

Relações Internacionais e futebol: limites e possibilidades para que China se converta em uma potência global de futebol em 2050



International Relations and football: limits and possibilities for China to become a global football power by 2050

Relaciones Internacionales y fútbol: Límites y posibilidades para que China se convierta en una potencia global del fútbol en 2050

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RESUMO

Com a liderança do presidente Xi Jinping, a revitalização do futebol se converteu em um objetivo estratégico essencial para China. Seus três desejos são se classificar regularmente, organizar e ganhar a Copa do Mundo FIFA para 2050. Considerando o estadismo do sistema esportivo internacional e a motivação política da China para alcançar objetivos tão ambiciosos, este artigo aplicará uma análise do futebol sob a perspectiva das Relações Internacionais. Nesse sentido, são identificadas três premissas básicas para a análise do futebol: 1. O interesse nacional no esporte é conquistar títulos. 2. O interesse nacional não é tão relevante quanto a habilidade e capacidade do Estado de vencer. 3. Mais recursos e investimentos podem garantir melhor desempenho, mas não necessariamente ganhar títulos. Concluindo, embora o futebol na China tenha tido um desenvolvimento considerável ao longo desta década, se considerarmos que a conversão de recursos em títulos não é a mesma para todos os países, a China pode enfrentar um paradoxo de poder, sendo incapaz de tirar proveito de suas habilidades extraordinárias para obter títulos e se tornar uma potência mundial do futebol.

Palavras-chave: China. Futebol. política esportiva. Relações Internacionais. Copa do Mundo FIFA.

ABSTRACT

Under the leadership of president Xi Jinping, the revitalisation of football has become a key strategic goal for China. His three wishes are to qualify regularly, host and win the FIFA World Cup by 2050. Considering the statehood of the international sports system and the Chinese political motivation to achieve

such ambitious goals, this paper is going to apply an analysis of football from an International Relations perspective. In this regard, three basic premises are identified for the analysis of football: 1. The national interest in sport is winning titles. 2. The national interest is not as relevant as the state's ability and capacity to win. 3. More resources and investments may guarantee a better performance, but not necessarily winning titles. In conclusion, although football in China is having a considerable development along this decade, if we consider that the conversion of resources into titles is not the same for every country, China might face a power paradox, being incapable to take advantage of its extraordinary capacities to win titles and become a global football power.

Keywords: China. football. sports policy. International Relations. FIFA World Cup.

RESUMEN

Bajo el liderazgo del presidente Xi Jinping, la revitalización del fútbol se ha convertido en un objetivo estratégico clave para China. Sus tres deseos son clasificarse regularmente, organizar y ganar la Copa Mundial de la FIFA para 2050. Considerando la estatalidad del sistema deportivo internacional y la motivación política de China para lograr objetivos tan ambiciosos, este artículo aplicará un análisis del fútbol desde una perspectiva de Relaciones Internacionales. En este sentido, se identifican tres premisas básicas para el análisis del fútbol: 1. El interés nacional en el deporte es ganar títulos. 2. El interés nacional no es tan relevante como la habilidad y capacidad del estado para ganar. 3. Más recursos e inversiones pueden garantizar un mejor rendimiento, pero no necesariamente ganar títulos. En conclusión, aunque el fútbol en China está teniendo un desarrollo considerable a lo largo de esta década, si tenemos en cuenta que la conversión de recursos en títulos no es la misma para todos los países, China podría enfrentarse a una paradoja de poder, siendo incapaz de aprovechar sus extraordinarias capacidades para conseguir títulos y convertirse en una potencia futbolística mundial.

Palabras clave: China. Fútbol. política deportiva. Relaciones Internacionales. Copa Mundial FIFA.

Introduction

Since Xi Jinping took office as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, the revitalisation of football has become a key strategic goal for China. In this regard, the Medium and Long-Term Development Plan of Chinese Football (2016-2050) expects to place China among the Asian top teams by 2030, qualifying regularly for the World Cup; and in long-term, becoming a leading football power, hoping to win the World Cup by 2050. It seems that football in China follows the political and economic purpose of the state, since it is a mean to develop the sports industry and a strategic element of Chinese public diplomacy², being part of the Belt and Road Initiative in order to promote exchange of knowledge and strengthen the Chinese leadership globally (LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2020, p. 77-79).

We can understand the political motivation of China considering that football is a great cultural institution that 'shapes and cements national identities throughout the world' (GIULIANOTTI, 1999, p. 23), and that 'more than being merely reflective of nationalism or place-based identities, sports and stadiums are themselves drawn upon to construct ideas about place and nation' (SHOBE, 2008, p. 329).

2. According to Gregory (2011), public diplomacy is 'an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes and behaviour; to build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and mobilise actions to advance their interests and values' (p. 343).

However, for Jedlicka (2017) there is still a need to develop a systematic, progressive approach to sport from International Relations (IR), using concepts and theoretical perspectives from this discipline to understand better the place of sport in the international political and economic system. In this sense, IR theory involves several research programmes –realism, constructivism, liberalism, etc.–, that conceive international issues from radically different viewpoints. Following a realist perspective of IR, one of the dominant schools of thought of this discipline, the state is conceived as the main actor in international politics under an anarchic international system. As a result, states compete primarily for power and security, implying that international regimes and institutions are just means for achieving individual state goals.

From this perspective, governments conceive sports competitions as a way to project their international status, making visible their political and economic achievements to a global public or as a scenario for high-level diplomacy (GRIX; BRANNAGAN, 2016; GRIX et al., 2015). These political goals contribute to develop a sporting arms race or a surrogate war (DE BOSSCHER et al., 2015; D'AGATI, 2018) between countries to win more titles and medals than their rivals.

However, to succeed we need to understand first that football competitiveness 'is conditioned by the world system and reproduces its dynamics' (MORALES RUVALCABA; ZHANG, 2018, p. 27). In the end, the state location at the international system tells us not only the resources that these countries have, but also their different approaches and interests on sport (PULLEIRO, 2020, p. 5-8). Moreover, the conversion of football's resources into titles is not the same for every country. For example, the English Premier League is considered the best national league of the world, but England does not reach a final of the FIFA World Cup or UEFA European Championship (also called UEFA Euro) since 1966; and along this decade, Manchester City and PSG have failed in their attempt to win the Champions League even with an investment of more than a billion of euros in transfer fees.

Accordingly, the goal of this paper is to understand the state behaviour in football from IR theory, in order to know the limits and possibilities for China to become a global football power by 2050. The starting point are three premises adapted from the neoclassical realist theory of IR, considering that both in international politics and sport the State is conceived as a central actor, and unlike neorealism, where the international power structure is the main element to determine the state behaviour (WALTZ, 1979); neoclassical realism explains 'foreign policy decisions and particular historical events by supplementing "third image" insights about international structure and its consequences with first and second-image variables' (SCHWELLER, 2014, p. 7). Consequently, the three premises are: 1. The national interest of every country in sport is winning titles. 2. The national interest is not as relevant as the state's ability and capacity to win. 3. More resources and investments may guarantee a better performance, but not necessarily winning titles. Consequently, the working hypothesis for the analysis of football would be the following:

Premise 1	Premise 2	Premise 3
Political will + Financial, human and material resources + Good extractive capacity =	↑	Performance ≠ Winning Titles

Materials and method

Table 1 shows the theoretical-methodological approach to the analysis of football. The development and performance of Chinese football is compared with the so-called big-5: England, Spain, Germany, Italy and France; since these European countries are the main reference of international football at human –nº of players, coaches, clubs, teams and referees-, material –stadiums and training facilities-, financial –revenues, wages and transfer fees among clubs and leagues- and prestige resources –international titles and rankings-.

TABLE 1 – Theoretical-methodological approach to football from International Relations

	IR approach to football	Chinese football analysis	Materials
1° Premise	Sports statehood: The State is the main political actor in sport due to national representation in sports competitions. National interest = winning international titles.	Chinese national interest in sport and the role of football: One-China policy. The Olympic Dream and Juguo tizhi. Xi Jinping's three wishes for Chinese football.	Literature review. Chinese policy documents. Data obtained from reports and websites of: Football federations and professional leagues. Deloitte, IFFHS, CIES Football Observatory, EU SME Centre, Forbes, Transfermarkt.
2° Premise	Sports competitiveness determined by: Distribution of power at international level. National sports policy. Extractive capacity.	Financial, human and material resources of Chinese football. Football governance model with Chinese characteristics. Collaboration agreements with foreign football powers.	
3° Premise	Better performance ≠ winning titles: Continental organisation of international football. Limits to the conversion of potential power into real power. Unpredictability of winning.	Performance of Chinese clubs, CSL and Chinese national teams in: AFC and FIFA competitions. IFFHS and FIFA rankings.	

Note: Own elaboration table

Apart from the literature review, with more than 50 journal articles, books and book chapters collected about the Chinese football development, we have reviewed policy documents of Chinese football, highlighting especially two of the four comprehensive reform programmes released between 2014 and 2016: the Overall Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme of 2015; and the 2016 Medium and Long-Term Development Plan of Chinese Football (2016-2050) –hereafter, National Football Plan-.

In terms of data, we have collected the latest information available about the number players, coaches, clubs, teams, football pitches and referees, from official reports and websites of football federations and professional leagues. This is complemented with several reports covering the socio-economic aspects of international football –migration, attendance to stadiums, audiences, total revenues of leagues, etc.-, made by Deloitte,

International Federation of Football History & Statistics (IFFHS), CIES Football Observatory, Forbes, or Transfermarkt.

In terms of structure, this article has two main sections. The first one develops the theoretical-methodological approach to football from IR, explaining how the international system and its dynamics configure and helps to explain the state behaviour in football. The second section studies the current situation of Chinese football and the difficulties observed to become a global football power by 2050, following the theoretical-methodological approach developed in the previous section.

International Relations and football: The state behaviour in sport from a realist perspective of IR
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Premise 1: The national interest of every country in sport is winning titles

The most basic and fundamental connection between football and IR is the statehood of the international sports system, meaning that International Federations (IFs) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) define the concept of country or nation since the 90s as a State that has an already accepted international recognition. This does not mean that international organisations like European Union (EU), United Nations (UN) or NGOs have their own sports agenda (MURRAY, 2018), but as the state is the only one with direct representation in the sports system through their National Federations (NFs) and National Olympic Committees (NOCs), it is conceived as the main political actor from an IR perspective (PULLEIRO, 2020, p. 4-5).

Therefore, trying to delimit the national interest in sport, understood here as an analytical tool to explain the state behaviour, the sporting values and Olympism stress that winning is not as important as taking part in the competition and fighting well. However, since sports competitions are zero-sum games and national symbolism is present through flags, anthems or national crests, the international prestige, status and competitiveness of countries is at stake (PULLEIRO, 2020, p. 5-8). In simple terms, winning in football and sport in general matters for the development and strengthen of national identity, for the promotion of concepts like solidarity or hard work among society and to the maintenance of governmental legitimacy and status at national and international level (HOULIHAN, 1991; RIORDAN, 1993).

Consequently, every country –from fans and players to clubs, federations and governments- wants to win at any cost, and although winning was important since practically the beginning of the international sports institutionalisation, this political vision of sport became the most relevant element during the Cold War. In the end, winning sports competitions under the bipolar order implied a display of superiority for the respective capitalist or communist bloc. Therefore, the traditional conception of sport as something that was exclusively part of the private sphere, rejecting public funding and state intervention, was progressively abandoned (GREEN; OAKLEY, 2001).

Since then, sports statehood, winning titles and national pride are so intertwined that for so many people winning in sport means either local or national success (SHOBE, 2008, p. 331). The players also realise the duty of responsibility that they have with their local communities and their countries as ‘people expect you to win, and this hurts more than the physical punishment’ (UNDERWOOD, 1964). Accordingly, the identification of players as representatives of their countries fighting for the sporting glory, increases the public interest, being a key element of the Tv sport system by which the sports organisations, television channels, advertising companies and consumers enjoy from a beneficial business relationship (LOBMEYER; WEIDINGER, 1992, p. 313).

Besides, for Kissoudi ‘history shows that governments have used international sports events, especially the Olympic Games, to pursue their own interests rather than understanding, friendship, and peace’ (2008, p. 1692); which would explain the political motivation of the sporting arms race, even when the logic of public investments in elite sport has been questioned by several studies along the last decade (GRIX; CARMICHAEL, 2012; DE RYCKE; DE BOSSCHER, 2019).

Premise 2: The national interest is not as relevant as the state’s ability and capacity to win

Daniel Morales and Alberto Rocha highlight a key element of the state behaviour in international politics and in sport, explaining that not only the national interest matters, since the ability of states to defend their interests at any given moment is also relevant (2010, p. 254). In other words, state power determines the limits and possibilities of a given policy.

According to the Mexican scholars, power in IR is a three-dimensional phenomenon, distinguishing among material, semi-material and immaterial capacities, which feed one another; a dynamic phenomenon, as states’ power is not static; and relative, as it depends on other states’ power (ROCHA; MORALES RUVALCABA, 2018).

In this regard, the hierarchy of the international system is determined by a state relation in terms of centre-periphery, with core-like production processes and peripheral production processes (WALLERSTEIN, 2004). The G7 –United States, Germany, Japan, France, United Kingdom, Italy and Canada- are the great powers³ that conforms a directory of the international governance, since they have enough power to act autonomously, impose their policies on other countries and lead the global economy (MORALES RUVALCABA, 2019, p. 144-145).

On the other hand, the semi-peripheral states, conformed by regional powers⁴, secondary regional states and subregional powers, would be an intermediate category, being influenced and determined by core and peripheral processes. Their state apparatus is in a process of modernisation, but they still contain deeply discordant forces and social dynamics because their economies are still in a process of industrialisation, with high socio-economic inequality and strong disparity in their internal regions (MORALES RUVALCABA, 2020).

3. In addition to the great powers, core states include also the category of middle powers and semi-core states (MORALES RUVALCABA, 2019).

4. According to Morales (2020), China, India, Russia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Turkey, Indonesia, Poland, Argentina and South Africa belong to this state category.

However, to understand in a comprehensive manner the foreign policy of countries we need to introduce in the analysis cognitive and domestic variables: the ruling elite's perceptions of systemic pressures or threats, and bureaucratic structures or different types of governments and governance (ROSE, 1998), because 'complex domestic political processes act as transmission belts that channel, mediate, and (re)direct policy outputs in response to external forces' (SCHWELLER, 2004, p. 164).

Accordingly, since sport becomes one of the means to realise the foreign policy of states (MURRAY, 2012, p. 581), 'the distribution of power and international hierarchy are conditioning factors to the governments, who will decide the behaviour and goals of countries in both international politics and sports competitions' (PULLEIRO, 2020, p. 7), which basically means that countries are not just automatons that react similarly to the same systemic pressures, as can be seen in the case of small states.

In the end, material and semi-material capacities –population, infrastructures, territory and natural resources, healthcare and education systems, etc.- would be the basis on which countries develop their sporting competitiveness in order to win titles that would guarantee prestige, fame, status and leadership –immaterial capacities-. However, the extractive capacity, namely, how the NFs, leagues and clubs manage and organise the sports resources, would explain how countries with similar number of players, managers, stadiums or investments may not be equally competitive (PULLEIRO, 2020, p. 6-7).

Applied to football, a good extractive capacity helps us to understand how a country like Iceland can reach the quarter-finals of the 2016 UEFA Euro and the group stage of the 2018 FIFA World Cup with only 179 full size pitches in the country, 115 affiliated clubs and 18.500 registered male players; and on the other hand, how Netherlands could not entered the group stage of those competitions having more than 75 stadiums with capacity for at least 3,000 people, more than 3,300 clubs, 1 million of registered male players and the revenues of the Eredivisie reaching almost €500 million (KSI, 2018; BARNARD et al., 2019).

Premise 3: More resources and investments guarantee a better performance, but not necessarily winning titles

As we mentioned before, power in sport and IR is relational since the gains of some countries means the losses of others. This means that due to the number of matches and competitions, the sporting authorities of each country can monitor and evaluate the performance of their teams and clubs, meaning that a country can reverse a downward trend if it has the appropriate resources, a good extractive capacity and the political will to do it. In other words, the competitiveness, technification and determination to win is such that changing the status quo of a consolidated sport is not an easy task.

Here we need to consider first the continental organisation of football. Except for FIFA tournaments, which are a minority, for clubs and national teams international football happens mainly among the tournaments organised by continental confederations: UEFA (Europe), CONME-

BOL (South America), CONCACAF (North America), CAF (Africa), AFC (Asia) and OFC (Oceania). This means that externally, the competitiveness of a country is conditioned and limited mainly by its most immediate opponents, making very stable the international power structure of football.

In this sense, acknowledging that since its origins, this sport has been a matter of European and South American countries; if we trace a centre-periphery logic in football, in the last decades, its centre of power has displaced to a few Western European countries, instead of including more contenders from other continents. The different rankings and reports about national teams or the economic and competitive performance of players, clubs and national leagues, reveal that UEFA countries, especially the big-5, have the best and most successful players, clubs and national teams of the world (BARNARD et al., 2019; IFFHS, 2020; TRANSFERMARKT, 2020; FIFA, 2020; OZANIAN, 2019).

The 71% – 10 out of 14 countries – of the FIFA World Cup semi-finalists in the XXI century are from Europe; with Brazil and Argentina being finalists only once, in 2002 and 2014 respectively, being Brazil the only non-European country that became champion.

In terms of clubs, the same process is happening. Historically, Europe and South America are not so far if we consider the Intercontinental Cup and FIFA Club World Cup since 1960: 33 titles won by European clubs (56%) and 26 by South Americans (44%). Nevertheless, in the XXI century 8 out of 12 clubs (66%) that have become world champions are from Europe.

Therefore, Western European domestic competitions are the most prestigious ones, as it happens with the UEFA Champions League at international level. Accordingly, although South American players are still considered among the best, since they play mostly for European clubs, especially after the Bosman ruling of 1995 (RAVENEL et al., 2017; CIES FOOTBALL OBSERVATORY, 2020); South American domestic and international tournaments like Copa Libertadores can no longer be compared to the competitiveness and economic impact of European ones.

However, a unique characteristic of sport is that we cannot anticipate a result until the match or the competition is finished. We already mentioned the cases of England, PSG and Manchester City; and in addition, we have Maracanazo, Centenariazo, Greece winning the UEFA Euro 2004 or Leicester FC becoming the champion of the 2015/16 Premier League, that are good examples of underdogs winning against all odds. Accordingly, we should consider the unpredictability of winning in football, no matter if we refer to long seasons or short tournaments, national teams or clubs.

In summary, the conversion of the potential power into real power in football is not the same for every country, which might lead to a paradox of power, explained generally in IR with the case of the Vietnam War and how United States was incapable to take advantage of its extraordinary military and economic capacities (SODUPE, 2002, p. 91). Therefore, the last premise considers that making substantial economic investments in order to have the best facilities or the biggest pool of talent will increase the performance of a country; but this does not necessarily mean winning international tournaments automatically, or even reaching to finals.

Chinese football development: difficulties for China to become a global football power by 2050

Following the three premises of the previous section, the focus of the analysis for Chinese football is, firstly, on the role of football within the Chinese sports policy. Secondly, how China is increasing the financial, material and human resources of football, and is trying to improve its extractive capacity. Finally, how the Chinese national teams and clubs have performed internationally along this decade.

The Chinese political will: From the Olympic dream to the three wishes for Chinese football

In competitive terms, for the CCP winning was important practically since the beginning, but the development of Chinese sport was initially determined mainly by China's confrontation with Chinese Taipei, and secondly, by its location in the international system. In this regard, the rejection of the IOC and IFs to follow the One-China policy of Beijing, implied the withdrawal of China from the Olympic Movement and every IF that recognised the national federations of Chinese Taipei – FIFA included – in 1958. Only after the correlation of power was favourable to China in the 70s, Beijing was able to impose its political demands into the international sports institutions (AUTHOR, 2020, p. 9-10).

Since the 80s, Chinese authorities followed the political logic of the Cold War, and the Olympics became China's primary target in terms of giving back 'pride, confidence and hope to the nation' (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012, p. 74-75). Consequently, thanks to the political and socio-economic development of China and the establishment of Juguo tizhi, a sports policy characterised by the governmental economic support to elite sport – especially prioritising Olympic sports – (HONG, 2008, p. 36-44); in less than two decades China went from being a secondary sports power, failing to reach the top ten countries in Seoul 88, to rank first in the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics.

Accordingly, with China focused on obtaining gold medals instead of scoring goals, it is not strange that football was underdeveloped in the background. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there was not any plan to raise the competitiveness of football. In the 50s, Chinese authorities considered that a strong performance in football 'would announce to the world that the march to modernity had begun, that Communist China and its people could match the world in play, as well as power and prosperity' (JINXIA; MANGAN, 2001, p. 81). However, the effects of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution implied the disruption of sports training, a shutdown of sports schools and a deterioration of sports facilities, which meant severe limitations for the development of football (JINXIA; MANGAN, 2001, p. 79-83).

After China came back to the AFC in 1974 and FIFA in 1979, the next two decades displayed a frustration with football throughout the Chinese society. In a situation where China was improving its sports performance at practically all levels, the continuous failure of men's football, incapable

of reaching the group stage of the World Cup and the Olympics, implied national despair, anger, criticism, and sometimes even public disorder, as it happened after an embarrassing loss against Hong Kong in 1985. Seven years later, it was published the first of the Ten-Year Plan for China's Football (1993-2002) that established unrealistic goals: the national team should not only had to qualify for all the editions of the World Cup and the Summer Olympics, but also to reach the quarter-finals of the 2000 Olympic Games and being among the top four teams in the 2002 World Cup (JINXIA; MANGAN, 2001, p. 88-91; PENG et al., 2019, p. 8-9).

In the XXI century, especially since the Beijing Olympics, sport has been reinforced as a key element of Chinese public diplomacy, particularly through the organisation of more sports mega-events. It is a way to show that China 'has earned its rightful place among the leading powers as a nation of culture, sport and entertainment' (MÜLLER; STEYAERT, 2013, p. 141), but 'old, stereotypical perceptions of a red, antique and communist state are proving hard to shift' (MURRAY, 2018, p. 66-67, 115). In this sense, the balance of the second Ten-Year Plan (2003-2012) made it clear that 'there was something wrong with the way football was governed, at all levels', due to the corruption, illegal gambling and match-fixing (PENG et al., 2019, p. 9-11).

Besides, the constant failure of Chinese football to deliver results in line with other sports and with the new international status of the country is unacceptable for Chinese authorities, and especially for Xi Jinping, who explained that the resolution of China after the success of the Beijing Olympics was to improve also the level of football. In 2011, Xi Jinping expressed for the first time his three wishes for Chinese football: to qualify, host and win the FIFA World Cup, which would lead in 2013 to announce the new football development strategy for the next decades, implemented through four comprehensive reform programmes released between 2014 and 2016 (GÜNDOĞAN; SONNTAG, 2018; SULLIVAN et al., 2019).

The guidance and leadership of Xi Jinping and the CCP in this policy renewal is very clear when it is stated at the beginning of the Overall Chinese Football Reform plan of 2015 that 'comrade Xi Jinping [...] has placed the rejuvenation of football as an important task for the development of sports and the construction of a powerful sports nation on the agenda' (STATE COUNCIL OF THE PRC, 2015), being the first time that football was at the core of the sports policy in China.

The National Football Plan is less ambitious in the short-term (2016-2020) than previous plans, since its main goal is strengthened grassroots football and building the foundation of Chinese football. The medium-term goal (2021-2030) is to become one of the world's powerful football nations, ranking the men's national football team among the top teams in Asia and women's national team among the top teams in the world. Finally, the Long-term goal (2031-2050) aims to achieve a comprehensive development of Chinese football, and therefore, being one of the world's leading football powers (NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM COMMISSION, 2016).

In conclusion, on a first level of analysis, we have seen how China has always had a political motivation to win in football, but this sport was not the main priority of Chinese sports policy until the arrival of Xi Jinping to the presidency.

The development of Chinese football: Investments, resources and knowledge to improve the extractive capacity

As it is stated in the second premise, not only the national interest matters, since the ability of states to defend their interests at any given moment is also relevant. In a broad sense, as a regional power China belongs to the high semi-periphery, hoping to rise its status 'as a producer, as an accumulator of capital, and as a military force' (MORALES RUVALCABA, 2020, p. 32-36; WALLERSTEIN, 2004, p. 56-57); but at the same time, as we mentioned before, China wants to prove that is one of the leading nations in terms of culture, sport and entertainment. That is why, in the context of football, the basis of the Chinese strategy is to 'to meet the new expectations of the people, to improve the image of Chinese sports and to realise the dream of becoming a powerful sports nation' (STATE COUNCIL OF THE PRC, 2015). Consequently, once that football is at the core of the sports policy, with specific goals at short, medium and long-term driving the development of football in the country, it seems that to succeed, China just needs to improve the quantity and quality of its football through a better extractive capacity.

In this sense, previous football plans failed miserably since they lacked clarity, it emerged a tension between political, sporting and commercial interests among stakeholders; there was a lack of success at grassroots, elite and professional levels; and corruption, illegal gambling and match-fixing persisted along time (JINXIA; MANGAN, 2001, p. 88-91; PENG et al., 2019, p. 9-11). Therefore, the challenge still is to integrate the advantages of Juguo tizhi with the market economy, 'the fight against corruption and expand the government regulation across the sport sector through institutional reform' (PENG et al., 2019, p. 11-13; HU; HENRY, 2017; CHEN; ZHENG, 2016).

On this point, the Reform Plan of 2015 constrained the governmental control since the CFA was decoupled from the General Administration of Sport of China (GAISC), the governmental body that predominantly manage the elite sport in the country (PENG et al., 2019, p. 11-12; HU; HENRY, 2017, p. 2-4). In 2017, twelve more policy documents were published. In two of them, the Ministry of Education (MOE) focused on youth and campus football, while the CFA focused on improve the management of the CSL (YU et al., 2019, p. 718-719). However, the complexity for the mobilisation and deployment of this institutional reform is significant, since it involves the action and collaboration of more than 30 public institutions from all administrative levels (SULLIVAN et al., 2019, p. 8).

On the other hand, the determination to have a football governance model 'with Chinese characteristics' (GÜNDOĞAN; SONNTAG, 2018, p. 109-11) can be seen in the connection between grassroots and professional football. Alternatively, in China, the project of cultivating young football talents has been traditionally attached to the school education (EU SME CENTRE, 2019, p. 12-16). A situation that is going to be reinforced under the era of reforms of Xi Jinping, considering that school football has a significant role in the consumption of sports products. In 2013, the investment in school football increased from 40 million to 56 million Yuan per year, and

the Reform Plan of 2015 highlighted the educational function of football and the necessity to popularise it in educative centres in order to accelerate the co-progress of football skills, to build a strong foundation of young football talents and to expand the number of professional football teachers (LI, 2018).

In this regard, in 2019 there was 27 million of students that attended football classes and participated in football training and competitions in 27,000 schools. Besides, '40,000 football fields have been built or renovated in the past five years with 20,000 more to follow by the end of the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020)' (XINHUANET, 2019a; ZHANG, 2020, p. 15). Accordingly, Chinese football development is being successful according to the short-term goals of the 2016 National Football Plan. For the medium-term goals, the idea is to have 1 pitch x 10,000 people, having a more dynamic management of football at all levels –social, campus and professional football- and becoming football into an important engine of the sports industry (NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM COMMISSION, 2016). For this ambitious development, the national funding for the period 2016-2018 was about 680 million Yuan, while provincial and district funding reached to over 20 billion Yuan (DELOITTE, 2019, p. 9).

Actually, in a few years, we can see already some progress, leaving behind the idea of a weak development of Chinese football in comparison with the European big-5 in several fundamental aspects –Table 2-.

TABLE 2 – Comparison of number of players, coaches, clubs, teams and referees between China and the big-5

	GERMANY	FRANCE	ENGLAND	ITALY	SPAIN	CHINA
Players	7,131,936 (2019)	1,933,680 (2020)	1,836,072 (2015)	1,057,690 (2019)	844,284 (2019)	1,000,000 (2020)
Coaches	60,498 (2016)	35,723 (2020)	90,103 (2016)	26,662 (2019)	26,061 (2019)	70,000 (2019)
Clubs	24,544 (2019)	15,000 (2020)	13,000 (2015)	12,449 (2019)	9,579 (2019)	-
Teams	149,735 (2019)	-	119,000 (2015)	66,492 (2019)	61,716 (2019)	21,736 (2019)
Referees	57,420 (2019)	21,672 (2020)	25,988 (2015)	31,812 (2019)	15,000 (2017)	30,000 (2020)

Note: Own elaboration table. Data obtained from different reports published in the respective webpages of UEFA and football federations of China, England, Spain, Germany, France and Italy.

Despite these growing figures, China still needs more of everything considering the ambitious planning for this decade. The president of the CFA explained that for 2025 China would need more than 100,000 coaches, as it is planned to have 50,000 specialised football schools for that year (SHIYAO, 2019). Consequently, technification is increasingly important, and currently, many collaboration agreements are signed annually with foreign countries to raise the skill level of Chinese players, coaches, referees, administrators, etc. (TAN et al., 2016, p. 1454; ZHANG, 2020, p. 15-16).

On the past, these agreements would just serve the interests of foreign powers in terms of promoting their leagues, clubs, players and associated brands in China through the selling of broadcasting rights or

summer tours. However, as it happens in other economic areas, modern China can decide what are the needs and priorities of its football in order to improve it. In this regard, we need to highlight how the Chinese government is involved in the process, becoming football part of the Chinese diplomacy in bilateral meetings with other Heads of State, creating an ideal climate to endorse agreements between chinese and foreign football stakeholders (LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2020, p. 73-77).

Accordingly, these international agreements not only function to develop the grassroots and the commercial activity of Chinese football, but also to improve its managerial and logistical knowledge, covering all the key stakeholders of Chinese football: MOE, CFA, CSL, professional clubs and football schools. Therefore, China is learning from the best football powers in key areas – only with the big-5 there are more than 30 collaboration agreements signed with football federations, professional leagues and clubs-, to become in the best Asian country in a near future, and to break the structural hegemony of Europe in the long-term.

External limitations to the performance of Chinese football: The continentalization of football

Considering the political motivation, investments, resources and the policy changes for the development of football in China, we can expect that the performance of the country at the international stage will be better, following the goals established in the National Football Plan.

About the possibility of becoming one of the best Asian countries by 2030, according to the IFFHS⁵, in this decade the CSL is having a remarkable progress, being ranked among the Asian top four since 2016 –Table 3- (IFFHS, 2020) thanks undoubtedly to the international performance of Chinese clubs. Since 2015, at least 50% of Chinese clubs reach the round of sixteen; and since 2017, it is usual to watch Shanghai SIPG or Guangzhou Evergrande –the only Chinese club that won this competition in 2013 and 2015- among the semi-finalists.

5. Since 2010, in the club world ranking of the IFFHS there are between 62 and 72 UEFA clubs among the top 100, while the AFC only has had between 2 and 7 clubs.

6. The IFFHS establish 4 levels to qualify the national leagues, with different points by match. Each year the ranking decides the level of each league for the next year. Currently, South Korea is the only Asian national league that belongs to level 3. National leagues of China, Japan, Saudi Arabia and Iran belong to level 2.

TABLE 3 – CSL ranking among the best national leagues according to the IFFHS⁶ (2010-2019)

	Top 1		Asian Top 1			China	
	League	Points	League	Rank	Points	Rank (in Asia)	Points
2010	Spain	1092	Japan	27 ^o	516	84 ^o (17 ^o)	248
2011		1194	South Korea	18 ^o	589	66 ^o (8 ^o)	298
2012		1283		15 ^o	653	70 ^o (10 ^o)	289
2013		1155		23 ^o	571,5	34 ^o (4 ^o)	430
2014		1259		24 ^o	562,5	56 ^o (6 ^o)	340,5
2015		1262		22 ^o	584,5	≥ 41 ^o (≥ 4 ^o)	-
2016		1277		18 ^o	618,5	36 ^o (3 ^o)	411,5
2017		1155		28 ^o	528,5	38 ^o (4 ^o)	403
2018		1256		19 ^o	580	44 ^o (3 ^o)	400
2019	England	1287		30 ^o	520,5	39 ^o (4 ^o)	428,5

Note: Own elaboration table

In this regard, the football market in China is composed at least of 300 million people. However, in terms of the total revenue –€200 million (¥1,593 billion)-, the CSL is still far behind in comparison with the €5,440 billion of the Premier League, the €3,168 billion of the Bundesliga or the €3,073 billion of LaLiga (EU SME CENTRE, 2019, p. 2; BARNARD et al., 2019, p. 9). Actually, it is not easy to find a balance between the commercial and political interest of the CSL, because in the end, the CCP understands the CSL as a mean to serve the Chinese national team by producing and developing local talent. Consequently, the promotion and the economic performance of the league and its clubs relying on foreign stars, has a secondary role (CHEN; ZHENG, 2016).

In fact, even though the quality of foreign talent in the league has increased⁷, one of the limitations of the CSL still is that even offering high salaries, the CSL and Asian football in general only get the best foreign players and coaches once that their facing a decline of their careers, or directly, just before retirement. This is the case of coaches like Lippi, Benitez or Pellegrini; and players like Fellaini, Hulk, Oscar or Tevez.

In this regard, Chinese authorities realised in 2016 the irrational and extravagant expenditures on foreign players after CSL clubs spent USD 451.3 million on transfer fees, ‘almost 17 times that of 2013, and 344.4 per cent more than the rest of AFC combined’ (FIFA, 2017). Accordingly, to guarantee the transition of Chinese young players from grassroots to professional football, and reduce the number of foreigners in the CSL, new regulations like the adoption of several quota systems or salary caps have been approved (YU et al., 2019, p. 721-723; CHEN; ZHENG, 2016; DELOITTE, 2019, p. 14).

TABLE 4 – Chinese national team in FIFA Men’s ranking (2010-2019)

	Top 1		Asian Top 1			China	
	Country	Points	Country	Rank	Points	Rank (in Asia)	Points
2010	Spain	1887	Australia	26º	816	87º (6º)	389
2011		1564	Japan	19º	884	71º (5º)	457
2012		1606		22º	840	88º (6º)	410
2013		1507	Iran	33º	720	92º (10º)	376
2014	Germany	1725		51º	580	97º (9º)	336
2015	Belgium	1494		45º	653	84º (8º)	405
2016	Argentina	1634		29º	814	82º (8º)	427
2017	Germany	1602		32º	798	71º (6º)	498
2018	Belgium	1727		29º	1481	76º (7º)	1317
2019		1765	Japan	28º	1503	76º (9º)	1322

Note: Own elaboration table. The FIFA Council approved a new rating model in August 2018 (FIFA, 2020).

About the national team, as we can see in table 4, the progression is slower. In FIFA men’s ranking, China has never been above 71º position in this decade, ranked among the top five Asian teams only in 2011. Actually, we can observe a stagnation of the Chinese performance in Asian competitions, since China does not reach a final since 2004, when it won the Asian Cup, the AFC U-17 Championship and lost to South Korea at

7. Along this decade, the number of CSL footballers who have played in the World Cup has increased. (DELOITTE, 2019, p. 15).

the AFC U-19 Youth Championship final. In this decade, China never passed quarterfinals in any of the AFC tournaments, being eliminated in the Asian Cup by Australia in 2015, and by Iran in 2019.

Therefore, considering that the success of the national team is what matters most for Chinese authorities, the main question still is if China will be one of the football powers that can dispute the final of a FIFA World Cup in a few decades. According to the third premise, even if China becomes the best Asian country by 2030, the issues attached to the continental organisation of football will be difficult to surpass in order to challenge European or even South American football competitiveness in the long-term.

In this decade, the top ten of FIFA men's ranking has been exclusively occupied by European and South American countries, except for Egypt, ranked 9th in 2010. In addition, no Asian country has managed to reach the quarterfinals of a World Cup since South Korea was a semi-finalist in 2002, where it was the co-host with Japan.

The continentalization of football is not only a problem for China. Australia realised that to progress in competitive and economic terms they should be part of the AFC instead of the OFC, something that happened in 2006 (HALLINAN; HEENAN, 2013). In addition, a SWOT analysis of the Japanese Football Association's Medium-term Planning (2015-2022) realised that a disadvantage for Japan to achieve the goal of being among the top ten countries in the FIFA ranking by 2015, was precisely the failure of Asian football (XIE et al., 2018).

In this sense, it seems that there is a problem in the transition from grassroots to professional football, because Asian youth football has demonstrated recently that can be relatively competitive. In the 2019 U-20 FIFA World Cup, South Korea lost the final against Ukraine; Iraq was a semi-finalist in 2013, and Japan, EAU and Uzbekistan has reached quarterfinals in different editions along the XXI century; in the 2012 Olympics, South Korea won the bronze medal against Japan; and in the U-17 World Cup, China, North and South Korea, Japan, Iran and Uzbekistan managed to reach quarterfinals.

But even if China become a catalyst for the development of Asian football, it is highly improbable that Asian domestic and international competitions could become a global reference and replace the prestige of European tournaments in the medium-term; making impossible to recruit the best global talent in order to raise the level of local football (CIES FOOTBALL OBSERVATORY, 2020). This might be balanced having Chinese footballers playing in the best foreign professional leagues, but currently, there are only nine Chinese players in professional clubs of European countries: Serbia, Spain, Portugal, France and Romania (CIES FOOTBALL OBSERVATORY, 2020). Besides, most of them are not yet playing in the first divisions or have a protagonist role in their clubs.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed from a realist perspective of IR the difficulties for China to become a football power and win the World Cup by 2050. Based on our analysis, China is following the first two premises explained

in this paper. In the end, it was the lack of acceptable results at international level what motivated the deep reform process of Chinese football, and it is the desire of becoming world champion what is driving the development of the football industry, interfering even with the management of the CSL.

About the Chinese ability and capacity to win, we can highlight that, for the first time, football is at the core of the Chinese sports policy, and that notable progress is being made to strengthen its material and human capacities. In addition, China is learning from foreign football powers, trying to optimise its extractive capacity but under a football governance model with Chinese characteristics, needing to wait a few more years to evaluate properly the effectiveness of this governance model.

Accordingly, acknowledging China's tremendous efforts to put its internal development factors to the same level as European football powers, the main limitation to become a major contender at the FIFA World Cup in the long-term relies on external competitiveness. Considering the European hegemony at all levels in a context of continentalization of international football, it will be difficult to raise the level of Asian football. There are huge limitations to make AFC's tournaments as prestigious and competitive as the European ones at short and medium-term. Consequently, even if China becomes the best Asian country after 2030, this does not guarantee that China will be competitive enough to beat the best European and South American national teams and clubs.

In this regard, we think that the globalisation trend in football with the promotion of new tournaments like the FIFA Club World Cup, which will be organised in its expanded format in China, will be positive to raise the competitiveness of Chinese and Asian football. On this point, the COVID-19 pandemic might become a window of opportunity to reform the management of international football, which would benefit China. Specifically, FIFA President, Gianni Infantino, suggested in March, after the COVID-19 outbreak, a reform of world football with different formats (BURTON, 2020), where he expressed his desire of having at least 50 clubs and national teams that could win the World Cup, not just eight from Europe and two from South America.

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