstacle to the development of a free market-based sports **industry and professional sport. So, the real key word of the Soccer Plan is “reform”**. It proposed and promised that the centralized sports governing system should be deregulated to release the huge market potential of the sports industry in China. Soccer is also the most popular team sport, as well as one of the very few professionalised sports in China. Thus, it is expected that the reform of soccer would serve as a pilot scheme for other sports to follow. In addition, China is of course well aware that soccer is a sport with global popularity and influence, highly intertwined with national pride. But the Chinese fans have been disappointed time and again by **the performance of their men’s national team. Thus, the talk of becoming a soccer super power has also become a natural part of the “Chinese dream” narrative** proposed by President Xi.

The timing and the signals sent out by these policies are also equally important. While accepting that by any measure, the sports industry in China is still in its infancy stage, there exists a real growing demand for quality sports products where demand has outstripped supply. Most of the core assets and properties of the sports industry are in the hands of the government, which could not be easily accessed by the private **sector. Thus, these national sport strategies couldn’t come at a better time** and are warmly embraced by the market.

While the importance of these strategies can’t be overstated, it would be naïve to say that the industry could be built with a handful of policies. Many of the challenges remain unsolved. The termination of the Chinese Football Administration Centre, the former state-run governing body of football, was officially declared on Jan. 5 2017, putting an end to the lengthy process of the so-called **“decoupling of Chinese Football Association (CFA) from government” as promised** in the Soccer Plan. But whether the CFA can become a real autonomous governing body remains to be seen. For some it might mean old wine in a new bottle, and even then, the bottle is not really new, given the CFA has always been there (at least in name). The reform of

football administration in its current form can hardly be interpreted as a deregulation of sport. The newly “elected” president of CFA is at the same time a vice minister of the Sport Ministry and may have already revealed the thinking behind the reform. Mr. Gou Zhongwen, the reform-minded new chief of China’s Sport Ministry, was already heard saying “the water of sport is [very deep](#)” implying the complexity of sport reform ahead.

In addition, the sudden rise of capital poured into sport-related business over the past two to three years, and the acquisition, often at seemingly inflated prices, of various sport properties, has led many to believe that a bubble may be in the making. The recent financial crisis facing [LeTV Sport](#) seems to show that these worries are not totally unjustified. It is also widely acknowledged that the dearth of talent and expertise is another bottleneck to sports business development [in China](#), which to some degree is highly associated with the failure of some emerging players.

Despite all the challenges, the Chinese sports industry achieved an outstanding growth rate of 35.97% in 2015, outshining most other sectors. Without doubt, this robust growth rate alone will continue to attract the cash-rich and investment-hungry nouveau riche into the market. While we will witness the fall of many investors in the years to come, there will be surely many others who will be smart enough to tackle all the challenges and rise to the top of this promising industry.

Online streaming media: FIFA **World Cup's next target in** China?



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[Bo Li](#) and [Olan Scott](#).

China Central Television (CCTV) is the only national broadcaster in China and it used to be the only platform that FIFA partnered with to distribute the content of major international soccer events. However, the situation may change in the near future with the growing popularity of online streaming modalities in China. Tencent sports, for instance, obtained exclusive rights for video-on-demand (VOD) and live streaming of the 2017 FIFA Confederations Cup. The agreement between Tencent sports and FIFA also contained exclusive digital media rights for FIFA U-17 World Cup 2017, which was held in India in October 2017. International sport federations, such as FIFA and UEFA, used to only sell broadcast rights of major events to CCTV in China. CCTV used to have stronger bargaining power in negotiations because of its status in China, so international federations had to relinquish some power to CCTV. With the increased broadcast right fees, some professional sports organisations started to sell media rights to other digital media platforms.

The first time for Chinese soccer audiences to watch major international soccer events online can be tracked back to the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa. China Network Television (CNTV), a national web-based TV broadcaster, obtained the exclusive online streaming rights from FIFA, becoming the first Chinese digital media to broadcast the FIFA World Cup. CNTV later resold the rights to other commercial online stream platforms including Tencent, Sohu, Youku, Tudou, and Ku6 for 15 million Chinese Yuan each (USD\$2.2 million). Results of a recent study revealed that 78.3% of Chinese internet users spent less time watching TV. The survey conducted by Tencent (2017) also showed that there is an increasing number of young audiences choosing to live stream sporting events, because there is more content available to fans. Meanwhile, this study also indicated that the games distributed via online platforms were of better quality and fans were easily able to search out information and interact with the commentators.

The increasing popularity of online streaming of media in China threatens the status quo. During the 2014 FIFA World Cup, CCTV refused to resell the livestream rights to other internet broadcasters since they were concerned that reselling the broadcast rights may hurt their ability to generate advertising revenue and all commercial websites only obtained VOD rights from CCTV. The fast expanding online stream services in China have started to change the landscape of the sport streaming services. Tencent Sports and PPTV, for instance, have been aggressively obtaining all online streaming rights from international sport organisations. Tencent Sports, for instance, signed a 5- year agreement with the NBA, worth a reported \$700 million. PPTV, a streaming video website owned by Suning Commerce Group, spent nearly \$2 billion to obtain international soccer competition rights, ranging from **UEFA Champions League, to Spain's La Liga, Italy's Serie A, English Premier League,** and AFC Champions leagues.

In order to continue to generate revenue and attract more young fans, professional sport leagues have already deeply cooperated with commercial online streaming

platforms in China. However, international governing bodies such as the IOC and FIFA still only sell digital rights to mainstream TV broadcasters in the majority of markets in the world. Furthermore, the policy introduced in 2000 by State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of China (SAPPRFT) stated that CCTV was the only broadcaster in China which had the right to purchase media rights of major international sporting events such as Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup (including qualification stages), and the Asian Games. The policy also mentioned that other broadcasters cannot purchase from international federations directly. Under the policy protection, FIFA reached an agreement with CCTV to grant the Chinese national broadcaster the exclusive media rights for streaming both the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups. Based on this agreement, CCTV also acquired all media rights, across all platforms including live, delay and highlights rights.

From FIFA's perspective, selling the new broadcast media rights to fast growing online media services may be a great strategy in the future. The newest data released by FIFA (2017) showed that the international soccer governing body lost \$369 million in 2016 and the number may increase to \$489 million. Being able to sell broadcast rights to new platforms will help FIFA generate more revenue to make up for the deficit. In addition, three Chinese organisations, Wanda Group, Hisense, and Vivo **Mobile, became the FIFA's top sponsors in last two** years. If the FIFA World Cup and other related events could be broadcast on more media platforms in China, it will be a good news for these Chinese top sponsors as well since this could benefit their brands and marketing strategies. For FIFA itself, it will also help them retain their new sponsors.

Bayern Munich's strategy to enter the Chinese market



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[Sascha L. Schmidt](#).

The world has understood: China wants to become a global power in soccer. The declared goal of the Chinese government is to hold a World Cup within the next 15 years and to win the world title by 2050. Yet it is not just this government-led soccer boom attracting foreign clubs to enter the Chinese market. China is the most populous country on earth, and the Chinese consumer is highly attracted to soccer, especially European soccer. Our data shows that 237 million people in China call soccer “my favourite sport” and, at 308 million, even more Chinese soccer consumers watch the sport at least once a week. This, already, makes soccer the **number two sport in China**. Only basketball is more popular in Asia’s largest economy. However, soccer is set to become the number one sport in China – thanks to government support. This opens up unimaginable marketing opportunities for local but also foreign soccer clubs.

Therefore, it is not a surprise that the top three German soccer clubs, measured by financial strength, are currently conducting their Asian summer tours with a stopover and several pre-season games in China. Current German champion FC Bayern

Munich is again touring through China. Borussia Dortmund is repeating its China trip from last year after having visited Japan, Singapore and Malaysia in 2015. And FC Schalke 04 has decided to return to China after a successful trip last year. Other German teams from the Bundesliga are also engaged in diverse collaborations with their Chinese counterparts. To mention a few: Hamburger SV signed a deal with **SIPG, which delivers advisory services to build the club's infrastructure for** systematic youth development in Shanghai; Eintracht Frankfurt recently agreed to cooperations with the Beijing Enterprises Group and the Federation of University Sport of China (FUSC); other grassroots collaborations with Chinese clubs have been run by 1. FC Köln and Bayer Leverkusen.

What appears to be the new normal was previously unthinkable. Bundesliga clubs **took their time entering the Chinese Market. In fact, although Germany's leading** soccer team, Bayern Munich, has returned to China for its fifth time, it was only in 2015 that they decided to strategically invest in China. So just two years have passed since the German record champion dared to start challenging other clubs like Manchester United or Real Madrid, who have already been active in China for almost a decade in the race for the Chinese soccer fan.

This late entry into the Chinese soccer market compared to their European peers has inspired us to write a Harvard Business School case study about Bayern Munich in China. Indeed, team tours and friendly games with local clubs get a lot of media attention. Nevertheless, they can only be a part of a market entry strategy. Winning the race for the Chinese consumer requires engaging with the Chinese fan base 365 days a year – online and offline.

The initial situation

After years of dominating the German Bundesliga and an increasing saturation of the domestic market, FC Bayern deeply analysed the foreign territories that would be the most interesting to enter. Alongside the USA, top-level management at Bayern

Munich's headquarters in Munich decided to go to China. However, it was not only the huge potential fan base market research was indicating. Looking for competitive advantages, Bayern Munich realized that Chinese consumer preferences fit well with **the club's identity and shared values**. For example, Chinese soccer fans appreciate **Bayern Munich's team culture, focusing on unity among stars and selflessness**. Furthermore, Bayern Munich's team colours are red and white. Red has cultural significance in China, as it is associated with good luck and happiness. Finally, many people in China are "Germanophiles", with a love of the Oktoberfest, German engineering, and products that are "made in Germany."

The "make" entry strategy

FC Bayern decided to undertake their Chinese market entry with a so-called **"make" strategy**. That means, **"do it yourself"** instead of **"let others do it for you"**. Overall, the market entry strategy of FC Bayern in China has three pillars:

1. Local legal entity and e-commerce infrastructure

Like other European competitors (e.g. FC Barcelona in Hong Kong or Manchester City in Beijing), the club opened an office in Shanghai. However, FC Bayern founded an own Chinese legal entity, which made it a pioneer compared to its European peers. In addition, the Bavarians built their own infrastructure for e-commerce, rather than give licenses to external service providers in China. The local team consciously invested in extensive product descriptions, special promotions and campaigns, player-specific content through special sub-sites, customer hot lines/chats, and put a lot of emphasis on product originality, quality and variety with a strong focus on the colour red.

Additionally, the club decided to open an official online flagship store on Alibaba's Tmall, China's dominating e-commerce platform, which had already existing partnership of Tmall with large brands such as Apple or Adidas. Although Bayern Munich gave the logistics service to its existing partner DHL, it keeps control of the

products and prices as well as the design of the stores **to fully leverage the club's** competencies and experience.

2. A strong focus on partnerships

Unlike other clubs, Bayern Munich carefully selects its partners, always having in mind that the club wants to keep true to its core. Long-term partners and relationships are key to this strategy. Rather than switching major sponsors every few years, FC Bayern prefers sustainable deals with most of its partners that are not easily replicable for competitors. For example, the club can look back on a 60-year partnership with Adidas, a 40-year partnership with Coca-Cola or a 15-year partnership with Audi. Making systematic use of these long-term global partnerships **have been of major importance for Bayern Munich's market entry in China.**

Moreover, FC Bayern focused on fostering local partnerships with Chinese soccer **schools. Given that the club's youth academy had nurtured five World Cup** champions in recent years, the Bavarians want to take advantage of the existing training expertise, coaches and coaching facilities (e.g., specific courses for Chinese junior coaches). Although many investors have knocked on their door in China, rather than rush in, Bayern decided to be patient and consider the best approach to take. As a first step, the club opened a soccer academy in Qingdao in 2016. Other plans are far advanced. For example, FCB recently announced their plans to build a soccer school in Shenzhen. That 5-year deal includes agreements on the training and supervision of coaches, a continued knowledge exchange as well as joint training camps.

3. A glass-clear brand building communication approach

Compared to its competitors FC Bayern's local team in Shanghai is focused on brand building rather than sole sales activities. The idea is evidently to position the club's identity in China before engaging in extensive sales efforts. Thereby, communication is key. It is clearly adapted to the Chinese consumer behaviour through tailored

stories, incentivizing interaction between the customers and a clear social media strategy on Chinese platforms such as Sina Weibo or WeChat. Although all of these **brand building communication efforts are centred around the club's sporting success, individual star player content, and the club's Bavarian tradition and origin,** Bayern wants to provide self-generated, unique and local content. The goal is to build **a strong brand in China, that it is largely independent of the club's sporting success.** Therefore, a dedicated native speaking team takes care of individual content for **FC Bayern's website, club-TV** and social media accounts in China.

Outlook

In order to win the race for the Chinese soccer fan, digital presence and continuous online buzz will be crucial. Thereby, the competitive landscape is less about the direct soccer competitors but more about other entertainment providers. According **to the most recent annual Red Card study (2017) of European soccer teams' digital** operations in China, FC Bayern came out as runner-up on Chinese digital media after Manchester United and has been awarded the title of the most fan-engaged soccer **club last year. In addition, FC Bayern's Tmall store not only outperformed its** European peers but also sports leagues such as the NBA and the NFL in terms of customer experience. Results have been surprisingly swift, yet this success does not **come unexpectedly. We are looking forward to seeing how the journey continues...**

E-sports in China: History, Issues and Challenges



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[Lu Zhouxiang](#).

E-sports refers to competitive tournaments of video games among mainly professional gamers. A 2015 research report produced by games market research company Newzoo and global sports market analytics firm Repucom shows that worldwide e-sports market revenue reached US\$194 million in 2014 and is predicted to reach US\$465 million in 2017. Competitive gaming has grown into a popular spectator sport with a fan base comparable to that of mid-tier traditional sports such as volleyball and swimming.

Initially, competitive gaming was most popular in North America and Western Europe. When the e-sports industry began to take off in the late 1990s, China joined the club and soon became a major player. In the early years, competitive gaming was regarded by most Chinese gamers as a hobby, a leisure activity, a social media platform and a new lifestyle choice in the era of information technology. From the late 1990s, profit-driven companies such as video game websites, PC newspapers, and computer hardware/software vendors began to organize and sponsor video

game competitions across the country, which facilitated the emergence of China's first generation of professional and semi-professional gamers.

The Chinese government took a supportive stance toward e-sports, hoping to take this opportunity to facilitate the development of the IT industry and boost the economy. In 2003, the Sports Ministry listed e-sports as one of 99 officially recognized sports. In 2004, the First China E-sports Games (CEG) were launched by the Sports Ministry and the All China Sports Federation. After more than 15 years of rapid development, competitive gaming has gained general acceptance. E-sports events are organised across the country on a regular basis. Domestic league matches are watched on the Internet and on television by millions of gaming fans. Top players have become national figures. In 2008, celebrity *Warcraft III* player Zhang Xiangling was selected as a torchbearer for the Beijing Olympic Games as a representative of e-sports. In March 2013, a national e-sports team was established by the Sports Ministry. By 2016, with a total annual revenue of US\$22.23 billion, China had **overtaken the USA as the world's largest e-sports** market. There are now over 100 million e-sports fans in China.

The past decade has seen the commercialization and professionalization of **competitive gaming**. **'E-sports' has become a new concept that gaming companies,** PC hardware vendors, video game publishers and online streaming platforms are eager to sell to gaming fans. The objective is to attract more young people to the ever-expanding gaming industry. Both domestic and foreign gaming companies like Perfect World, Blizzard and Riot Games are investing heavily in China to recruit new players and viewers. While leading gaming companies, live streaming services and online gaming platforms are making millions of dollars of profits from young e-sports audiences and participants, who put countless time, money and effort into online gaming, the booming e-sports culture has contributed to the formation of a vast cohort of gaming addicts in China. Parents, educationists and doctors have

expressed growing concern over the social and health costs of the e-sports industry. Many question the sustainability of the e-sports industry.

Professional gaming offers new opportunities for young players who dream of becoming superstars, earning millions in prize money at international competitions. However, aiming to become a professional player seems to be a pricey gamble. The professional e-sports world operates in a pyramid structure, with its base formed by millions of gamers who are willing to devote their time and money to pursuing the dream of e-sports success. The reality is that, more than 90 per cent of the professional and semi-professional players will remain at the bottom of the pyramid, earning small salaries. The average career lifecycle of a professional e-sports player is three to five years, which is significantly shorter than in traditional sports. Most of the pro players are between 16 and 23 years old. After bidding farewell to their e-sports dreams at a young age, they soon find out that the knowledge and skills they have learned during their e-sports careers are of little help in securing a new job. At the same time, the e-sports world has also closed its door behind them because e-sports streaming service companies and game software developers only want star players.

A study conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2010 revealed the increasing number of problems associated with Internet gaming. It pointed out that nearly 50 per cent of young Chinese people use the Internet just to play games. Internet gaming addiction started attracting the attention of the general public when an increasing number of deaths began to occur in Internet cafes. In 2012, a 23-year-old man was found dead in an Internet cafe after a marathon 23-hour gaming binge. In 2015, 24-year-old gamer Wu Tai collapsed and died in an Internet cafe in Shanghai. Internet gaming addiction-related violence and crimes are also on the rise. A 2010 survey conducted by the China Youth Association for Network Development showed that gaming addiction has become a significant factor in juvenile crimes such as theft, burglary and robbery. In December 2013, a 15-year-old secondary school

student was stabbed to death by a 14-year-old boy in an Internet cafe in Dandong. The 14-year-old confessed that he could not control his anger when the victim had laughed at his poor gaming skills. In February 2015, a 60-year-old taxi driver in Danyang was robbed and killed by two 14-year-old teenagers. The money was used to feed their Internet gaming habit. The staggering fact is that similar tragedies and crimes happen nearly every month in China.

In response to the worrying situation of the ever-growing number of young Internet gaming addicts, an increasing number of clinics and military-style boot camps have been set up across China to tackle the issue. This initiative has been supported by many desperate parents. **As early as 2007, the country's psychologists had also** launched initiatives to classify Internet gaming addiction as a mental disorder that leads to problems and symptoms including irritability, [anxiety](#), depression and anger disorders. Although Internet gaming addiction has not been officially recognized by the Ministry of Health as a medical disease, regulations were passed by the Chinese government to limit the time teens can spend playing online games and prevent under-18s from Internet cafes except on public holidays. China, like South Korea, Japan and the USA, is now recognizing gaming addiction as a public health matter. Academia, media and the general public are becoming more cautious about the development of the e-sports industry, which mostly targets vulnerable groups made **up of the country's children, teens and young adults.**

Football's China Future: Doing Business in Beijing



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[Simon Chadwick](#).

China's interest in football is not just a recent phenomenon; in fact, some in China are convinced their country first invented the game. Whether this is true remains a subject that many across the world would no doubt debate. Yet it was not until the 1980s that overseas football league games were broadcast in China, when Italian Serie A matches were first shown on television. This partly explains why clubs such as AC and Internazionale of Milan remain popular among groups of Chinese fans. As **the 1990s and early 2000s unfolded, China's economic transformation attracted the** interest of football clubs from across the world, which saw significant economic growth, rising income levels and the emergence of a consumption culture as a commercial opportunity. Throughout this period, however, many clubs struggled to establish a strong or meaningful presence in China. Hence, the country seems to have spent **most of the last decade being labelled as 'an opportunity', without many** clubs ever really gaining traction in this fast-moving market.

When Didier Drogba and Nicolas Anelka moved to China in 2012, it seemed like the country and its football were on the cusp of major change. This failed to materialise, but it was only just over two years later that President Xi announced his vision for **China to create the world's largest domestic sport economy by 2025. Crucially, Xi** placed football at the heart of his vision, most notably for the country to ultimately host and win the World Cup. Since then, China has been heavily investing in football from the grassroots right through to the elite professional level of the game. This has **renewed world football's appetite** for doing business in China. Over the last three years there has been a consequent flurry of activity in China ranging from the predictable club tours to the sale of tailored merchandise, innovative use of social media and creation of club offices in key Chinese cities. These have been heady days for organisations in football, with many of them proclaiming their successes.

Despite the euphoria, there is however strong evidence that people from outside China still do not understand its football, its people or the country. If there is one **incident that illustrates this, it is Chelsea player Kenedy's social media misdemeanour over the summer. During the English club's Chinese tour, the Brazilian** posted a couple of photographs that resulted in outcomes that only just seemed to **fall short of a diplomatic incident. The specific nature of Kenedy's posts suggested** that football clubs and players remain oblivious to some hugely important issues when doing business in China. In this case, communication management and the use **of social media were especially pertinent, as were the implications of Kenedy's posts for Chelsea's commercial and country strategies. China nevertheless remains an** important country for football, one that clubs, associations and others should not be afraid to do business in and with. However, it is important to understand that China is a unique, complex and nuanced environment in which to operate. Hence, the following are suggested as general areas that organisations should address prior to market-entry:

Get to know China

Step-back from football for a while to learn about the country. The country has a long, rich, fascinating history that is interesting-in-itself. However, by understanding **something about China's history and culture, one is far** better placed to get to grips with understanding issues such as relationship management and communication.

Ignorance and arrogance are not a strong foundation for doing business

In areas such as relationship management and, for that matter, creating new products, building an online presence, and hiring employees in China, people in football cannot simply assume that China is somehow an extension of Europe and North America. The country has its own unique, distinctive way of doing business and is increasingly confident of its own identity and place in the world. Failing to understand and accept these things can result in an organisation failing to gain traction in the Chinese market.

Politics always trumps business and economics

It is important to remember that China has a different political system to many other countries, hence Westerners should not expect to find the same notion of economic rationality that one does elsewhere in the world. As we have seen throughout 2017, **China's state authorities have** regularly and unexpectedly intervened in football. In simple terms, football in China always operates in the context of politics, and new entrants should always be mind of the uncertainty this can bring. Predicting political intervention is difficult and kicking against it is fruitless if not potentially dangerous.

Embed yourself in the socio-cultural fabric of China

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of society and culture is language, and one should never assume that Chinese people speak English, German, French or any other Western language. Indeed, most people in China speak only Chinese, of which there are nearly three hundred versions being used across the country. Yet there are other ways in which socio-cultural norms are important in China, ranging from how

one presents a business card and addresses an older person through to the role food plays and the significance of national holidays. Acknowledging, understanding and embracing these phenomena is vital.

Bilateralism and partnerships rule

Many in **European football have tried and failed to ‘crack’ the Chinese market**, although this has too often been premised on an approach emphasising revenue generation and a one-sided view of who should derive greatest value (i.e. the Europeans). When seeking to do business in China it is important that organisations in football do so bilaterally; in other words, ensuring that China and the development **of Chinese football is at the forefront of one’s thinking. This is bound-up** in the need for a partnership approach, **where both sides of a relationship ‘win’**. Such relationships must be built upon trust, which is established over years rather than days or months. If you want to be in China, be prepared to commit to the long-term.

These general points cover a multitude of issues, which the interested reader should take care to familiarise themselves with.

How China's Huawei is taking on Samsung and Apple

Mark Skilton.

Chinese telecoms giant Huawei posted an eye-popping [70% growth in 2015](#). It is now beating HTC and Sony when it comes to market share in Europe and is third only to **Apple and Samsung when it comes to global smartphone sales**. Huawei's growth is another indication of how Chinese companies are successfully moving away from their traditional strategy of producing cheaper products to attack the low-end of the market. The world of smartphones, tablets, smart watches and connected devices of the internet of things is the new battleground to provide digital services. And Huawei **has quickly announced itself as a serious player in it**. Last year's success was built on a strategy that rival Western firms have excelled in – marketing, brand building and customer service.

The race to engage

Existing brands such as Blackberry and Sony are already engaged in competitive marketing in both product and customer engagement to grab a piece of the large **but finite customer base, so Huawei's rapid rise to** overtake them is very impressive. Huawei increased its global share of the smartphone market from 6.8% in 2014 to 9% in 2015 – a massive 50% gain [compared to Apple's growth of 27%](#). It suggests Huawei now understands how to play the smartphone market. New organisational and workforce strategies that have a laser focus on a customer-first mindset, tightly driven by the needs of the local market, have been put together. In a crowded price-sensitive android market this matters greatly where choice and brand awareness are critical.

Just competing on product functionality and a brand name is not enough when the **nature of "smart" means** you have connected consumers and feedback on social media is instant. Huawei understands that the mobile market is now all about the customer service experience and no longer just a telecoms commodity. Getting hold

of the consumer and personalising the digital world for them with a good experience and price point that fits their needs and lifestyle choices is also critical. Huawei is a prime example of a modern commercial mindset emerging from Chinese industries. Its marketing embraces local markets and they aggressively target consumers with sponsorship deals that include a host of big football clubs across Europe, including Arsenal, Paris Saint-Germain and [AC Milan](#). Plus, their product portfolio spans the complete modern telecoms provider from hardware to software.

Three ways to succeed

Customers cannot be taken for granted in this tough market. History shows that customers lack pure brand loyalty – they are more loyal to the experience, the community and ecosystem of services that best fits their needs. With so much choice out there, it is more about listening and socially engaging with the customer that is key. At least three key strategies seem to be emerging in the growth of the telecoms players in the new mobile, wearables and connected internet of things services.

1. **A strong focus on “customer first” philosophy from the CEO down through the whole organisation to effectively manage customer experience 24/7.**
2. Using third parties to sell your products and a service that adds value and extends penetration into new markets. Huawei has a [partner programme](#) that drives sales across its portfolio. Recent awards in Asia in 2015 follow [expansions into Australia in 2011](#) and similar regional strategies across Latin America, the Middle East and Europe. This federated supply chain model allows companies to extend their workforce and has accounted for more than **55% of Huawei’s growth from [these third party sales](#)**. It is increasingly essential for scaling up sales regionally.
3. Embracing international standards to get into thought leadership positions. For example by joining [The Open Group](#), a major software standards

consortium, and its Digital Business and Customer Experience [\(DBCX\) workgroup](#) helps Huawei define initiatives on connected customer and product design. Taking part in these kinds of groups enables firms to raise their game and influence in new markets by getting smarter in the way they interact with existing and potential customers and partners. It can then be translated into improving working practices – from managing the supply chain to service delivery – across the board.

What Huawei has done well is realise that consumers are always connected. Companies that exploit this will start to gain more ground in the battle for owning the digital market. It requires more than the specific strategies but thinking holistically about how to transform to a digital operating model in this new world of connected things.

Internationalisation

History of the People's Republic of China and FIFA



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [FHKE](#)/flickr.

[Layne Vandenberg](#).

Although the People's Republic of China has recently emerged as a prominent player on the international football stage, its connections in the football world run deep. **China's changing internal politics have controlled its approach to international relations, including those in the sports world. The modern history of international relations of the People's Republic of China can be explained in three** distinct periods: 1) from 1949-1970, when China was isolated and pushing back against international recognition of the independence of Taiwan (also known as Chinese Taipei); 2) from 1971-2007, when China attempted to normalize itself after the shock of the Great Leap Forward and the beginnings of the Cultural Revolution; and 3) from 2008 to today, as China carves out its own role as a confident player on the international stage. **China's relationship with football's governing body, the Fédération Internationale de Fútbol Association (FIFA), progressed through three distinct periods with similar characteristics: 1) the ongoing conflict between China and FIFA based on the Cold War and the Taiwan issue; 2) the opening and recognition of China by FIFA after their exit in 1958, to their national goals to dominate football in the late**

1990s; and 3) the slow emergence of China as a soon-to-be important player in global football before and after the 2002 FIFA World Cup.

The Chinese Football Association (CFA) was founded in 1924 and affiliated with FIFA in 1931. When the PRC was founded on October 1, 1949, the Shengyan Football Team was invited to Beijing to play – **“in celebration of the establishment of the new communist regime. Football was seen as a symbol of modernity; a talisman of topicality; a statement of intent. The intention was clear: modern sport would characterize modern China”** (Dong and Mangan, [“Football in the New China”](#)). In December 1951, China fielded its first national team. In 1952, the China National Sports Commission (NSC) was established, bringing sport officially under government rule. In the following two years, local sports were established at various levels of Chinese society.

The relationship between the PRC and FIFA, however, has been routinely impacted by the tension between China and the rest of the international system. In 1954, **Taiwan was also admitted as a member of FIFA. FIFA’s recognition of Taiwan gave the impression of the “two Chinas” that carried over from the Cold War’s radical divide between the communist People’s Republic of China (PRC) and capitalist Taiwan.** Two Chinas really meant two Chinese Football Associations (CFAs): one being the PRC, and the other known as the Republic of China, or Taiwan. Both members claimed to represent Chinese football players, and as FIFA members, each **had an equal vote in FIFA’s Congress. As a result, the PRC’s CFA advocated for the removal of Taiwan from FIFA in 1956. When its demands were not met, the PRC officially announced its resignation as a FIFA member in 1958. Similar to China’s more general international relations policies, its break from FIFA represented its desire to be recognized internationally amidst its willingness to isolate itself to demand that recognition. In this way, China’s pull away from FIFA was characteristic of the Cultural Revolution’s foreign policies, and cannot be viewed as a unique or unexpected act.**

In 1971, under the direction of the NSC, China returned to sports organizations it had previously left, including the IOC in 1979. In terms of football, China relaunched its national league after the Cultural Revolution (a seven-year absence from 1966-1973), and began to prepare itself for economic reintegration into the footballing world. In 1979, both China and FIFA agreed to compromise in order to reinstate China as a **FIFA member. This “formula” included two provisions:**

**“(1) To maintain the membership of the Football Association located in Taipei on the condition that it changes its name in ‘The Chinese Taipeh Football Association’ and consequently does not use any symbols of the former ‘Republic of China’; and
2) To re-admit the ‘Football Association of the People’s Republic of China’ in accordance with Article 3 of the Statutes of FIFA.”**

The IOC had a similar formula instituted in October 1979, after negotiations and visits **to China. In 1980, the “formula” succeeded and the Chinese Football Association was** ratified, making China a FIFA member once **again. Despite China’s agreement to reintegrate politically, the country still defied FIFA’s rules against government** interference in sport and asserted its own self-**sovereignty by presenting a report “on improving the technical levels of Chinese football”** to the Chinese State Council, rather than FIFA (Simons, *Bamboo Goalposts*, 218). These actions in Chinese football **reflect China’s position on international relations, showcasing the desire to integrate** while also limiting its participation in the international economic and political systems.

In June 1992, China’s National Football Conference outlined a new plan for football with seven major goals (Dong and Mangan):

**“(1) To employ the German Klaus Schnappler as the head coach of the Chinese team;
(2) to attempt to enter the 1994 World Cup;**

- (3) to be among the top five teams in the Second International Women's Competitions in 1995;
- (4) to qualify for the 1996 Olympic Games;
- (5) to represent Asia in the 1998 World Cup;
- (6) to reach the quarter-finals of the 2000 Olympic Game; and
- (7) to be among the top four teams in the 2002 World Cup."**

These goals did not come to fruition, and in 1998, the then-Minister of Sports announced a ten-year plan for Chinese football with goals to reach the World Cup finals and become one of the top sixteen teams in the world by 2002. This policy also failed, although China did appear in the 2002 World Cup.

From 2008 to today, China has transformed itself into an important player defining its own international role. The year 2008 marks the fulfilment of the 100-year **"Olympic Dream,"** as Beijing held China's first-ever Olympic Games and took a seat as a world-class host. The year 2008, then, is based on the Olympic calendar, and not a football calendar. While the third period of Chinese international relations more generally may have begun in 2008, the third period of Chinese football should begin **in either 2000 or 2002. In 2000, FIFA's President Sepp Blatter announced that China** was the birthplace of football, in the form of the sport known as *cujū* that developed in Shandong province over 2,000 years ago. The formal recognition of China as the founder of football enticed a new pride in the sport as it suddenly grew Chinese roots. The other potential date is 2002 when China qualified for its first ever World Cup. Even though the Chinese national team did not win a game or score even a single goal, the 2002 World Cup sparked hope that Chinese football could – one day – be great.

China is now ready to take more prominent roles in football: as founder of football, as an economic player in football, as a political power in football, and as a country ready to make changes to make way for football. As founder, China opened a £17

million National Football Museum in Linzi, Shandong in January 2016, to celebrate itself as the original place and creators of football. As an economic player, Alibaba **Group just stepped in and saved FIFA's sponsorship by [signing a major deal](#)** to sponsor the Club World Cup from 2015 through 2022. As political power, candidates for the February 2016 election for the FIFA presidency **[appealed to China](#)** by hinting at the possibility of creating an Asia regional headquarters in Beijing and even hosting the World Cup. Lastly, China has showcased its willingness to transform to accommodate football on its own terms: the CFA officially separated from the Chinese General Administration of Sport in an effort to separate sport from government, and President Xi Jinping released a **[plan in February 2015](#)** detailing how he will expand football throughout the country in the next ten years. What used to **be the Chinese Olympic Dream is now Xi's "World Cup Dream," and China is again** vying for international prominence in an effort to define its role in the football world.

Although China has already grown to a position of power in global economics and **politics, it has a long road ahead until it can say the same for football. China's** engagement with FIFA provides a window into its foreign policy, and their evolving **relationship will showcase China's commitment to balancing its own inflexibility with** international norms of cooperation. Football can continue to serve as a vehicle of **China's opening to the West, an arena where China will make concessions** to strengthen its position with the long-term goals of success. Those goals, however, can only run on fumes for so long. The next decade is a crucial period for Chinese **football to sink or swim, and China's ever-increasing** importance in the international order will push football to concurrently catch up – either by its own evolution or by force.

What will China's World Cup look like?



Image credit: CC by [U.S. Army/Flickr](#).

[Simon Chadwick](#).

In December 2017, China's second-biggest dairy firm, China Mengniu Dairy (CMD), became a 2018 World Cup sponsor. The Inner Mongolia-based company has thus **acquired the less than catchy title of 'official [tournament] supplier of drinkable yoghurt and pre-packaged ice cream'**. CMD's deal with world football's biggest competition brings to four the total number of Chinese corporations of the Russia World Cup 2018. It joins [Wanda](#), [Vivo](#) and [Hisense](#) as a sponsor – probably prompting many people outside East Asia to ask: who? For those unfamiliar with the brands, it perhaps matters less who they are and what they do, than what they **signify**. Four years ago, at the World Cup in Brazil, China's Yingli was sponsoring its second World Cup. Few may recall **the company's name on the pitch-side rotational signage**; even fewer are likely to know that the company is one of the world's leading **solar panel manufacturers**. The sponsorship was probably more about China's emerging status as a leader in green technology than anything else. Four years on, the situation has changed. Late in 2014, President Xi made his proclamation that China should host and win the World Cup by 2050 and, since then, corporate China

has become increasingly interested in partnering with FIFA (it is worth noting that [Alibaba is also a sponsor](#), but of the governing body's Club World Cup).

As several of the country's business giants have encircled FIFA, the issue therefore seems to have become 'when' not 'if' China will host the tournament. There has been some speculation that this could be [as early as 2030](#). Whatever FIFA's vulnerabilities might have been over the last four years (especially financially), and [whatever moves](#) China may have made in the corridors of power at the organisation's Zurich headquarters, corporate China's growing influence is telling. After all, behind every great Chinese corporation is the not-so-hidden hand of government providing appropriate direction. If China's growing influence is to result in Xi's endgame, it raises some interesting questions about what a Chinese World Cup might look like. The precise nature of China's World Cup will ultimately depend upon Xi's influence beyond 2022, when he is technically supposed to leave office. There remains some question about whether he will cede power at that point, and about what influence he will continue to exert into the 2030s. If Xi's successors uphold his vision, then there will be an expectation that China will need to do well in its home tournament and not lose face.

Following a decision to host, there will consequently be further investment in grassroots football – and probably more investment still once the event is over. **Indeed, if China's [admiration for Brazilian and German football](#) means anything, then winning the World Cup once may simply not be enough. The emerging evidence already indicates it will be a showcase for Brand China and its corporate might. Whereas the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was something of a coming-out party for a newly emergent China, a 2030s World Cup is more likely to be a show of strength from an increasingly dominant force keen to flex its muscles and take its place at the world's top-table. We should expect a tournament that subtly yet forcefully communicates a strong political message about China and its identity. This in turn is likely to be underpinned by further additions to FIFA's Chinese sponsor portfolio.**

At the same time, unlike the 2008 Olympics when the world was watching Beijing, the World Cup will be an opportunity for China to get the world looking westwards beyond its affluent eastern coastal belt. One suspects that cities such as Chongqing, **Chengdu, Kunming and Xi'an may become not only host venues, but also part of a** wider strategy to promote tourism in such areas. While the Beijing Olympics may have ventured to leave a political legacy, the World Cup will be expected to embrace **a far broader notion of event legacy. The Bird's Nest might be a globally iconic** sporting venue, but its legacy is questionable, as it has remained grossly underutilised. President Xi will look towards a far less ostentatious World Cup; the Chinese government has begun clamping-down on wild architecture, and it is likely that stadiums will be required to deliver a tangible return on investment by fulfilling a post-event role or being linked to civic infrastructural developments.

It is also likely that Xi, and his successors, will see the organisation and staging of the tournament to sustain its One Belt One Road (OBOR) ambitions. Stadium construction and development contracts may therefore be awarded to key OBOR **partners. As for the tournament itself, FIFA's announcement in 2017 that [an increased number of teams](#)** will be permitted to compete in the World Cup from 2026 surely improves the prospects for the Chinese national team to qualify and prosper in subsequent tournaments. But there remain other outstanding issues that will smooth **the path to China's success** in its own World Cup, one of which is its scheduling. It is hard to imagine the competition taking place without games being held in Guangzhou. However, during June and July, temperatures in southern China can reach upwards of forty degrees, while humidity is often 80 per cent or more. Not to mention, it is typhoon season. During mid-summer in Beijing and Shanghai, temperatures and humidity are also rather more challenging than in, say, Western Europe. There might be local pressure to re-arrange the tournament to another time later in the year – by November, the CSL season could have concluded and the weather would be more temperate. Europeans and Americans may have to get used

to the idea that the Beijing government could press for a Qatar-style scheduling change.

Scheduling would not be the only difficulty. Unless China sorts out its [air traffic delays](#), moving around the country may prove to be an issue for fans. And if host **cities want to avoid Delhi's recent embarrassment, when severe air pollution during** a cricket Test match stopped play and left Sri Lankan athletes [vomiting on the field](#), then China must do much more to improve air quality across the country. For football **fans and the sport's other stakeholders expecting their regular, four-yearly staple of** international football, China is likely to demand that they change their view of the World Cup.

Chinese Soccer, Soft Power and Fair Play



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [See-ming Lee](#)/Flickr.

[Keunsu Han.](#)

There is little doubt that in analysis of China by parameters such as size, economic potential, abundant culture, history and tradition, the word “powerhouse” is appropriate. China has definitely become one of the world’s important destinations for tourism and business alike. What about Chinese Soccer? Can you imagine a tourist in China adding a Chinese Super League (CSL) game as a must-do activity? On the other hand, the English Premier League (EPL) with teams such as Manchester United and Chelsea is definitely a must-see attraction for tourists and fans. Likewise, La Liga, boasting stars such as Messi and Ronaldo, draws in many tourists to Spain.

Chinese soccer clubs lead global spending in terms of growth, going from \$52 million in 2012 to \$451 million in 2016: about 785% growth. It is much more than the French league (\$208M) and almost as much as the Spanish (\$509M) or Italian leagues (\$509M). The CSL has already had great success domestically and it shows the huge potential of the CSL to attract international fans. Despite incredible short-term growth, CSL teams still cannot be compared with other powerhouse global sport league or team brands such as: the EPL, MLB, NBA, Premier League, Manchester

United, Chelsea, Barcelona, Real Madrid, or New York Yankees in terms of brand image or international reputation.

The concept of “Soft Power” proposed by Joseph Nye has recently gained currency in sports analysis. According to Nye, soft power is the ability to influence others by attraction and persuasion. Soft power strategies are not only about improving a **country’s image abroad but also about fulfilling propaganda goals, first and foremost, at home by mobilising and heightening national identification and belonging.** Sports have been used as a critical vehicle of soft power strategy in **diverse diplomatic contexts (i.e., “ping-pong diplomacy” between China and U.S.;** and the 2002 World Cup held by both Korea and Japan). The Olympics and the World Cup, as two of the biggest mega-sporting events, have certainly constituted **a powerful way to enhance cities’ and nations’ soft power. For example, the 2006 World Cup in Germany was successful in altering a nation’s** negative stereotypes (its troubling wartime past) and improved its image abroad. The UK enjoyed a generally positive global image throughout the 2012 London Olympics. London benefited and was projected as a business-friendly location.

What about professional sport leagues and teams? It is true that sport leagues and **teams have been crucial resources for nations’ soft power strategy. Successful and** popular sport leagues and teams provides invaluable opportunities for governments who seek to attract others with their values, culture, national image and most importantly, in a soft power context, universal friendship and mutual cooperation. For instance, EPL games would easily be a top must-do attraction for most international tourists who visit the UK. Many international fans watch and follow the EPL while often skipping their own national soccer league games. It is evidenced by **the EPL’s £3.2 billion deal with foreign broadcasters for 2016-2019.** The digital firm PPTV in China will pay £180 million per year for 2019-2022. That is almost 14 times higher than the current SSMG pay of £13 million. America boasts top sport leagues such as NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, as well as college basketball and football. However

even here, American media giant NBC is spending £128 million per season through 2022 for EPL.

The CSL and their teams have huge potential to generate soft power, enhancing **China's image, just as the 2008 Beijing Olympics did. But it has a long way to go.** This is not meant to compare these other aforementioned leagues that have a well-established history and tradition. That would be unfair. If we wish to make the CSL better, where are we going to start? Before mentioning traditional marketing strategies including quality players, coaches, world-class facilities, competitiveness, rivalry, fan service, history and the success of a national team, it needs to start from **"fair-play."** Poor refereeing and corruption have been headlines in too many news articles. The international media loves to cover this type of negative news because it reinforces the public opinion of the CSL. Sadly, this type of negativity of the CSL seems to correspond with the image of country itself, China. Other global sport leagues are not necessarily much better than the CSL in terms of such issues, however, the CSL has a significantly more negative image regarding fair-play.

I am not talking about sport ethics or morality, but I am talking about sports marketing, management and/or leadership as means to enhance the Chinese soccer **league's image.** I expect the CSL can contribute to a more reliable image of China using a soft power strategy. When a family plans to travel to China, I expect a CSL game to be a top 10 attraction. But to get there we will need to begin with fair-play. More specifically, we must consider the image of fair-play.

International Sporting Mega-Events in China since the 1980s



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [chumsdock cheng](#)/Flickr.

[Marcus P. Chu.](#)

Any international sporting mega-event refers to games in which numbers of athletes from at least two countries participate. Given that the world community often attaches great importance to the event preparations and implementation, the governments of the hosting cities in general are willing to lavish funds on (1) building athlete villages, (2) constructing sports stadiums, (3) staging torch relays, (4) producing opening and closing ceremonies, (5) renovating urban areas and (6) upgrading hotels and transportation infrastructure. Chinese metropolises, before Hu Jintao stepped down, were loyal followers of this extravagant culture, changing only **after Xi Jinping's formal accession to power in late 2012.**

China's history of holding international sporting mega-events can be traced back to the Republican era. Shanghai celebrated the Far East Championship Games in 1915, 1921 and 1927. In the 1950s, the newly established Communist regime did not attempt to obtain any hosting rights for Chinese cities and instead cut off its ties with the

International Olympic Committee (IOC) and some other international sporting organizations. China, in the early 1960s, zealously supported the GANEFO (Games of the New Emerging Forces) – an international sporting mega-event initiated by then Indonesian President Sukarno with the aim of countering the Olympic movement. Beijing was later assigned to hold the 1970 Asian GANEFO. The capital city, however, forwent this hosting duty because of the Cultural Revolution.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, China not only launched economic reforms, but also re-joined the IOC and other member organizations of the international sporting community. Beijing, in 1984, obtained the right to host the 1990 Asian Games. Given that the prime objective of celebrating the event was to display the progress of reforms to the world the Chinese government in total invested RMB 1.5 **billion (USD 314 million) to renovate the capital city. Beijing's success indeed attracted some other Chinese cities to follow suit. An example of this was Shanghai's** application to stage the 1993 Summer World University Games. It, however, was defeated by Buffalo – a low-key city in New York State in America – because of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident which triggered a worldwide political boycott of China.

To project a positive image of China on the world stage in the post-Incident era, Beijing, one year after the celebration of the Asian Games, bid to host the 2000 Summer Olympics. Meanwhile, Sydney, Manchester, Berlin, and Istanbul also respectively expressed the same hosting intention. While both the Chinese central and Beijing municipal authorities intensified efforts to lobby the voters, other Chinese local governments also assisted. Shanghai, for instance, spent a total of RMB 300 million (USD 37.5 million) to organize the 1993 East Asian Games – a newly formed sporting mega-event – for the sake of impressing the IOC members. Its hosting standard, despite gaining Juan Samar**anch and his colleagues' compliments,** failed to improve the odds of the capital city in the bidding competition. Sydney eventually won the hosting rights in September 1993.

This failure did not dampen China's determination to stage the Summer Olympics. After 3-years of extensive preparation, Beijing, in July 2001, successfully obtained the hosting rights to the 2008 Games. Since the event was leveraged for boosting **the Chinese people's national pride, both the central and municipal authorities** decided to lavish upon it a great deal of attention. Consequently, the Beijing government first announced that a total of RMB 235 billion (USD 28.4 billion) would be committed to renovate the city and improve its environment from then to 2008. The foundations of the luxury stadiums, like the Bird Nest, the Water Cube and others, were subsequently laid one after another.

While the lavish organization was taking place in the capital city, Macau, one of **China's Special Administrative Regions, voluntarily expressed the** wish to use its 2005 East Asian Games to pre-celebrate the 2008 Olympics. Beijing was indeed **surprised by this announcement, because under the 'One Country Two Systems'** formula, the city was not expected to do so. It was delighted by this deliberate link-up, as a fine 2005 Games would further publicize the capital city and its Olympics in the international sports community. To perfectly realize the pre-celebration goal, the Macau authorities, from 2002 to 2005, in total invested MOP 4.4 billion (USD 550 million) for constructing stadiums and upgrading urban infrastructures. The Chinese officials, after witnessing the entire process of the event staging, stated that they had learnt a lot from the experience of the Special Administrative Region.

Predictably, the 2008 Olympics cost China overall RMB 280 billion (USD 45 billion). When this 17-day ultra-sumptuous gala was confirmed to have successfully intensified the nationalist and patriotic sentiments amongst Chinese citizens, the central authorities decided that in the post-Beijing Games era, other cities in the country should continue to host sporting mega-events in an extravagant manner. As a result, Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong province, hosted a RMB 122.6 billion (USD 20 billion) Asian Games in **2010. Shenzhen, one of China's Special**

Economic Zones, also spent RMB 14 billion (USD 2.25 billion) to operate the Summer World University Games one year later.

Although the Shenzhen Games, similarly to the Beijing and Guangzhou Games, was celebrated by the Chinese authorities as a success, four senior officials of the Shenzhen municipal government were successively arrested from 2009 and 2012 because of their involvement in graft over the event-related construction projects. Then Vice President of China, Xi Jinping, paid great attention to these scandals, and believed that the key to exterminating corruption in any future sporting mega-events was to cease the decades-long extravagant hosting culture in China. Therefore, after he chaired the Communist Party in late 2012, Chinese cities were required to complete their hosting duties more frugally. Not surprisingly, through adopting a series of cost-control measures, the overall outlays of the Nanjing 2013 Asian Youth Games, the 2013 Tianjin East Asian Games and the 2014 Nanjing Summer Youth Olympics were not only under budget, but also lower than those of preceding events.

In addition, up to now, frugality has been constantly promised by both the central and local authorities as a key principle for the organization and celebration of the 2022 Beijing and Zhangjiakou Winter Olympics. It is predicable that a number of cost-saving arrangements will continue. Nevertheless, will these frugal endeavours facilitate Xi Jinping and his administration in their efforts to rejuvenate the Chinese nation in the mid-21st century – **the ultimate goal of pursuing the ‘China Dream’?** We are still waiting for the answer.

Soft Power, East Asian Sport and the Delayed ‘Neo-Wilsonian’ Renaissance



Image provided by author.

James Mangan.

‘... the Triple East Asian Olympic Games ... are the precursors of Asian mega events to come: sooner rather than later. The momentum ... will increase year by year. The traction of the Asian engine grows increasingly more powerful and there should no doubts in’

Initial Reflection: Genesis

British Imperial sport (transmuted and transformed) has been a cultural global force with both direct and indirect influences, highly visible in its modern interpretations, amazingly influential in its evolutionary outcomes and astonishing widespread in its modern consequences. A major driving force in this astounding global modernization **was the British Empire, ‘it ensured... the transmission of much of modern sport** played in the modern way to many parts of the world where it was mostly assimilated, frequently adapted, and only infrequently rejected. The outcome has been a contemporary cultural revolution of gargantuan size. The world, at one level, is now a vast playground but its play has become much more than sport. The **political, economic, cultural and emotional resonances... are stupendously deafening... sport is now part of politics, economics and culture** – within nations and

across nations. [Modern sport](#) played globally, politicized globally and, last but not least enjoyed globally – whatever the local variations, interpretations and nuances – **... is an obsession.** It owes much to the British Empire and its *Homo Ludens Imperiosis*.

Modern Sport: European Origins and Influences

Sport played globally, organised globally, commercialised globally, politicised globally and, last but not least, *enjoyed* globally – whatever the local variations, interpretations and nuances – resulted in sport-obsessed global societies with **common ‘play’, pleasures and purposes. It is an obsession that will only grow in the twenty-first century.** And it [all began](#) in Europe. The rise of the West to a position of dominance is one of the most important developments in world history in recent centuries. All [writing](#) about the world beyond Europe has had to take the rise of the West into account, consciously or unconsciously. Europeans foisted their presence on the unwilling and unprepared majority of humanity, transforming the entire world in their own image and establishing a hierarchy of prestige defined by the success of imitation. In the world revolution of Westernisation, Western political ambition and competitiveness became universal. The victorious Western self-confidence boosted by worldwide control left much of the world humiliated physically and culturally. Under the Western impact, many traditional societies lost their self-belief. However, an East Asian Renaissance is in progress not least in modern sport – potent modern instrument of soft power and more!



Image provided by author.

East Asian Ascendancy and Assertion

From its zenith at the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe's hold over Asia has dramatically weakened; by 1950, Europe was reduced to a peripheral presence in Asia, shored up only by the newest Western power, the USA, and increasingly depended on an informal empire made up of military bases, economic pressures and political coups. Europeans, and then Americans, have found that they have underestimated the Asian ability to assimilate modern ideas, techniques and **institutions; the 'secrets' of Western power**, and then to turn them against the West itself. They have ignored the intense desire for equality, dignity and status among **peoples whom Europe's most influential thinkers, from Hegel and Marx to John Stuart Mill, had deemed unfit for self-rule** – thinkers whose ideas, ironically, would in fact [prove highly potent](#) among these subjected peoples.

Well Beyond the Wilsonian Moment: Modern Sport – Modern Symbol

[‘Once we remove the Eurocentric lens through which ... international history in general has most often been viewed, central events and experiences pertaining to non-European peoples come into focus...’](#) The removal of this lens is the focus of *The Olympic Games: Prism for East Asian Politics and Geopolitics: London 2012 and*

Tokyo 2020. It is necessary. This is the 'The Asian Century'.¹ The shift away from the West as the focal point of modern history was one of the [notable features](#) of the twentieth century: this shift is accelerating in the twenty-first century. It is true of sport – the modern [global obsession](#), and especially true of [East Asian](#) sport.

Attention is focused more and more, as it should be, on non-Western nations as increasingly influential participants in world affairs – *including world sport*: without any doubt, now a significant political and geopolitical instrument. One distinct advantage in East and West is release from an insular Western view of the world.

Nevertheless, paradoxically, however, in modern sport a standardised global manifestation of common commitment is essential to maintain difference, to demonstrate difference and to enhance difference – in order to *exude* superiority: to employ a now fashionable and, in this instance, appropriate metaphor, superiority **requires 'a level playing field'**. To jettison metaphor and state the matter bluntly, there has to be common sports at which to compete. Only then is ideological superiority demonstrably [flaunted](#). In East Asia, no better illustration of attempted flaunted ideological superiority can **be found than in China in 2008. It 'adopted... the Olympics as an important marker of its external success and as a means of asserting domestic legitimacy'**. However idealistic the Olympian impulse, it should never be overlooked that sport is a prism through which [national identity](#) and image are refracted. Iconic Olympic sports complexes and sumptuous opening and closing ceremonies were most certainly intended **inter alia to eradicate images of 'the Tiananmen Incident'**.

East Asian Sport: Beyond China

More widely and significantly in East Asia, the global geopolitics of sport are being **upended ... East Asian nations in recent decades have used sport with considerable success to create assertive national identities, to promote advanced modern images**

¹ See, for example, *Australia in the Asian Century*, passim. This is a significant (even momentous) Australian government White Paper with far reaching implications. This reference was provided by Dr Peter Horton.

and to acquire unshakable international esteem dramatically illustrated by the impressive post war East Asian Olympics, the recent glittering Asian Games and the **escalating influence of the Asian Soccer Federation**. Inexorably the **‘global empire of commerce’** is also being transformed by the sports sponsorship of wealthy East Asian corporations, ... the increasing competition for Asian enthusiasts and purchasers by FIFA, MLB, the NBA, the PGA and various other Western sports organisations in pursuit of mouth-watering financial political and geopolitical influence and large and **burgeoning populations guarantee it.**⁵ There is a **‘tectonic’ shift under way**. Modern sport is sliding from West to East with geopolitical, political, economic, cultural and social [consequences](#).

East Asian parity, and probable pre-eminence, in modern sport could be coming ever closer. The world of sport is now well [beyond](#) the **‘Wilsonian Moment.’**



Image provided by author.

Final Reflection: Sport: Political Act: Political Instrument

Sport is part of the [growth and modernisation](#) of Asian nations ... **sport is not just a spectacle: it is a *powerful political agent*** (emphasis added) that generates internal

and external pressures for change that are difficult to ignore, ...all future hosts of the Games will know that sport matters *politically* (emphasis added).

The empowerment effect of supporting foreign clubs in China



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[Thilo Kunkel](#) and [Yiran Su](#).

On June 14, 2017, Chinese president Xi Jinping highlighted the importance of soccer development in China during a meeting with FIFA president Gianni Infantino. Xi [emphasized](#) the societal role of soccer due not only to its nature as a competitive sport, but also because of its educational role in cultivating patriotism, collectivism, and perseverance. Given the size of the Chinese market, international soccer **leagues, especially the “big five” European leagues, have been promoting their teams** in China over the last decade, with increased activity over the last few seasons. These leagues are now widely broadcast on various Chinese media and followed by many Chinese soccer fans, particularly after the [decentralization](#) of sports broadcasting **and streaming rights. China’s so-called “satellite fans” have been identified by many** European clubs as an [important target market](#). Therefore, we were looking into the antecedents that motivate Chinese soccer fans to follow an international club team, and the benefits they derive from associating with it. We conducted interviews with 20 Chinese soccer fans who support European clubs, and one theme kept emerging during the data analysis – *Empowerment*.

For committed Chinese soccer fans, following their favourite soccer team was more than entertainment: The team was a source of psychological empowerment that they could apply to their daily work and life. For example, one Serie A fan interviewed in **Beijing stated:** “I experienced the competitive spirit of AC Milan, and this spirit has accompanied me since I was a kid. It encourages me to strive to do better, no matter whether I play soccer in my spare time or do my job. I think this spirit is helpful to me.” Similarly, a Bayern Munich fan interviewed in Guangzhou said: “I was encouraged by Bayern Munich. They never give up. They ended in second place in three major tournaments. And next year, they won three championships in those three tournaments. I think it is a good lesson. I fall sometimes, but it is ok. I will stand up again.” The empowerment factor was also used by fans to explain why they start to follow a team. For instance, a Liverpool fan recalled that: “I started to follow Liverpool in 2005 because of the Champions League. I did not watch the game but I read about it. I recognized that this team was very special because they fought back after a 0:3 disadvantage at half-time. They finally won the game in a penalty shoot.”

Traditionally, empowerment through sport has referred to the empowerment of disadvantaged individuals through participation. The effect has been demonstrated in the context of [empowering](#) female sports participants’ self-perceptions as a group with social power, or charity events advancing participants’ confidence to initiate change on behalf of the charity organizations. However, our interviews indicate that spectating from afar can also have empowering effects on Chinese soccer fans. Empowerment is derived from [social processes](#) that help people gain control over their own lives. These processes are a series of experiences in which individuals learn to see a closer connection between their goals and ways of achieving them by gaining more access to and control of resources. As a result, they achieve mastery over their lives. When looking at empowering processes derived from spectator sport, our findings align with research on fans of music artists. For example, teenage

fans of performing artists make use of the self-empowerment their [fandom](#) gives them to take charge of the meanings of their own sexuality, generating greater confidence. A specific example invoke fans of Lady Gaga feeling [empowered](#) to live their life free of societal conventions because of her rebellious attitude and unconventional style.

When investigating our findings, it seems that Chinese soccer fans also experience empowerment effects based on the characteristics of certain teams. Liverpool FC demonstrated courage and was successful in a situation with little chance of winning. Similarly, Bayern Munich overcame failure by learning from their mistakes and achieving success the following season. The interviewed fans indicated that the teams act as role models for how to deal with difficult situations or how to overcome failure. Respondents could see a connection between team attitude and the goals that the teams have achieved (quite literally) by taking control of their situation. Although these findings have been derived from fans of international soccer teams, the benefits may also be derived from following domestic teams in the Chinese Super League (CSL). With an ambitious strategic plan of soccer development, the CSL has invested heavily in rebranding the league and teams, including introducing foreign coaches and players, partnering with new commercial sponsors, and leveraging fan engagement activities. Due to the vast population of China, the league currently has more followers than the Premier League, the Bundesliga, and La Liga [combined](#). It has also received a lot of media attention in the last years because teams have successfully recruited international superstars. As stars are flocking into the CSL, fans are showing greater interest in following their local teams.

Cultivating the fan culture and soccer community is key to maintaining a profitable, long-term team-fan relationship, given that the quality of the games still lags behind international standards. CSL teams should consider developing branding strategies **centred on empowerment and inspiration by team performance as well as players' personal struggles for success**. By doing so, they could enhance their connection

with fans. Especially the growing middle class is now facing [great pressure](#) owing to rising living costs and considerable economic slack. A soccer team that could empower its fans will lead to a higher level of fan commitment.

Beyond the commercial league, the Chinese government plans to make the game accessible to over 30 million primary and secondary school children by 2020, as well as creating up to 20,000 football schools and laying 70,000 pitches ([FIFA](#), 2017). Highlighting positive psychological outcomes associated with supporting soccer could gain traction among teenagers and parents. In our research, respondents were provided with role models that demonstrated the positive impact perseverance can have on achieving goals and mastering their own life, which is one of the goals President Xi has associated with the societal role of soccer. While the program is focused on developing soccer players, our findings indicate that some positive outcomes can also be derived from supporting soccer teams as a spectator. Thus, the further development of the CSL may also have positive implications on the Chinese society initially associated with developing soccer as a participant sport.

Between China and Italy through the lens of soccer history



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [Nicolas Nova](#)/Flickr.

[Gianluigi Negro](#) and [Nicholas Gineprini](#).

The aim of this pilot study is to explore past and present forms of cooperation between Italy and the city of Tianjin in the football sector. The idea of this pilot study grew out of a more general analysis of the historical relations in football between Italy and China. We realised that Giuseppe Matarazzi was the first professional Italian coach to work in China in 2003. It might be not a coincidence that he was selected to be the manager for Tianjin Teda. The Italian football experience in Tianjin was enriched by the former AS Roma and Italian midfielder Damiano Tommasi who played for Tianjin Teda in 2009 and by the 2006 golden ball winner Fabio Cannavaro who was selected to be the coach of Tianjin Quanjian, the second team of Tianjin, in June 2016.

We performed a content analysis on these three Italian sportsmen during their professional experiences in Tianjin. We used Factiva as tool for our research. We collected all newspaper articles published in Italian referring to Mr. Matarazzi in 2003, Damiano Tommasi in 2009 and Fabio Cannavaro from June 2016 to August

2017. We also provided a qualitative analysis selecting the most representative articles based on their contribution focused on match reports, Chinese culture, the transfer market, and comments on the quality of Chinese soccer.

SOURCES-GIUSEPPE MATERAZZI (2003)		
Ansa: 9	La Stampa: 4	Gazzetta dello Sport: 3
Giornale 2:	Agi: 1	

Table 1 Sources analysis in Giuseppe Materazzi

The sample on Giuseppe Materazzi provided a total of 19 documents. After a more accurate analysis and the data cleaning process, we found that the most representative sources were the press agency *Ansa* and *La Gazzetta dello Sport*. The analysis of the category appears to be more balanced (see table 2)

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS ON GIUSEPPE MATERAZZI (2003)				
Results/ Matches reports	Culture	Transfert Market	Quality on Chinese soccer	Not Inherent
5	4	3	5	3

Table 2 Categories for Giuseppe Materazzi

The sample of the Chinese experience of Damiano Tommasi provides 47 documents. In this case, after the data cleaning process, we discovered that *La Gazzetta dello Sport* showed higher coverage, the second source is *Ansa* (see table 3). Unfortunately, most of the articles are not related to Chinese soccer or the Super League. However, we counted eight articles related to the transfer market (see table 4)

SOURCES-DAMIANO TOMMASI (2009)		
Gazzetta dello Sport: 14	Ansa: 12	Repubblica: 5
La Stampa: 3	La Nazione: 3	Agi: 2
Giornale: 1	TM news: 1	Il Giorno: 1
Milano Finanza: 1		

Table 3 Sources analysis on Damiano Tommasi

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS DAMIANO TOMMASI (2009)				
Results/Matches preview	Culture	Transfert	Quality on Chinese soccer	Not inherent
3	5	8	4	27

Table 4 Categories for Damiano Tommasi

The coverage of Fabio Cannavaro is clearly the greatest of the three because of the 694 documents. After the data cleaning process, *La Gazzetta dello Sport* is the most representative source with 32 articles, followed by *Il Resto del Carlino* (9) and *Il Giorno* (8).

SOURCES-FABIO CANNAVARO(2016-2017)			
Gazzetta dello Sport 32	Resto del Carlino 9	Il Giorno:8	La Nazione 7
Il Mattino 6	La Repubblica 5	Il Giornale 5	Messaggero 4
Tirreno 3	Corriere della Sera 3	Unione Sarda 3	Gazzettino 3
Ansa 2	Gazzetta di Mantova 1	Gazzetta di Modena 1	Gazzetta di Reggio 1
Sole 24 ore 1	Fatto Quotidiano 1	La provincia pavese 1	La nuova Ferrara 1

Table 5 Sources for Fabio Cannavaro

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS FABIO CANNAVARO 2016-17				
Results/Matches	Culture	Transfert	Quality on Chinese soccer	Not Inherent
26	7	53	1	11

Table 6 Categories for Fabio Cannavaro

Qualitative Analysis

In 2003, Giuseppe Materazzi was the first Italian to join Chinese professional football league as Tianjin Teda head coach. At that time the Chinese **football system wasn't** an important reality as today and the newspaper coverage did not fully engage with the culture and football development of China. From the documents, we found that there are no mentions of the story of professional football in China and newspapers **didn't demonstrate any curiosity about Tianjin Teda, such as discussing the ownership or whether they could compete for the title.** The newspaper *La Stampa*, in a short interview 'Con il decreto salva calcio da 40 giorni guida la squadra di Tianjin' (February 2003), referred to Tianjin just as: *"A city with a population of 11 million inhabitants, located about 100 km from Beijing"*.

The main focus of the connection between Materazzi and Chinese football was on two aspects: the Winter cup and SARS. During preseason, Tianjin Teda played a friendly tournament in Umbria, Italy, and newspapers reported the results of the Winter Cup. From April 22 to May 8, newspapers were focused on SARS and the interruption of sports competitions in China, while the precautionary return of **Materazzi in Italy was on the back burner. From Italian newspapers we don't know** anything about the conclusion of the season for Giuseppe Materazzi, if he has led Teda until the end of the season or was sacked before.

In 2009, Damiano Tommasi joined Tianjin Teda. At the beginning of the season we can find a great number of articles that are not primarily concerned with China, with **news about AS Roma (former Tommasi's club) and allude to the transfer of Tommasi to China.** Even in this case, **excerpts from Tommasi's interviews don't focus on the**

development of Chinese football or Tianjin Teda's background. We realised that there are two additional Italian elements in Chinese football that are mentioned by newspapers, the first one is Chinese Super League main sponsor which was Pirelli, the second one is the Italian Super Cup that was played in Beijing, between Inter FC and SS Lazio. **The coverage of season results is irrelevant: from Tommasi's interview** we know the result of the first two Asian Champions League matches, only *La Gazzetta dello Sport* briefly mentioned his debut in the Chinese Super League, then, **the entire season was not covered. Contrary to Materazzi's case, we know that** Damiano Tommasi ended the season, with a short preview article (on *La Gazzetta dello Sport*) **on the last round of the championship, but the article didn't mention how** Tianjin Teda was ranked at the end of the year.

In 2016, Fabio Cannavaro became Tianjin Quanjian head coach. When Cannavaro joined Quanjian (at that time in the Chinese second division), Chinese football was already a regular fixture in Italian newspapers, for the previous experience of Lippi at Guangzhou Evergrande, the transfer of international players to the Chinese Super League and the purchase of clubs by Chinese enterprises in Europe. Despite the facts, even though the quantity of articles increased compared to Materazzi and **Tommasi's coverage, the quality remains unsatisfactory.**

The main information about Chinese football came from interviews with Alexandre Pato, a Tianjin Quanjian footballer, and former AC Milan player. Italian newspapers **do not offer historical background, and there aren't continuity elements with the** professional career of Materazzi and Tommasi in Tianjin. Most of the articles are focused on rumors about the transfer market, indeed Quanjian was close to reaching **an agreement with Fiorentina's striker, Nicola Kalinic, then, last summer it was in** negotiation with Aubameyang, an international star player who was linked even with AC Milan. The league results are mentioned briefly, we do not have a general recap **on the league. It's curious that some articles referred to Tianjin Quanjian as: "Tianjin,** *the club coached by Cannavaro*", as if there is only one team in the city.

Despite the growing interest in Chinese football and the historical and cultural connection between Italy and Tianjin, most of the articles in the Italian newspapers analysed offer very little insight into Chinese football and in fact these articles are not able even to provide the reader with satisfying contextual information. We did not find a comprehensive overview of the dynamics that drive Chinese football.

China and Qatar's Stadium Diplomacy

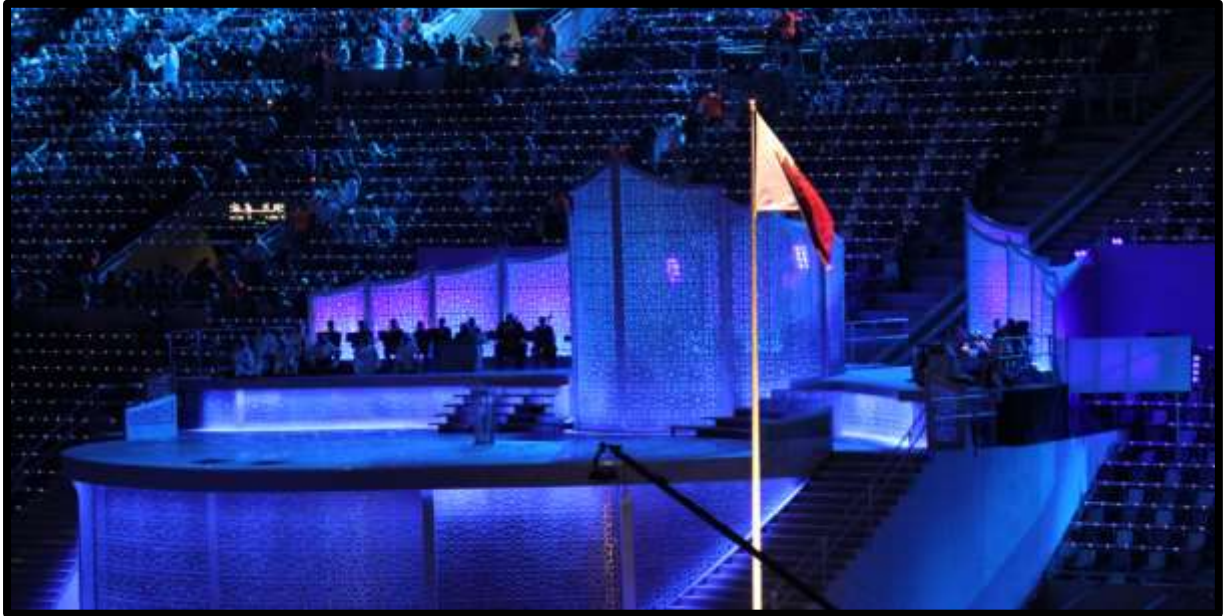


Image credit: CC by [Isabel Schulz/Flickr](#).

[Simon Chadwick](#).

Football's global centre of gravity is shifting eastwards as countries in Asia strategically focus on the sport's development. As I've [previously noted](#), in this Football 3.0 Qatar and China are playing an essential role in the sport's 'Asianisation'. For several years, Qatar stood alone in its ambitious, lavishly resourced pursuit of football success (most potently symbolised by the nation's winning bid to stage the 2022 World Cup). Late in 2014 however, China announced a vision for football that seemed like 'Qatar x100'. Since then, the East Asian giant has exhibited a voracious appetite for all things football. And now it seems that the two countries are working together in an East-West Asia alliance that could profoundly change global football's balance of power, as well as the environment within which the sport is organised and played.

As if to mark the marriage of world football's most ostentatious couple, it was [recently announced](#) that the 2022 World Cup Final venue will be jointly constructed by Qatar and China. The Lusail Stadium will be built in a joint venture between Qatari firm HBK Contracting and the China Railway Construction

Corporation (CRCC). One suspects there will be more such collaborative ventures to come too. Lusail City is more than just a stadium, with plans in place to create a 19-district development in which 200,000 people will be living by 2022. CRCC is now surely in pole position to partner with the Qataris on further construction projects in Lusail (and probably Qatar more generally) given its existing construction work. It will be interesting to observe how the Qatar-China relationship unfolds; Qatar has been in the grip of fiscal stringency over the last year or so following oil price falls and consequent public spending controls. In the meantime, China has continued spending heavily on football; among other things, the country has [gifted new stadiums to Gabon](#) in preparation for the country's staging of the 2017 African Cup of Nations.

China's long-established [use of stadium diplomacy](#) has been premised on building venues in return for access to raw materials, mineral resources, and markets. That China is now working with the Qataris on Lusail should not, therefore, be too much of a surprise. Indeed, it is conceivable that China could also gift facilities to the Gulf state, particularly if the country steps up its bid to host the 2030 World Cup. As with most relationships in which China engages, this East-West Asian marriage is about much more than football and the World Cup. Sport might be a helpful entrée to meaningful dialogue between Doha and Beijing, but trade, investment, and mineral resources are among the more important elements in Chinese football's *guanxi* network. China is already a major trading partner with Qatar, with bilateral deals between the two countries worth [QAR21.5 billion \(US \\$5.9 billion\) in 2015](#). Indeed, such is the depth and scale of their commitment to one another that China's ambassador to Qatar, Li Chen, recently proclaimed his desire that the strengthening relationship should bring "[great common prosperity](#)" to both countries. China might be an important source of help and support for Qatar, as well as being an established supplier of goods and services the Gulf nation itself cannot produce. But this is not a one-sided relationship in which China exerts influence over a much smaller partner. As the second largest exporter in the world (after Russia) of

liquefied natural gas and the eighth largest exporter of petroleum products, Qatar not only punches above its weight politically, it also represents an important source of carbon fuels for China.

To this end, there have been several high-profile meetings involving Chinese and Qatari government officials in recent years. **As early as 2014, China's Premier, Li Keqiang, and Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani, Emir of Qatar [reached agreements](#)** on bilateral cooperation in oil and gas exploration and development, liquefied natural gas production, and integrated cooperation in the petrochemical industry. At the same time, Li announced that China would be willing to participate **in the construction of Qatar's high-speed rail network**. He also vowed that China would engage in investment and financial cooperation with Qatar, promote currency swaps and clearing cooperation, and jointly establish an international crude oil futures market. These commitments are hardly surprising, as Qatar is already involved in **China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative**. **Nevertheless, in a further act of courtship earlier this year, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi publically reemphasised his country's desire to work with Qatar, stressing that China could help Doha's government to [achieve its 2030 Industrial Vision](#).**

Crucially, sport (particularly football) is a key strategic pillar of Qatar's 2030 National Vision, which is why China's open support of it is implicitly also a statement of support for football and the 2022 World Cup. This tallies nicely both with China's own sporting goals, and its broader geopolitical and mineral resource interests. In this context, one can see OBOR being the glue that holds all of this together. In another [column](#) published by *Policy Forum*, I examined the role of OBOR in helping to advance Chinese sporting interests. It might seem like a long way from Beijing to Doha, but China has already proved to be hugely adept at bridging geographic distances, which is the essence of its OBOR initiative. In sporting terms though, the leap from the centre of Beijing to downtown Doha is in many ways a much shorter one, **given the two countries' shared football ambitions. Indeed, this East-West one-**

two seems capable of enacting sharper moves than either Messi or Ronaldo. This is something which is perpetuating the emergence of Football 3.0, and during the next decade may ultimately see football, mineral markets and geopolitics caught in a grip that stretches between these two ambitious Asian nations.

Suning-FC Internazionale: A Tale of National Redemption



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [Joanne Wan](#)/Flickr.

Emma Lupano

“The Chinese market is a danger for all – for all the teams in the world. But we must concentrate on our work and not think that in China there is a lot of money and they can arrive to take the players”. This was the opinion expressed by Chelsea’s Italian coach Antonio Conte in 2016 in reaction to the announcement that Brazilian midfielder Oscar had been bought by Shanghai SIPG for over 60 million pounds. The move, that would deprive Chelsea of a key talent, happened during a shopping spree when, over the winter transfer window, Chinese Super League clubs spent vast amounts of money buying football stars from European clubs. The phenomenon, which also included acquisitions of several European clubs, has been referred to in Chinese media using the expression “买买买”: a repetition of the verb “buy” that suggests the idea of a shopping frenzy.

What seemed to disturb football managers and professionals in Europe was the **possibility that China's money would change the power order of the world's football market**. The **open support for the shopping spree granted by the country's political system**, and the endorsement provided by Xi Jinping, made the scenario appear realistic.

The European press gave a voice to these worries by framing the relationship between European and Chinese clubs in conflictual terms. But what type of discourse has the Chinese media developed on the topic? Can a narrative of conflict also be found in the Chinese press? A case study of the acquisition of FC Internazionale by the Chinese company Suning in June 2016 can help answer the question. Its relevance lies in it being the first acquisition of a successful, established football club in Europe, as the Chinese press have stressed.

A basic hypothesis is that the media discourse in China should echo the official discourse, due to the tight political control that is still in place in the sector. The importance attached by the current leadership to the development of football in the country makes the topic particularly sensitive to the official narrative, although sport also played a fundamental role in the past. In the 50s, 60s and 70s, cinema and propaganda posters were widely used with this aim in mind; more recently, the coordinated coverage of large-scale events such as the Beijing 2008 Olympics also served this purpose well.

Yet never before had football been at the forefront of the national agenda as with Xi **Jinping, who presented himself as the top sponsor for China's football revitalisation**. During the first mandate of the so-called **"fifth generation" of leaders**, in 2015, the **State Council issued a "Comprehensive programme for the reform and development of Chinese football"**, which gave instructions on how to promote the institutional reform, popularisation, professionalisation and internationalisation of football,

summing up the leadership's vision up to 2050. Sport, political and economic-related thematic frames can be identified within the project, but the official discourse on football has particularly **stressed the sport's role in building "patriotism"** (爱国主义). The case of Suning-FC Internazionale shows how the building of patriotism and nationalism has been achieved through the Chinese media by interpreting sport as an arena of power contention between China and Europe.

Xi portrayed the nation's football aspirations as part of the "Chinese dream" (中国梦) of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (中华民族伟大复兴) after the "century of humiliation" (百年国耻) that followed the Opium wars. The underlying theory is that, now that the country has shown its economic power to the world, China's "discourse power" (话语权) also has to be re-established, including in football. Also, the reform of football should help the development of China's sport industry that the "Programme" lists among its goals. The document declares that the aim of the football reform is to "build a sport power" (建设体育强国), and the shopping spree that has hit Europe is a way to support the building of such power. China's decision to invest in the development of football stems in part from the need to promote new industries to rely on in the context of the "New normal" (新常态) economic slowdown, and in the transition from the "world's factory" model to a model focused on cultural industries, as indicated in the "[Key points of the national plan of cultural reform and development during the 13th five-year plan](#)".

Suning announced their acquisition of FC Internazionale at a press conference in Nanjing on 6 June 2016. According to [Xinhua News Agency's coverage](#), the company invested 270 million euro to buy the 68.55% of the club's shares. The deal resonated widely in the world's media as well as in China's press and this case study builds on a corpus of articles belonging to the genre of news commentaries (新闻评论) retrieved from the online archives of respected Chinese media in Chinese language: two specialised periodicals; a non-specialised daily; and a non-specialised news agency. The financial magazine *Caixin* (财新), the sports weekly *Titan Zhoubao* (体坛

周报), and the non-specialised daily *Xin Jing Bao* (新京报) are commercial outlets, meaning that their financial resources do not come from a state or Party organisation, which makes them relatively independent from political institutions. The government-run *Xinhua News Agency* has been added to the corpus due to the special role it plays in the Chinese media system. When sensitive topics are at stake, its articles are imposed as the only legal source of information to all the media. The mix of commercial and institutional media in the corpus should allow a higher degree **of variation between the opinions expressed, since commercial papers' news commentaries** tend to express more independent views compared to institutional outlets.

The corpus is composed of news commentaries published between 1 and 30 June 2016, totalling over 17,000 words. A qualitative analysis of the language and content of the opinion articles followed, in order to find the most significant thematic frames in relation to the case. Three dominant frames have been identified, which appear to coincide with the three frames to which the reform of football is linked: the sport, the financial and the political frames.

The sport frame is the least pervasive in the corpus, which is a surprise given the topic. Commentaries that look at the story from this angle generally contain positive opinions regarding the acquisition. They describe the sport exchanges between Suning and FC Internazionale as an element that will help improve the performances and competitiveness of Jiangsu Suning, the other club owned by the company, as well as on the Chinese sport system as a whole. The general understanding emerging from these commentaries is that football investments are not a completely private initiative, but part of a systemic effort that aims to develop **China's football in order** to contribute to the triumph of the nation through sport. They are therefore to be considered a highly patriotic activity, and commentators stress that Suning should become an example for other Chinese companies that aim to support the growth of **"China's sport industry"** (中国体育产业).

Another recurring frame in the corpus focuses on the financial aspects of the acquisition and the commercial benefits that the transaction will generate for **Suning's business internationalisation**. The operation is believed to help popularise **the company's brand and improve its "international fame"** (在海外的知名度), giving Suning a **"strategic position in the international market"** (海外战略布局). But most importantly, the positive impact on the entire Chinese sports system is emphasised: some **commentaries hold that the investment has "a very important meaning"** (意义重大) **for the internationalisation of China's football sector as a whole**.

When examining the discourse related to the third and most pervasive frame in the corpus, the political one, the narrative of building a strong and rich Chinese nation emerges. The development of football is clearly depicted as a sign of national success, and a means for China to re-affirm its symbolic heritage in the face of international powers. The commentaries celebrate the deal as a milestone, stressing that for the first time a Chinese company has taken control of a football club with a long history and strong international influence. The feeling of achievement is **palpable: "Starting today, Chinese blood is running in the army of the Nerazzurri"** (从今天开始, 蓝黑军团将流淌着中国的血液). **The result is due to the Party's actions**, since **"favourable policies"** (利好政策) **are said to have started a new era for China's sport industry**. The event is described as a **sign of the country's rise in the world, and a triumph over the "old European continent"** (老欧洲). In this tale, the countries that humiliated China in the second half of the 19th century through the Opium wars have now been conquered by Chinese capitals. The acquisition of FC Internazionale is a **display of China's new "purchasing power"** (购买力), which is changing the life of football fans. Compared to **"kids standing in front of a shop window, looking at toys"** (羡慕地盯着玩具橱窗的少年孩童) that they knew they could not afford, in the past **Chinese supporters "could not even dream"** (做梦也没想过) that the Milan clubs would become Chinese one day. The acquisition of FC Internazionale, thanks to **"the growth of China's economic power"** (中国经济的强劲增长) and to the continuous rise

of its “national power” (国力), allows the Chinese fans to abandon their “unconditional devotion and admiration” (无条件的仰视膜拜) and to embrace a more “rational view” (理性的平视).

To some commentators, the deal will go so far as to have an effect on China’s position in the world. China has gained more “discourse power” (话语权) in the circles of international football: in the era of China’s “purchase power” (中国实力) also the world of football has to meet China’s demands, such as the change of matches schedule “in line with the Chinese prime time, to please the Chinese audience” (安排在周末黄金时段，满足中国观众).

The analysis of the Suning-FC Internazionale deal shows how a sport-related story has been used by the Chinese press as an opportunity to promote a discourse of national supremacy over Western nations. The narrative emerging from the analysis of the corpus generally stresses the positive effects of the deal in line with the **leadership’s discourse on football, with references to Xi Jinping’s “Chinese dream”** of a rich and strong country that re-establishes its due position against Europe’s past supremacy. The acquisition of FC Internazionale is therefore portrayed as the symbol of a nationalist resurgence.

The case also shows the intertwining of economic and political motives that is implicit in the project of globalisation of Chinese football. The success of a private company becomes the success of the entire country, while the financial takeover of a football club is assigned a political and even philosophical meaning: the redemption of China from a shameful past. In this view, the commercial and financial power of Chinese companies responds to institutional calls, and their success has **highly political effects. On the one hand, it nurtures China’s soft power abroad by popularising its image and brands through football. On the other, it supports China’s soft power within China, where the public opinion, reinforced in their patriotic**

feelings by the country's financial power, could be more prone to sustain the Party's political project.

Over the last year, huge investments in foreign clubs and operations of global shopping in sport have begun to receive less support from the institutions, even suffering [heavy limitations](#) starting in June 2017. In July 2017, government-run China Central Television (CCTV) accused Suning of having bought FC Internazionale as part of a [money-laundering operation](#), while in August 2017, investments abroad in sport and entertainment were [further tightened](#). Even though unexpected, these measures should not be seen as a way **to slow down China's football plans. China** prefers to avoid being perceived as an aggressive or dangerous force, and the shopping spree that shocked the global football establishment was giving the opposite impression. A non-threatening, co-operative China is more likely to be able **to maintain a positive impression amongst Europe's football experts, allowing the** country to learn what it takes to realise their tale of national redemption. Despite the recent developments, there is no sign that Xi Jinping is abandoning the plan to **challenge the world's football order.**

Cross-Strait Relations and Taiwan's Five Bids for the World University Summer Games

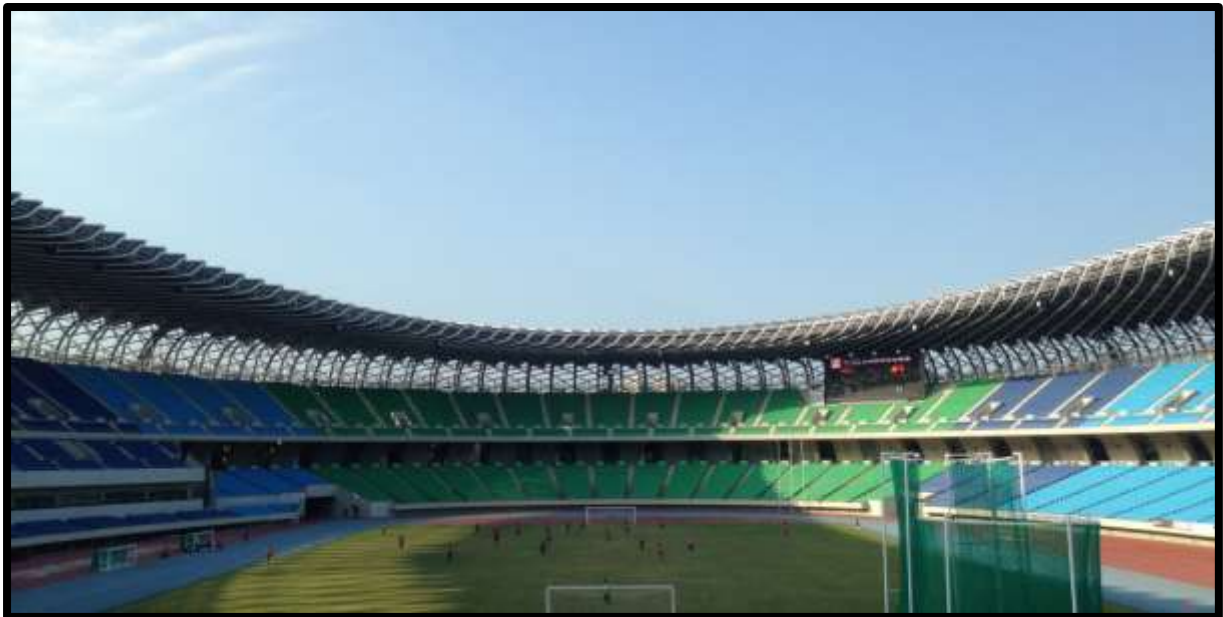


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[Marcus P. Chu.](#)

Since Taiwan joined the International University Sports Federation (FISU), the governing body of the Summer and Winter World University Games, in 1987, its capital city Taipei and largest trade port Kaohsiung have respectively activated bids **to host the Summer World University Games (SWUG) five times. China's role in these five bids overwhelmingly determined the Taiwanese cities' failures and success.** After it submitted the application documents for hosting the 2001 SWUG in 1996, Kaohsiung was optimistic about its chance to win; the ongoing Kosovo war and the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis reduced the odds of the other two candidates, Belgrade of Yugoslavia and Daegu of South Korea respectively. Such rosy prospects, however, were hampered when the FISU, in April 1998, confirmed Beijing as another participant in the bidding process.

Beijing's intention of holding the 2001 Games was about more than simply improving its odds in the 2008 Summer Olympics bid. The bid accelerated the pace of Taiwan's isolation in the international society – which was considered a top priority of the

Chinese authorities' Taiwan policy since President Lee Tung-hui's American visit in 1995. To win this face-to-face battle with Kaohsiung, the Chinese candidate played financial cards, including promising to provide financial donation to the FISU and covering the cost of transportation, accommodation as well as supplying food to participant athletes from developing countries. Somewhat surprisingly, the Taiwanese candidate did not provide any counter offers. The contrast ultimately caused Kaohsiung to be eliminated.

In summer 2001, Kaohsiung together with Tainan informed the FISU about their decision of staging the 2007 SWUG. The Chinese authorities once again were against the Taiwanese cities hosting the event, partly because their municipal governments then were chaired the pro-Taiwan independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) members and partly because President Chen Shui-bian and his deputy Lu Hsiu-lien, in August 2002, announced the One-Country-on-Each-Side theory and commenced the Scorched-Earth diplomacy **respectively. To ensure Kaohsiung's** failure, China intensified efforts to lobby the voters to support Bangkok – the front-runner of this bid. The capital city of Thailand, meanwhile, also intensively promoted its successful experience of celebrating the 1998 Asian Games and pledged to increase its donations to the FISU and subsidies for the participating athletes. Although the Taiwanese candidate also gave reciprocal financial promises, most of the voters, comparing the monetary offers, facility quality and hosting experience of **the candidates as well as considering China's voice, cast their votes to the Thai** candidate.

In 2006, Kaohsiung was challenged by Shenzhen of China in the bid for the 2011 SWUG. To win this contest, the government of the Taiwanese candidate promised to donate USD 8 million to the FISU. President Chen Shui-bian and his colleagues in the Taiwan government also joined the activities of imploring the voters to support the city. In view of this, a high-profile group of officials from both the Chinese central and local governments was arranged to lobby the voters to support Shenzhen. Its

government even promised to lavishly donate a total of USD 22 million to the FISU if the Chinese candidate city won the hosting rights. Although the standard of its sports facilities was assessed to be inferior to that of Kaohsiung, Shenzhen eventually obtained the hosting right.

Shortly after Ma Ying-jeou became the new President of Taiwan in 2008, Taipei commenced its application for holding the 2015 SWUG. Given the insistence of Ma and his party mates, including the then Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-pin, on the 1992 Consensus, China, this time, did not install any fatal impediments, rather it allowed the Taiwanese to lobby the FISU voters during the celebration of the 2009 Winter World University Games at Harbin. Even so, the FISU ultimately still passed the hosting right to Gwangju of South Korea instead of the capital city of Taiwan. However, on this occasion the reasons appear to have been that the bidding tasks of the latter were sloppily completed and that the experience of holding sporting mega-events of the former was richer than those of the other candidates.

To prevent a repeat of its failure two years ago, Taipei cautiously prepared every task in the bid for the 2017 SWUG and repeatedly stated that a total of NTD 37.5 billion (USD 1.3 billion) would be expended for the event. Although the FISU appreciated **the Taiwanese candidate's offers, it was also impressed by the Brazilian capital, Brasilia's theme** of the event celebration, concept of the post-Games legacy management, and standard of information technology and communication facilities. **Given its appreciation to Ma and his party' contributions to tighten up the cross-**Strait interaction, including opening up postal, transportation and trade links, proposing to reduce economic tariffs and barriers and allowing Chinese residents to visit Taiwan on individual tours, the Chinese government not only decided to vote for Taipei in this neck-and-neck race, but also requested other FISU members to **support it. China's enthusiastic support eventually led to the success of the capital city of Taiwan in this tough race.**

The above review demonstrates that the Chinese authorities would surely obstruct Taiwanese cities to win mega-sports event bids as long as both the Taiwanese President and the municipal executives supported Taiwanese independence, Two Chinas and/or One China, One Taiwan. They would only offer support to the cities if both the central and local Taiwanese leaders insisted upon the One-China principle and zealously engage China. However, when any bid is a face-to-face race between Chinese and Taiwanese candidates, the Chinese side would ensure that the former wins by any means regardless of the political stance of the Taiwanese central and local authorities. By this logic, the Chinese are very likely to continue to install fatal obstructions for any future sporting mega-sports event bids conducted by Taiwanese cities where municipal governments are chaired by current President Tsai Ing-wen's DPP party friends or allies. Consequently, Taiwan's quest for sporting mega-event in the next few years would doubtless be a useless exercise.

Three stories of Italian football in Tianjin: A missed chance for a cultural exchange between China and Italy



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [Luca Volpi](#)/Flickr.

[Gianluigi Negro](#) and [Nicholas Ginperini](#).

Given that sport can be considered an important arena in the wider realm of soft power, this chapter will address the paucity of literature on Chinese soft power in the field of sport and sporting events.

One of the very first strategies launched by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in 2004 was the creation of a network of the Confucius Institutes – a move to improve international recognition of China's culture and language. In general, much analysis of Confucius Institutes in the western world has concluded that their proliferation has not had a positive effect in terms of China's global interest promotion.

A second layer of analysis emphasises the role played by the media. Academic literature confirms that China has diversified the ways to promote its image abroad through the launch of Chinese media outlets, movies and internet services. Nevertheless, Wanning Sun in one of her papers argues persuasively that China is still facing a crisis of credibility internationally.

The final layer of analysis focuses on the role played by international events such as the Beijing Olympic Games, Shanghai Expo and Beijing Winter Olympics. We argue that sport, and soccer in particular, is a crucial arena by which to explore the idea of soft power. It is important to highlight that in the document titled *Chinese Football Reform and Development Program*, issued by the General Office of the State Council in 2015, it is pointed out that Chinese football is a central part of the “realisation of the dream of becoming a powerful sports nation”, holding “great importance for the development of the economy, society and culture”.

Chinese football reform aims to help construct the international image of China, forming one part of a more comprehensive and systematic plan. This article aims to analyse the Italian media frame of Chinese soccer with a particular focus on Tianjin. We argue that the Italian case is relevant for at least three reasons.

- First, the Italian football league *Serie A* holds a very important place in the collective imagination of Chinese football fans because of its attractiveness to those fans during the 1980s and 1990s.
- Second, beside the experience of Marcello Lippi, coach of the Chinese national team at the time of writing this article, the *Chinese Super League* benefited from the international experience of two Italian managers at Tianjin. They were: Giuseppe Materazzi from 2003 to 2004 coach for Tianjin Teda FC; Fabio Cannavaro from 2016 to 2017 coach for Tianjin Quanjian. In addition,

former Italian football player Damiano Tommasi played for Tianjin Teda from 2009 to 2010.

- Third, the Italian presence in Tianjin has its historical roots at the beginning of the 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion. In more concrete terms, Italy held a concession of 46 hectares. Marinelli has discussed the importance of the Italian connection, identifying the most relevant Italian forms of influences in Tianjin both from a political studies dimension and urban studies perspective.

Our goal is to understand how Italian media frames Chinese football in order to test the effectiveness of Chinese soft power through soccer in the case of Italy. This process will by extension identify which kind of narrative and interest Italy has in terms of Chinese football. From a quantitative perspective, our preliminary findings demonstrate limited Italian press coverage of Chinese soccer. This study provides a qualitative analysis focusing on the coverage of Chinese football in the Italian press, **relating primarily to Materazzi, Tommasi and Cannavaro's experience in Tianjin.** In order to increase the range of our analysis, our corpus includes two other sources: a **set of online articles from Fox Sports database (2017) related to Fabio Cannavaro's experience as coach at Tianjin Teda and Tommasi's book *Mal di Cina* (2010) focused on his experience as football player in Tianjin.**

Fox Sports in 2017 was the official broadcaster of *Chinese Super League* in Italy so we expected to find detailed reports on the Chinese football league. Unfortunately, our *Online Sources* **section of this paper didn't meet our expectations.** *Mal di Cina* is the first and only book written by an Italian football player/coach who had experience in China and it is a useful source by which to understand China through the lens of football.

As we have already demonstrated in a previous publication, "[Between China and Italy through the lens of soccer history](#)", despite the growing interest in Chinese

football and the historical and cultural connection between Italy and Tianjin, most of the articles in the Italian newspapers analysed offer very little insight into Chinese football. Indeed, most of the articles do not even provide any form of contextual information to the reader. The failure of Chinese soft power in football is evident: to identify Chinese soccer, newspapers and online websites employ many stereotypes. Our analysis of the articles related to Giuseppe Materazzi and Fabio Cannavaro confirmed our prior assumptions.

We divided data into three parts: the first one forms a collection of the most evident simplifications and stereotypes from the data collected for our [previous article](#); the second one is a **qualitative analysis of Fabio Cannavaro's articles on Fox Sports**; the **third one is also a qualitative analysis of Tommasi's book**.

Part 1: Simplifications and stereotypes

In this first part, where we analyse articles related to Materazzi and Cannavaro's experiences in Tianjin, we collected the most evident simplifications and stereotypes related to food, race, environment, the quality of the game in the *Chinese Super League*, and the media perception on the spending power of Chinese football.

-Most evident simplification (and mistakes): In every article we analysed, Tianjin is described as a city of 11 million inhabitants, 120 km far from Beijing. There were no references to the historical connections between the Chinese city and Italy. There is not even simple background information on the football clubs in Tianjin: one article published in 2003 explains that Teda, the owner of the club, is a government enterprise, while Fox Sports wrongly reported that it is an insurance company. In fact, Teda is the acronym of Tianjin Economic Development Area and the Teda Co. Ltd is in the business of nutrition, medicine and transportation.

-Eyes (Race): An article from ANSA, in 2003, defined Zichai Song (former owner of La Palmense FC) a **businessman with 'almond eyes'**. In 2017, Ezequiel Lavezzi was

accused of racism for a photo where he appeared to pull at the corners of his eyes, a gesture widely considered insulting to East Asian people. Fox Sports reported the episode in few words without taking any position.

-Food: Fox Sports, in an article on Axel Witsel (Fabio Cannavaro's player at Tianjin) reported that players may be convinced to go to China for the heritage of the country **and the cuisine; unfortunately, they mentioned 'spring rolls' as a typical food.** Spring roll is not a common food in China, but it is typical in Chinese restaurants in Italy, where dishes vary considerably to the authentic Chinese menu.

-Authority (Government): Another stereotype that emerges often relates to authorities. In 2017, after the match between Shanghai Shenhua and Tianjin Quanjian, the midfielder Qin Sheng was banned for 22 games after he stamped on Witsel. After that episode, Fox Sports reported: *China will also be open to the world, but when it comes to discipline it is difficult not to perceive the one party atmosphere.*

-Environment (Pollution): A frequent stereotype that we observed was the state of the environment. One curious article on this issue was published in 2003 by *// Giornale*. It was titled **'Marco Materazzi: the coach with the mask'** insinuating a mask for pollution, but in the article it was reported that: **'No one has seen Materazzi use the object that in Mao's Country is on the mouth of everyone'.**

-Quality of the Game: We can know through the interviews with foreign football players that there are issues with the quality of football in China. The common points between the declarations of Pato and Axel Witsel in two different articles (Fox Sports) are that the level is not competitive as in Europe, the intensity in the game is lower and most teams are tactically weak.

-Perception of the Chinese football project: China is defined as the new superpower in world football (Fox Sports) because Chinese football clubs purchased many top players. For this reason, the sports channel on Sky's Platform decided to broadcast the football league in 2017. The identification of a Chinese football revolution is identified mainly by the spending power of football clubs and enterprises that own assets in Europe. What is missing according to our perspective is a dedicated focus on the development of football at grassroots level, infrastructure, and marketing, amongst many other perspectives.

Online Sources

In our [previous article](#) on we demonstrated that from 2003 to 2017, newspapers displayed a lack of quality articles relating to Chinese football when covering Materazzi, Tommasi and Cannavaro in Tianjin. In this chapter, we have analysed the qualitative aspects and quantity of articles published on Fox Sports. Our findings show that the impression of a lack of a detailed analysis was probably correct. Indeed, we did not find a single article on Chinese culture itself (see table below).

Market	Results	Culture	Quality	Non inherent
17	30	/	2	10

The analysis of Cannavaro provides a corpus of 59 articles. Cannavaro was the only Italian coach in CSL at the beginning of that season in 2017. As we can see from the table, Fox Sports focused only on the match recaps and on transfer market stories (most of them related to Aubameyang and Diego Costa, players linked with Tianjin Quanjian). We retrieved two articles that we consider to be of a reasonable quality. One about match fixing, the other about the ban of 22 games for a Chinese player. In general terms, we did not find enough substantial coverage to understand the wider landscape of Chinese football. Articles included transfer market speculation and interviews with Alexandre Pato and Witsel. In these cases, no cultural aspects were explored in the interviews. The Brazilian football player said that he was

attracted to come to China by the project and by working with Fabio Cannavaro, while Witsel admitted that he accepted the offer only because of the money. Moreover, the presentation of the league was inconsistent: only foreign players were quoted in the article, not even the most famous Chinese football players Wu Lei and Zheng Zhi were discussed. In every article we analysed that quoted Fabio Cannavaro, we did not find any real consistent analysis to contextualise the state of Chinese football or its background.

Tommasi's Book

Tommasi's book (Mal di Cina, 2011) is one of the best sources to understand China through the lens of football. In his book, Tommasi wrote many things on cultural aspects of China and football. First, he provides an economic context explaining the background of Italian enterprises moving to China (page. 15), which he describes as an emerging and convenient market. The economic aspect is present even when Tommasi writes about the environment, noting the quality of the air - often bad. Tommasi reported that after the United Nations Climate Change Conference held in 2008 in Copenhagen, BRICS countries asked to maintain their economic growth without limitations (page. 25). Another important cultural aspect reported is the traffic conditions. Tommasi also compared the state of the traffic to the state of life of a nation and wrote that the traffic in Tianjin is chaotic as the rhythm of life (page. 48).

In terms of the quality of our selected articles on Chinese football, Tommasi stated that, at that time there were leagues in the world more attractive than China (even in terms of the monthly wage). The first impression he had was that foreign players were considered mercenaries at the end of their careers who come to China for easy money (page. 19). The conditions – being a foreigner in a completely different culture and language context – emerge in the realm of food. Tommasi and the other foreign players of Tianjin Teda ate at a different table, eating different foods than Chinese players (page. 39).

Another very interesting finding whilst reading Tommasi's book is the comparison between the training systems of Italy and China.

When it comes to tactics, the conclusions provided by Tommasi are that there is little movement off the ball in the field and that Chinese footballers are more individual. The Italian football player even laments the fact that Chinese soccer players do not appear to have collective spirit (page. 34). **Tommasi's contribution is much more elaborate compared to material provided by Fox Sports, which informs us only that Chinese players need to improve the tactical aspects of their game without specifying further details. Lastly yet importantly, Tommasi's book informs the Italian public about some cultural aspects of the Chinese *Super League*, for example the grudge match status of Tianjin Teda and Beijing Guoan (the Jingjin derby) and the fact that referees for league matches are sometimes foreign.**

Conclusion

The qualitative analysis confirms that at the present, the Italian press coverage of Chinese football appears not only very weak but also far from desirable and does not meet the goals set in the *Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme*. Considering the historical ties between Tianjin and Italy we consider this a missed opportunity for promotion of the idea of China and Chinese football in Italy. Equally, it is a lost opportunity to develop new business and cultural connections between Tianjin and Italy. A further negative perspective is offered by our larger corpus of **data that includes the Fox Sport database and Tommasi's book. These two sources confirm a continuity of negative media framing Chinese football in the Italian press. We hope our findings could contribute to an improvement in the quality of Italian press coverage of both Chinese football and China itself.**

Why the world game is still a foreign land in China



Image credit: CC by [Marc Dalmulder/Flickr](#).

[Simon Chadwick](#).

Several years ago, a postgraduate student and I surveyed 16,000 Chinese football fans. In our research, we essentially asked three questions: which national team do you support, which club team do you support and, in both cases, why? The most common answers we received were: Germany, Arsenal and a multitude of accompanying motives including a history of team success, star performers, and the fact that some decent German players have recently played for one of the English Premier League's (EPL) London-based teams. **China's preoccupation with Germany** was borne-out earlier this year by Shanghai-based research company [Mailman's findings](#) that Bayern Munich remains the most popular football club on Chinese social media. If further evidence was needed of heavy flirting between the two countries, look no further than [Xi Jinping and Angela Merkel's](#) recent giggle-fest at **a children's football match in Berlin involving the two nations. It was, therefore,** something of a surprise this summer that as Arsenal, Chelsea, Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund all headed to China, it was the EPL teams that came out on top. A kindly, somewhat perseverant, soul brought it to my attention on social media that games involving German teams had been poorly attended affairs.

The Arsenal/Chelsea match staged in Beijing's Bird's Nest Stadium in 2017 drew a crowd of 55,000, although this was still some way short of the venue's maximum capacity. Nevertheless, on the day of this game, it was striking how many Chinese people were walking around Beijing wearing Chelsea and Arsenal shirts. These greatly exceeded any other shirts on show at the time in China. I spotted a couple of Dortmund shirts, there was some residue of Leicester City's 2016 Premier League success, a smattering of Barca shirts (albeit those carrying the Qatar Airways shirt sponsorship logo rather than the less palatable Japanese e-commerce brand Rakuten – potentially a contentious matter for some Chinese consumers), but otherwise the London giants ruled the Beijing streets. As I was working in Beijing at the time that Arsenal played Chelsea, I took the liberty of asking Chinese people around me why the game seemed to have captured peoples' imaginations. When questioned about the Blues, the response was universal: they are the champions and have been champions many times over the last decade. As for Arsenal, the common answer was rather more enigmatic: "I have always supported Arsenal".

Exactly why Arsenal are so popular in China will, for the time-being at least, remain an unanswered question. Yet two things were clear from the responses and stories of fans: firstly, whichever EPL teams visit China will generate a transitory fan-base that essentially emerges and dissipates as teams arrive in and leave the country; secondly, once one cuts through the gloss of seduction generated by the latest teams to head East for a game, it becomes clear how highly regarded Italian football remains in China. In the same way that European and South American football fans remember watching their first football match on television with their mother or father, the same is true in China. But fans back in the 1980s were not watching Chinese football – Italy's Serie A was top-dog back then. In fact, just as Chinese pop music fans flocked to see Wham play a concert in Beijing in 1985, so they flocked to watch Internazionale and AC Milan on TV at home. In the 1980s, Serie A was the only overseas league one could watch. Just as many middle-aged Chinese people may

still be lusting after George Michael, so others are still captivated by the thought of Gullit, van Basten and Rijkaard playing for AC. And, just as generational influences are important among football fans in England, Brazil and elsewhere, the sons, daughters and grandchildren of China remain deeply engaged with Serie A. Indeed, **given China's deeply oriented family culture, it is arguable that generational influences are even greater than elsewhere in the footballing world.**

As for local teams, a walk around Beijing on a match-day suggests that China is not yet the land of footballing milk and honey that many foreigners believe the country to be. When Beijing Guoan plays at home, the average attendance at CSL games jumps. When the club plays away from home, the average attendance figure for league games can be pitifully low (sometimes less than 10,000 – in a country of 1.6 billion people). There are several reasons why Chinese people do not watch their own football, most notably that in general, it is not very good. However, having lunched with a FIFA referee in China during my recent visit there, he was full of praise for the tactical sophistication and physical fitness exhibited by teams such as Guangzhou Evergrande. Instead, he felt that poor strength in depth is Chinese **football's biggest problem. A more** common response among football fans on the streets of China was a disappointment with the absence of domestic heroes and icons in the Chinese game. Whereas images of Paul Pogba, Zlatan Ibrahimovic and even David Beckham can be seen on hoardings attached to the fronts of buildings, China needs some of its own to step-up and step out of the shadows of their counterparts from other parts of the world.

Otherwise, there's something strangely different about Chinese football fans, something the business brains of European football should be aware of. This is that football in China is not about beer, banter and bravado; to be a fan means something more subtle and sophisticated. One illustration of this was the couple of hundred football fans walking around the Temple of Heaven on match-day wearing Arsenal and Chelsea shirts. Success helps, as does what your mother and father tell you. In

the end though, if foreigners are to better understand football in China, they must spend some time on the streets of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

How a footballer's way with words caught China offside



Image credit: CC by [IQRemix/Flickr](#).

[Simon Chadwick](#).

The Ken(n)edys clearly have a way with words. More than 50 years after John Fitzgerald possibly [likened himself to a doughnut](#) in his '*Ich Bin ein Berliner*' speech, young Chelsea player Robert Kenedy Nunes Nascimento similarly challenged the world's linguistic communities. However, while J.F.K.'s phraseology was subsequently proven grammatically sound and therefore not a reference to fried confectionery, Brazilian Kenedy's social media postings have failed to withstand the scrutiny of cyberspace watchers, particularly in China. Premier League club Chelsea played in Beijing as part of its preseason preparations. During the tour, Kenedy took to Instagram to post some comments about his hosts. One was a photograph of a sleeping security guard accompanied by the statement '*Acorda china Vacilão*'. The second was a selfie, linked to which he wrote '*Porra China*'. The precise translations of both have now been debated, although each interpretation has generally confirmed that the Brazilian insulted his hosts. The guard was told by the Brazilian to '*wake-up, Chinese fool*'. The selfie post induced more detailed analyses, but the consensus seemed to be that it meant '*fuck-you, China*'.

Both posts were subsequently deleted by Kenedy, with both the player and Chelsea **apologising to the Chinese. Kenedy was also sent home from Chelsea's tour.** In simple terms, when one is being hosted on a short visit by a foreign country it is normally good etiquette and advisable not to criticise it in such a way. As a well-paid, professional athlete, Kenedy should have known better. That said, Chelsea should have been more careful in briefing its players ahead of the tour, especially as China **is supposed to be a strategically important' market for the club. A multitude of issues** linked to communication and football is bound-up in the Kenedy case, not least whether individual players should have the freedom to express their personal views without being scrutinised or admonished by the clubs they play for. Clearly, football clubs still have some issues with communication management, both as brands and as employers. Chelsea also face a commercial and strategic dilemma. Over the last decade, but particularly during the last two years since 2015, China has become an important focus for European football clubs. Many have been actively seeking to build fan engagement, as well as to capitalise upon the focus China has been placing on the development of its football.

The English club has already done very nicely in this regard, having [sold players](#) to Chinese Super League clubs for inflated transfer fees. At the same time, Chelsea has been utilising its status as English Premier League champions to reinforce its **positioning in China as one of the world's highest profile and most successful clubs.** In the space of two Instagram posts, however, Chelsea's China strategy may nevertheless have unravelled as the Chinese authorities have reportedly been [seeking to remove content about the club](#) from the country's social media channels. Furthermore, calls have come from some quarters in the country asking for the Premier League club to be completely banned from China. At a time when President Xi and his allies have been vigorously, though often subtly, pursuing a **'China first' policy, particularly in football, this was the last thing European football** needed. After a year in which the Chinese government has imposed several measures on its **football clubs aimed at protecting the country's domestic interests,**

Kenedy has unwittingly helped confirm what some officials in China have long since suspected: that foreign players, clubs, and business people are more interested in making money for themselves rather than supporting the long-term development of Chinese football.

Yet there are more profound issues at the heart of Kenedy's posts than the simple high jinks of a footballer who was presumably either bored or homesick at the time he posted his messages. The condescending nature of the Instagram posts plays to a narrative that China has long been seeking to break away from. Whereas countries such as the United States still enjoy global popular appeal, China remains frustrated that it still struggles to be perceived in the same way. In this respect, the dismissive, **mocking tone of Kenedy's social media musings was acutely felt by some people in** China. Nowhere was this more evident than in cyberspace, where the posts appear to have irked large **numbers of people, particularly the country's cyber-nationalists**. As the sophistication and dynamism of Chinese social media has grown over the last decade, so, too, has the strengthening of online nationalist sentiment. Debate has raged about whether the state has tacitly supported the propagation of such attitudes online, although President Xi is [believed to be somewhat concerned](#) by the ramifications of people freely and openly expressing anti-foreign sentiment.

In 2016, Taiwan elected a president intent on reducing the country's reliance on China. In response, thousands of Chinese netizens [engaged in coordinated attacks](#) on Taiwanese websites. Cyber-nationalism, though, is not restricted to the highly-charged world of East Asian politics. Earlier this year, Italian luxury fashion house Dolce & Gabbana were targeted by online nationalists for using what they felt were [disparaging images of Chinese people](#) as part of a promotional campaign. Social media slip-ups **such as Kenedy's, which some in the West and elsewhere might** even find humorous, can have serious ramifications for a football club and, indeed, for organisations in general. It is a little too early to say what the long-term damage **might be for Chelsea's brand or its business in China, but with the country's school**

curriculum promoting a [more nationalist tone](#), football clubs dismiss the semantics of words such as 'vacilão' at their peril.

Translation, communication, inter-cultural understanding and a basic level of respect are all essential elements for clubs that are serious about doing business in China. Added to which, their football players need to stop behaving like doughnuts.

Sports Development

Can China's Super League help spur its global ambitions?



Image credit: CC by [Gothia Cup](#)/Flickr.

[Simon Chadwick.](#)

Imported stars signed for large transfer fees and paid hugely inflated wages; high hopes of success for domestic clubs competing in international competitions; stories about massive television contracts being signed that will revolutionise the game; and concerns about the perpetually under-performing national team and where it goes next. No, it's not the English Premier League. Welcome to China's Super League.

Chinese clubs have been frenetically engaged in transfer activity, with the country's transfer fee record repeatedly being broken. Brazilian international Ramires' move from Chelsea to Jiangsu Suning for £25m set the early pace. The value and significance of this transfer was then surpassed by Jackson Martinez's move from

Atletico Madrid to Guangzhou Evergrande for £31m and by Alex Teixeira's switch from Shakhtar Donetsk to Jiangsu Suning for £38m.

The acquisitions come **on the back of China's strategy last year of buying European football clubs. At the start of 2015, Wang Jianlin, Asia's richest man and owner of the Dalian Wanda property empire, took a 20% stake in Atletico Madrid.** This was followed by an array of Chinese investors buying several clubs including Espanyol in Spain, Den Haag in the Netherlands, Sochaux in France, and a 13% stake in Manchester City.

Global ambitions

For a country with no previous history of footballing success, many have been left bemused by these developments. Yet what we are currently witnessing is the Chinese state and its entrepreneurial lieutenants executing an industrial strategy for **football that is comparable to China's recent growth in other sectors. Twenty years ago, China wasn't a global superpower in, for example, the computing and IT industries. Now, it is, and the government has similar ambitions for football.**

This ambition is borne of President Xi's 2014 declaration that China will bid for the right to host the World Cup and then win the trophy (ideally on home soil). Since then, China has dived into frenzied spending that has seen heavy investment across **the sports industry, but with a particular focus on the world's favourite game. Xi is thought to be a football fan, but he also understands what the political, economic and socio-cultural benefits of global football success can bring. Investing in the sport makes good sense – hence the sudden prominence of China's clubs, owners, and investors. Yet China's football vision is not simply being played-out at the elite professional level. Grassroots football is also awash with cash. Entrepreneurs, companies and provincial governments are all scrambling to execute state policy.**

Rather sneeringly, football fans across Europe and South America have dismissed **China's newfound, voracious appetite for the sport as being comparable to Russia's** ultimately unsuccessful oligarch-fuelled football revolution of several years ago. China has also been labelled as a retirement home for footballers who have decided not to follow the well-trodden path to Major League Soccer in the United States. Yet these views are both dismissive and naïve. China has already proven its ability to instigate successful industrial change on a massive scale. The country has proven itself adept at aligning its vast financial resources with its ambitions, intentions and actions. Moreover, the collective commitment to football of both state and business differentiates China from the piecemeal approach witnessed in Russia. And the moves of Martinez (a recent Arsenal target) and Teixeira (heavily courted by Liverpool) show that China has rapidly become a realistic option for many players at the peak of their careers.

China's targets

The target for Chinese football will be to maintain the success of its teams in the Asian Champions League. Prior to 2013, a Chinese club had never won the competition; since, Guangzhou Evergrande has won the trophy twice. The winner of **this competition qualifies for FIFA's Club World Cup; last year**, Guangzhou reached the semi-finals where the club lost to the competition's eventual winners, Barcelona. **China will want to do better this year, success being a measure of the nation's** football development. We should expect more high profile player signings by Chinese clubs. Much of the recent transfer activity has been intended to sustain the Champions League contenders through the competition. However, the Chinese are conspicuous consumers who seem to have fallen in love with breaking world records. It is **entirely feasible that one of the world's biggest stars will move to China for the world's largest ever transfer fee.**

In the medium-term, the importance of the Club World Cup to the Chinese should **not be underestimated; indeed this may explain why China's Alibaba E-Auto** recently

signed an eight-year deal to sponsor the competition. Moreover, the chances of securing the rights to host the competition and have one of its clubs win it, are arguably greater and more straightforward than hosting and winning the World Cup. **Longer-term though, winning the World Cup remains China's big goal. While some people may perceive the country has become the latest home for football's mercenaries, China itself sees these players as being central to raising the quality of its football and its players. An ongoing challenge, however, will be to translate club strength into international team success.**

Building a sport, raising its quality and achieving success are not achieved easily. Whether or not China realises its footballing vision is likely to depend upon the length **of Xi's tenure. If he can endure, we may see the World Cup realistically** being held in the country after 2030. In which case, the question becomes: can China sustain its **interest in the world's favourite game for that long?**

Sport for All: Has a Golden Age of Mass Sport Participation Finally Arrived in China?



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [Lain](#)/Flickr.

[Shushu Chen](#).

‘Those who work with their brains rule; those who work with their brawn are ruled.’

This popular Chinese saying, one of Mencius’s, illustrates the low esteem in which China holds sports and physical education. Various influences throughout the nation’s history have helped to shape such attitudes: for example, Confucian cultural emphasis on moral virtue and intellectualism over physical development, civil service examinations that overlook and hamper men’s physical education, and a tradition of foot-binding that physically disabled Chinese women for a millennium. As such, China’s development of mass participation (as distinct from a primary focus on elite sport) has not been plain sailing.

Despite a traditionally dismissive attitude to sports and exercise, China has enjoyed notable [elite sport success in recent years](#). An invaluable secret weapon helping to facilitate this success is known as *Juguo Tizhi*, roughly translated as ‘nationwide

support for an elite-sport system'. Victories in the arena of elite sport (and Olympic medal successes in particular) have thus, for more than thirty years, constituted the primary objective for China's sports development. Mass participation, meanwhile, has taken a back seat. Following the origins of sports reform in 1979, China's sports development pivoted on the principle of ['prioritising elite sport, then leading subsequent general development'](#). In 1995, China finally accommodated sport for all by introducing the National Fitness Programme, which promoted exercise for the benefit of economic development and aimed to improve the nation's overall health and fitness. The conception of the National Fitness Programme, along with the accompanying legislation, signalled the sport-for-all agenda's active role in policy-making. However, sport for all was still subsequently deemed lower priority than was the agenda of elite-sport development.

In the 2000s, fresh concerns about citizens' health (in particular that of children and young people) [pushed the issue of developing mass participation into the limelight](#). In 2002, the General Administration of Sport published *Opinions on Accelerating the Development and Improvement of Sports Work in the New Era*. This publication reiterated that the development of sports should serve ordinary Chinese people and should give the development of national fitness top sports priority. In light of China's successful bid placed in 2001 for the right to host the 2008 Olympic Games, however, political attention and state financial investment were for the most part still strategically placed on the development of elite sport. Realising a 100-year-old dream of hosting the [Olympic Games](#) and achieving medal successes at the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games (including the summing of the gold-medal table) fulfilled China's sports policy goal of becoming a major sports country. Yet, apart from some sporadically issued policy statements relating to the agenda of developing sport for all, the ideal of mass participation had received little more than lip service.

Following the 2008 Olympic Games, sport for all gradually began to build momentum again in China. The State Council made August 8th national 'Sport-For-

All Day’; and, in 2009, it launched a specific sport-for-all-related regulation which— as the very first regulation on developing sport for all—was different to the often vague and inadequately implemented policy statements published previously. This new regulation articulated the responsibility of relevant bodies in the national fitness system, formalised a systematic national fitness test programme, and formally addressed other issues in relation to sports facilities and sports-related business.

The London 2012 Olympic Games cemented China’s second-place position in the gold-medal table and confirmed, via an impressive array of Chinese medal wins, the **nation’s Olympic prowess. There soon began to be increasing public debate about how Chinese elite sport’s interests could be complemented with potential broader** benefits of developing sport for all. With these issues in mind, the agenda of developing sport for all was finally singled out as a state priority. During the preparation of the bid for hosting the 2022 Winter Olympics, President Xi proposed ‘**using the 2022 Games to get a population of [300 million in China to play winter sports](#)**’. This ambition for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games was bold and significant, to say the least; linking an Olympic event with developing sport for all had not been explicitly addressed when the 2008 Summer Olympic Games were hosted. Following **President Xi’s remarks, a few months later, a strategic document titled *Opinions of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption*** was published. This represented a watershed in the policy status of mass participation in China and signalled a clear governmental desire to develop sport for all, urged by growing concern about the deterioration of **children’s physical fitness and about a steadily increasing percentage of adults** becoming overweight.

In the wake of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, despite China’s unsatisfactory performance (where it dropped to third place in the gold-medal table and was **overtaken by Great Britain**), **people’s discussions on social media have generally indicated the nation’s** increasingly relaxed and inclusive attitude to sporting

achievement; and this suggests the end of an [‘only gold Olympic medals matter’](#) era. Some influential figures have also spoken out: for example, Yao Ming (a retired professional basketball player, now president of the Chinese Basketball Association) said that ‘the development of a world sports power [cannot rely merely on winning Olympic gold medals](#)’; and Gou Zhongwen (recently elected Director of the General Administration of Sport) stated that ‘the next stage of sports development business should focus on the term [“the people’s sport”](#)’. Two major reforms are now on the cards: (1) introducing nineteen new sports (including dragon boat racing and Tai Ji) at the next National Games—an event that could be considered the most high-profile multi-sports event in China—encouraging ordinary people to participate and compete in the event; (2) the announcement by the Chinese Athletics Association of an ‘I am running for the Olympics’ campaign which, as part of the overall reform plan, will select two marathon runners with zero professional training to represent China at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. The China Sports Press has described such reforms as [‘unbelievable’](#).

Although China’s aspirations concerning sport for all have made headway, this has been slow going: combining the agendas of mass participation and elite sport was first touted as an idea around ten years before China eventually came on board with it fully by implementing relevant reforms. It may now appear, superficially, that a golden age of sport for all has subsequently arrived there. However, realisation of the ideal at stake will require major concrete reforms, such as provision of more sports space and facilities, improving awareness of sports (particularly in rural areas), addressing unhealthy lifestyles and cultural biases regarding the value of sport, and an increase the role of physical education in curricula. In terms of realising its vision of sport for all, China may have learned to talk the talk; but now it must learn to walk the walk.

Chinese football's year of irrational investments and underachievement



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [MrkJohn](#)/Flickr.

[Simon Chadwick.](#)

It may have appeared for some time now to be all quiet on the Chinese football front, the frenzied activity of the last two years having seemingly come to an end. And with the end of the 2016/2017 season, and the last Communist Party Congress (CPC) recently **concluded**, it was almost as though a lull had hit the country's football. Even so, looking closely one can observe that there was still plenty going on. Indeed, **whilst there hadn't been the splash of a major European club acquisition by Chinese investors, or a big international signing by a Super League club**, strong signs were still there of what **China's government is thinking**. One need go no further than Hong Kong to see Beijing's direction of travel. China had forced the territory to criminalise [disrespecting its national anthem](#), notably in response to the booing of it by Hong Kong football fans prior to their **national team's games**. Fans object to **China's creeping influence in the semi-autonomous city**.

This creep was not, however, just characteristic of China's relationship with Hong Kong. An extended article in Britain's *Financial Times* observed how its next wave of investments is intended by Beijing to result in the development of '[football with Chinese characteristics](#)'. This was always China's intention, though the country has often struggled to match its football vision with an appropriate strategy. However, with President Xi Jinping's position reinforced following the CPC, the strategy appears more coherent, more focused, and now with a much stronger emphasis on China. Whilst the earlier introduction of a 100 per cent tax on overseas player acquisitions was a signal of Beijing's desire to channel funds into Chinese football's grassroots, it has subsequently become clear that the country's investors, entrepreneurs and business people are expected by their government to put China first. If the Chinese government really does hold out any realistic hope of winning the World Cup by 2050, then the clock is ticking. The generation of youngsters now playing football in schools will be in their early-30s by the time we get to 2040. To build and sustain subsequent generations of elite professionals will be a major task and is much needed. China's national team has demonstrated how far it is behind its international rivals. Back-to-back home defeats by Serbia and Columbia (neither of which are currently ranked in FIFA's top-10) illustrates how much work China still has left to do. As if further evidence was needed of China's pressing need to develop talent and build winning teams, its Super League in 2017 failed for the second consecutive year to get a team into the Asian Champions League Final.

The Champions League is an important showcase for the continent's football – its strength and its commercial development – not least because the winning team qualifies for FIFA's Club World Cup. However, with Guangzhou Evergrande (GE) having won the tournament twice (in 2013 and 2015), China's failure to win further subsequent iterations of the tournament sends out an unfortunate message about Chinese football to the rest of the world, and at just the wrong time. Although Shanghai SIPG made it to the semi-finals of this year's competition, the relatively early exit of GE must have been a concern for China's football authorities. This is

especially so, as in November 2017 the team subsequently went on to win its seventh **consecutive Chinese Super League (CSL) title. GE's domination at home but failure abroad does not bode well for China's football ambitions and suggests that grassroots player development alone is not the only challenge ahead for the country's football administrators.**

There is clearly an issue of competitive balance for them to address; it is counterproductive for GE to be dominating domestically but failing internationally. Furthermore, whilst other Chinese clubs (like Shanghai SIPG) become stronger, many wonder whether they are strong enough to compete or whether they can **sustain a challenge to GE. One response of China's authorities to the issue of talent development, competitive balance and, linked to this, league structure, has been to redesign some of its lower leagues. Reiterating notions of 'China first' and 'Chineseness', Beijing has been battling problems of overseas capital flight for some years. Football over the last two years has contributed to this flight, through rampant spending on overseas players, club acquisitions, sponsorship deals and an assortment of other investments. Edicts have been issued by central government in attempts to moderate what have been labelled ['irrational investments'](#).**

Following the CPC in October 2017, the messaging coming out of China was that such investments are no longer acceptable, and that those making them should focus their attention back towards China (and Chinese football). As such, proposals have been made to further regulate outbound investments, which will potentially impact upon both football and industry in general. To further complicate matters, rumours **continued to circulate that existing overseas investments will be 'called-in' by the Chinese government. This has been especially concerning for fans of Italy's AC Milan, with some observers speculating that the club's Chinese owners [will be forced to sell their asset](#)** and repatriate the funds back to China.

Despite the signals and messages coming out of Beijing, many football fans across the world remain hopeful that a Chinese investor will rescue their respective clubs. For the time being, this seems to be a forlorn hope, though there is evidence that China remains active in the sector. Notwithstanding investment controls, there have **been recent reports that Premier League Chelsea's stadium redevelopment project** will be [funded by a Chinese investor](#). Whether this is the case will remain a moot **point for the time being. However, Chelsea's location in an affluent part of London,** means the real estate value of any cash injection that a Chinese investor might make in the club would be considerable. Indeed, resultant currency flows back into China **would make this an attractive proposition for the country's state regulators.**

And this is what we should all now accustom ourselves to. President Xi and **China's** legions of investors were never going to be football sugar-daddies. However, this **year's events have brought clarity and cohesion to our understanding, China's too,** of what happens next in football.

Xi Jinping's Football Dream and the Nightmare Scenario



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[Alan Bairner](#).

It is generally accepted, although seldom properly evidenced, that successful national sports teams play a significant role in forging national solidarity. Conversely, failure on the international stage can undermine attempts to unify the nation. In all but a few countries in the world, the sport which is most often talked about in this regard is association football. In 2009, newly elected Chinese President Xi Jinping made a public statement about promoting elite football and expressed his personal hope that China would be capable of both qualifying for the final stages and winning the FIFA World Cup. With such concern on the part of the state leader, increasing attention turned to football.

Despite the fact that football was the first sport to be professionalized in China, this **has not brought about a marked improvement in the standard of China's elite football**. During an official visit to Germany in 2009, Xi Jinping, the then-vice president expressed his country's determination to put considerable effort into China's elite football development. Subsequently, in 2011, Xi highlighted his three

World Cup dreams of ‘participating in the World Cup’, ‘hosting the World Cup’, and ‘becoming World Cup champions’. In light of the Chinese leader’s concerns about the future of the country’s elite football, the previously neglected campus football in schools and universities has attracted the attention of wider Chinese society. In addition, many private corporations have echoed Xi’s proclamations by starting to support the development of elite football in China. Of particular significance, however, has been the ‘inviting in and sending out’ policy which involves government agencies and business stakeholders. The main aims have been to introduce high-level foreign experts to provide training for Chinese coaches, referees, and instructors and to encourage football clubs, corporations, and other social forces to select professional and young players to participate in training in countries that excel at football. The overall objectives have been to cultivate potential Chinese football stars and to revitalize Chinese football.

To date, the results of these policies have not been apparent. At the time of writing, China is in second last place in Group A in the Asian Football Confederation’s preliminary qualifying stage for the FIFA World Cup Finals in 2018. A notable victory over South Korea was secured but there have also been losses to Iran, Syria and Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, the Chinese Super League (CSL), established in 2004, has gained increasing significance in world football as clubs offer vast salaries to European and South American players. Member clubs are permitted to have five foreign players in their squads and they can use a maximum of four of these in a game. All but three of the season’s most valuable players since the league was founded have been foreigners, including three Brazilians. These developments, if left unchecked, have the potential to further undermine the production of local talent, thereby threatening Xi’s dreams for the national team. It is not only in the football context, however, that the contrasting fortunes of the CSL and the national side could yet cause President Xi some sleepless nights.

Originally contested by twelve teams, the number of teams in the CSL has subsequently grown to 16. There are currently two teams in each of Shanghai, Tianjin and Guangzhou and teams in ten other Chinese cities, including Beijing and Chongqing. There are no teams located west of the latter. The league has been dominated to date by Guangzhou Evergrande, with six championship titles and Shandong Luneng with three. Attendances have shown an increase in every season apart from 2013 and the average attendance for the 2016 season was 44,883 which stands favourable comparison with even the wealthiest leagues in Europe.

Although the CSL has raised the global profile of football in China, it appears to have done relatively little to improve the fortunes of the national team. In addition, the experience of other countries has been that fans of successful club sides are often little interested in the fate of their national teams. Not only do they regard their club sides as superior, as indeed they often are as a result of importing players from other countries, they also fear that when club players go on international duty, they might **get injured, thereby damaging their clubs' chances of success in domestic and international competitions.** In addition to football specific issues fans also often regard their club teams as representatives of particular civic or regional identities. One thinks, for example, of members of La Liga in Spain – Barcelona CF as standard bearers for Catalan identity and Athletic Bilbao for the Basque country. At present, none of the clubs in the CSL pose any threat to the concept of the Chinese nation-state although they undeniably set city against city. The situation would change, of course, if there were CSL teams based in Ürümqi or Hong Kong which could become a focus of opposition groups.

The integrity of nation-state boundaries is never wholly secure as was demonstrated by the break-up of the Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia with sport, and in particular football, contributing to the counter-hegemonic struggle in both instances. The developing strategies for elite football in China have been closely associated with the objectives of the Chinese leader following the 2008 Beijing

Olympics. The goals set by the **government for Chinese football were based on Xi's three World Cup dreams. As a consequence, in order to accomplish Xi's 'World Cup Dreams', the sport system, the education system and even the industrial sector have** been assigned the task of raising the level of elite football as an urgent task. However, those three systems have conflicts of interest, a factor which cannot be ignored in relation to the future development of Chinese football. Resultant tensions can create the conditions for conflict between state control and the power of market economy (or within socialism with Chinese characteristics). This does not in itself open the way for any expansion of the CSL to incorporate teams in parts of the country which have national or regional axes to grind. However, given the power of football to help consolidate national unity but equally to provide outlets for political **opposition, the realization of Xi's dreams for Chinese football could be even more** important than one might, at first glance, think.

China shines the spotlight on football spending spree



Image credit: CC by [Carsten Ullrich/Flickr](#).

[Simon Chadwick](#).

English football fans often use the phrase ‘it all kicked-off’, which essentially means ‘when the trouble started’. In the never-ending soap opera that is Chinese football, it kicked-off once again in 2017. During the politically induced damp squib of this Chinese Super League (CSL) transfer window (which closed mid-July), rumours circulated that a host of China’s investors in football were in trouble with the government. At the end of June, the China Banking Regulatory Commission [requested information](#) from financial institutions regarding loans made to companies including [Dalian Wanda Group Co.](#) (owner of a stake in Spanish club Atletico Madrid), [Fosun International Inc.](#) (owner of English club Wolverhampton Wanderers), and Zhejiang Luosen (owner of AC Milan). At the time of writing, no action has been taken by the Chinese government against any of these companies. However, the state’s moves can be interpreted as a warning shot across the bows of corporate China’s excesses, particularly with regards to what the government has called [‘irrational investments’](#).

This phraseology has hung around the vicinity of Chinese football throughout 2017 without the government having ever publicly clarified what it means. Having spoken to several officials associated with football during a recent visit I made to China, I now have a stronger sense of its meaning. Likewise, I have been able to better understand the reasons why some football investors appear to be in the spotlight, **whilst others are not. At one level, ‘irrational investments’ can be explained as a Chinese government concern that more of China’s currency is flowing out of the country than is flowing into it.** This is bound up in a view that investments being made in, for example, European football are economically unproductive and have failed to contribute to inward currency flows. At the same time, it is felt that companies such as Wanda and Fosun have funded their overseas investment programs by incurring considerable domestic debt, which in turn has exposed China to significant financial risk. This is problematic as Chinese economic growth has slowed considerably in recent years. Adding to these developments, during my time in China more alarm bells began ringing for Chinese football and investors in it. In one instance, Chinese state broadcaster CCTV announced that [Suning is under suspicion of buying football clubs for the purposes of ‘money laundering’](#). This is deeply concerning for football, as the company owns both the CSL club Jiangsu and the Italian Serie A club Internazionale of Milan.

Most people in China I spoke to seemed unaware that Suning had provoked the **government’s ire, though international media outlets appeared to be rather more engaged by the story. ‘Money laundering’ suggests illegal activity,** however, the view among experts in China is perhaps less compelling, though rather more politically intriguing. **China’s President Xi Jinping has made the eradication of corruption one focus for the legacy of his term in office, and he wants nothing to undermine it. Being accused of activity that may consequently be deemed as ‘corrupt’ is therefore not** only deeply concerning for those in positions of wealth or power (they could be imprisoned), it is also publicly embarrassing for them too. Suning has been a largely **respectable high street and online electrical retailer. However, the company’s forays**

into sport have posed some financial challenges for it. As such, the Chinese **government's use of the term 'money laundering' is less a threat that Interpol** will soon be pursuing Suning, and is more about the government seeking to shame the company into being more financially disciplined. Alternatively stated, the term money laundering, in this case, is whatever the Chinese government chooses to define money laundering as being, and Suning is being warned to act responsibly or face the consequences.

Yet this was not the only chapter of Chinese football's unfolding financial story. The following week, the CSL announced that 13 clubs [face expulsion](#) from the league due to unpaid debts. As clubs have stuttered and stumbled through their responses to **the CSL's request, the sense we are left with is of Chinese football's wild days of** excess being moderated and its clubs being pulled into line by the state, at least for the time being. With Wanda, Fosun and now Suning all seemingly being monitored by the Chinese government, this raises some interesting questions. Why does Alibaba not seem to be in trouble? How has Zhejiang Luosen so far escaped significant scrutiny? The latter is especially intriguing because, as more modest spenders have been reigned-in by the state, Luosen has taken AC Milan on an [extravagant player transfer spending spree](#). There are several possible explanations.

One is that asset yields on acquisitions undertaken by some investors have been greater than those undertaken by others. Alongside this, companies such as Alibaba have engaged in business development activities that have been more consistent **with a 'China first' policy; that is, investments at home.** Sport industry insiders believe, however, there are other reasons for the state becoming more invasive in its approach to football investments. The likes of Wanda have spent fast, big and widely on the sport, going way beyond what Xi expected. In government, such autonomy **has been perceived to be a growing threat to Xi's autocracy, especially at a time** when the president has otherwise been systematically [removing his rivals](#) from

important government positions. Similarly, it would appear there are significant divisions within the ruling communist party, with some of the football investors now being investigated or threatened by state apparatus apparently heavily associated with anti-Xi factions.

The English normally refer to things ‘kicking-off’ in the context of players fighting or rival hooligans goading each other. It seems that China is at least having an impact on the world game by reinterpreting the terminology and recasting it as a political (and indeed economic) football.

Beijing Guoan: New owners, declining fortunes



Image Credit: ???

[Nicholas Watanabe](#) and [Brian Soebbing](#).

In late January of 2017, Sinobo Land Corporation purchased a 64 percent stake of Beijing Guoan for around \$512 million (U.S. dollars) and took control of arguably the most popular professional soccer club in China. Despite being one of the most historically powerful teams in the Chinese Super League (CSL), Guoan has been in a state of decline since the turn of the decade as an influx of wealthy corporations and individuals have poured huge financial resources into several rival clubs.

Chief among Guoan's rivals are Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao, which was purchased by the Evergrande Group in 2010 after the team had been relegated to China League One due to participation in match-fixing. Under the control of a large corporation owned by billionaire Xu Jiayin, Guangzhou Evergrande was provided with a wealth of financial resources allowing them to secure promotion back to the CSL in 2011, and immediately win the league title in one of the most dominant performances ever seen in Asian club football. Since re-joining the CSL in 2011,

Guangzhou Evergrande has won the league title every year, as well as two Chinese FA Cups, and two Asian Champions League titles.

Following Evergrande's lead, other teams in China such as Jiangsu Suning, Shanghai SIPG, and even CSL newcomers Tianjin Quanjian have all started to invest substantial sums in both player and coaching talent to compete with Evergrande on and off the field. However, as Evergrande and other new teams have been purchased by wealthy corporations which have provided financial backing to buy some of the best talent in the world, it has been many of the traditional teams in China which have ended up suffering. For example, Dalian Shide football club were once considered to be one of the top clubs in Asia, but in 2012 they were purchased and merged with their crosstown rivals Dalian Aerbin who had only existed as a professional club for two years.

Amidst all the financial changes that have occurred in the CSL, Beijing Guoan managed to remain one of the most popular teams in the country, backed by an energetic fan base and a long tradition of strong performances in the CSL and prior professional and semi-professional leagues. For example, in 2009 when Guoan last won the league title, they averaged an attendance of over 36,000 people per game, while the rest of the league averaged 16,059. Since Evergrande entered the league and dominated it in terms of on-field performance and attendance, Guoan managed to remain competitive finishing top three in the league for three of the last five years. Many Guoan fans were excited about the potential of what the club could accomplish with the financial backing from the Sinobo Corporation.

Despite having increased financial resources to improve the team, Guoan's performance continued to decline under the new ownership group. In 2017, Guoan was on track to miss out on a top-three spot in the league for a third year in a row, something that fans had not seen since the early 2000's. From the perspective of the fans of the club, [the real problems](#) at Guoan have only become worse under the new

ownership group, who fans on Chinese social media platforms were quick to point out have no understanding of football or how to run a club. To begin with, the Sinobo group backed the hiring of former Japanese national team manager Alberto Zaccheroni, yet he was fired nine games into the 2016 season with the team in the bottom half of the CSL table. For the 2017 season, the team hired Jose Gonzalez with the ownership group again claiming that this was a great move for Guoan. However, after losing 5-1 away to Shanghai SIPG, and at home to Hebei China Fortune by three goals, the Guoan fans began to express their anger.

Guoan fans took to WeChat, Weibo, and other popular Chinese social networking sites to voice their frustration with the team and the ownership group. Perhaps the greatest issue that fans pointed out was the changes to the front office and technical staff, which included the firing of many long-time Guoan staff members and replacing them with people who have had little to no experience in managing football clubs. When combined with the blowout losses to teams that are higher than Guoan in the table despite having only been formed in the last seven years, the Guoan social networking sites and groups boiled over with anger. At the end of May, 2017, Guoan supporters presented a new proposal to Sinobo saying that Sinobo should give back **the name “Guoan” to the fans** and should move out of the Workers Stadium in Beijing. **In essence, the Guoan fans have started to use phrases like “not my Guoan” or “we want our Guoan back” as part of a movement to try and drive away the Sinobo ownership group and hopefully regain control of the club.**

Following this recent outpouring of anger from the supporters, and a large decline in attendance at matches from previous years, Guoan fired coach Jose Gonzalez only 10 matches into the season and replaced him with Roger Schmidt who had previously **managed Bayer Leverkusen. Gonzalez’s firing was one of six sacking of coaches in a one-month period in the Chinese Super League, something which has become more common with the growing expectations that are placed on coaches in the league.**

From all of this, Guoan, who have experienced years of success in the league, found themselves in a difficult situation.

While the club has the financial backing to compete with Evergrande, it is the case that they have been surpassed by a number of other new clubs in regard to performance and obtaining talent. Additionally, as the team has continued to remain under the ownership of the Sinobo corporation, it has been the case that the fans have become more disinterested with the team. While Guoan is not in danger of being bought out or shut down as some other Chinese soccer clubs have, the club does face major challenges in terms of regaining the trust of fans and producing a quality product on and off the field. If Guoan fails to do this, it is certainly possible that they will continue to witness an erosion of consumer interest in the club.

Booing fans and failing teams hint at China's football future



Image credit: CC by [Wikipedia Commons](#).

[Simon Chadwick](#).

It may have appeared for some time now to be all quiet on the Chinese football front, the frenzied activity of the last two years having seemingly come to an end. And with the 2016/2017 season just over, and the last Communist Party National Congress recently concluded, it is **almost as though a lull has hit the country's football**. Even so, look closely and one can observe that there is still plenty going on. Indeed, whilst **there hasn't recently been the splash of a major European club acquisition by Chinese investors, or a big international signing by a Super League club**, strong signs are still there of what China's government is thinking.

One need go no further than Hong Kong to see Beijing's direction of travel. In recent weeks, China has forced the territory to criminalise [disrespecting its national anthem](#), notably in response to the booing of it by Hong Kong football fans prior to their national team's games. Fans object to China's creeping influence in the semi-autonomous city. This creep is not, however, just characteristic of China's relationship with Hong Kong. A recent extended article in Britain's *Financial*

Times observed how China's next wave of investments is intended by Beijing to result in the development of ['football with Chinese characteristics'](#). This was always China's intention, though the country has often struggled over the last two years to match its football vision with an appropriate strategy. However, with President Xi Jinping's position newly reinforced following the National Congress, the strategy now appears more coherent, more focused, and with a much stronger emphasis on China. Whilst the earlier introduction of a 100 per cent tax on overseas player acquisitions was a signal of Beijing's desire to channel funds into Chinese football's grassroots, it has subsequently become clear that the country's investors, entrepreneurs and business people are expected by their government to put China first.

If the Chinese government really does hold out any realistic hope of winning the World Cup by 2050, then the clock is ticking. The generation of youngsters now playing football in schools will be in their early-30s by the time we get to 2040. To build and sustain subsequent generations of elite professionals will be a major task. In recent weeks, China's national team has once again demonstrated how far it is behind its international rivals. Back-to-back home defeats by Serbia and Colombia (neither of which are currently ranked in FIFA's top-10) illustrates how much work China still has left to do. As if further evidence was needed of China's pressing need to develop talent and build winning teams, its Super League failed for the second consecutive year to get a team into the Asian Champions League Final. The Champions League is an important showcase for the continent's football – its strength and its commercial development – not least because the winning team qualifies for FIFA's Club World Cup. However, with Guangzhou Evergrande (GE) having won the tournament twice (in 2013 and 2015), China's failure to win further subsequent iterations of the tournament sends out an unfortunate message about Chinese football to the rest of the world, and at just the wrong time.

Although Shanghai SIPG made it to the semi-finals of this year's competition, the relatively early exit of GE must have been a concern for China's football authorities. This is especially so, as in November the team subsequently went on to win its seventh consecutive Chinese Super League (CSL) title. GE's domination at home but failure abroad does not bode well for China's football ambitions and suggests that grassroots player development alone is not the only challenge ahead for the country's football administrators. There is clearly an issue of competitive balance for them to address; it is counterproductive for GE to be dominating domestically but failing internationally. Furthermore, whilst other Chinese clubs (like Shanghai SIPG) have become stronger, many wonder whether they are strong enough to compete or whether they can sustain a challenge to GE. One response of China's authorities to the issue of talent development, competitive balance and, linked to this, league structure, has been to redesign some of its lower leagues.

Reiterating notions of 'China first' and 'Chineseness', Beijing has been battling problems of overseas capital flight for some years. Football over the last two years has contributed to this flight, through rampant spending on overseas players, club acquisitions, sponsorship deals and an assortment of other investments. Edicts have been issued by central government in attempts to moderate what have been labelled ['irrational investments'](#). Following the National Congress in October, the messaging coming out of China is that such investments are no longer acceptable and that those making them should focus their attention back towards China (and Chinese football). As such, proposals have been made to further regulate outbound investments, which will potentially impact upon both football and industry in general. To further complicate matters, rumours have continued to circulate that existing overseas investments will be 'called-in' by the Chinese government. This has been especially concerning for fans of Italy's AC Milan, with some observers speculating that the club's Chinese owners [will be forced to sell their asset](#) and repatriate the funds back to China.

Despite the signals coming out of Beijing, many football fans across the world remain hopeful that a Chinese investor will rescue their respective clubs. For the time being, this seems to be a forlorn hope, though there is evidence that China remains active in the sector. Notwithstanding investment controls, there have been recent reports **that Premier League Chelsea's stadium redevelopment project will be [funded by a Chinese investor](#)**. Whether this is the case will remain a moot point for the time being. **However, Chelsea's location in an affluent part of London means the real estate value** of any cash injection that a Chinese investor might make in the club would be considerable. Indeed, resultant currency flows back into China would make this an **attractive proposition for the country's state regulators. And this is what we should** all now accustom ourselves to. President Xi and **China's legions of investors were** never going to be football sugar-daddies – I said as much in [earlier pieces](#) I wrote on **the topic. However, this year's events have brought clarity and cohesion** to our understanding – **and China's too** – of what happens next in football.

Women's football in China: Bend it like Sun Wen?



Image Credit: [CC](#) by [Wikepeida Commons](#).

[Kayleigh Renberg-Fawcett](#).

At the time of writing, general attitudes toward Chinese football inside China itself are far from positive. China, a country of 1.4 billion people, lost 6-0 to a country **whose first sport is not football and whose population is only 0.02% of China's – Wales.** Elsewhere, responses to China's 'world class footballing ambition' are often tinged with scepticism and disbelief – money is at the root of these perceptions. At present, billions of pounds are being spent on football stadiums in areas where there are no teams to fill them. For example, the average attendance of Zhejiang Yiteng, founded 24 years ago, is 4,000 (their capacity is 60,000). A recent fight between two Guangzhou Evergrande reserve players during a match has also added to the bitter taste both at home and abroad. Three years after President Xi announced his football plan, China dropped eight rankings to number 73 in the FIFA/Coca-Cola World rankings.

Is it all going wrong for football in China? Not necessarily.

In terms of elite football, China's Women's team offers a whole different narrative. Playing their first international match in 1986, the past 30 years of women's football

history in China has been punctuated with titles in regional cups, and some near misses in the World Cup (notably 1999). The women's team sits at number 17 position in the FIFA/Coca-Cola World rankings. They came third in the Asia Football Cup, beating hosts Jordan comprehensively 8-1. Whilst the men's team has become something of a national embarrassment, the women's team goes from strength to strength.

Why is women's football in China better?

At the moment it is not clear, but there is an apparent trend in Asian women's football teams. In the women's FIFA rankings, four of the top 20 teams are from Asia – North Korea ranking higher than the rest. For the men's world rankings, there is not a single Asian team in the top 20. There is no authoritative answer as to why this is the case. The men's team seeks to improve through international coaches, foreign exchanges and study tours, but could they in fact learn more from the way the women's team coaches and plays?

What about grassroots football?

Whilst the professional game is doing well, the grassroots game is also growing. As in the UK, the numbers of girls participating in football is increasing year on year. The high quality of female football was noted during CBFC's visit with Nottingham Forest's to Zhejiang in September. It was remarked that Ningbo girls team level of football was higher than that in Nottingham, and that their attitude compared with the boy's teams, was different. Unfortunately, this is where women's football is defeated in China. Not on the pitch – but in the homes, schools, and government.

One mother, Joyce Qu from Ningbo, one of China's more affluent cities, sums it up best:

“My daughter (aged 7) loves playing football, but the only team she can join is for boys – she is smaller and younger than them. She is not very good, but she enjoys chasing after the football. My husband is not happy that she is playing. He says she

will get too brown and her muscles will get too big and wants her to stop – but my daughter refuses not to play!”

At a recent training session in one school, a number of girls were sat on the side-line.

When asked why the girls couldn't join in, the response was:

“They are too fat, they cannot play” – (PE coach).

Whilst it must be noted that comments on physical appearance are much more common in China, and not necessarily offensive, this quote serves to demonstrate some of the wider issues. Football can often be an exclusive game: based on talent, physique, and sometimes money. Football is not yet, for all.

Are there systemic issues?

Most definitely. At a grassroots level, football teams are mostly based in schools, unlike the community club model in the UK. Outside of school it can be an expensive sport that is run for profit. Opportunities for competition are limited by the pressure of the education system and lack of awareness over the benefits of regular exercise and competition. Exceptional players will be selected to play for their city, and province. If you are not initially good, or cannot afford to play, opportunities to play are very limited, for both boys and girls.

At a professional level, **a concrete example of the China's failure to acknowledge the strengths of the women's team is the China Cup. The China Cup was established in 2017 and is played annually – a competition against three other international clubs. China's men team has come third and fourth respectively. If a similar cup was established for the women's team then China would stand a much better chance of securing a morale boosting victory on home soil.**

The future?

It is easy to criticise Chinese football but compared to western nations that have played the sport for well over a century, football in its modern form is new. Furthermore, it has come a long way in terms of infrastructure, opportunity and **professionalism. Whilst China's men's team struggles to grow professionally, the country would do well to focus more of its attention on the women's side where there** are a growing number of success stories that will fuel the continued rise of the sport.

The Chinese Super League: A Footballing Vanity Project on Steroids



Image credit: [Wikipedia Commons](#).

[David Prentice](#).

Founded in 2004, the Chinese Super League consists of 16 teams; Guizhou Zhicheng, **Liaoning F.C., Jiangsu Suning, Beijing Guo'an, and Guangzhou R&F make up just five** of these clubs of which little is known outside the Middle Kingdom. Whilst they are hardly well known, established footballing names, the Chinese Super League (CSL) is perhaps currently the richest footballing league in the world. A recent explosion of spending power reaching mind-numbing proportions is putting the CSL firmly on the map, and big-name players more than ever are starting to turn their attention to **Chinese cash. China's love affair with football is relatively new. In 2014, Chinese** President Xi Jinping made it a national sporting priority to develop the beautiful game and tasked officials with finding ways of improving the quality of the sport in the communist state. Xi, himself a big football fan perhaps prematurely expressed his desire for China to win a World Cup title within the next 15 years. His personal involvement seems to have galvanized the footballing authorities, and the Chinese Football Federation (CFA) recently published an ambitious report outlining that by

2050, China should be “a first-class football superpower” that “contributes to the international football world.”

Reality suggests, however that footballing success is a long way off. China, at the time of writing, ranks number 83 in the FIFA world rankings, just below the Caribbean island nation of Antigua, and one position above the Faroe Islands. Furthermore, a recent 1-0 home loss to Syria – a country understandably preoccupied with other things than putting out a football team – prompted fans to **take to the streets to demand the removal of the head coach, Gao Hongbo. China’s** performance in their only World Cup outing in 2002 was equally as underwhelming with the team losing all three group games without a goal scored. Rampant corruption further hinders the development of the sport, whilst playing facilities and footballing academies are still considered a luxury only available to a middle class urban elite. Foreign stars turning up on Chinese shores to play their trade is hardly a new phenomenon. Former England legend Paul Gascoigne played four games for the now defunct Gansu Tianma towards the end of his career, whilst former Germany international striker Carsten Jancker played for Shanghai Shenghua for a season in 2006. However, only in the last few years have other footballing nations started to worry about Chinese teams using their seemingly endless spending power to pick up the best players in their peak years from the top leagues.

This worry was highlighted earlier in the week by the Chelsea and former Italy manager, Antonio Conte who admitted that the sale of one of his star players to Shanghai SIPG was a “danger [...] for all the teams in the world”. The £60 million (US\$75 million) sale of 25 year old Brazil international Oscar highlights not only the **Chinese drive to attract the world’s best players, but also the insane economics** behind such deals. Hardly underpaid for his talents currently earning around £100,000 per week, a move to China would give the midfield playmaker a hefty pay rise at £350,000 per week after tax, a wage packet only the new-found riches of the **CSL can realistically afford to pay. Oscar isn’t the first to be attracted to China.**

Graziano Pelle formerly of Southampton is said to be one of the highest paid players on the planet, whilst Alex Texeira, and Jackson Martinez are two other big names players to have recently made the move.

Such concerns, however, may prove unfounded. Football is a sport driven by emotion and passion as much as economic might, **and China simply can't replicate** the romance of the game which dictates day-to-day life in the great European footballing cities of Lisbon, Liverpool, Madrid, Munich, Milan, Manchester, Barcelona, and Rotterdam. No amount of Chinese cash can buy a footballing history **and culture as rich as what's on offer mainly in Europe, but also in the Brazilian, and even Mexican domestic leagues. Even fans of this author's beloved Newcastle United** – an English club starved of success for decades – find solace in the rich history of the club which was founded in 1892, when China was still ruled by the Qing Dynasty. **This kind of organic and unique fan culture is missing in China, where you're more likely to hear both the young and older generations talk with great zeal about their "beloved" AC Milan, rather than, say Chongqing Lifan.**

Before adding noughts to the contracts of footballing superstars from foreign leagues, **China would be better off adopting a "bottom-up" approach: pumping** money into its academies and making football a sport truly accessible for the masses to partake in. The Chinese Football Association has only [7,000 registered players under the age of 18 \(equivalent to 1.4 percent of those in neighboring Japan\)](#), whereas approximately [300 million Chinese children regularly choose to play basketball instead](#). Creating a footballing powerhouse is as much about creating opportunity and honing existing talent as it is creating a league of hastily-assembled, overpriced vanity projects on steroids. Rather, China should look inwards for its future success. For example, how many footballing academies could be funded by the wages on offer to Oscar at Shanghai? When it comes to the beautiful game, the Chinese demonstrate only that they know the cost of everything, but the value of nothing.

Simply, Chinese cash alone is not enough to buy footballing success for a whole nation, no matter how much Yuan is thrown **at it. Thus, Conte's worries seem** somewhat premature. The most talented players will not leave the best leagues in the world to play in a distant, polluted Chinese second-tier mega city. Professional ambition and the will to win meaningful trophies will always appeal more to the **world's best than adding a few million to their bank accounts.**

Buddhism and Basketball: The Dai Monks of Yunnan



Image provided by author.

[Roger Casas.](#)

While not enjoying the popularity of other sites in Yunnan Province such as Lijiang or Dali, Xishuangbanna (西双版纳) is today a favourite destination among national **tourists as a ‘little Thailand’ within China. A popular topic for the cameras of visitors** to the region, as can be seen in web travelogues, is that of Buddhist novices playing basketball, in fact a frequent sight not only in the urban temples of the capital Jinghong City, but also in monasteries in the rural countryside. These young novice monks belong to the largest group of Theravada Buddhists in China, and are included in the Dai *minzu* (民族, ‘ethnic group’). **For most Han Chinese and Western travellers,** the view of boys in robes jumping around may be little more than an anecdote, a **feature of the ‘ethnic peculiarity’** (民族特色, *minzu tese*) of the Dai. For visitors from countries where Buddhism is an essential part of the national culture (particularly Thailand), as well as for concerned locals, the topic is a sensitive one, as in most of those countries playing sports is an activity considered inappropriate or outright unacceptable for monastics.

In a way, these idiosyncratic monks are victims of their own **region's economic** development. A former semi-independent principality in the frontier between the Burmese and Chinese empires, Xishuangbanna was fully integrated into the administrative structures of the Chinese polity only after the establishment of the **People's Republic in 1949. In the last decades, the systematic exploitation of the area's resources, mainly rubber and, more recently, tea and tourism, has accelerated this integration as well as the region's participation in national and regional economic** circuits. Pushed by sustained double-digit economic growth in China, Xishuangbanna has become a key trade hub in the Economic Quadrangle formed by that country, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar, and one of the fastest developing areas in the borderlands where China meets Southeast Asia. The new integration and openness have meant in turn that Dai monastic practices (basketball-playing among them) have been brought into the spotlight, and pointed as markers of an alleged backwardness on the part of the group. Their perceived defectiveness as Buddhists **now adds to their inherent inferiority as ethnic minorities within the 'Chinese Nation,'** the *Zhonghua Minzu* (中华民族).

Problems of discipline among Dai monks are commonly attributed by observers to the negative influence of state repression and of contemporary mainstream Chinese culture. Indeed, local Buddhism suffered greatly during the Maoist period. The Cultural Revolution in particular was especially damaging, as temples and shrines all across Xishuangbanna were destroyed or put to more earthly uses by Red Guards (often Dai themselves), while monks and novices were forced to disrobe. By the time **of Mao's death in 1976, Buddhist practice had all but stopped in the area, but China's** Reform and Opening-up (改革开放, *gaige kaifang*) policy changed all this, and by the mid-1980s the numbers of monasteries and monastics had reached pre-**'Liberation'** figures. According to some, Buddhism in Xishuangbanna, and monastic discipline in particular, has never recovered from the destruction of the past.

On the other hand, young Dai monastics are fully exposed to post-Maoist modernity. To start with, within the Chinese public education system novices and monks are considered ordinary students, and therefore they must partake in all sorts of school chores and activities together with their lay classmates. This includes participating in physical education classes, which involve playing basketball as well as other sports. Apart from the school system, mass media and mainstream culture are often blamed for spreading consumerist culture and for corrupting local monastic discipline and morality. As in the rest of the country, and thanks to the broadcast of NBA competitions as well as other national and global sport gatherings such as the Olympic Games, figures like LeBron James or Kevin Durant (not to mention martial actors such as Bruce Lee, Donnie Yen, or even Jason Statham) have replaced the sober, self-sacrificing exemplars of the Maoist past as contemporary idols for youth in Xishuangbanna.

But if basketball and sport practice in general can be seen as markers of degeneration and a source of embarrassment, for monastics themselves they are often meaningful tokens of pride. As in many other areas of Southeast Asia, monastic ordination in Xishuangbanna is most often only a temporary endeavour. While a small minority of men remain ordained for life, most monks will eventually disrobe to get married and set up a household, something that brings no shame to the individual. In this context, it is only natural that these boys and men are not interested in religious ideals of complete renunciation, and that the self-cultivation they pursue while in the **monastery concerns not only their ‘souls,’ but their bodies as well. Basketball** matches have actually become one of the arenas where the cultivated bodies of monks are displayed, admired and appreciated, and there is a degree of exhibitionism in the display of the most skilful and handsome players, aware that they are being contemplated and evaluated by their peers. A boy who is able to combine an athletic body with a suave, self-controlled demeanour may also appear as a preferable partner for local girls.

Furthermore, sport is not only a matter of individual interest. Dai monks and former monks are still today the moral exemplars and guardians of tradition among the Dai. By playing basketball and cultivating their bodies, these youths not only learn team spirit and strengthen their friendship, but they also state claims to high *suzhi* or **‘human quality,’** and therefore to a rightful place in the Chinese Nation and in global modernity on the part of the whole Dai community, while preserving the core of their identity and their foremost traditions. An example of this took place during the Yunnan Province Third Religious Sport Games and Cultural Exhibition, celebrated last September in the city of Yuxi. At this event, which included competitions in different sports, the Sipsong Panna monastic basketball team ended in third place, losing in the semi-finals only to Dali, ultimately the champion team. The value of these bodily sub-politics in the Chinese context should not be underestimated.

In short, the current, enthusiastic interest in basketball on the part of Dai monks and novices cannot be questioned in relation to Buddhist canonical texts and doctrines or judged simply as a problem of (in)discipline. Sport practice among monastics responds to the practical demands of a context in which the ideal of the religious specialist is only partially desirable, as well as to an eagerness to engage with modernity. Instead of either criticizing or seeing such enthusiasm as a sign of the degeneration of local monastic discipline, it may be more fruitful to try to understand the role this practice, and the overall care of the body play in the unfolding of monastic identities – a notion which surely applies to many other Buddhist communities in Asia.

Is silence golden when it comes to Chinese football?



Image credit: CC by [Wikipedia Commons](#).

[Simon Chadwick](#).

Before his sacking by Bayern Munich, rumours had circulated that [Carlo Ancelotti](#) would quit his post in Germany to go and work in Chinese football's Super League. That aside, however, not much is said about China and its football, inevitably **leading football's sometimes fickle stakeholders to claim the Chinese bubble has (or soon will) burst**. Unlike the hysteria and hyperbole of recent years, during which speculation about which player would next head to China has often been rife (if not wild), we now seem to be in a period of silence. Critics and cynics alike will no doubt **be congratulating themselves on calling this one right: that China's spending spree would not last long**. It is worthwhile recalling the words of American writer Elbert Green Hubbard: "He who does not understand your silence will probably not understand your words." From the point in 2009 when China's President Xi Jinping

first expressed positive personal views on the sport, the global football community **has repeatedly failed to understand his and his country's words.**

Xi's [2014 proclamation of his football vision](#), and subsequent interventions into football by the Chinese authorities, have drawn perplexed commentaries from **observers seeking to understand and find meaning in China's football revolution.** Even as recently as 2017, the hype associated with new player transfer regulations seemingly **baffled many people. And as Hubbard's quote suggests, observers are** equally now failing to understand the silence. One intriguing aspect of world **football's fast-disappearing summer** were stories about some of the biggest investors in Chinese football. **Suning, owners of Chinese club Jiangsu and Italy's Inter Milan,** [found themselves accused](#) of possibly having used football as a means for them to launder money. Subsequently, the chairman of Fosun (which owns Wolverhampton Wanderers), Guo Guangchang, was [reported to be missing](#), with some speculating that he had been detained by the Chinese authorities. An even bigger name associated with football in China, Wang Jianlin (Chairman of the Dalian Wanda Group), was then rumoured to have been [stopped at Tianjin airport](#) and prevented from leaving the country.

Other than some mild reassurances via their respective company websites that [Guo](#) and [Wang](#) are safe, well and free, little more has been heard about them. Indeed, while Alibaba owner Jack Ma recently ostentatiously appeared [dressed as Michael Jackson at a party to celebrate his company's 18th birthday](#), little has been seen or heard of his two counterparts. As for Suning, if a state broadcaster in, for example, Europe were to accuse a domestic corporation of money laundering, local lawyers would be relishing the impending payday that would surely follow. In **Suning's case though, CCTV's claim about one of its biggest retailers has been** followed by what appears to be complete silence. It is telling too that Suning, Fosun and Wanda are all seemingly refraining from football investment excess. So, it is all quiet on all the Eastern front, but what does the silence actually mean? One

interpretation is that China's government has simultaneously been engaged in deflating the player transfer market bubble, whilst **also protecting the country's** national interests (as well as its financial system). In the last few years, money has flowed out of China into football investments elsewhere in the world – investments which have, thus far, often failed to deliver a tangible economic return or otherwise have undermined domestic efforts to build a football sector.

Through measures ranging from the imposition of a 100 per cent tax on foreign player transfers to frequent state warnings that Chinese companies should not engage in [“irrational investments”](#), **China's investors in football have been euphemistically** warned to be quiet by desisting from overseas club purchases, the acquisition of expensive foreign talent, and so forth. When the state issues such edicts, organisations are normally well advised to conform. The silence also likely reflects **Xi's broader clampdown on dissent and potential** political rivals. The Communist Party of China (CPC) is believed to be riven by factionalism, with some of football's leading Chinese investors understood to have associations with anti-Xi factions. Even under normal circumstances, the politically astute Xi would be unlikely to countenance such deviance and dissent. However, with the 19th Communist Party Congress, Xi has [been accused of](#) seeking to suppress and, in some cases, remove political opposition. As such, recent state interventions in football may be part of a wider political crackdown targeting those from within China who have been deemed either unpatriotic or else working against the best interests of the country. For those affected, silence is, if not golden, then certainly advisable.

Meanwhile, in the largely mute current world of Chinese football, one voice has periodically continued to bellow. Chinese entrepreneur Dr Tony Xia, owner of the English club Aston Villa, has apparently failed to read the significance of his **government's desire for silence. Always a trigger-happy** presence on social media, Xia has nevertheless surpassed himself on Twitter. While President Xi and his government have been obsessing about irrational football spending, Xia has made

several public social media posts in which he appeared to explain how his companies are going to [avoid Chinese government controls on his investments](#). It remains to be seen whether Xia will face the consequences of his words in China. If he is aligned with a pro-Xi faction of the CPC, then it may be that his misdemeanours will be conveniently ignored. One suspects the latter applies to Yonghong Li, owner of AC Milan, his club having spent upwards of £160 million on new players (which nobody **in Chinese government appears to have labelled ‘irrational’**). Perhaps, then, in China **it isn’t just the silence** one needs to understand; it is also who is silent and why that we need to think about. Equally, for those breaking the silence, the noise they make is just as intriguing. Indeed, once the upcoming Congress is over, it will be interesting to listen-out for who in Chinese football speaks first and who remains silent. The question is, will the world of football understand either?

In the shadow of China: Hong Kong's eclipsed football dream

[Tobias Zuser](#).

While the East-Asian football landscape is often reduced to the “Big Four” – South Korea, Japan, China, and Australia, the ambitions, struggles, and objectives of the “second tier” are often underrepresented in the regional discourse. However, many of these places have started their very own battles to join the upper ranks, facing unique challenges along the way. Arguably, Hong Kong is in a particularly peculiar position and, driven by a culturally ingrained affinity for football, it has sought its own path in the shadows of China's football dream. Tracing the city's curious relationship with sport, this chapter lays out the trajectory towards three major policy projects: the reformation of the Hong Kong Football Association, the sustainability of a fully professional league, and the future challenges in the field of gambling laws and cross-border cooperation.

Football without soft power

Although Hong Kong has hardly been associated with inspiring football ambitions in recent decades, the historical legacy that the beautiful game enjoys in China's Special Administrative Region tells a different story. Boasting the first ethnically Chinese team in the early 20th century, known as South China Athletic Association, players from Hong Kong were seen to be among the best in Asia, such as Lee Wai-tong, who earned his legendary status for representing the Republic of China throughout the 1920s and 1930s. While some might feel inclined to credit the British colonial presence for spreading the game, the appropriation of football by locals was a hard-earned bottom-up process in a racially segregated society.

The post-war period turned Hong Kong into a political melting pot, in which Communist, Republican, and anti-colonial sentiments all [encroached into the sporting sphere](#). At the same time, the decision by FIFA and the IOC to recognize colonies as fully independent members provided the city both with new incentives for sports development and a discursive struggle over identity and representation.

The Sino-**British Joint Declaration** that regulated Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty first generated some uncertainty over the institutional framework for **sports, but the Basic Law, Hong Kong's de facto constitution** which came into effect on July 1st, 1997, eventually clarified that the former colony would retain its status of a separate sporting entity [within the international community](#).

However, this is not to say that sports, or football in particular, have received significant support from either colonial or postcolonial governments. Instead, they continuously relied on the commitment of local philanthropists, businessmen, and private organizations. In earlier days, the infrastructure for leisure activities was limited to private clubs, many of them exclusively open to non-Chinese ethnicities, and it took major incidents such as mass-scale riots, culminating in 1967, for the government to understand that sports facilities could be beneficial for social cohesion. At the same time, elite sports development has continuously experienced a lack of public commitment, which can be explained with **Hong Kong's status as a non-nation state** and its corresponding absence of a foreign affairs agenda. While major sports policy projects in other countries are often subsumed under a soft power strategy, arguably this kind of expediency never really applied in the case of Hong Kong.

The beginning and end of a golden era

Established in 1914, the HKFA is one of the oldest football associations in Asia, and it only took several years before the fledgling domestic football league was almost entirely dominated by ethnically Chinese clubs. By the 1970s, local businessmen and tycoons have taken full control of the FA board and continued to prioritize the commercial development of domestic football over the success of the national team. Hong Kong became the first place in Asia to legalize professional football in 1968, and [subsequently convinced](#) several major companies to build up their own teams.² In those years, Seiko SA, named after the Japanese watch brand, rose to prominence

² While professional football was legalized as early as 1968, the league remained semi-professional. **South Korea's K-League**, established in 1983, is commonly credited for being the first fully professional league in Asia.

and was willing to boost its popularity with several high-profile signings from Europe, such as Arie Haan. However, what appeared to be a successful business model for some time, drawing crowds of up to 1.2 million people into the stadia over the course of one season, was also volatile when it came to economic and institutional disruptions. An ill-advised ban on foreign players from the league, followed by financial crises in the 1990s and the SARS epidemic in the early 2000s, saw attendance figures tumbling and led to **what has become known as Hong Kong's "football ice age". The commercial potential of domestic football, which compensated for the absence of its use for national aggrandizement, has faded away.**

However, the unlikely victory at the football tournament in the 2009 East Asian Games became the starting point for a public initiative, which found support from legislators across the political spectrum. Interestingly, the main argument in this revitalization process became the historical legacy of football in Hong Kong. For the first time, football was associated with a socio-cultural value that apparently justified its maintenance in a city that has been [named](#) the **"freest economy in the world"**. **The following reform plan, titled "Project Phoenix", targeted the organizational structure of the HKFA and aimed to decrease the influence of patrons that were mainly acting in their own interest. Between 2015 and 2016, "Project Phoenix" was followed by a new 5-year-strategy plan, called "Aiming High – Together", which significantly increased the overall share of subventions from both public and private stakeholders.**

Without a major political agenda, the football association was given the task to not only restore the commercial success of the domestic league, but also to increase the competitiveness of the representative team. Up to that moment, Hong Kong and China have rarely met on the international stage and controversial encounters were limited to the May 19th incident in 1985, when Hong Kong – then still a British colony – beat the Chinese national team 2-1 in Beijing. Arguably, the reform has not anticipated that this rivalry would re-emerge during tumultuous political times as

well as the seriousness with which China would pursue their very own football dream, using all the political and commercial prowess that the Special Administrative Region was lacking.

The burden of professionalism

Putting an end to decades of semi-professional top-tier football, one of the key **objectives of “Project Phoenix” was finally achieved in 2014: the implementation of** the fully professional Hong Kong Premier League. While there have been drastic improvements in management and organization, paired with a slight increase in public interest, the initially ambitious development plans had to be scaled back. Some clubs were reluctant to transform into fully professional business entities and were backed in their decisions when some other teams had to dissolve due to financial pressure. At times, the HKFA even struggled to register a sufficient number of clubs, leaving the Premier League with only nine teams over the first two seasons. Although the Bank of China insurance branch has been secured as title sponsor, the competition itself remains commercially unviable. Most clubs operate on an annual budget of between HK\$ 7 and 30 million (£ 680,000 to 2.9 million). In addition, they are required to bear some of the production costs of the live TV broadcasts. In search for new revenue, Chinese Super League side Guangzhou R&F was allowed to send a satellite club into the Hong Kong Premier League after paying a substantial registration fee, exposing the unwillingness for local investment. Given the slow growth and economic reality, the HKFA decided to shelve the initial idea to turn the league into an independent and eventually self-sufficient entity.

The major challenge for the development of professional football can be narrowed down to the lack of infrastructure. Stadiums and sport grounds are usually publicly owned and administered by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. Therefore, most professional clubs have to compete with the general population over the slots for their daily training sessions. Given the shortage of space in the city, there are around 70 full-sized 11-a-side pitches for more than 7 million people. However,

the opening of a new HKFA training centre, that provides six fields on top of a former landfill, is expected to improve the current situation in the coming years. At the same time, the territorial constraints have made it difficult for teams to establish long-term relationships with certain communities. Apart from a few district clubs that are rooted in particular satellite towns at the peripheries, the remaining clubs will choose their home stadiums according to their league ranking in the previous season, which renders loyalty by proximity rather insignificant in the local context.

While the overall restructuring process of the HKFA has led to several improvements, the association remains under on-going pressure to justify the use of public resources. Many of the newly developed programs will need longer time before it is possible to **evaluate their success, but in the wake of China's football dream**, the discrepancy in investment and infrastructure puts further pressure on the local attempt in pursuing professionalism.

New perspectives: Redefining gambling laws and border lines

Given the current situation of a hardly sustainable professional league format, the consideration of two potential reformation projects has become unavoidable in any public debate over the future of local football. With the local government following their principle of positive non-interventionism, it has been common practice to outsource subsidies to private stakeholders. The Hong Kong Jockey Club, who owns the monopoly rights over all gambling activities in the city, has therefore become not just the biggest single tax payer in the city, but also the de facto most significant charity organization for culture, sports, and social welfare. However, the domain of local football is currently excluded from the betting market, mainly due to fears over match-fixing. Lobbying efforts by the Hong Kong Football Association to change the current framework have yet to find governmental and legislative support. One of the ideas put forward in recent years is to follow the Singaporean model of establishing a football development fund that is fed by revenue generated from domestic gambling. In 2016/17 alone, the Hong Kong Jockey Club reported a record turnover

of HK\$ 216.5 billion (£ 20. 8 billion), HK\$ 92.7 billion (£ 8.9 billion) of which came from bets on non-local football, suggesting [some potential](#) for tapping into this funding stream. A positive side effect could be an increased interest in the local league as well.

The second, and more controversial reform idea results directly from the recent success of the Chinese Super League, raising the legitimate question if Hong Kong should continue to sustain its own professional league after all or instead send clubs into the league system governed by the CFA. While such scenarios offer a political **opportunity for Hong Kong's integration into a patriotic discourse, it appears** – at the current conjuncture – rather detrimental to the institutional interests of both associations. First, it would diminish the significance and influence of the HKFA and **could lead to Hong Kong's absence in regional AFC club competitions. Second, the** CFA might also be cautious to indirectly support players from Hong Kong with more professional conditions and better infrastructure, if the very same players might later challenge the Chinese national team in Asian Cup and World Cup qualifiers.³ Still, the possibility of clubs from Hong Kong participating in the CSL will most likely **receive more attention when the city's new stadium will be completed in 2023**, promising to provide up to 50,000 seats for rugby and football games. The HKFA also reiterated their hopes that the new infrastructure would allow them to play a role in **China's future World Cup plans. However, at the moment both institutions** rather foreground their differences than their similarities. While China and Macau supported Morocco in the 2026 World Cup bid, Hong Kong gave its vote to USA, Canada, and Mexico.

The eventual decisions made over these two reform ideas – local football gambling and cross-border cooperation – will be an indicator for the future development of **professional sport in Hong Kong. It is yet to see if the existence in China's shadow**

³ After China had suffered two goalless draws against Hong Kong in 2015, the CFA soon after disallowed the previous practice among clubs in the Chinese Super League and China League One to register players from Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan as local players. Since 2018 clubs in the Chinese league system are again allowed to sign at least one of such players without having to sacrifice their limited quota for foreign aids.

turns out to be a blessing or curse for domestic sporting ambitions that have been struggling to survive in a soft power vacuum.



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