

## **Sport in China: Citizenship, Symbolic Power and Civic Spaces**

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### **Introduction**

The transformation of Chinese football under the aegis of Xi Jinping's "Chinese Football Dream" (中国足球梦) illuminates the party-state's domestic aspirations and modus operandi. The latest iteration in a long line of football reform plans is being used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a tool to serve broad economic and socio-political ends, including promoting public health, well-being and active lifestyles, generating feelings of national unity and pride, stimulating middle-class consumption, inculcating social cohesion, encouraging patriotic citizenship and forging a shared national identity. The utility of the sport as a vehicle explains why the Chinese leadership has invested significant financial and reputational capital in the top-down direction of football development. Yet, the competing motives of diverse organizations, institutions, private commercial actors involved in the execution of a transformative reform program, and the agency of individual citizens, whether football fans, players or consumers, mean the state cannot simply will a successful football industry and culture into existence. There is an articulation between the needs of the state and the public and private institutions that respond and contribute to state projects to advance their own interests. Studying this articulation, through the specific case of football reform, reveals the complexities of policy-making and politics in contemporary China. In their application of Appadurai's (1996) work on

cultural economy, Yu et al. examine how the coalescing of people, finance, images and ideology create “football-scapes” imbued with “new systems of meaning, power, capital, and consumer identities from which the state, and sport therein, are articulated” (2017: 4). Yu et al. (2017) is a compelling study of the role of football in China's engagement with cultural globalization, and seeking to extend this pioneering work we explore a more explicitly political dimension implicated in Chinese sport, namely the relationship between football and state-building, national identity and citizenship.

China's engagement with football is complicated by its evolving status, first as a Communist country and subsequently as a reforming socialist economy, a rapidly modernizing country and an authoritarian regime. There are similarities (and legacies) between China's organization of sport during the Mao era and other Communist countries, notably the Soviet Union (Edelman, 1993; Riordan, 2007), and patriotism and propaganda are a feature of numerous Communist regimes' treatment of sport, like North Korea (Lee & Bairner, 2009). However, reform-era developments in Chinese football have relatively little in common with post-Soviet states, where chaotic professionalization led to endemic corruption and the emasculation of domestic football structures (Molnar, 2007). Football in China is not an incubator of violent nationalism or ethnic conflict as it has been in other reforming socialist nations (Mills, 2009). Neither has football become a site for anti-state mobilization as it has in other developing nations like Brazil, despite sharing similar social conditions such as inequality and corruption (Goldblatt, 2014). Other authoritarian regimes have sought “soft power” gains through association with football, particularly countries in the Gulf (Thani & Heenan, 2017), and many countries have adopted policies to promote sport to tackle health issues and deliver elite sporting success (Grix & Carmichael, 2012). Other nations, notably Japan and the US, have launched new football leagues

and invested heavily in the recruitment of foreign expertise (Collins, 2006; Horne, 1999). Football in Europe and elsewhere is similarly no stranger to the involvement of political figures and a business-football-politics nexus embodied by individuals like Silvio Berlusconi and Roman Abramovich (Doidge, 2015). While individual aspects of China's football experience have corollaries elsewhere, taken as a whole, its experience is distinct from other nations. To anchor our analysis, therefore, we use the concept of symbolic power, a lens that helps us make sense of the totality of the Chinese approach to football by treating it as a "field-spanning" socio-cultural and politico-economic sphere. The article proceeds in three stages. We first present an overview of the role of football and sport through the history of the PRC, before analyzing current practices manifest in multiple policy documents and accompanying discourses and praxis that underpin China's hybrid state-corporatist approach to football.

### **From Sport to Citizenship**

The symbolic resonance of football in China goes beyond the appreciation of sport. At the domestic level it is implicated in China's ongoing pursuit of modernity, the Party-state's narrative of national development and, ultimately, regime legitimacy. Such linkages are longstanding. Sport during the Mao era was highly politicized, as it was in other Communist nations. Sporting prowess, especially demonstrations of supremacy over other nations, was conceived as "a manifestation of ideological supremacy" (Dong & Mangan, 2001: 82). From the founding of the PRC, football was "a symbol of modernity; a talisman of topicality; a statement of intent" (Dong & Mangan, 2001: 79) The leadership of the new Communist state held the ambition for China to become a footballing power, a position the predecessor Republic of China regime briefly occupied in Asia during the 1920s. A centralized elite sports system was incorporated into the planned economy by the mid-1950s, but

suffered substantial disruption during the catastrophic Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. Upon adopting “opening and reform” as its mantra after Mao’s death, China re-engaged with international sport and began the gradual and experimental process of dismantling the centrally administered football system. Newly enriched, but still desirous of validation (Deng, 2008), the contemporary party-state has reanimated football as a vehicle for its nation building projects. The current iteration, launched in 2014, falls under the aegis of the Chinese Dream (中国梦) and Core Socialist Values (社会主义核心价值观) (Gow, 2017), defining components of Xi’s national development and citizenship discourses that were incorporated into the PRC Constitution at the 13<sup>th</sup> National People’s Congress in March 2018 (Lu, 2018). With ambitions to play an expanded global leadership role and accelerated efforts to recalibrate the manufacturing-led model that facilitated economic take-off, China has entered a “New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” (新时代中国特色社会主义思想) (Peters, 2017). Codified at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in November 2017, the New Era is set to be the motif for the foreseeable future now that state and party term-limits have been formally removed, allowing Xi Jinping to remain in power beyond his originally allotted two five-year terms (Bader, 2018). A flourishing domestic football industry, combined with internationally competitive performance have a role to play in the New Era through promotion of domestic consumption, civic participation, cultural engagement and national pride. Like other national level projects, development of the football sector must proceed in a manner deemed acceptable to the increasingly proscriptive Chinese authorities under Xi’s centralized leadership. One circumscription applicable to national sport policy relates to the contribution it makes to the formation of state-approved notions of Chinese national identity and the delineation of citizenship. For guidance on how to approach this development we turn to the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu.

### **Symbolic Power and Stratification: Appropriating Bourdieu**

The utility of Bourdieu's theorizing with regard to China lies in the concepts of symbolic power and symbolic violence, which provide useful lenses to frame the top-down creation of cultural industries, the emergence of consumer culture, and the superior-subordinate relationship between the state and the private sector. Specifically, Bourdieu's concepts allow us to consider the impact of these factors on state-led stratification in contemporary China, and post-socialist contexts more broadly, which serves to define and determine the parameters of citizenship. Calhoun (2006) argues that Bourdieu's work is situated in the sociology of development, beginning with his earliest studies of the Kabyle in Algeria, whereby French colonialism sought to incorporate Algeria into its own sphere of capitalist relations. In doing so, French colonialists essentially stratified the Algerian context, producing and reproducing inequalities which served to define and delimit social groups and include or exclude them from society. It is this process of the state exercising a monopoly over "symbolic power" to determine the characteristics of acceptable and legitimate citizenship, which we aim to explore in relation to China. A key aspect of China's post-socialist context is the pragmatic inter-marriage of state industrial strategy and market forces – a union of political authoritarianism with economic reforms. The resulting and continuing emergence of Chinese consumer culture provides an arena that cannot be effectively explored without the introduction of critical theories of capitalism. Critical and social theory are useful tools in the Chinese context because they help us examine complex dynamics of state power and state legitimacy, the interplay between the state and private sector, and the role of consumerism and cultural industries as arenas for performing citizenship and securing state legitimacy.

Symbolic power is a defining component in Bourdieu's political sociology and examination of state legitimacy. Bourdieu's notion of power is a combination of physical violence exercised through the repressive state apparatus of political society, and symbolic violence, realized through the ideological state apparatus of civil society (Burawoy, 2015). Symbolic domination is "a particularly insidious form of violence", being both *everywhere* and *nowhere*, as "we fail to recognize its very existence" (Schubert, 2008). In developing this concept, Bourdieu emphasizes the characteristic of misrecognition, where symbolic power normalizes hierarchical power relations, rendering the dominated incapable of questioning the prevailing order (Jung, 2004). It plays a subtle but influential role in legitimizing hierarchies through a process of establishing standards to measure identity and position, including gender, race, ethnicity and class (Swartz, 2013). For Bourdieu, the essence of symbolic power is the capacity to consecrate or reveal social groups (Bourdieu, 1989). The ability to delimit groups constitutes an exhibition of symbolic power, creating a perceived hierarchy and conferring legitimacy on the state via the widespread recognition and consequent acceptance of the ruling elite's world view. Applied to the context of football development in China, the utility of Bourdieu's conceptual lens lies in elucidating how emerging cultural industries facilitate the creation of citizens and the stratification of society through processes of "consecration and revelation" (Ho & Fung, 2016). Contemporary China provides a fertile context to explore state-building through the effective operationalization of symbolic power in both the domestic (the focus of this article) and international contexts (e.g. Cheng, 2017; Vangeli, 2018; Zhang, 2018). The Chinese state, broadly defined as the government of the PRC under the direction and leadership of the CCP, controls a sophisticated repressive apparatus and dominates the ideological sphere including the media, internet and education system. The Chinese state monopolizes symbolic power, determining the forms of symbolic capital which

can be bestowed on (or withdrawn from) agents across all sectors of society. A reservoir of symbolic capital is available to organizations and individuals that participate in state ordained projects. In the case of football, the project entails the creation of a quasi-cultural industry, realized through the mobilization of national, provincial and local governments, and the extensive contribution of the private sector. More than pure economic activity, the cultural industries are particularly potent incubators of symbolic power and the distribution of symbolic capital, and in the work of Bourdieu, Adorno and other critical scholars, associated with the ultimate disempowerment of citizens vis-a-vis the state (Susen, 2011).

### **Sport and State-Building in the reform era**

Sport has played a significant role in state efforts to build consensus and enhance perceptions of legitimacy in the PRC. Deng Xiaoping's decision to "open to the world" (对外开放), combined with rapid economic progress in the post-1978 reform era, incentivized and enabled China's hosting of multiple international sporting events. The Chinese leadership has been explicit about the connection between hosting, performing well on the international sporting stage and burnishing regime-supportive feelings of national pride (Xu, 2009). A succession of events was used to signal China's re-joining international society after the self-imposed isolation of the Mao years and diplomatic exile that followed the bloody denouement of the Democracy Spring movement in and around Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Beijing and Shenzhen hosted the Summer Universiade (2001, 2011), Shanghai, Macao, Hong Kong and Tianjin convened the East Asian Games (1993, 2005, 2009 and 2013), and the Asian Games were held in Beijing and Guangzhou (1990, 2010). The major prize was the Olympic Games held in Beijing in 2008. The state capitalized on the first global mega-event to be held in post-reform China as an opportunity to demonstrate the country's

progress, to generate respect internationally and instill pride domestically. The Beijing Games, underwritten by a \$45 billion state investment in infrastructure, security and decade-long strategic targeting of high-yield sports that led to China's dominance of the medal table, were suffused with symbolism propagated through constant media narratives. Disruptions to the international torch relay by human rights organizations and Free Tibet activists prompted waves of patriotic indignation. The disruptions to the relay in Paris led to a widespread boycott of French supermarket chain Carrefour (BBC, 2008; Jacobs, 2008). Notwithstanding Western criticism over heavy handed urban redevelopment and restrictions on free speech, which in any case were censored in the Chinese media (Economy & Segal, 2008), the Games' significantly burnished the national pride narrative central to the patriotic education curriculum adopted after Tiananmen (Price & Dayan, 2009). The spectacular architecture at the Olympic Park, director Zhang Yimou's stunning opening ceremony invoking the glories of Chinese culture and PRC athletes' sporting superiority made significant contributions to the Chinese national imaginary. These successes were particularly resonant at a time when the nation was reeling from a devastating earthquake that killed more than 80 thousand people. The fact that many of the victims were children who died in collapsed schools due to corrupt officials siphoning construction funds, was heavily censored. Against the backdrop of the Wenchuan earthquake, the flawless Olympics conferred legitimacy on the state through the symbolic realization of national objectives, while simultaneously rewarding participating individuals, institutions and organizations with symbolic capital. Flushed with this success, soon after the Olympics the state's attention turned to back to football, long conceived as a symbolic power resource that had gone untapped.

### **Football in the Post-Reform Era**



In 2009, in the afterglow of the Beijing Games held the year before, Hu Jintao declared China's intention to become a global sports power (Tan, 2015). At a subsequent planning meeting, Liu Yandong made the case for the special role of football in satisfying the spiritual and cultural demands of the Chinese people (China Daily, 2018; see also Tan et al., 2016). While China is not widely seen as a "football nation" outside the country, the sport has long had a special resonance for Chinese people because it is widely perceived as the world's game and successful participation as a marker of national status. China's lacklustre performance in football competition "taps into deep Chinese insecurities that, no matter what great leaps the country has made or grudging deference it has earned through economic or military might, China remains an inferior power" (Wan, 2015: np). While the women's side won the Asian Cup in 1997 and finished second at the World Cup two years later, the men's national representative teams have been a source of national angst, with losses sometimes provoking serious rioting (Bridges, 2008). Dominance of the now defunct Far Eastern Games, when the Republic of China won nine titles between 1915 and 1934, has never been replicated by the PRC. The men's national team has qualified twice for the Olympics (1988, 2008) and participated in a single World Cup (2002), failing to win a match and scoring a solitary goal in nine matches. Routine failure to qualify for international tournaments is compounded by periodic humiliations, such as the "615 Massacre" (a 5:1 loss to Thailand in 2015) and the "519 incident" (a defeat to Hong Kong that prevented China's advance in the qualifying tournament for the 1986 World Cup). Poor performance has created public pressure on the football authorities, and players have been targeted for poor attitudes and application, despite the patriotic curriculum that is a "constant theme in the education of elite athletes" (Tan & Bairner, 2010).

The futility of the men's national team has prompted a succession of reform plans for the national football infrastructure. Soon into the reform era, defeat in the qualifying phase of the 1980

Olympics led to a new youth system and youth team structure initiated the following year. The “519” defeat to Hong Kong was the stimulus for significant reforms to the administration and organization of the sport along European lines, including the introduction of a professional club system and establishing football companies as commercial agents (Tan & Bairner, 2010). Later failure to qualify for the 1990 World Cup prompted a “Ten Year Millennium Plan”, part of which was a coordinated effort to send young players abroad to receive training and to increase the number of foreign coaches and players in the Chinese domestic league. Xi Jinping himself first revealed his ambitions to strengthen Chinese football on a visit to Germany in 2009. Soon before his rise to General Secretary of the Communist Party, Xi’s targets had become more concrete, expressed to Korean politicians as qualification and hosting of the World Cup. Operationalizing these objectives would require more systematic investment in grassroots facilities and youth training, further institutional reform of the organization of domestic and national football structures and financial burden-sharing with the private sector. The State Council thus convened a conference in 2011 to identify pathways to involve private investors, notably Wanda CEO Wang Jianlin, one of China’s richest private entrepreneurs. Wang agreed to invest 500 million RMB in a strategic partnership with the Chinese Football Association (CFA), including 65 million RMB per annum to sponsor the Chinese Super League. During Xi’s first term from 2012 to 2017, Chinese football expanded its domestic and international profiles in large part due to the investments, acquisitions and marquee player signings facilitated by entrepreneurs like Wang. Behind the scenes, however, the Xi administration was focused on devising a systematic plan for the development of football from grassroots to the national team.

### **A New Era of Football Reform?**

Three official policy documents released at intervals between 2014 and 2016 formalized the parameters and pathways of Xi's "football dream." In 2014, the State Council issued an opinion on "Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry to Promote Sport Consumption" (国务院关于加快发展体育产业促进体育消费的若干意见) (PRC State Council, 2014), which set out an industrial vision for Chinese sport with a projected domestic sports economy worth up to US\$800 billion by 2025.[37] It was followed by "The Overall Reform Plan for the Reform and Development of Chinese Football" (中国足球改革发展总体方案) (PRC State Council, 2015) issued in 2015, which proposed the professionalization and streamlining of the institutional architecture, including greater autonomy in planning and operations for the CFA. Finally, in 2016, the National Reform and Development Commission (国家发展改革委) specified a "Medium to Long Term Development Plan 2016-50" (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050 年; hereafter, National Football Plan) (NDRC, 2016a), containing the targets, means and benchmarks for a projected world-class football power.

The short (2016-20), medium (2021-30) and long-term (2031-50) phases of the National Football Plan lay out key objectives and milestones. The short-term goal is the establishment of football as a key component in compulsory education, with a stated target of 30 million school children actively involved in football initiatives at 20,000 football schools (全国特色足球学校). The emphasis on grassroots initiatives is manifest in the expanded target of 50 million people involved in football by 2020, and the construction of 70,000 national football facilities nationwide. The medium-term objectives (中期目标) require an expansion of football pitch provision across China, resulting in a minimum of one for every 10,000 citizens. During the medium phase, the emphasis is on developing infrastructure for campus football, amateur participation and consolidating professional leagues. The ambition for the national men's team is to become a

leading force in Asian football by 2030. The overarching goal for the long-term phase (长期目标) is to establish China as a “world-class football power,” aligning with broader national objectives to establish a nation characterized as powerful (富强), civilized (文明) and harmonious (和谐) by the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 2049 (Gow, 2017). Aside from overarching goals for each phase, the National Football Plan provides 21 key objectives (重点任务分工) which involve the mobilization of several ministries, commissions, administrative and regulatory bodies and branches of national, provincial and local government. These goals are designated to be achieved by 2020 (2020 年底前完成) or through vaguer “sustained implementation” (持续实施). Table 1 sets out the short-term objectives as incorporated into the 13<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (十三五) at the National People's Congress in March 2016 (Melton, 2015; NDRC, 2016b). The medium and long-term objectives currently lack specific road maps, which will likely be developed into more coherent projects and initiatives in the 14<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan.

**Table 1: Objectives and timeframe**

**(INSERT TABLE 1)**

The National Football Plan, requires the mobilization and deployment of a significant coalition of state institutions. The State Council's Office of the Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference on Football Reform and Development (足改部际联席会议办公室) is the coordinating body overseeing the 21 stated objectives, with each objective identifying other responsible bodies. Overall, action and collaboration is required from 11 Ministries, 4 State Council Commissions, 5 government agencies, the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, the Central Bank, and the CCP Propaganda Department (CCPPD), in addition to a range of bureaus, agencies and commissions at the provincial and local government levels. The executive,

legislature and judiciary are all implicated in efforts to develop the required infrastructure and institutionalization, while the CCPPD's remit is to utilize state media and the extensive array of communication channels in its purview to "foster football culture" (培育足球文化). Table 2 identifies the various state authorities specifically referenced in the National Football Plan and the corresponding objectives they are responsible for as detailed in Table 1 above.

**Table 2: Institutional responsibilities**

**(INSERT TABLE 2)**

Medium to long term plans (中长期规划) emerged as a policy format distinct from the five-year plans towards the end of the first term of the Hu administration (2002-2007), with medium to long terms developed for Science and Technology (2006-2020); Education (2010-2020); Human Resources (2010-2020); Youth Development (2016-2025); Automotive Industry (2017-2025). The aim was to prevent inconsistencies in policy design and implementation during periodic changes in party and state leadership positions. The National Medium to Long Term Education Development Plan (国家中长期教育发展规划 2010-2020), for instance, was adopted to ensure policy coherence between the Hu and Xi administrations. The expansive timescale of the National Football Plan ensures more consistent policy over a projected seven full Five-Year Plans. While launched under CCP and PRC leadership cycles formulated at the 18<sup>th</sup> CCP National Party Congress (2012-2016) and 12<sup>th</sup> PRC National People's Congress (2013-2018), the National Football Plan will end during the leadership formulated at the 25<sup>th</sup> CCP National Party Congress (2047-2051) and 19<sup>th</sup> PRC National People's Congress (2048-2052). These policy documents also

constitute the material of symbolic power, in this case shaping discourse on football reform and framing it as part of the PRC's broader teleological modernization project. Under the system of democratic centralism, individual political figures derive their symbolic authority from compliance and adherence to the vision laid out in official discourse. While the policy documents themselves embody the symbolic power of the state, "symbolic violence" is manifest in the dissemination of the football reform narrative as it is rolled out across state media, in the speeches of government cadres, and in widely reported developments in the private sector. It is through repeated expressions of consensus that notions of nation state, shared identity, patriotism and citizenship are reinforced and inculcated through state policy discourse. However, the implementation of policy is necessarily decentralized through delegation to subnational actors that form a national-local-national policy loop.

The central leadership has set out a grand vision and a vague framework to be filled-in incrementally. This form of emergent strategy is a hallmark of policymaking in the reform era, which allows for experimentation, responsiveness to unintended consequences and adjustments to ensure "stability." It requires the outsourcing of policy operationalization and implementation to government ministries, provincial and municipal governments, State Owned Enterprises (SOE) and private businesses. As revealed by their behavior, these actors often have different interpretations, priorities and strategies to those of central leaders. Furthermore, significant coordination problems are exacerbated by bureaucratic competition, institutional bottlenecks, corruption and ever-present political imperatives. Like state-ordained projects in science, education and the creative industries, the development of football is driven by investment in infrastructure, industrial clustering and the centrally-directed but distributed marshalling of capital, institutional capacity and human resources. As a component of China's hybrid system of market

socialism, it is a strategy that has led to rapid gains across numerous sectors, but also over-capacity, investment bubbles and widespread corruption.

The National Football Plan sets objectives to be achieved within given timeframes, but provides limited information on strategies to achieve these objectives. This is attributable to the cascade effect of industrial policy in China, whereby national level objectives are realized through the cumulative achievements of different levels of geographic governance. This effect can clearly be seen when examining various football plans at the local and provincial levels. Not all sub-national plans are made publicly available, while some provinces and municipalities have yet to complete their policy responses. Provinces generally issue a medium-to-long term football development plan (足球中长期发展规划), while cities at the municipal, sub-provincial (prefecture) and county (sub-prefecture) levels issue a document called the Overall Program of Football Reform and Development (足球改革发展总体方案). However, this is not entirely consistent and these two different names generally refer to a document which sets out how the locality in question responds and contributes to the pursuit of goals laid out in the National Football Plan. Examining policy documents at different levels reveals how a policy loop originating at the national level passes down to the local level, before being assessed to ensure the cumulative effect is consistent with national objectives. Taking the example of National Football Plan objective to establish 20,000 National Specialised Football Schools (全国特色足球学校) with 30 million school-age children participating in football by 2020, Table 3 illustrates how national football policy cascades down to inform policy goals at the local level. At the city level, specific figures on school-age children participation are not given, though Lanzhou outlines plans for 80% participation across 130 specialized football schools by 2020; Shenzhen focuses on a target of

10,000 pupils registered with amateur football teams by 2020, and Shijiazhuang outlines plans for separate girls' football schools.

**Table 3: National Specialized Football Schools (全国特色足球学校)**

**(INSERT TABLE 3)**

### **Football and business**

In response to political signaling, China's rapidly professionalizing and commercializing sports industry has witnessed significant growth, with corporations seeking opportunities for sustainable businesses and accompanying revenue streams. Major conglomerates like Wanda Corporation, Evergrande and Fosun have actively pursued profitable investments in football domestically and overseas (Chadwick, 2017). Chinese commercial investments are often influenced by political calculi, and are often embedded in a network of politicised relationships and adherent to the conventions of *guanxi* (Fei, Hamilton, & Wang, 1992; Graham & Lam, 2003). The private sector has demonstrated willingness to contribute to the state's football project, and has accrued financial, political and symbolic capital through its participation. The distribution of the latter form of capital constitutes the monopolisation of symbolic power by the Chinese party-state, and it can be awarded or denied as illustrated by the admonishment of private corporations since mid-2017, when the state deemed their activities (mainly over-investment) as contravening the spirit and objectives outlined in the National Football Plan.

Founding CEO of commercial property developer and mall operator Wanda, Wang Jianlin is emblematic of the interaction between the state and private capital in football. A former Dalian



government official, one-time associate of Dalian Mayor Bo Xilai and a veteran of the People's Liberation Army, Wang began his investment in football during the early stages of professionalization. As owner of the local former dockyard club, Wang led Dalian Wanda to four of the first five Jia-A titles between 1994 and 1999 (Stead, 2016). Based in the (post-)industrial northeast, where football traditionally enjoyed great popularity, the club put China's new professional league on the map in Asia by reaching the final and semi-final of the Asian Club Championship in 1997 and 1998 (Weinberg, 2015). Wilson (Wilson, 2013) documents Wang's sale of the club in 2000, with the league falling into decline and suffering from endemic corruption scandals. His successor as owner of the Dalian club, was also an entrepreneur with political connections, Xu Ming, which helped his rise and precipitated his downfall. Xu cultivated a close relationship with Bo Xilai, a rising political star in the Party, and suffered the consequences when Bo fell out of favour with Xi Jinping. Both ended their careers in jail, where Xu died in 2015. Xu's club fell into decline and ultimately merged with another Dalian club (Herman, 2016).

Despite having sold his interest in the Dalian club, Wang emerged as a key entrepreneurial lieutenant for the state, both domestically and internationally. Wanda purchased Infront Sports and Media, the Swiss-based company run by former FIFA president Sepp Blatter's nephew, which holds and manages media marketing rights for major international sports events and organizations, including the World Cup. Wanda then took a 20% stake in blue-chip Spanish club Atletico Madrid, and built the stunning new Wanda Metropolitano stadium. Seeking to diversify away from China's overheated real estate market, Wanda bought numerous high profile western leisure and sport properties, including the Iron Triathlon, luxury yacht maker Sunseeker International, the American cinema chain AMC Theatres, a Parisian amusement park and Legendary Entertainment. Wang, who bought back in to Dalian football in 2017, like other entrepreneurs with significant

football investments like Alibaba's Jack Ma and Suning's Zhang Jindong, sees sport as an entertainment commodity (Chadwick, Widdop, & Parnell, 2017). In his keynote to the second China Sports Industry Forum, held as part of the 7<sup>th</sup> Caixin Summit in 2016 (第七届财新峰会暨第二届中国体育产业论坛) (Wanda Group, 2016), Wang acknowledged his desire to create a global entertainment and leisure empire, calling for the integration of sports with commerce, media, tourism, infrastructure development and construction. The business interests of CSL and League One club owners in the 2017 season is marked by concentrations in property development and real estate. China Fortune Land Development, Evergrande and R&F, for instance, are construction and real estate companies that have invested in Guangzhou and Hebei football clubs. These companies have benefited from local government grants of land for the development of football and related leisure and entertainment facilities. Since urban land is a valuable commodity, buying a football club can be a valuable equity investment in addition to generating symbolic capital through widely recognized involvement in state-approved projects, and building political capital with municipal and provincial governments keen to demonstrate their commitment to implementing Xi's football development plans. Acquiring overseas football assets, upon Xi's signalling, has enabled Chinese businesses and entrepreneurs to make a significant global statement about Brand China, but the government's attempt to rein in "irrational acquisitions" since 2017 demonstrates that the state and business are involved in a "negotiation" over the interpretation and operationalization of policy goals. Part of a broader crackdown on over-leveraged companies initiated by the General Office of the State Council (PRC State Council, 2017), not even someone as trusted and politically connected as Wang escaped unscathed, with Wanda forced to sell most of its stake in Atletico and other assets.

Numerous football investors have been rebuked by central government for the extravagance of their overseas expenditure and high transfer fees paid to bring marquee player signings to the CSL. Responding to concerns about external currency outflows and liquidity problems that have characterised other Chinese industrial sectors (Balding, 2017), the government enforced a taxation rule upon CSL clubs whereby overseas player signings were subjected to the imposition of a 100% tax, with consequent revenues in turn being allocated to developmental activities in Chinese football (de Menezes, 2017). Despite these policy interventions to “correct” what was effectively an edict to private business to invest in football, the interest of entrepreneurs and enterprises in football and the expansion of international linkages and investments are part of the broader globalization of Chinese capital (Connell, 2018). These rebukes offer increasing evidence that the Xi administration will only convey symbolic capital upon private sector actors which comply with and contribute to state objectives in a manner deemed fit by the state. The value of this symbolic capital to companies lies in continued access to opportunities across the full scope of commercial activities, with the state using it as leverage to advance the realization of National Football Plan objectives.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

At the heart of China's football development is an articulation between the motivations of the state and the motivations of the private sector. The state occupies the leading role, and is concerned with the maintenance, reinforcement and operationalization of symbolic power through football. The National Football Plan and associated policy initiatives at the provincial, municipal and local levels seek to exercise symbolic power in two distinct ways. First, they present objectives in the short (2020), medium (2030) and long-term (2050) phases, which define the overarching trajectory

for development. Second, they create opportunities for the private sector to accumulate various forms of social, cultural and economic capital in exchange for their contribution to the realization of project objectives. The creation of these opportunities encourages both cooperation and competition among private firms. The alignment of interests between various state and private sectors is synergetic yet distinct, and in need of articulation. That is, the intended objectives of the firms involved in football projects across China are to strengthen their own position, not necessarily to deliver a world class football industry. Conversely, the state's intention is that the objectives outlined in the National Football Plan will be achieved as a result of competition between diverse public and private sector actors. The state does not mind who contributes to the achievement of policy objectives, only that all objectives are achieved within the stated timeframes. In this respect, there is often an "ontological hiatus" (Bhaskar, 2014) between the National Football Plan and developments on the ground. The Chinese football dream narrative and policy framework provides the necessary conditions for intentional agential activity, yet the football dream does not exist independently of agential activity, nor is it an intentional product of agential activity. To paraphrase Bhaskar (2014), agential activity does not intentionally create the Chinese football dream, but rather reproduces and transforms it as an unintended consequence of actors pursuing various forms of capital specific to their own field of activity. The discourse of the Chinese football dream is a pre-condition for the activity which leads to its reproduction and transformation and propels development along a trajectory deemed desirable by the state. The intentional objectives of individual and institutional agency are the accumulation of symbolic capital, which may take the form of economic, social or cultural capital pursued through participation in any aspect of football activity, made available across various fields, resulting from the emergence of this cultural industry.

The Chinese state is not only exercising symbolic power through differentiating, commodifying and classifying culture (Susen, 2011), it is limiting the potential for mass culture, which functions as a form of social distinction, to emerge. Where bottom-up, mass culture movements do emerge, they are swiftly suppressed, allowing the state's own cultural industries to develop unchallenged. In China, there is little room for mass football culture amid an industry engineered to commodify football and imbue it with symbolic capital. While Bourdieu argues that the state's role is to act as a referee on the monopolization of symbolic violence, in China's authoritarian context the state retains a monopoly itself and is actively expanding cultural industries to further exercise symbolic violence. In Xi Jinping's New Era, culture is being unleashed as both a source of power and as an instrument of domination through the effective creation of cultural industries. Football, and sport more generally, is being mobilized as part of the operationalization of cultural power to cement state legitimacy. As cultural capital (D. Swartz, 2012), football takes several different forms: as embodied cultural capital in the form of Chinese Super League competition, live broadcasts, highlights shows; the men's and women's national team matches and other commodified football products; as objectified cultural capital in the form of stadia, football facilities, sports insurance products, sporting equipment that are used by cultural participants; and in institutionalized cultural capital through campus football initiatives, amateur leagues, varsity competitions which are convertible to other forms of capital through credentials. This analysis echoes a key argument presented by Yu et al. where football is commodified by the state as "an eminently consumable aspect of everyday (physical) cultural life" where the citizen-consumer is "called into action by the state to perform on behalf of nationalist modernization" (2017:20). In short, football is being commodified into forms of cultural capital which are

consumed, utilized or achieved, yet which are being made available through an imposed cultural industry created via industrial policy and the mobilization of the private sector.

The sustainable development of the Chinese football industry and culture requires the enthusiastic participation of Chinese citizens on several levels: as supporters of clubs and national teams, as players in campus football and amateur leagues, and as consumers of football and related products and services. The interaction between the state and the private sector is similarly crucial to the creation of a vibrant footballing landscape for civic participation and consumption in a vast array of footballing activities. As Yu et al argue:

In the conception of modern, post-socialist China in and through football, the nation is not only told a story about itself but is actively engaged in the dominions of participatory and consumer-based citizenship, where to play, watch, or even support the national team or the programs initiated around football is to engage with discourses and cultural logics of the aspirant Chinese state. (2017: 20)

The National Football Plan mobilizes the private sector through its own self-interest and desire to engage in symbolic projects, terraforming the spatial geography of civic engagement and shaping the terrain upon which citizenship can be expressed through football. Schools, colleges and universities will become increasingly prominent alongside the proliferation of Sino-foreign initiatives in football training. Construction companies like Wanda will develop not only football stadia and facilities, but also the accompanying shopping complexes, hotels, transport infrastructure and landscaping which will surround them. Online content creators and aggregators will, through social media and video streaming platforms provide on-demand coverage and analysis of domestic football, international matches and other prominent football leagues (Long, 2017; Associated Press, 2016). Electronics retailers and retail platforms, including Suning and Alibaba stand to benefit through sales of home and mobile electronics sales, while insurance companies, including current Chinese Super League sponsors Ping An Insurance take advantage

of opportunities detailed in the National Football Plan to provide tailored financial products and services. As the commercial power of China's conglomerates are mobilized, the creation of a civic football space will extend beyond the thousands of football pitches currently appearing around the country to permeate China's digital environment, reaching China's citizens through smartphones, TVs and other devices.

The implications of this project for Chinese people, and more broadly across society, must be taken against the wider context of developments in and across other arenas of China's ideological state apparatus. When taken alongside legislative developments impacting media, entertainment, education and NGO's, we can perceive a highly restrictive ideational landscape forming. From the perspective of the CCP, this is a consolidation of ideational power via a configuration of legislative and regulatory moves which delimit the boundaries of acceptable citizenship, shape discourse and disincentivize any notions of Chinese citizenship which compete with their own vision. Legislation and regulation constitute a coercive rearguard action which is then complemented with a cultural industry which allows for consensual expressions of citizenship within the boundaries laid down by the state. For Chinese people, the arenas for expression through consumption are becoming more sophisticated, yet, through a combination of prescription and proscription, the parameters of acceptable citizenship within those arenas is defined according to the prevailing doctrine of Xi's New Era.

The PRC's football project reinforces the state's monopoly on symbolic power in a number of key ways, providing new channels to perpetrate symbolic violence both reinforcing and enhancing the performance legitimacy that has been a feature of the post-reform era. Most importantly, it will establish a space for citizens to actively participate in the Chinese Dream through non-political activity, allow citizens to express or "perform" their identity in a manner

approved by the state, and continue to develop a new sector to facilitate China's shift to a consumer-driven economy. It is through this process that symbolic power is exercised: through the conferral of symbolic capital on participating agents and actors. This, in turn, results in the construction of new channels between the state and the citizenry where symbolic violence reinforces misrecognition through the strengthening of perceptions of state legitimacy and notions of shared identity. In this sense, football becomes a key feature of Xi's "New Era of Socialism with Chinese characteristics" as both a driver of China's shift to a consumer-driven economy and as a potentially significant source of cultural power aimed at fostering consent and citizenship identity.

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**Table 1: Objectives and timeframe**

	National Plan Objectives	Timeframe
1	13 <sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan Football System Reform Action Project	2020
2	Establishment of a standardized and effective football legal system	Sustained
3	13 <sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan Campus Football Popularization Action Plan	2020
4	Expansion of coaching and referees and establishment of mechanism for healthy development of professional athletes	Sustained
5	13 <sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan specialization personnel training plan	2020
6	Cultivation of comprehensive football industry talent	Sustained
7	13 <sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan Football Stadium Facilities Construction Project	2020
8	13 <sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan Professional League Promotion Plan	2020
9	13 <sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan Social Football Training Activities	2020
10	Development of stadium operations, training, football intermediaries and other service markets.	Sustained
11	Acceleration of football financial insurance services industry development	Sustained
12	Investigation, development and promotion of China Football League sports lottery	Sustained
13	13 <sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan Cultivation of Outstanding Football Enterprises	2020
14	Promotion of the integration of football industry and related industries	Sustained

15	13 <sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan “Football + Internet” Innovation	2020
16	Fostering of football culture across China	Sustained
17	Promotion of football “opening-up” (Domestic and International)	Sustained
18	Improvement to Public finance input mechanisms	Sustained
19	Expansion of football industry investment and financing channels	Sustained
20	Diversification of football insurance products including campus, disability, personal accident and venue property insurance.	Sustained
21	Land use and Planning – Allocation of protection and requirement measures for football facilities.	Sustained

Source: China National Football Development Plan 2016-2050 (NDRC, 2016a)

**Table 2: Institutional responsibilities**

Chinese State Institution	PRC Ministry	Objectives
China Insurance Regulatory Commission 保监会	State Council Commission	11, 20
China National Tourism Administration 国家旅游局	Government Agency	14
China Securities Regulation Commission 证监会	State Council Commission	19
Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department 中央宣传部	CCP	16
Local and Provincial Government 各级地方政府	Provincial/Municipal Govt	18, 21
Ministry of Civil Affairs 民政部	Ministry	1, 9,
Ministry of Commerce 商务部	Ministry	14,
Ministry of Culture 文化部	Ministry	14, 15, 16,
Ministry of Education 教育部	Ministry	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 16, 17, 18, 20
Ministry of Finance 财政部	Ministry	11, 12, 18, 20
Ministry of Foreign Affairs 外交部	Ministry	17

Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development 住房和城乡建设部	Ministry	14, 21
Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security	Ministry	6,
Ministry of Industry and Information Technology 工业和信息化部	Ministry	13, 15
Ministry of Land and Resources 国土资源部	Ministry	21
Ministry of Public Security 公安部	Ministry	2, 17,
National Health and Family Planning Commission 卫生计生委	State Council Commission	14, 17,
National Reform and Development Commission 国家发展改革委	State Council Commission	7, 14, 16
Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference on Football Reform & Development 足改部际联席会议 办公室	State Council Office	ALL
People's Bank of China 人民银行	Central Bank	19,
State Administration for Industry and Commerce 国家工商行政管理总局	Government Agency	8, 10,
State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television 国家新闻出版广 播电视电影总局	Government Agency	8, 9, 15,

State Administration of Taxation 国家税务总局	Government Agency	8, 10, 11, 20
State General Administration of Sport 国家体育总局	Government Agency	ALL (except 11, 19 and 20)
Supreme People's Court 最高人民法院	Judiciary	2
Supreme People's Procuratorate 最高人民检察院	Judiciary	2

Source: National Football Development Plan 2016-2050 (NDRC, 2016a)

**Table 3: National Specialized Football Schools (全国特色足球学校)**

<b>National Level</b>		
Policy Document	Campuses	Children
National Football Plan 中国足球中长期发展规划 (NDRC, 2016a)	20,000	30 million
<b>Provincial &amp; Municipal Level</b>		
Guangdong Province Football Plan (GDDRC, 2017) 广东省足球中长期发展规划	1380	3 million
Hebei Province Football Plan (HBDRC, 2017) 河北省足球中长期发展规划	1000	1.5 million
Gansu Province Football Plan (GSDRC, 2017) 甘肃省足球中长期发展规划	357	600,000
Beijing Overall Football Reform & Development Program (BMG, 2017) 北京市足球改革发展总体方案	230	200,000
Chongqing Overall Football Reform & Development Program (CQMG, 2016) 重庆市足球改革发展总体方案	500	N/A
<b>Sub-Provincial City Level</b>		
Shenzhen City Football Plan (Guangdong) (SZCG, 2017) 深圳市足球中长期发展规划	300	N/A

Shijiazhuang City Football Plan (Hebei) (Shijiazhuang Daily, 2016) 石家庄市足球改革发展总体方案	200	N/A
Lanzhou City Football Plan (Gansu) (Lanzhou Daily, 2016) 兰州市关于加快发展青年校园足球的实施意见	130	N/A