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Chinese Football in the Era of Xi Jinping: What do Supporters Think?

Ilker GÜNDOĞAN and Albrecht SONNTAG

Abstract: Football has become a field of high priority for development by the central government of the People's Republic of China. After Xi Jinping took office as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012, a football development strategy was launched, including four “comprehensive” reforms. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of these reforms by Chinese football supporters – a fundamental stakeholder group – through an online survey. Particular emphasis was laid on how nationalistic attitudes underpin supporters' expectations, especially with regard to the concept of the “Chinese Dream.” In addition, issues of football governance were also addressed.

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Keywords: China, Chinese Dream, football, nationalism, Xi Jinping

Ilker Gündoğan is a research associate in the department of East Asian Studies at Ruhr University Bochum and a PhD candidate at Ruhr University Bochum and ESSCA School of Management. Since 2018, he has been a scholar of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. His research focuses on China's football politics in the era of Xi Jinping. He is also an author of the blog *China Football 8* <<http://china-football-8.com>>, a website dedicated to reflections as well as general information on Chinese football.

E-mail: <Ilker.Guendogan@rub.de>

Dr. Albrecht Sonntag is a sociologist and professor in European Studies at the EU-Asia Institute of ESSCA School of Management (Angers, France). Over the last two decades, he has published extensively on football. He was the initiator and coordinator of the “Football in an Enlarged Europe” (FREE) research project <www.free-project.eu>, as well as the main author of a recent UNESCO report on racism and discrimination in international football.

E-mail: <albrecht.sonntag@essca.fr>

A New Kick-Off for Chinese Football

The sporting history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is associated with considerable international success in disciplines such as gymnastics and table tennis. Moreover, the PRC's performance both as host country and in the medal table at the Beijing Olympics in 2008 has attracted considerable attention domestically and internationally (Manzenreiter 2010; Luo and Huang 2013). In terms of the sport of football, however, the PRC does not currently play a major global role.

While the Chinese women's national football team has done quite well in international tournaments (being, over the last 15 years, on average positioned 12th in the World Ranking established by football's global governing body, FIFA), the Chinese men's team has been ranked consistently low (being, over the previous 25 years, on average positioned 72nd in the FIFA World Ranking). The men's team has only once qualified for the finals of the FIFA World Cup, in 2002, losing there all its matches and failing to score a single goal. On the domestic level, meanwhile, there have been contrasting experiences. Since the introduction of professional football leagues, first launched in 1994, football has become one of the most popular sports in the PRC – producing internationally successful teams such as Guangzhou Evergrande (Asian Champions League winners in 2013 and 2015). On the other hand, though, the PRC's professional football leagues suffered a loss of reputation and popularity around the turn of the century due to numerous match-fixing and corruption scandals. As a result, many business corporations withdrew their investments in them (Fan and Lu 2013; Hill 2010).

These facts are important, because football – also known as “soccer” – may be considered the world's most popular sport, according to a variety of indicators (number of national federations, number of countries competing in the FIFA World Cup, worldwide practice, cumulated audience for major international events, global online and offline media reach, levels of commercialisation). In 2009, following the remarkable sporting achievement of the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese political leadership reacted to the unsatisfactory state of Chinese football. In an interview, then vice president Xi Jinping declared that:

The level of Chinese football is relatively low, but after winning so many gold medals in other sports at the Olympic Games, China must be determined to boost football, but this might take a long time. (Wang 2009)

Only a few weeks later, the PRC's Ministry of Public Security launched one of the most extensive anti-corruption campaigns in Chinese sports history (Hang 2009). This campaign lasted over the next two years, during which time more than 50 high-level football officials, players, referees, and club managers were detained (Liu 2012).

Table 1. Comprehensive Football Reforms in the PRC

Year	Title	Main purpose, objectives, and key indicators
2014	The State Council's Opinion on How to Accelerate the Development of the Sports Industry to Promote Sports 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》	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand domestic demand and supply of sports products and services, foster new field of economic growth • Improve physical fitness and health • By 2025: sports industry to surpass USD 800 billion; number of people who regularly participate in sports activities to reach 500 million
2015	The Overall Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme 《中国足球改革发展总体方案》	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet new popular expectations by realising the dream of becoming a powerful sporting nation • Improve physical health, enrich cultural life, promote the spirit of patriotism and collectivism, develop the sports industry • Develop football through institutional reform and innovation • Short-term goal: increase participation in amateur and youth football (Campus Football) • Mid-term goal: men's national football team to be among the best in Asia; women's team to return among global top tier • Long-term goal: bid to host the men's World Cup; increase significantly men's national team's competitiveness

Year	Title	Main purpose, objectives, and key indicators
2016	The Medium- and Long-Term Development Plan of Chinese Football (2016–2050) 《中国足球中长期发展规划（2016—2050年）》	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond to fervent hope and expectation of the Chinese people by revitalising and developing football • Improve physical and mental health • Contribute to realising the Chinese Dream through rejuvenation of the nation; enhance national cohesion and pride • Expand consumption and create economic growth • Promote socialist core values through football • Short-term goal (2016–2020): Strengthen grassroots football. Indicators: number of schools that are specialised in football to reach 20,000; number of primary and secondary school students that regularly participate in football to exceed 30 million; number of people that frequently participate in football to surpass 50 million • Medium-term goal (2021–2030): Become one of the world’s powerful football nations. Indicators: men’s national football team among the top teams in Asia, women’s national team among top teams in the world; football to become an important engine of the sports industry • Long-term goal (2031–2050): become one of the world’s leading football powers
2016	The National Construction Plan for Football Pitches and Facilities (2016–2020) 《全国足球场地设施建设规划（2016—2020年）》	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide infrastructure for football development • Indicators 2020: over 70,000 football pitches across the country, with an average of more than 0.5 football fields per 10,000 people and more than 0.7 in the most qualified areas

In 2011, one year before Xi Jinping came to office as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), he publicly expressed his “three wishes for Chinese football”: to qualify for a World Cup, to host a World Cup, and eventually to win a World Cup (Sina 2011). Moreover, after having taken office as president in 2013, an entire

football development strategy was launched, including four so-called comprehensive (全面, *quanmian*) reform programmes between 2014 and 2016. According to official sources, these four programmes all underpin each other (see Table 1 above).

Football and the “Chinese Dream”

All of the political reform measures to develop Chinese football are, in both official and unofficial narratives, associated with President Xi Jinping’s leadership (Buckley 2017). For instance, the “Overall Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme” begins with the following words:

Since the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as its General Secretary 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. (SC 2015a)

It is, however, doubtful that the PRC’s central government – characterised by scholars like Zhao (2016) as “pragmatic” and “strategic” – has been implementing reform programmes at the national level just because the president feels fond of football. As Mr Shen Lei, Vice Chairman of the Shanghai Sports Bureau, summed it up in one of our preparatory interviews:

It cannot be seriously claimed that President Xi Jinping wants to develop football in China just because he is a football fan. This is absurd. There’s more behind it. (Shen 2015)

That said, neither the media nor academia have so far come up with a satisfactory explanation for why exactly the development of national football is now so actively promoted by China’s central government. We argue that political development concepts such as the “Chinese Dream” (中国梦, *Zhongguo meng*) (also known as “China Dream”), promoted in a number of presidential speeches since Xi Jinping took office (*Xinhua* 2012), may provide an explanation. According to the Overall Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme, the reforms were introduced for three reasons:

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. (SC 2015a)

It is revealing that this explanation refers explicitly to the key concept of the Chinese Dream, which, in contrast to the “American Dream,” is not mainly about the economic comfort of the middle class but also has strongly nationalistic undertones to it too (Ferdinand 2016; Callahan 2015a).

The Chinese Dream is related to a not very clearly defined set of personal and collective dreams (Wang 2014), which permits a relatively large variety of interpretations to coexist. Statements made by the Chinese government and media elucidate that the concept is linked to “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and the common factor of “unity,” for the country to regain “its place in the pantheon of global leadership” (Dzodin 2017). According to the president himself, “the realisation of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history” (*Xinhua* 2012).

Football, recognised as the most global of games, appears to be perceived by Chinese policymakers as one element in this “comprehensive rejuvenation” (全面振兴, *quanmian zhenxing*) process (NDRC 2016a). In 2014, for instance, when Xi Jinping explained to delegates of the National People’s Congress how important dreaming and desire is in achieving goals, he gave football as an example:

It is the same as in Chinese football. If you do not have this dream, and you don’t think about it, then you can never get there. It will only become possible if you wish for it. (Zhu 2014)

Football Governance Structures

The governance structures of Chinese football were immediately impacted upon by the overall governance transition process in the PRC occurring after Xi Jinping took office – and in which decision-making powers shifted to newly established central Party organs. A new layer of control was instituted by forming new “Central Leading Groups” (CLGs, also called “Leading Small Groups”), such as the National Security Committee. These groups are characterised by a low level of transparency and are comprised of the most influential leaders in the country. In practice, the decisions taken by these groups often represent a consensus reached between powerful factions within the CCP. Hence, the Party leadership in many cases adopts the conclusions of the CLGs without modification. These

newly established bodies have enhanced Xi Jinping's capacity to lead, and have helped him to enforce his agenda (Lee 2017; Heilmann and Stepan 2016).

One such newly established body was the "Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms," which was transformed into the "Central Comprehensively Deepening Reforms Committee" in March 2018. In February 2015, the group approved the Overall Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme, one month prior to its official announcement (SC 2015b). This centralisation turn in Chinese power structures is not without consequences for national football governance ones. Their reorganisation is considered one of the crucial requirements for the successful development of football nationwide across China. Football-related reform is thus referred to as a "problem-oriented institutional reform and innovation that has to ensure the systematic development of Chinese football" (SC 2015a). From this perspective, a football governance model "with Chinese characteristics" (中国特色, *Zhongguo tese*) has to be created in order to generate an environment and atmosphere conducive to the further development of the sport. The insistence on particular Chinese characteristics echoes the established discourse on "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Heilmann 2017), and incorporates football into the larger narrative of "systematic superiority" (制度优势, *zhidu youshi*) and "organisational leadership" (组织领导, *zuzhi lingdao*) that are emphasised in the official reform agenda of the Chinese central government (SC 2015a).

The main issue underpinning the governance question is the involvement therein of the Chinese state. It has been reported that the central government will eventually withdraw from its involvement in the management of Chinese football, and that the Chinese Football Association (CFA) will thus in time become a "full-fledged" non-governmental organisation (Sun 2015). The transformation process of governance structures is to be enforced by "decoupling" (脱钩, *tuogou*) the CFA from the General Administration of Sports (GAS), an oversight body that is subordinate to the State Council.

In contrast to European football associations, the CFA has ever since its foundation in 1955 been controlled and ruled by political institutions. In 1995, the CFA was renamed the "Management Centre of Football" and officially became a department of the GAS (Fan and

Lu 2013). As a result of the forthcoming reform, however, the CFA and GAS should be independent of each other (SC 2015a).

This forthcoming change is in contradiction with the reform programme's call for "optimisation of leadership institutions" (优化领导机构, *youhua lingdao jigou*) and "strengthening of Party leadership" (加强党的领导, *jiaqiang dang de lingdao*) (SC 2015a). The CFA should consequently act as an organisational mechanism of the Party, and proceed by following the principles of Party cadres and the personnel policy of the Party itself. It is to be established as a Party committee that is managed by leading members of the GAS. It is not clear how the reform programmes will combine the intended "separation of government and society" (政社分开, *zheng she fen kai*) while simultaneously aiming at that strengthening of Party leadership.

Another official document called "The CFA Adjustment and Reform Programme" focuses more precisely on the reorganisation of the CFA (SC 2015c). It reveals that the personnel structure of the CFA is not likely to change significantly during this institutional transformation process. Most staff members that were previously employed in the Management Centre of Football will continue to work in the CFA. This fact reveals that, despite the decoupling of the CFA from the GAS, many responsibilities and administrative operations will remain with the latter body going forward.

According to the reform programme, the CFA will be charged with tasks concerning foreign affairs. All of these activities will be approved per existing rules and procedures by the GAS and, after verification, by the State Council itself (SC 2015c). This organisational setting demonstrates that decisions taken within Chinese football will be supervised, approved, shaped, and undertaken at the highest political levels. One positive side effect of these reforms is that the CFA's future seems destined to comply with FIFA's stated opposition to political interference. In conclusion, the transformation of governance structures illustrates how the political leadership of the PRC has shifted decision-making powers in Chinese football from the GAS to an even higher level of authority; this, in turn, stresses the degree of importance attributed to football by China's contemporary political leaders.

Initial Effects of Reform Implementation

Realising the “comprehensive development” (全面发展, *quanmian fazhan*) of Chinese football, as announced in the overall reform programme, will require the simultaneous development of the two key pillars of contemporary football: on the one hand, a professional, business-oriented football league with competitive clubs and popular star players that between them ensure high stadium and media attendances and lucrative commercialisation prospects; on the other, a national team run by a federation whose primary purpose is not profit-oriented but built on the selection of talent capable of successfully competing in international tournaments. Since the release of the above-mentioned overall reform programme, both of these pillars of Chinese football have already undergone a series of transformations that may be summed up under the umbrella term of “capacity-building.”

Enhancement of the Chinese Super League’s Attractiveness

Several star players under contract at European top clubs were transferred to the Chinese Super League (CSL) – the top tier of professional football in the PRC – for spectacular amounts of money. According to FIFA’s Transfer Matching System, Chinese football clubs spent USD 451.3 million on transfer fees in 2016 – representing a 168.2 per cent increase on the year before and a figure 344.4 per cent higher than that for all the other clubs in the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) combined (FIFA 2017). By the end of 2016, however, the central authorities of the PRC labelled these outward investments as “irrational” (非理性, *fei lǐxìng*) and so tightened capital controls (NDRC 2016b).

Investment by Major Chinese Corporations

Prior to this intervention, Chinese corporations made several financial investments in European top-tier clubs like Manchester City (City Football Group), as well as in football-related service companies (Jackson 2015; ISM 2015). In addition, Chinese entrepreneurs have become strongly involved in the commercialisation of their country’s football. In 2015, for instance, a subsidiary of the Chinese conglomerate China Media Capital acquired the CSL broadcasting rights for the years 2016 to 2020 for a record CNY 8 billion (about USD 1.19

billion) (Sina 2015). In comparison, the previous broadcasting deal for the year 2015 had a value of only CNY 60 million (about USD 9 million) (*Xinhua* 2015).

Development of Young Talent

The development of professional football has been accompanied by the increased practising of the sport among children, and by the systematic identification and training of home-grown talent. Both privately and publicly funded “football academies” are popping up all over China, often staffed with or led by experienced experts from highly acknowledged football nations like Spain or the Netherlands (Aldama 2018). Football has even entered the diplomatic arena, most notably with an official cooperation agreement concluded at the highest level between the Federal Republic of Germany – considered one of the world’s most developed football nations – and the PRC (FG 2016).

While these activities have raised considerable media interest around the globe, the international public debate – which takes place mainly within the football-interested community of specialised news outlets – focuses on the visible surface level of spectacular business news and trends (Lee and Brownlee 2017). In academia, likewise, there has been a growing interest in Chinese football in recent years too (Tan et al. 2016; Yu et al. 2017; Stride and Vandenberg 2018; Sullivan 2018; Qi, Skinner, and Houlihan 2018). So far, however, there has been little discussion herein about Chinese supporters, one of football’s key stakeholders. No previous study has provided insight into the expectations and perceptions of Chinese football supporters regarding the political reforms unfolding in the era of Xi Jinping. Our research attempts, then, to address this gap. Based on the theories of football fandom and the history of football and nationalism, we surveyed a specific subcultural community of Chinese football supporters with the aim of providing a descriptive overview of perceptions of the football reform programmes among this important stakeholder group.

Theoretical Background

Football Fandom

As Scottish coaching legend Jock Stein famously put it: “Football without fans is nothing.” This is also true for Chinese football. Fans are an essential factor of success for the current development measures, because they are the holders of the resource key to football triumphing as the world’s number one sport: attention. Without the continued attention of a worldwide following, made up of a huge number of people, the social, commercial, and political value of football may no longer be there.

Academic research on football fandom has almost exclusively focused on professional clubs. As historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have shown for modern European football cultures in the years since the professionalisation of the game in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, typical “partisan identification” was based mainly, though not exclusively, on territorial affiliation, gender, and class (Walvin 1975; Holt 1989; Bromberger 1995). Over the last quarter of a century, these traditional patterns have evolved into something new. In the wake of the creation of the English Premier League and the Champions League – launched and managed by UEFA, the administrative body for football in Europe – in 1992, football has undergone a process of increased commodification, excessive commercialisation, and, to a certain degree, intentional gentrification (King 1998). This process has led to the emergence of new forms of spectatorship that some authors qualify as “postmodern” (Giulianotti 1999; Sonntag 2008).

In a seminal article, the Scottish sociologist Richard Giulianotti differentiated between “four ideal-type spectator identities that may be found in the contemporary football world” (Giulianotti 2002). In addition to the traditional categories of “supporters” and “followers,” whose loyalty to and involvement with a football club is based on cultural and symbolic relations, he identified the new categories of “fans” and “*flâneurs*.” These may be best described as consumers of football, and individuals more prone to responding to marketing cues and switching brand loyalty.

There are two major caveats to this typology that need to be addressed for our own research, however. First, the emergence of the postmodern consumerist football fan has not changed the fundamen-

tal fact that traditional supporters motivated by partisan identification are an essential element of football's emotional appeal. Not only do they provide the game's visual and acoustic background, but also their unfaltering identification and long-term emotional involvement with a particular team heighten the dramatic intensity of the event, and provide incentives to investors, sponsors, and broadcasters to engage with football. Second, while the typology established by Giulianotti makes sense within the framework of professional league football as performed by clubs, it is less pertinent in the context of national teams. As Sonntag (2016) has shown, a considerable gap has developed over the last 25 years between these two complementary, interdependent, yet distinct types of football.

In light of the conceptual challenge of applying traditional categories to the relatively recent fan culture in China – as well as against the contextual difficulties of surveying Chinese football supporters – we decided to use a looser definition of the term supporter and thus target individuals who declare both to have a strong “interest” in football and to consume football news on a weekly (or, indeed, even more frequent) basis. We did not include regular league match attendance as a main criterion. Only half of the respondents declared having attended a match of their favourite club in recent months, which may be related to the fact that many football supporters in China support foreign clubs and national teams (Chadwick 2017). Most of the respondents, however, showed a strong interest in the national team's performance and future prospects, which constitutes an important part of the added value of our survey.

As studies of major football events have repeatedly demonstrated (Manzenreiter and Spitaler 2011; Rinke and Schiller 2014; Alpan, Schwell, and Sonntag 2015), national teams are heavily charged with symbolic value and they trigger profoundly nationalistic identification patterns based on feelings of belonging, perceived singularity, and national pride – elements that all have significant social impact. Much more than an affluent, high-performing football league, globally competitive national teams contribute to the enhancement of soft power resources. It is therefore necessary to understand the historical link between football and nationalism.

Football and Nationalism

Football is a game that was created with the codification of its rules in England in 1863. Its institutionalisation, development, and international dissemination over the following decades were contemporary to a period marked by a strong trend of political and cultural nationalism across the entire European continent. It is therefore not surprising that from the beginning of the twentieth century, when the first international matches were played on the continent, football was – due to its intrinsic territorial layout and battlefield terminology (“attack,” “defence,” “wings,” “shots,” “captain,” and the like) – understood everywhere as a mock confrontation of nations. Both dictatorial and democratic regimes were tempted to instrumentalise the game as a way of consolidating national identities.

For over a century football has thus contributed in many countries to a wide range of popular “sites of memory” underpinning nationalist narratives (Pyta and Havemann 2015), and, as every international tournament illustrates anew, national teams continue to serve as a sturdy projection screen for the national “imagined community” (Anderson 1983). Moreover, the history of football shows that, although the sociology of football has been mainly theorised within the European context, the game’s propensity to serve as a consolidator of national identity can be applied to many different varieties of nationalism around the globe – as Paul Dietschy (2014) has demonstrated in his exhaustive *History of Football*. An entire strand of football studies has been devoted to the game’s impact on the construction of national identity within a wide variety of domestic settings (Lever 1983; Eisenberg 1997; Wahl 1989; Milza 1990; Finn and Giulianotti 2000; Llopis-Goig 2015) and in international confrontations (Sugden and Tomlinson 1994; Kuper 1994; Mason 1995).

In an oft-quoted conclusion, historian Eric Hobsbawm summed up football’s capacity to rouse nationalist feelings – as repeatedly highlighted by this significant body of research:

The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people. The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of the nation himself. (Hobsbawm 1990: 143)

In the PRC, there is no long-standing tradition of a national football narrative. And yet, in the Overall Chinese Football Reform and De-

velopment Programme it is claimed explicitly that the football agenda is introduced “to meet the expectations of the people.” Football is described as “loved by the great masses” and, accordingly, considered “a beacon of hope for [them],” capable of “promoting the spirit of patriotism and collectivism” (SC 2015a). These are words that recall “the nationalisation of the masses” that George L. Mosse (1975) famously described for the case of early-twentieth-century Germany, wherein sport played an important role.

Nationalism in contemporary China, meanwhile, is composed of specific characteristics. Gries identifies the concept of “face,” which

involves efforts to preserve what social psychologists call “in-group positivity” or “collective self-esteem” [and] captures the interplay of self and society in the process of constructing personhood. (Gries 2004: 22, 23)

Although the concept of face is by no means limited to China, being rather a universal cultural phenomenon (Lin and Yamaguchi 2011), it is nevertheless most often used in relation specifically to Chinese culture. The PRC’s current soft power aspirations on the international stage have therefore been named “face diplomacy,” best described as a form of affirmative nationalism (Shambaugh 2013).

In conclusion, the succinct overview above on the theories of football fandom and the study of football and nationalism suggests that if the PRC wants to be recognised as a great football nation, the yardstick against which it will be measured – both domestically and abroad – is the development of its national team. Against this backdrop, our descriptive research on the Chinese football community focuses on attitudes towards and perceptions of the national team, its symbolic value, as well as its social and political impact.

Research Question and Hypotheses

After an in-depth study of the four football reform programmes, consisting of an exhaustive and detailed translation and careful analysis of official documents, a series of eight preparatory expert interviews (with various interlocutors such as Chinese and foreign sports journalists, coaches, officials of Chinese clubs, and the vice chairman of the Shanghai Sports Bureau) were carried out in order to obtain complementary insights and confirmation of an existing knowledge gap on Chinese football supporters’ views. Based on this preparatory

work, the research question of how the Chinese football community perceived the reform programmes was formulated. A quantitative survey among football supporters in mainland China was designed and conducted. The survey design was guided by four research hypotheses on Chinese football supporters, testing issues of their awareness, reception, and assessment of the reform programmes – as well as any underlying nationalistic motivations:

- Chinese football supporters are aware of the political reform programmes.
- The reform programmes are perceived as a response to a public demand.
- The public demand for football development is underpinned by nationalistic elements within the Chinese Dream.
- Chinese football supporters are capable of assessing the likelihood of successful achievement of the reform programmes' objectives.

Methodology

The survey and sampling method were chosen in accordance with the overall descriptive objective of revealing prevailing opinions and perception patterns within the subculture of Chinese football supporters (the questionnaire, available both in English and in Chinese, can be viewed in the online version of the article at: <www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org>). The study targeted an attentive football public characterised by two core features: 1) a high level of interest in football in general and 2) their online presence. Hence, the sample does not represent the entire football public in China nor the general public either. In order to target this specific subcultural community, it was decided to opt for an online survey applying a purposive, non-probabilistic sampling method (Best and Krueger 2004) – achieved by soliciting visitors to football-specific Chinese websites.

For the collection of quantitative data, a web-based survey software was used. The survey consisted of 40 questions. It was first designed in English and then translated into Chinese. The link for the online survey was placed on and distributed via Chinese social media channels and websites such as WeChat, Sina, and Tencent Weibo (the authors would like to thank the management staff of German football club Borussia Dortmund as well as several Chinese sports jour-

nalists for posting and distributing the online link to the survey on Chinese social media platforms). The link was launched in November 2015 and expired in February 2016, receiving 3,010 responses – with 1,885 respondents completing all 40 of the questions.

The data set was subject to a data-cleaning process. Respondents that did not fulfil the two criteria of the target group mentioned above and did not select their “Residence,” “Gender,” and “Age Group” were eliminated. Among the remaining questionnaires, partially filled out ones were taken into consideration. Consequently, the total number of respondents varies accordingly in the tables below. The results do not change qualitatively if only complete questionnaires are included. After finishing this process, the total number of respondents amounted to 2,499 – of whom 31.2 per cent were female. Considering the administrative divisions in the PRC, the place of residence of participants in the online survey covered all of mainland China geographically. While more than half of the respondents came from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Jiangsu, or Zhejiang provinces, at least one person from each of the country’s provinces, autonomous regions, or municipalities participated. The majority of participants were aged between 21 and 30 years old.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Involvement and Awareness

Given the chosen research method, respondents were, expectedly, characterised by a high level of interest in football in general: some 96.8 per cent of the surveyed respondents indicated that they either are “interested” or “very interested” in football in general. Moreover, respondents are characterised by their online presence. Our assumption that Chinese football supporters love to consume, comment on, and shape football-related online content seems to be confirmed. A total of 98 per cent of the respondents stated that they either read football news online via Chinese social media channels “every day” or “several times a week” (see Table 2 below), which indicates not only their commitment to their passion but also hints at a certain level of knowledge about the sport. In comparison, about half of the respondents (49.3 per cent) stated that they “never” or only “several times a year” read football news via print media (see Table 3 below).

Table 2. Social Media Use for Football News

How often do you read football news online via social media (like WeChat, Weibo, QQ, etc.)?			
	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Every day	2,115	89.4	89.4
Several times a week	204	8.6	98.0
Once a week	11	0.5	98.5
Several times a month	24	1.0	99.5
Once a month	3	0.1	99.6
Several times a year	6	0.3	99.9
Never	2	0.1	100.0
Total	2,365	100.0	

Table 3. Print Media Use for Football News

How often do you read football news via print media (like newspapers, magazines, etc.)?			
	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Every day	411	17.4	17.4
Several times a week	269	11.4	28.8
Once a week	124	5.2	34.0
Several times a month	303	12.8	46.8
Once a month	91	3.8	50.7
Several times a year	660	27.9	78.6
Never	507	21.4	100.0
Total	2,365	100.0	

Due to the high interest in football and involvement in online media consumption, it is not surprising that respondents were aware of the Overall Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme (SC 2015a) issued by the General Office of the State Council: a significant 78.1 per cent of survey participants stated that they had heard about this reform programme. This figure suggests that this political reform has been repeatedly mentioned and discussed within this subculture of football supporters. Hypothesis 1 can therefore be deemed to be validated.

A Response to Public Demand

As pointed out earlier, the four football reforms were officially introduced with the objective “to meet the new expectations of the people” as well as “to improve the image of Chinese sports” (SC 2015a). In one of the few questions where respondents could choose among multiple possible responses, they were asked what, in their opinion, were the main motivations behind the reform and development efforts vis-à-vis Chinese football. The responses reveal that the reforms are perceived by a large majority of respondents as a response to a public demand (80 per cent) and an attempt to raise China’s soft power on the international level (59 per cent), very much in line with the stated goals in the official reform programme (see Table 4). According to the respondents, the developmental aspirations of China’s political leadership in the field of football have less to do with efforts to stimulate economic growth (25.7 per cent), or with the endeavours of a new leader keen to shape his public profile (19.1 per cent), or with attempts to consolidate the legitimacy of China’s central government (6 per cent). Hypothesis 2 can therefore be deemed to be validated.

Table 4. Main Motivations behind the Football Reform Programme

What do you think were the main motivations behind the reform and development of national football? (Multiple responses possible)		
	Frequency	Percentage of respondents
Response to a public demand	1,572	80.0
Attempt to raise China’s soft power on international stage	1,158	59.0
Effort to stimulate the economy	505	25.7
Endeavour of a new leader to shape his profile	375	19.1
Attempt to consolidate the legitimacy of the central government	118	6.0
Other reasons	520	26.5
Total	1,964	

Nationalist Attitudes and the Chinese Dream

Given that national football teams contribute to the formation and consolidation of national identity, it is consistent that one of the main objectives of the reform of Chinese football is the development of a more competitive men's national football team. In the Overall Chinese Football Reform and Development Programme, it is thus explicitly asserted that the development of a high-performing national team would "enhance national pride [...], carry forward the Chinese sports spirit [and] win glory for our country" (SC 2015a). The reference to collective "pride" is commensurate with the perception of supporters that it is an honour for a footballer to play for the Chinese men's national team. Some 96.4 per cent of the survey participants agreed with this normative statement (see Table 5 below), more than in leading football nations like Germany or Spain – where, according to previous surveys, football supporters are 83.6 and 78.2 per cent respectively inclined to agree (FREE Project 2014). The response also highlights that the national team is overwhelmingly perceived as being situated outside of the realm of business.

Over the last decade, the poor performance of the men's national team has resulted in considerable discontent among Chinese football supporters. A sizeable 64.5 per cent of respondents indicated that they feel sad or upset for several days when the Chinese men's national team loses an important match (see Table 5 below). This fact demonstrates that the performance of the Chinese national football team affects the emotional state of the majority of respondents and highlights the strong emotional bond of many Chinese football supporters with it.

These figures are corroborated by incidents where frustration and perceived humiliation in football competitions have turned to violence, such as the riots that occurred after a 5-1 defeat against Thailand in 2013 (Minter 2013). The men's national team is perceived to represent the nation, and doing so in an inappropriate manner produces significant frustration among supporters. In such cases, social media often acts as a vector for them to express their anger and disappointment through enabling many Chinese supporters to vent their frustration with a kind of bitter humour (Lu 2016). Interestingly, it is not the case when foreigners take the liberty of engaging in the same ironic joking on the Internet. About half of the respondents (52.1 per cent) declared that they could not "stand it easily" when

football supporters from other nationalities would make fun of the Chinese men's national football team (see Table 5 below). Only 26.8 per cent of respondents were willing to tolerate this kind of humour. This not only highlights the identification of many Chinese supporters with their national team but also confirms the persistence of shared feelings of humiliation, both among the national collective and ultimately for the individual who is represented by the team.

Table 5 also confirms that political symbolism matters in international football. The national anthem is, besides the state flag, one of the most salient emblems or embodiments of the identity of a nation-state. In the pre-match ceremony, flag, anthem, and team reinforce each other's emotional impact – expressing singularity and uniqueness. It is hardly surprising that 84.6 per cent of respondents indicated that they feel great pride when the Chinese national anthem is played before a match of the national football team (see Table 5 below). Moreover, a majority 52.2 per cent of survey participants agreed that matches between national teams represent more than just a football game – considering that the sport has a political dimension to it. This suggests that the intellectual recognition of football's political implications is somewhat more difficult to achieve than a quick emotional response to a symbolic cue like the anthem in the ceremonial stadium setting.

A large number of supporters (57 per cent) also consider that the development of Chinese football plays a vital role in the realisation of the Chinese Dream (see Table 6 below). This demonstrates that a majority of respondents perceived the reform and development of Chinese football as part of the fulfilment of their personal definition or interpretation of that guiding concept. Interestingly, the survey provides evidence that the younger the respondents are, the more likely it is that they associate the development of national football with the realisation of the Chinese Dream. While this was the case for 65.9 per cent of the respondents aged between 16 and 20 years old, only 43.6 per cent of those from the age group of 31 to 40 established a conceptual link between football and the realisation of the Chinese Dream. The age of supporters thus appears to be a determining factor for the expression of their nationalist sentiments through the medium of football.

Table 5. Football and National Pride (Men's Team)

		Strongly agree	Agree to an extent	Neutral
It is an honour for a footballer to play for the national team	Percentage Frequency	79.7 1,696	16.7 355	2.4 50
When my national team loses an important match, I am sad or upset for several days	Percentage Frequency	31.3 665	33.2 707	21.1 449
The national team is nothing "sacred" (not so important for the Chinese nation); I can stand it easily when other nationalities make fun of it	Percentage Frequency	7.8 165	19.0 402	21.2 450
When the national anthem is played before a match of the national team, I feel great pride	Percentage Frequency	60.9 1,294	23.7 503	12.2 259
Matches between national teams represent more than football: they have a political dimension	Percentage Frequency	16.0 339	36.2 769	20.1 427
		Disagree to an extent	Strongly disagree	Total
It is an honour for a footballer to play for the national team	Percentage Frequency	0.8 17	0.4 9	100 2,127
When my national team loses an important match, I am sad or upset for several days	Percentage Frequency	8.8 187	5.6 120	100 2,128
The national team is nothing "sacred" (not so important for the Chinese nation); I can stand it easily when other nationalities make fun of it	Percentage Frequency	29.9 634	22.2 470	100 2,121
When the national anthem is played before a match of the national team, I feel great pride	Percentage Frequency	1.5 31	1.8 38	100 2,125
Matches between national teams represent more than football: they have a political dimension	Percentage Frequency	17.7 376	10.0 213	100 2,124

Table 6. Football and the Chinese Dream

According to the reform programme, the development of national football plays an important role for the realisation of the Chinese Dream. Do you think this is correct?			Yes	No	Don't know/ No opinion	Total
Age groups	16–20 years	Frequency	220	64	50	334
		% of age group	65.9	19.2	15.0	100
	21–25 years	Frequency	483	183	140	806
		% of age group	59.9	22.7	17.4	100
	26–30 years	Frequency	258	129	114	501
		% of age group	51.5	25.7	22.8	100
	31–40 years	Frequency	109	99	42	250
		% of age group	43.6	39.6	16.8	100
Total		Frequency	1,117	487	354	1,958
		% of total	57.0	24.9	18.1	100

Concerning the prospect of hosting the FIFA World Cup, the survey participants were asked if they would feel proud if China was to organise the men's FIFA World Cup in 2034. The ambition to host a World Cup is never innocuous: as football research has shown repeatedly (Sugden and Tomlinson 1994; Rinke and Schiller 2014), organising the planet's most popular mega-event has a multidimensional impact not only on the modernisation of football infrastructure and subsequent economic development of the professional football sector, but first and foremost on patterns of perception and self-perception. This is as true for established medium powers like France (1998) or Germany (2006) as it is for emerging nations like South Korea/Japan (2002), South Africa (2010), or Brazil (2014).

A majority of 69.5 per cent of respondents indicated that they would feel proud if China hosted the men's FIFA World Cup in 2034 (see Table 7 below), which suggests that organising this event is perceived as an enhancement of national prestige. Overall, given the

responses to the different questions pertaining to nationalist sentiments, Hypothesis 3 may be deemed to be validated.

Table 7. China Hosting the Men's FIFA World Cup

Would you feel proud if China was to host the men's FIFA World Cup in 2034?			
	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Yes	1,364	69.5	69.5
No	384	19.5	89.0
Don't know/No opinion	216	11.0	100.0
Total	1,964	100.0	

Assessment of the Reform

Only 1.6 per cent of the survey participants declared that they are currently satisfied with the performance of the Chinese men's national team (see Table 8 below), a result that highlights a wide discrepancy between expectations and actual performance. As pointed out above, this massive frustration is regularly vented via social media channels. Accordingly, one of the mid-term goals of the overall reform programme is that the Chinese men's national football team should come to be among the best teams in Asia (SC 2015a). This goal is met with a very high level of scepticism by football supporters: a significant 80 per cent of respondents believed that the Chinese men's national team will not be able to overtake those of Japan and South Korea in the FIFA World Ranking over the course of the next 10 years at least (see Table 8 below). This result shows that respondents have a good understanding of the dynamics of footballing success. The mere fact that Chinese supporters understand that in football things cannot change overnight grants additional credibility to their overall assessment of the country's related reform programme.

Despite the good intentions and immensely large potential talent pool in mainland China, the responsible authorities in the country face difficulties in forming a competitive men's national team. There are various tentative explanations offered for why the Chinese men's national football team has failed so far in international competitions. Hence, this matter was addressed to the sample of the football community in the PRC. In one of the survey's few questions where mul-

tiple answers could be selected between, football supporters were asked what, in their opinion, has hampered the development of Chinese football the most. A sizeable 79.2 per cent of respondents blamed the education system in the PRC (see Table 9 below). Other primary reasons that were indicated include the poor recruitment of young talent (72 per cent), the scarcity of football pitches (62.3 per cent), and the corrosive influence of gambling that has led to match-fixing and corruption (52 per cent). A minority of survey participants indicated that the state's emphasis on individual over team sports (22.1 per cent) and the one-child policy (10.6 per cent) are the major factors that have hampered the development of Chinese football. Meanwhile, 35.7 per cent of the respondents stated that there were still other reasons besides.

Table 8. Performance and Prospects of the Men's National Team

		Yes	No	Don't know/No opinion	Total
Are you satisfied with the performance of the Chinese men's national football team?	Percentage Frequency	1.6 34	85.5 1,787	12.9 270	100 2,091
One of the mid-term goals of the reform programme is that the men's national team should be among the best in Asia. Do you think that the Chinese men's national team will be able to overtake the ones of Japan and South Korea in the FIFA World Ranking in the next 10 years?	Percentage Frequency	9.3 183	80.0 1,572	10.7 211	100 1,966

Table 9. Obstacles to the Development of Chinese Football

Despite its large population, China faces difficulties to form a competitive men's national team. In your opinion, what has hampered the development of Chinese football the most? (Multiple responses possible)		
	Frequency	Percentage of respondents
Education system	1,632	79.2
Poor recruitment of young talent	1,484	72.0
Scarcity of pitches	1,283	62.3
Match fixing and corruption	1,071	52.0
State's emphasis on individual over team sport	456	22.1
One-child policy	219	10.6
Other reasons	735	35.7
Total	2,060	

When asked about their assessment of the different aspects and objectives of the overall reform programme, between 10.1 and 23.5 per cent of respondents stated “Don't know/No opinion” (see Table 10 below). This seems to be commensurate overall with the number of those who claimed to even be aware of the reform programme (78.1 per cent). One of the short-term goals of the programme is that the conditions for the development of Chinese football should be improved and a football management system with Chinese characteristics established. Over half of the respondents (51.3 per cent) agreed that this measure would have a positive impact on Chinese football, while 26.5 per cent expressed their disagreement herewith. This measure is related to one of the fundamental principles within the reform programme, which states that Chinese football should combine

domestic conditions and international experiences [to] provide a decent development pathway for Chinese football. [Therefore] it is necessary to start from the current situation in China and learn from the experiences of developed football countries to achieve a new way of reform and development of football with Chinese characteristics. (SC 2015a)

As Table 10 shows, 55.9 per cent of respondents stated that this was the right approach to developing Chinese football, while 20.6 per cent thereof indicated that they were against this. These results are

linked to issues of football governance. As pointed out earlier, the transformation process of governance structures should be in principle enforced by decoupling the CFA from the GAS – which is itself subordinate to the State Council. Some 76.6 per cent of survey participants thought that the restructuring and decoupling of the CFA from the responsibilities of the GAS is a good measure (see Table 10). The very fact that respondents did not skip this question *en masse* is remarkable given the complexities of the country’s governance issues.

Table 10. Assessment of Major Principles of the Reforms, Including Governance

		Yes	No
The short-term goal of the football reforms is to improve the conditions for the development of Chinese football and the establishment of a football management system with Chinese characteristics. Do you think that this measure will have a positive impact on Chinese football?	Percentage Frequency	51.3 1,005	26.5 519
The football reforms are based on several fundamental principles. One of them is that Chinese football should combine national circumstances with foreign expertise to achieve development with Chinese characteristics. Do you think this is the right approach?	Percentage Frequency	55.9 1,098	20.6 405
The football reform programme aims to restructure the Chinese Football Association and decouple it from the responsibility of General Administration of Sport of China. Do you think this is a good measure?	Percentage Frequency	76.6 1,504	5.6 109
The football reforms require in principle a “separation of government and society” while simultaneously aiming at a “strengthening of Party leadership.” Do you think the central government should have a leading position within the CFA?	Percentage Frequency	8.2 161	81.7 1,607

		Don't know/ No opinion	Total
The short-term goal of the football reforms is to improve the conditions for the development of Chinese football and the establishment of a football management system with Chinese characteristics. Do you think that this measure will have a positive impact on Chinese football?	Percentage Frequency	22.2 435	100 1,959
The football reforms are based on several fundamental principles. One of them is that Chinese football should combine national circumstances with foreign expertise to achieve development with Chinese characteristics. Do you think this is the right approach?	Percentage Frequency	23.5 462	100 1,965
The football reform programme aims to restructure the Chinese Football Association and decouple it from the responsibility of General Administration of Sport of China. Do you think this is a good measure?	Percentage Frequency	17.8 350	100 1,963
The football reforms require in principle a “separation of government and society” while simultaneously aiming at a “strengthening of Party leadership.” Do you think the central government should have a leading position within the CFA?	Percentage Frequency	10.1 198	100 1,966

The survey participants were also asked if the Chinese central government should have a leading position within the CFA. A hefty 81.7 per cent of respondents indicated that the Chinese central government should not (see Table 10). In all of the evidence, there exists a significant discrepancy between the expectations of the majority of respondents and the prevailing political conditions in the PRC.

Finally, the survey participants were asked which stakeholders should have more or less influence concerning the governance of Chinese football. The respondents could choose from among the following institutions: central government, local government, private enterprises, state-owned enterprises, CFA, local football associations, club management, supporter organisations, and the media. There are considerable differences in the levels of approval (see Table 11 below). The management of Chinese football clubs received the highest

approval rate, with 91.4 per cent of respondents stating that they should have more influence on the governance of Chinese football. According to the collected data, other stakeholders that should have significantly more influence include the CFA (74.7 per cent), regional football associations (71.5 per cent), and private enterprises (68.9 per cent).

On the opposing end of the spectrum, a relatively high number of respondents stated that certain institutions should have less influence on the governance of Chinese football. A significant 29.8 per cent of survey participants indicated that the central government should have less influence hereon. According to the data set, other institutions that should have less such influence include local government (27.6 per cent), state-owned enterprises (21.3 per cent), and Chinese media (20.8 per cent). The results for the supporter organisations do not particularly stand out as noteworthy in either direction.

Table 11. Desirable Influence of Various Football Stakeholders

How much influence should the following institutions or bodies have with regard to the organisation of Chinese football?				
		Should have much more influence	Should have more influence	Neutral
Central government	Percentage	32.7	16.7	20.8
	Frequency	624	319	398
Local government	Percentage	23.1	27.6	21.7
	Frequency	437	523	411
Private companies as investors	Percentage	27.7	41.2	23.1
	Frequency	525	780	438
State-owned enterprises as investors	Percentage	16.4	31.1	31.3
	Frequency	310	588	591
Chinese Football Association	Percentage	52.3	22.3	13.8
	Frequency	994	424	263
Regional Football Associations	Percentage	38.0	33.5	17.7
	Frequency	716	632	334
Club management	Percentage	69.9	21.5	6.6
	Frequency	1,321	406	125
Supporters organisations	Percentage	30.9	33.8	22.1
	Frequency	587	642	419
Media	Percentage	18.9	26.9	33.3
	Frequency	357	508	628

How much influence should the following institutions or bodies have with regard to the organisation of Chinese football?				
		Should have less influence	Should have much less influence	Total
Central government	Percentage Frequency	17.4 332	12.4 237	100 1910
Local government	Percentage Frequency	17.6 333	10.0 189	100 1893
Private companies as investors	Percentage Frequency	5.9 111	2.1 40	100 1894
State-owned enterprises as investors	Percentage Frequency	14.6 275	6.7 126	100 1890
Chinese Football Association	Percentage Frequency	7.5 142	4.0 76	100 1899
Regional Football Associations	Percentage Frequency	7.3 138	3.5 66	100 1886
Club management	Percentage Frequency	1.4 27	0.6 12	100 1891
Supporters organisations	Percentage Frequency	7.7 146	5.4 103	100 1897
Media	Percentage Frequency	13.5 255	7.3 137	100 1885

Hypothesis 4, according to which Chinese football supporters are capable of assessing the likelihood of the successful achievement of the four reform programmes' objectives, can at least partly be deemed to be validated then. Supporters seem to have distinct perceptions of the various dimensions of the reforms' intended outcomes, and have a differentiated assessment of the ideal methods to help achieve them.

Implications and Conclusions

In recent years, an extraordinarily ambitious development strategy for football in the PRC has been launched with active support from the highest political levels. While the first effects of these reform programmes, mainly visible in certain spectacular business initiatives, have been largely reported and discussed in the global media, very little is known currently about the attitudes and perception of one of

the key stakeholder groups in this development: the supporters themselves. The results of our research suggest that there is a high level of awareness of the overall reform programme within the subculture of football supporters, especially among those who are very active on social media. Given the place that football tends to occupy in the lives of those who consider themselves “supporters,” it is coherent that the survey participants felt concerned by a reform programme that is directly targeted at their passion and is thus likely to have an impact on their everyday lives.

The general rationale for the development efforts undertaken vis-à-vis Chinese football has repeatedly been the personal preference and fondness of President Xi Jinping for the beautiful game. Interestingly, the official claim that the reforms have as their objective “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” was perceived as credible by the majority of respondents – who considered the reforms as a response to a public demand (80 per cent) and as an attempt to raise China’s global soft power status (59 per cent). The fact that both the authors of the reform programme and survey participants themselves associate the development of Chinese football with the same objectives raises interesting questions (ones that go beyond the scope of this article) regarding, among other things, the responsiveness of authoritarian regimes to key societal actors.

The study has confirmed that reform and development of Chinese football are closely linked to nationalism, and to the consolidation of national identity. The authors of the football reform programme have used the term “dream” in their official objectives, fitting with the repeated use of the nationalistic elements of the concept of the “Chinese Dream” in Xi Jinping’s own presidential speeches. The majority of survey participants (57 per cent) indicated that the development of football in the PRC has significance for the realisation of this Chinese Dream, demonstrating apparent convergence in interpretations of what the latter concept even denotes.

Most respondents supported the majority of the political reform measures put forward to develop Chinese football. They were, however, very pessimistic about the development prospects of the Chinese men’s national football team in both the short and medium term. Some 80 per cent of respondents believed that the Chinese

men's national team will not be able to overtake those of Japan and South Korea in the FIFA World Ranking within the next 10 years. If, contrary to these expectations, the Chinese government actually achieved this ambitious goal by the time the 2026 World Cup comes around then it would have a notable impact on the felt satisfaction of Chinese football supporters – and, by extension, on the Party's own credibility.

Concerning governance, one of the most important measures contained in the reform programme has been to restructure the CFA and decouple it from the responsibilities of the GAS, a government agency subordinate to the State Council. The majority of survey participants agreed with this measure. However, the investigation showed that there is a significant discrepancy between the expectations of most respondents and the prevailing political conditions in the PRC. Almost 82 per cent of respondents stated that the Chinese central government should not have a leading position within the CFA. Official documents reveal, however, that the reorganisation of Chinese football demonstrates an essential shift in power structures within the PRC. The transformation of football governance ones illustrates how the political leadership in the PRC has reinforced the concentration and shifting of decision-making powers in Chinese football from the GAS to a higher, more centralised level directly linked to the president himself.

Our research fills a key gap by providing original and relevant information about the stakeholder group that is often missing in public discussions of the current reforms occurring with regard to Chinese football. Moreover, the differentiated manner in which respondents answered rather specific questions shows that Chinese football supporters are not only knowledgeable about the game and its governance, but also – like their European counterparts – simultaneously “smart consumers and hopeless romantics” (Sonntag 2016: 161).

Future empirical research on Chinese football needs to take supporters into account, not only as jersey-buying customers of major European football brands but also as a crucial stakeholder group whose continued contribution and attention is indispensable for the realisation of the “Chinese football dream.” Ideally, future research on supporters would include qualitative fieldwork. At the same time, the last few years have provided ample evidence that things are moving extraordinarily quickly in the context of football in China. Our

research provides merely a descriptive snapshot of supporters' critical appraisal of broad reforms that have only just kicked off. It would need to be deepened by ethnographic fieldwork, and put into perspective through a larger sample of expert interviews.

What our research confirms is that football – which already occupies a significant place in most European societies – is more than a game, even in countries that are not considered traditional footballing powerhouses. It may be argued that the sport's impact as compared to other resources of cultural soft power – through great clubs, national teams, but also individual stars and hosting of the World Cup – has been underestimated by academic research on contemporary China. It is precisely because many efforts aimed at accumulating Chinese cultural soft power had a limited return on related investments (Nye 2012; Shambaugh 2013; Callahan 2015b) that the new reforms and developments in football are of particular interest, especially with regard to the question of what they reveal about how the Chinese government in the era of Xi Jinping sees its place in the world at large.

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