

## **KICKING POWER PLAY: CHINA'S FOOTBALL DIPLOMACY AS A GEOPOLITICAL FORCE**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines China's strategic utilization of its burgeoning sports industry, specifically football, as a means of global influence and the implications of this approach. The study draws on an analysis of policy documents, academic literature, and empirical examples to explore the evolution of China's sports diplomacy and the role of football in this context. The research elucidates how China's leadership has orchestrated policies to transform the nation from hosting sporting events to becoming a global powerhouse. The government's initiatives underscore this ambition, integrating the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with sports diplomacy further amplifying China's soft power. The concept of *guanxi*, deeply rooted in Chinese society, influences business relationships, also impacting sports diplomacy. The study showcases China's European football club acquisitions as emblematic of a multifaceted strategy blending cultural and economic influence. Shifts in foreign investment policies and state support have influenced the trajectory of Chinese investments in foreign football clubs. This research contributes to understanding how China leverages its sports industry for global influence and the complex interplay of politics, economics, culture, and diplomacy. The analysis underscores the adaptation of established concepts like *guanxi* in sports diplomacy. It elucidates China's evolution from hosting sporting events to actively shaping global sports diplomacy. The study further underscores the broader implications of China's approach, and the transformation of football as a soft power tool. As China redefines its role in the global sports arena, this research offers insights into its evolving strategies and the multifaceted implications for international sports and diplomatic relations.

### **Keywords**

China, *guanxi*, soft power, sport, strategy.



## Resumo

Este artigo analisa a utilização estratégica que a China faz da sua crescente indústria desportiva, especificamente do futebol, como meio de influência global e as implicações desta abordagem. O estudo baseia-se numa análise de documentos políticos, literatura académica e exemplos empíricos para explorar a evolução da diplomacia desportiva da China e o papel do futebol neste contexto. A investigação elucida como a liderança da China orquestrou políticas para transformar a nação de anfitriã de eventos desportivos numa potência global. As iniciativas do governo sublinham esta ambição, integrando a Belt And Road Initiative (BRI), ou Iniciativa Faixa e Rota, com a diplomacia desportiva, amplificando ainda mais o soft power da China. O conceito de guanxi, profundamente enraizado na sociedade chinesa, influencia as relações comerciais, tendo impacto também na diplomacia desportiva. O estudo retrata as aquisições de clubes de futebol europeus por parte da China como emblemáticas de uma estratégia multifacetada que combina influência cultural e económica. As mudanças nas políticas de investimento estrangeiro e no apoio estatal influenciaram a trajetória dos investimentos chineses em clubes de futebol estrangeiros. Esta investigação contribui para a compreensão de como a China aproveita a sua indústria desportiva para obter influência global e a complexa interação entre política, economia, cultura e diplomacia. A análise ressalta a adaptação de conceitos consagrados como o guanxi na diplomacia desportiva. Ele esclarece a evolução da China, desde a organização de eventos desportivos até a definição ativa da diplomacia desportiva global. O estudo sublinha ainda as implicações mais amplas da abordagem da China e a transformação do futebol como uma ferramenta de soft power. À medida que a China redefine o seu papel na arena desportiva global, esta investigação oferece perspectivas sobre a evolução das suas estratégias e as implicações multifacetadas para o desporto internacional e as relações diplomáticas.

## Palavras-chave

China, guanxi, soft power, desporto, estratégia.

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### **Introduction**

China's growth in its influence in the global sports business is no secret. The fact that Chinese investors acquire and invest in sports properties throughout Europe, in international leagues and teams, or are part of the sponsorship of Formula 1, basketball championships or tournaments on the world tennis circuit no longer surprises. China has realized the possibilities the world of sports offers on the international stage. The world looks at China, but China, too, looks at the world.

As the most popular viewed sport in the world, football is no stranger to this circumstance and has proven to be a great pole of attraction. The development of the Chinese professional football system, and its growing influence worldwide, is being driven by different strategies and investment plans from the government. The list of clubs under Chinese control has grown substantially in recent years. At the same time, the Chinese Super League and its investments have led to significant signings from the most established European and Latin American leagues. Likewise, Chinese companies and investors with high purchasing power have been encouraged to invest in events, equipment, facilities, agencies and sponsorships as an internationalization strategy underscoring the soft power present in Chinese foreign policy.

Beijing has made football one of its top sporting priorities over the past decade. President Xi Jinping makes no secret of his obsession with football. A year before becoming president, he commented that he had three wishes: for China to qualify for the World Cup, to organize the World Cup on Chinese territory, and to win the World Championship. The dream of Chinese football is still present as a sport, but also as an instrument and master key to internationalization, development, and progress.

In recent years, China's football industry has witnessed a boom, followed by a steep decline. Initially, driven by governmental ambitions and private investments, Chinese clubs aggressively secured top-tier international players and coaches. However, this influx of capital did not align with foundational grassroots development, leading to an unsustainable growth model. Many clubs soon grappled with financial issues, unable to sustain the high salaries and other commitments, leading to defaults and, in some cases, bankruptcy. This top-heavy approach, aiming to elevate China's global football status rapidly, compromised long-term competitiveness and stability. Thus, the football bubble in China has burst in the last years preceded by a global diplomacy strategy and the use of football as a geopolitical tool. This paper delves into the soft power implications of these developments in the Chinese football industry.



## Theoretical framework

### Chinese football dream

Since the 1980s, one of China's goals has been to become the world's most significant sports power. The strategies for this purpose have led it to compete with the United States, Russia and the United Kingdom to become the country with the most gold medals at the Olympic Games. This success is the result of government effort and planning.

After its return to the International Olympic Committee in 1979, China established an "Olympic strategy", which was applied from 1980 (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2013). However, at first, it was not a successful plan. After the poor results in the 1988 Seoul Games, during the 1990s and 2000s, an elite sport system was implemented: *Juguo Tizhi*. This time it did work, and China hosted the 2008 Olympic Games and won 51 gold medals compared to 36 for the United States (Leite Júnior & Rodrigues, 2017). Thereafter, China needed to replicate its success in Olympic sports with football. Thus, the then vice president Xi Jinping declared in 2009, after the success of the Beijing Olympics, that the results in football were low and that the country should promote football (Wang, 2009). After the 2008 Beijing Olympics, then-Chinese President Hu Jintao issued directives aimed at transitioning the nation from being a "country of major sporting events" to a global sports powerhouse (Tan, 2015). Subsequently, President Xi Jinping intensified the pursuit of this objective by his proclamation of the "Three World Cup dreams": participating in the World Cup, hosting the World Cup, and winning the World Cup (Tan & Bairner, 2018). In order to transform China into a future global football power, the Chinese government unveiled the Medium- and Long-Term Football Development Plan (2016-2050), and the National Football Field and Facilities Construction Plan (2016-2020) in April 2016.

Moreover, on October 20, 2014, the State Council of China issued a national strategic policy, titled "Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption". At this juncture, the first declaration emerged in which the highest echelon of the government acknowledged sport as a significant industrial sector, and furthermore designated it as one of the new focal points for Chinese economic growth (Laurell, et al., 2021). This strategy envisioned that by 2025, the Chinese sports business would evolve into a market with an approximate value of \$815 billion, yielding an annual Gross Value Added (GVA) of around \$250 billion, which roughly translates to between 1.2% and 1.5% of the national GDP (Liu, Zhang y Desbordes, 2017).

On March 16, 2015, China accompanied this strategic policy with another strategic plan, the "Comprehensive Reform Plan to Drive the Development of Football in China". As a follow-up strategy to implement the 2015 plan, on April 6, 2016, the National Development and Reform Commission, China's principal planning body, introduced the "Medium- and Long-Term Plan for Chinese Football Development (2016-2050)", a 35-year football development plan outlining short-, medium-, and long-term objectives. Its aim is to evolve into a dominant football power in Asia by 2030, and a global football superpower by 2050. The objective was to establish a novel management approach for this sport with distinctive indigenous features. The medium-term goal was to increase the number of adolescent football players, and to attain leadership status in Asia in both football competitiveness and in the organization of professional league matches. Furthermore, China expected the women's football team to regain its status among the world's foremost football powers (Leite Júnior & Rodrigues, 2017).

An essential strategy in the Chinese football industry is promoting grassroots football and training national players to become professionals. With this aim, the goal of reaching 50 million practitioners in this sport by 2020 was set, with the expectation that most local talents would emerge effortlessly. In 2011 specialized football schools began to open, focusing on elite players' development. In addition, in 2021, the General Administration of Sport of China encouraged constructing critical cities to develop national football. With



this ambition, in the next few years, China would develop 16-18 football cities for the expansion of football, and in the longer term, by 2035, football would be the driving force for China to become a sports power (Li & Nauright, 2021).

This cascade of strategic policies and initiatives, while ambitious in terms of domestic football development, is also indicative of China's broader intent to leverage football as a diplomatic tool. Coined as "football diplomacy", this involves the integration of sports into a nation's foreign policy to foster goodwill, improve bilateral relations, and elevate its global status. China's aggressive roadmap to become a football superpower by 2050 can be seen in this light. It is not just about fostering national pride or enhancing domestic sporting capabilities, but also about building a prominent soft power tool in its diplomatic arsenal. The establishment of football schools and the vision of creating football cities demonstrate a commitment to nurturing talent and projecting football as a symbol of China's rising influence and ambition on the world stage. As these endeavours progress, the symbiotic relationship between sport and diplomacy will underscore China's strategy, wherein football becomes a medium to amplify its global outreach and diplomatic clout.

### **Soft power strategy**

The Beijing Olympics represented a pivotal moment in China's engagement with the international arena, underscoring a fusion of local and global dynamics, and playing a critical role in spurring the advancement of elite football in the nation (Giulianotti, 2015). While Beijing's distinction of hosting both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games by 2022 is noteworthy, the mere organization of such mega-events might not suffice in advancing China's sports industries for geopolitical aims. Considering the football industry through the lens of Joseph Nye's soft power theory, the appeal to foreign audiences becomes paramount.

The success of the soft power approach hinges upon the attractiveness of the final product (Callahan, 2015). The Chinese Super League (CSL), operational since 2004 and following the sport's professionalization in 1994, emerges as a central player. This league has forged ties with diverse industrial sectors, predominantly real estate, and construction. Such affiliations can be attributed to various dynamics, including initiatives to entice entrepreneurs into football club investments (Chadwick, Widdop, and Parnell, 2016), thereby catalyzing the sport's appeal within the real estate business domain.

In this context, China adopted the approach of utilizing football as a geopolitical tool and, within this strategic framework, devised a high-performance, international-oriented sport with the potential to reaffirm national identity. Furthermore, China could harness football to promote the country's image regarding international acceptance (Allison & Monnington, 2002) and establish international relations through the so-called soft power (Brentin & Tregoures, 2016). To this end, when establishing the CSL, the development of new regulations for a transfer market and player mobility became crucial. This facilitated player transfers and enabled their movements on a global scale with competitive labour conditions, thereby supporting the internationalization of the industry. Consequently, after various attempts with different systems, China developed a football labour market partially akin to the European model, eventually transitioning to a free transfer system in 2010 (Shuo, Tangyun and Fang, 2016), 16 years after the industry's professionalization.

Researchers consider the surge of Chinese companies' investment in the European football market over the last decade as a form of soft power (Connell, 2018). During this period, Chinese investors bolstered their European influence through this means. Investment trends experienced substantial fluctuations over the decade. Europe emerged as the primary recipient of such investment, to the detriment of other global leagues where Chinese clubs had invested, albeit to a much lesser extent, in prior years. In this



regard, international relationships with recipient clubs in the transfer market also varied. The proportion of players acquired from the top four European leagues (England, Germany, Italy, and Spain) increased from 6% in the 2011-2012 season to 65% in the 2017-2018 season. However, one aspect has remained relatively constant throughout the decade. Chinese clubs' investment in CSL or lower divisions players comprises around 20-30% of the total investment, slightly decreasing in years of more excellent overall investment. Thus, China has continued to emphasize the development of domestic talent even while considering the use of the football industry in the geostrategic landscape.

Upon analyzing China's overseas investments on a broader scale, it is noteworthy that the two most recent five-year plans, though differing in certain aspects, share standard features. The Thirteenth Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) marks the first instance of a reference to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). More significant overseas investment, infrastructural activities along the BRI route, and demonstrating tangible outcomes through foreign aid are highlighted as crucial points. This plan also acknowledges the significance of sports as an emerging sector capable of fostering economic growth and employment. It advocates for the development of the sports industry, including the promotion of winter sports, the expansion of the fitness industry, and the hosting of international sports events in China (United Nations Development Programme, 2016).

Meanwhile, the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) outlines a long-term development goal for 2035 of adhering to future openness policies, attracting ODI flows, and promoting ODI through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), albeit with heightened sustainability. Within the sporting realm, this plan refers to the continued reinforcement of the sports industry, expansion of sports participation within the country, and incorporation of measures to enhance public health and well-being, promote physical education in schools, and stimulate sport-related economic development. The primary narrative of the 14th Plan is one of continuity, with some innovations and expanded ambitions (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

The most ambitious strategy pursued by the Chinese government, the Belt and Road Initiative, encompasses sport among its principal objectives. This is so much the case that in July 2017, the China National Tourism Administration of Sport of China launched the "Action Plan for the Development of Sports Tourism along the Belt and Road (2017-2020)". This strategic plan aimed to propel the growth of sports tourism in China and along the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), while fostering increased cooperation with different countries along the route through sports tourism (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2023). Football was not exempt from this, and the integration of sports tourism, football, and the BRI in China has been unfolding through various football exhibitions and tournaments (Table 1).

**Table 1 - Sample of events related to the use of football in the BRI strategy**

Location	Year	Tournament	Countries involved
Shenyang	2017	One Belt One Road Football Tournament	China, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Zambia, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Somalia, Zimbabwe and Ghana
Haikou	2017	The "Belt and Road" Haikou Youth Football Tournament	China, Croatia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore
Mangshi	2017	"Colorful Yunnan, Belt and Road" International Football Open	China, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Cambodia, East Timor and Croatia



Guangxi, Zhuang	2017	China-ASEAN International Youth Football Tournament	China, Taiwan, Australia, Russia, Vietnam, Indonesia and the People's Republic of Korea
Shanghai	2018	Shanghai "Belt and Road" Culture and Soccer Winter Camp	China, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Kenya and Panama
Hainan	2018	Hainan: "Belt and Road" Cup	China, Azerbaijan, the Czech Republic and Hungary

Source: Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2023

Furthermore, mention of the well-known concept of Stadium Diplomacy concerning the construction of infrastructure abroad is essential. China has built over 140 sports facilities worldwide since 1958, significantly emphasising investment in the African continent (Vondracek, 2019). In this manner, China secures access to specific raw materials while also addressing the overcapacity in its construction sector (Jin *et al.*, 2021). Within this context, African countries become entangled in grand projects that, while providing a sense of development, erect structures that do not necessarily enhance the quality of life for local inhabitants (Dubinsky, 2021). Additionally, with Africa's evolving priorities towards local industrialization, it remains to be seen how China will adapt its investment strategies and whether such infrastructural projects will still be central to its engagement with the continent.

This inflow of investment for the football and sports industry's development has been regarded as a soft power strategy. However, akin to the BRI, it can also be considered an intelligent power strategy with distinct Chinese characteristics—melding cultural influence with economic clout. This *modus operandi* has transformed into a hallmark of the country's identity and serves as the driving force behind China's foreign policy, encompassing various investments and projects. Infrastructure, finance, culture, education, interpersonal relations, political relations among states, and even the football industry are not exempt from these investments. It combines elements of hard power, such as economic investments, with a soft power strategy, encompassing the promotion of Chinese culture or enhancing China's image. It is ideal for disseminating its soft power strategy (Brînză, 2018).

An example of this was the acquisition of a 56% stake in the football team RCD Espanyol of Barcelona in November 2015. This move corresponds to a series of interests associated with the Maritime Silk Road in the Mediterranean Sea, as the port of Barcelona holds a strategic location. Owning a local football club can serve as a political and economic tool of persuasion, functioning as an effective instrument to attempt to exert influence or establish connections. This operation was not the first instance of a Chinese company's involvement in Spanish professional football. Presently, the Chinese conglomerate Hutchinson manages the most critical container terminal at the port of Barcelona, and China has become the top trading partner of the port of Barcelona, serving as a key entry point for Chinese vehicles into the European market. Such geostrategic manoeuvres have been recurring throughout the decade in the complete or partial acquisition of numerous European clubs (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Sample of Chinese investments in European football clubs from 2014 to 2021.**

Club	Country	Year of acquisition	Company
Club Atlético de Madrid	Spain	2014	Dalian Wanda Group
ADO Den Haag	Netherlands	2014	United Vansen
RCD Espanyol de Barcelona	Spain	2015	Rastar Group
City Football Group	England	2015	China Media Capital Holdings & CITIC Group
FC Sochaux-Montbéliard	France	2015	Ledus
Slavia Praga	Czech Republic	2015	CEFC China Energy Company
Northampton Town	England	2015	5USport
West Bromwich Albion	England	2016	Yunyi Guokai Sports Development Limited
Aston Villa	England	2016	Recon Group
Wolverhampton	England	2016	Fosun Group
OGC Nice	France	2016	NewCity Capital
AJ Auxerre	France	2016	ORG Packaging
Inter Milan	Italy	2016	Suning
Granada	LaLiga	2016	Wuhan Double/Link International Sports Limited
Birmingham Sports Holdings	England	2016	Trillion Trophy Asia
Olympique Lyonnaise	France	2016	IDG Captial
AC Milan	Italy	2017	Sino-Europe Sports Investment Management Changxing Co., Ltd
Barnsley	England	2017	PMC/NewCity Capital/ BFC Investment Company Limited
Southampton FC	England	2017	Lander Sports Development
Inter Milan	Italy	2019	Lion Rock Capital
FC Thun	Switzerland	2019	PMC/NewCity Capital
KV Oostende	Belgium	2020	PMC/NewCity Capital
AS Nancy Lorraine	France	2020	PMC/ NewCity Capital
FC Den Bosch	Netherlands	2021	PMC/ NewCity Capital
Esbjerg Fb	Denmark	2021	PMC/ NewCity Capital

Source: own research

However, the shift in China's foreign investment policy also manifested itself in the withdrawal of investments, resulting in an outflow of Chinese capital from many of the clubs that had been wholly or partially acquired. Among those listed in Table 2, notable instances include the divestment and withdrawal of stakes in the City Football Group, Aston Villa, Club Atlético de Madrid, Wolverhampton, OGC Nice, AC Milan, and Southampton, among others, following the loss of state support.





## Guanxi as a critical tool in Chinese international football diplomacy

The complexity of personal relationships finds a stable and deeply pervasive embodiment in Chinese society known as *guanxi*, which transforms individual identity into a collective one, whether within familial, educational, or work contexts. This interdependence also facilitates the population's ready adoption of the narrative of collective effort and the need to contribute towards shared objectives. *Guanxi* closely intertwines with Confucian social norms. *Guanxi* comprises two interconnected aspects: a utilitarian dimension based on mutual interests, beneficial purposes, and an affective or caring dimension, where emotional closeness gauges the quality of *guanxi* (Hernández & García, 2023, pp. 36-37).

In a second sense, *guanxi* is an institutionally defined system developed within contemporary Chinese society. The inefficiency and ineffectiveness of Chinese business infrastructures and related institutions have reinforced the reliance on personal *guanxi* for success and protection. In this scenario, frequent interactions and exchanges between individuals from two companies or organizations lead to enhanced institutional collaboration. This collaboration is nurtured by mutual trust, information exchange, and acquiring resources and advantages to improve business performance. Its significance in business has been extensively studied (Zhang & Hong, 2016, pp. 19-39). Pursuing mutual benefit in relationships involving exchanges is a fundamental tenet of Chinese thought, influencing the negotiation process based on concessions made by parties. This also shapes the ultimate content of agreements, which must be balanced and fulfil parties' expectations (Hernández & García, 2023, p. 38).

*Guanxi* has defined business and personal relationships in China for thousands of years. Additionally (Luo, 2001), explains that the Chinese executive system is highly complex and bureaucratic, with different levels such as central offices, provincial, municipal, district, and street-level offices, as well as various departments and divisions, including the General Administration of Sport, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Ministry of Education. For this reason, a positive relationship with national and regional public administration can assist companies in resolving conflicts, for instance, with suppliers and buyers. It can also provide some support to these enterprises. Moreover, it is worth recalling that before the significant investment bubble in Chinese football, the government had advised companies and investors to invest in the CSL. Thus, researchers understand football in China as a mean to forge relationships and participation rather than a way to generate revenue within a broader business portfolio (Xue *et al.*, 2020; Chadwick, 2022).

Another significant reason explaining the interrelation of the football industry with other sectors could stem from the success story of Evergrande, which transformed from a provincial real estate contender into a national magnate (Sullivan, 2017). Both private and state-owned enterprises observed the success of Evergrande in domestic and continental football tournaments, prompting them to start investing in the football industry. Sponsorship of the CSL was relatively inexpensive prior to 2015 due to the instability of the Chinese football league during the previous decade. Therefore, Evergrande acted like a "planet" attracting numerous "satellites" through the force of gravity, such as powerful state entities like Luneng, Greenland, and SIPG, as well as influential private entities like Suning and Jianye investing in football clubs (Tan & Bairner, 2018).

Although this relationship may seem surprising, the truth is that it has been highly significant in the recent history of this league. As Liu, Skinner, and Grosman (2020) point out, club owners are the primary funding source for CSL clubs, primarily because they have had few other investors. Until recently, the club's name served as advertising space for its leading investor, deterring other potential sponsors. This relationship can also



shape the clubs' business models. Furthermore, this becomes evident when comparing clubs managed by private enterprises and state-owned enterprises. Clubs owned by private enterprises tend to exhibit more flexible and efficient management processes, whereas those under state ownership display bureaucratic organizational practices. Typically, privately-owned clubs possess more significant financial resources and exhibit a quicker response capacity to poor results. However, a commonality among all the companies owning CSL clubs is their greater focus on business objectives than football-related ones.

In summary, the football industry in China has employed diverse investment and internationalization strategies in addition to player expenditures. Over the past decade, we can distinguish partial or total club acquisitions, sponsorships, and the hosting of mega sporting events. In the last two decades, China has hosted significant international events.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics marked a watershed moment in demonstrating the nation's transformation and economic potential. Recent additions to this list include the 2022 Winter Olympics and the hosting of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Championship in 2023. China not only hosts major international events but also uses national sports infrastructures to host foreign league and club events. For instance, the French Cup finals were played in China, first in Beijing in 2014 and subsequently in Shenzhen in 2018 and 2019. In this context, the French Professional Football League (LFP) and the French Football Federation (FFF) jointly established an office in Beijing in 2017, intending to expand the reach of French football in China. Through these events, China aims to shift the focus of sports enthusiasts, particularly football enthusiasts, towards its league.

## Discussion and conclusions

China's strategic employment of football, and more broadly, the sports industry as a tool for global influence and soft power projection, is manifestly articulated through the analysis. Framed within its mid-20th century economic openness and interdependence, football, despite its initial languid growth, has burgeoned as a critical domain of interest, especially post-1992, primarily propelled by domestic economic reforms (Tan, 2015; Tan & Bairner, 2018).

The recent tumult in China's real estate sector, particularly epitomized by the Evergrande scenario, poses queries about the longevity and robustness of China's financial commitment to football and, more expansively, its soft power projection. Coupled with Africa's pivot towards local industrialization, it holds the potential to recalibrate China's global influence, encompassing its soft power dynamics. Financial and geopolitical challenges cloud China's image as a reliable economic actor. This may impact on its cultural and diplomatic sway in tandem (Liu, Skinner & Grosman, 2020; Sullivan, 2017). In football, such external financial and geopolitical perturbations cast shadows on the perception of China as a steadfast economic player, thus impacting its cultural and diplomatic sway. Should China turn more introspective to stabilize its economy, its global soft power projection, especially in sports, might wane.

Moreover, the role of *guanxi*, a quintessential relational concept in China, is pivotal in understanding the dynamics at play. This interdependent relationship approach, nourished by Confucian social norms, has been integral to China's sports diplomacy, crafting meaningful relations and collaborations (Hernández & García, 2023). In this regard, China's orientation towards foreign investment, as mirrored in the acquisitions of European football clubs and its subsequent withdrawal in numerous instances, underscores its diplomatic strategy's mutable and frequently volatile nature in sports. This trend might be influenced by a medley of factors, spanning from shifts in domestic policies to broader geopolitical challenges.



However, what remains salient is that despite manifold investments and strategies, economic sustainability and a long-term strategy for football remain subjects awaiting comprehensive address. The integration of sports diplomacy within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) epitomizes how China has aspired to meld economic and geopolitical ambitions, although the veritable fruition of this endeavour remains a matter of conjecture (Brînză, 2018).

## Conclusions

This study underscores China's dynamic and multifaceted approach to utilizing its sports industry, particularly football, as an instrument of global influence and soft power projection. The Chinese leadership has strategically orchestrated the evolution from hosting major events to becoming a prominent player in the international sports arena, with policies to foster sports development and enhance international engagement.

The upheaval in China's real estate sector, epitomized by the Evergrande situation, coupled with Africa's pivot towards local industrialization, holds the potential to recalibrate China's global influence, encompassing its soft power dynamics. In the sphere of football, such external financial and geopolitical perturbations might cast shadows on the perception of China as a steadfast economic player, thus impacting its cultural and diplomatic sway. Should China turn more introspective to stabilize its economy, its global soft power projection, especially in the realm of sports, might wane.

Although there have been substantial investments in player transfers, partial or total acquisitions of European clubs, or sponsorships, the use of the industry as a geopolitical tool has impeded the sustainability of such expenditure and the establishment of a strategy that could translate China's international success and recognition in the sporting industry to football. In this regard, the integration of sports diplomacy within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) showcases China's nuanced integration of economic and geopolitical pursuits. However, the plans implemented in 2016 - the Chinese Football Development Medium- and Long-Term Plan (2016-2050) and the National Football Field and Facilities Construction Plan (2016-2020) - represent a shift in the industry's development strategy, contextualizing the government's objectives within a medium - and long-term framework to achieve the long-desired competitiveness. The lack of economic sustainability following the investment period and the real estate crisis impacted football. Thus, the country's sports objective has shifted in favour of a more economically sustainable approach, with a significantly reduced investment profile and a strong emphasis on grassroots sports. China exemplifies that the use of sports as a soft power tool is less about economic profitability and more about a geopolitical strategy that relies on *guanxi* to forge relationships on the international stage.

As China redefines its role on the international stage, its evolving sports diplomacy strategy will likely continue to impact foreign investments, regional relationships, and global perceptions. Understanding China's utilization of football and sports diplomacy enhances our comprehension of its broader geopolitical aspirations and the innovative ways it wields soft power. This research provides a lens through which to observe the ever-evolving dynamics of China's engagement with the international community and its multifaceted influence through the prism of sports diplomacy.

## Limitations and future research

Firstly, this analysis examines sports diplomacy in China from a perspective exclusively centred on football, potentially overlooking a broader landscape within the study's scope. Moreover, the qualitative approach might provide a somewhat nuanced perspective on the motivations, strategies, and challenges in China's efforts concerning sports diplomacy.



Future research could direct attention towards how China can strategically leverage football once again as a geopolitical tool while ensuring the industry's sustainable development to regain international competitiveness. Additionally, it would be insightful to analyse the perspectives of local communities regarding the development of CSL football clubs and the growth of grassroots sports within China to evaluate the broader implications of these initiatives comprehensively.

The limitations highlighted in this study offer opportunities for forthcoming research to delve further into the intricate aspects of China's sports diplomacy, thereby providing a more comprehensive comprehension of the motivations, challenges, and impacts of its strategies on the global sports arena and international relations.

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