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Conflict and Supremacy in Chinese Sport News Commentaries: a Case Study

China as a ‘danger’ for European football

“The Chinese market is a danger for all—for all the teams in the world. But we must concentrate on our work and not think that in China there is a lot of money and they can arrive to take the players.” This was the opinion expressed by Chelsea Football Club’s Italian coach Antonio Conte at a press conference in December 2016 in reaction to the announcement that Brazilian midfielder Oscar had been bought by Shanghai SIPG for over 60 million pounds (Law 2016). The move, that would deprive Chelsea of a key talent, happened during a shopping spree when, over the winter market window, Chinese Superleague (中国足球超级联赛) clubs such as Shanghai SIPG, Guangzhou Evergrande and Jiangsu Suning spent vast amounts of money buying football stars from European clubs. The phenomenon included acquisitions of shares in European football clubs such as Nice, Aston Villa, Atlético Madrid and Birmingham City and was referred to in Chinese media with the expression “买买买” (Tao 2016), a string that, by repeating the verb ‘to buy’, suggests the idea of a “buying fever”.

Antonio Conte’s accent on the concept of “danger” inadvertently echoed the metaphor of the “Yellow Peril”, which developed in the 19th century to suggest that the peoples of East Asia are a danger to the Western countries (Shim 2014; Tchen/Yeats 2014; Witver 2015). The possibility that China’s money would change the power order of the world’s football market was unsettling for football managers and professionals in Europe (World Soccer 2017). This scenario looked realistic due to the support for the “buying fever” given by the coun-

try's political system, and the personal sponsorship provided by the president of the People's Republic of China and General secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping (Chadwick 2016; Sullivan 2017).¹

The European press gave voice to these worries by framing the relationship between European and Chinese clubs in conflictual terms. However, the aim of this paper is to focus on China and analyse the characteristics of the Chinese media discourse on football in relation to Europe. The core question is whether a narrative of conflict can be found, and it will be addressed by looking at China's media discourse on football regarding a specific event that has been considered particularly important both in China and in Europe:² the acquisition of FC Internazionale by the Chinese company Suning in June 2016.³

The analysis builds on the hypothesis that the Chinese media discourse emerging from a corpus of articles related to the case collected by the Author⁴ should echo the Chinese official discourse on football. This is due to the importance attached by the current Chinese leadership to the development of football in the country, and to the tight political control that is still in place in Chinese media, especially when issues that are considered key by top rulers are concerned (Qian/Bandurski 2011; Young 2013; Creemers 2015; Brady 2016). Sport has traditionally been used in the PRC as a tool for the promotion of patriotic feelings since Mao Zedong's era (Fan / Xiong 2003; Brady

¹ Huge investments in foreign clubs and players started to receive less institutional support, and even suffered heavy limitations, starting in June 2017, with regulations that discouraged Chinese Superleague clubs from making expensive signings from European leagues. Following a new regulation approved in May 2017 by the Chinese Football Association (中国足球协会) and implemented from June 2017, Chinese Superleague clubs who buy a player from foreign leagues have to pay a further 100 percent of the amount paid to buy the athlete into a national fund for the development of youth football in China. The new rule clearly targeted the shopping spree in an attempt to slow down investments (de Menezes 2017). In August 2017 investments abroad in sport and entertainment were further tightened (Wu 2017).

² Its importance lies in it being the first acquisition of a successful, well-established football club in Europe.

³ An initial analysis of this case was published in Lupano 2017a.

⁴ For more details on the corpus construction, see the following paragraphs.

2009; Brownell 1995, 2015).⁵ As I will discuss in the next paragraph, the current official discourse on football has similarly stressed the role of sport in building “patriotism and collectivism” (爱国主义集体主义). As a consequence, China’s media discourse on football can be expected to revolve around these two themes.

In the next paragraph, the reasons behind China’s football reform and the characteristics of the official discourse on the development of football will be presented, while in the third paragraph the case study will be introduced and the methodological approach explained. The results of the study will be analysed in the fourth paragraph. In the conclusion, I will argue that, in the case of the acquisition of FC Internazionale, the construction of patriotism and nationalism has been achieved in the Chinese periodical press through the interpretation of sport as an arena of conflict and power contention between China and Europe.

Sport and politics: Xi Jinping’s ‘football dream’

Xi Jinping is the first Chinese leader to have put the development of football to the fore of the national agenda, presenting himself as the top sponsor for China’s football revitalisation. During the first mandate of the so-called “fifth generation” of leaders headed by Xi, a “Comprehensive programme for the reform and development of Chinese football” (中国足球改革发展总体方案) was issued by the State Council in 2015. In fifty points, organized in eleven sections, the document gives instructions on how to promote the institutional reform, popularisation, professionalisation and internationalisation of football, summing up the leadership’s vision of football in China until 2050.

⁵ Fascinating examples of this phenomenon are art products such as Xie Jin’s “Woman basketball player No. 5” (女篮五号) [1957], the first Chinese colour movie on sport, as well as propaganda posters on sport between 1950s-1980s (Lupano 2017b).

Sport-related, as well as economic and political motivations for the project can be identified.

At the sport level, the popularisation of football by introducing it as a compulsory subject in schools and by building thousands of facilities in the country is aimed at stimulating the practice of the sport. This is done in order both to promote a healthy lifestyle and to nurture promising athletes to raise the level of the game at national and international level. China's football performances are considered far from acceptable by Chinese people, who could instead take pride in the nation's breakthroughs in Olympic disciplines that culminated in 51 gold medals won by Chinese athletes at the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games.⁶ This feeling of frustration explains the declared goal to grow 100,000 new players and to open academies dedicated only to football (Economist 2014).

At the economic level, the reform of football should help the development of China's sport industry, which the aforementioned "Comprehensive programme for the reform and development of Chinese football" lists among the goals of the plan. The document declares that the aim of the reform is to "build a sport power" (建设体育强国), and the shopping spree that has hit Europe's football is intended as a way to support the building of such sport power. China's decision to invest in the development of football stems in part from the need to promote new promising industries to rely on, in the context of the "New normal" (新常态) economic slowdown (China.org 2015; Li 2015). The connection between the development of a sport industry and the transition from the "world's factory" model to a model focused on culture and services is made clear in the "Key points of the national plan of cultural reform and development during the 13th five-year plan" (国家'十三五'时期文化发展改革规划纲要), a document published in May 2017 where the cultural industry is defined a "pillar" of China's development (Guowuyuan 2017).

In political terms, from Deng Xiaoping's supposed 1950 quote that he loved football, but felt like suffocating every time he watched the national team play (Bartram 2012), to the world ranking of the

⁶ The result placed China in the second position of the medal tally, after the United States. See <http://www.espn.com/oly/summer08/medals>.

men's national team which is as low as countries of significantly less economic and demographic power,⁷ in China the lack of success in football is considered a national shame (Tan et al. 2016). Unlike the women's national team, which did reach the highest levels internationally and ranks among the top twenty in the world,⁸ the men's team has qualified for the World Cup only once, in 2002. The team scored no goals, losing all of the three group matches played (Bellinazzo 2017: 201-2).

According to the Chinese media, Xi Jinping started to talk about football as a national priority when he was still serving as vice-president of the PRC, in 2009. At that time, he reportedly claimed that it was necessary to promote elite football in China and admitted that he hoped that China would win the World Cup in the future (Tan et al. 2016). During a State visit to South Korea in 2011 he expressed his "three wishes" (三大愿望) for Chinese football: that China would qualify for the World Cup, host the World Cup and win the World Cup (Xinkuaibao 2011). More recently, Xi portrayed the nation's football aspirations as part of the "Chinese dream" (中国梦), an expression that has become the ideological trademark of Xi's first mandate (2012-2017). The dream Xi talks about has been defined as the dream of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (中华民族伟大复兴) after the "century of humiliation" (百年国耻) that followed the Opium wars. Implicit in the expression, which is currently at the core of the leadership's discourse, is a conflictual understanding of the relation with the European powers that were considered responsible for China's 19th century decadence (Schell / Delury 2015). The "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" refers to the aspiration to re-establish what is considered China's due position in the world. In other words, it is the idea that, now that the country has reached the highest levels of economic importance in the world, China's "discourse

⁷ China's up-to-date ranking according to the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) can be found at <http://www.fifa.com/fifa-worldranking/associations/association=chn/men/index.html>

⁸ For up-to-date information about the women's ranking see FIFA's website: <http://www.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/associations/association=chn/women/index.html>.

power” (话语权) has to dominate every field (Lavagnino/Mottura 2016), including the realm of sport and the most popular game in the world, football.

A case study: the acquisition of FC Internazionale

On 6 June 2016, the Chinese electronic appliances retail company Suning Commerce Group Co. Ltd. (苏宁云商集团股份有限公司) and the Italian football club Internazionale held a press conference in Nanjing to announce the acquisition of the club by the Chinese company. According to Xinhua News Agency’s (新化社) coverage, the company invested 270 million euro to buy 68,55% of the club’s shares (Xinhua 2016; Xinhua She 2016; Xinhua Ribao 2016). The deal, which should not be seen as an isolated decision taken by a single company,⁹ resonated widely in the world’s media as well as in China’s press, appearing as one of numerous steps taken by the Chinese government and by private businesses to develop Xi’s “football dream”.

Corpus construction and methodology

This case study builds on a corpus of articles belonging to the genre (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993, 2012) of news commentaries (新闻评论)¹⁰ that I retrieved on the online archives of respected Chinese periodicals in Chinese. I selected three news outlets: two specialised periodi-

⁹ This is due to the economic and political motivations for the football reform illustrated in the previous paragraph, and can be inferred from the analysis of the above-mentioned “Comprehensive programme”, which encourages Chinese companies to invest in the football sector as a form of “patriotic” action.

¹⁰ The news commentary is widely recognised as a particularly important genre in Chinese journalism, especially since the 1990s. Among the many scholars who have studied it, see Cheng 2008 and Zhao Z. 2012.

cals (a financial and a sport one); and a non-specialised outlet with direct links to the political authority.

The periodicals I selected are commercial papers: the financial magazine Caixin (财新 Financial News) and the sports weekly Titan Zhoubao (体坛周报 Titan Weekly). The definition of “commercial” (市场化) papers is attached to the outlets that are less directly dependent on the institutions, since their financial resources do not come from a state or Party organisation. Caixin and Titan Zhoubao are both highly respected periodicals. Caixin is considered one of the most outspoken outlets in China, due to its bold, yet political-savvy editor-in-chief, famous journalist Hu Shuli (Shirk 2011: 12-13). Titan Zhoubao was founded in 1998 in Changsha and is now at the centre of a media conglomerate that includes a number of magazines and the news portal www.titan24.com. It is one of the most successful sport papers in the country.

The third outlet included in the corpus is directly financed by the institutions: the government-run Xinhua News Agency. Regardless of the inhomogeneity of the source compared to the periodical press, the special role played by the agency in the Chinese media system makes it impossible to overlook its production. When sensitive topics are at stake, Xinhua’s articles are imposed as the only legal source of information to all the other media of the country, including periodicals (Xin 2012). At a time when football was at the core of the leadership’s discourse, there are reasons to believe that the story of the acquisition of FC Internazionale was guided by the country’s top institutional outlet.

After selecting the sources, I used the publicly available online archives to search for all the articles related to the genre of news commentary that have been published by the outlets in the month when the deal was struck, i.e. between 1st and 30th June 2016. The keywords used were “Suning” and “FC Internazionale” (国际米兰). The total number of news items found was 19, for a total of over 35,000 words, which included different genres, such as news articles, dispatches, sport commentaries and news commentaries. The analysis of the structure and the content was conducted to identify and select only articles belonging to the genre of news commentaries: either editorials (社论), which are anonymous, or commentaries on current

affairs (时评), which are signed by the author,¹¹ for a total of around 10,000 words.

Inspired by Raymond Williams' approach to keywords (Williams 1985; Durant 2008), as a third step I conducted a linguistic analysis of the articles, in order to identify the most meaningful semantic fields and connect them to related keywords. Three dominant semantic fields have been identified, which happen to coincide with the three motivations that I recognised in the actual reform of football: the sport semantic field, represented by the keyword "competitiveness" (竞争能力); the financial semantic field, represented by the keyword "commercial benefits" (商业利益); and the political semantic field, represented by the keyword "national power" (国力). In the next three sub-paragraphs I shall present my linguistic analysis, focused on lexical choices, for each semantic field, moving from the least pervasive to the most pervasive field in the corpus.

The sport field

The semantic field related to sport is the least pervasive of the three in the corpus, which, given the topic, comes as a surprise. Commentaries that look at the story from this angle generally contain positive opinions regarding the acquisition. They describe the sport exchanges between Suning and FC Internazionale as an element that will help improve the performances and competitiveness of the club Jiangsu Suning, the other club owned by the company, which plays in the Chinese Superleague:

- (1) FC Internazionale's advanced management system, scientific training model and youth training branch will help Jiangsu Suning lay the foundations for improving its own results and increasing its own competitiveness¹²

¹¹ A definition of the characteristics of these two sub-genres of the genre of news commentary in Chinese media can be found in Lupano (2018, in press).

¹² Author's translation, unless stated otherwise.

国际米兰先进的足球管理理念，科学的训练体系和青训梯队，都能够帮助江苏苏宁足球俱乐部夯实基础，提高成绩，提升核心竞争力

In addition, the commentaries hold that the deal will have positive effects also on the entire Chinese sport system:

- (2) How can this not be a positive event for the improvement of Chinese football as a whole?
对提升整个中国足球而言又何尝不是一件好事？

It is important to note that the use of the term “competitiveness” is particularly meaningful: the concept of competition in sport was banned in China’s public discourse for a long time, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), since it was considered an element linked to capitalism. The slogan “friendship comes first, competition comes second” (友谊第一 比赛第二), reportedly pronounced by Mao Zedong in 1969 while watching a basketball match (Wang 2003), is considered one of the explanations for China’s lack of sport success in the past.

A general understanding emerging from these commentaries is that football investments are not a private matter or choice, but part of a systemic effort that aims to develop China’s football. For this reason, the writers stress that Suning should become an example for other Chinese companies that, in the context of the fundamental relationship that links business and politics in China, wish to enter the football industry:

- (3) From the experience and lessons of Suning and other companies, companies that aim to enter the sport and football industry can learn how to develop Chinese sport industry and Chinese football
有志于进入体育、足球产业的企业完全可以借鉴苏宁等企业的经验和教训，中国体育产业、中国足球发展的道路

As far as sport is concerned, the deal is presented as a positive initiative: “improvement”, “development”, “increasing” are recurring

words in this section, expressing the idea of growth. Unlike the other semantic fields, China is presented as fully benefitting from European's know-how. The relationship with Europe is presented in peaceful terms here, and a position of superiority is openly recognised to Europe in terms of sport knowledge.

The economic field

As Brownell has argued, since the end of the 1980 Chinese companies and public opinion have become increasingly aware of the economic opportunities offered by sports (1995: 101-102). As a consequence, most articles in the corpus look at the financial aspects of the acquisition. In particular, the focus is on the commercial benefits that the transaction will generate for the Chinese investor, and on the interpretation of the transaction as an important element in the company's internationalisation strategy. In addition to the benefits for the single company, the positive impact on the entire Chinese sports system is emphasized.

In this field, two contrasting opinions appear in the commentaries. On the one hand, the acquisition of FC Internazionale is seen as a financially risky venture:

- (4) Serie A is not financially sound, and the two Milan champions [AC Milan and FC Internazionale] are declining teams
意甲经济不景，米兰双雄衰落

On the other hand, the acquisition of Internazionale is interpreted as a sound commercial opportunity for the company. The operation is believed to produce “commercial benefits” (商业利益) since it will help popularize Suning's “brand” (品牌) beyond China's border, enhancing its international image.

- (5) Suning's acquisition of FC Internazionale has a very important meaning for the company's internationalisation strategy
苏宁并购国米无疑对其国际化战略意义重大

- (6) Looking at the brand and the social value, Suning's initiative will surely enhance its recognition abroad, and it could improve its reputation, serving as a vehicle for its strategic position internationally
如果从品牌、社会价值的角度来衡量的话，苏宁此举无疑将有助于提升其在海外的知名度，抑或可以提升其美誉度，为其海外战略布局做好铺垫

At the same time, the commentators see the deal as an opportunity for the internationalisation of the industry as a whole:

- (7) The acquisition of FC Internazionale is a step in the international development that the company has strived for since 2008, and it is an important component of the international development of the whole industry
并购国米就是苏宁自2008年迈出国际化发展步伐以来，全产业国际化发展的重要组成部分

Some commentaries stress cultural elements as a deciding factor for the success of the investment, when they argue that

- (8) The success [of Suning's investment] will depend on many factors, a crucial one being the blend of cultures and ideas
是否真正成功取决于很多因素，关键之一就在于文化、理念的融合
- (9) Suning's capability to adapt to the Italian culture and to positively blend with the Italian club are very important factors for the internationalisation of FC Internazionale and for its return to the top of European football
苏宁如何适应意大利文化、如何与意大利团队积极融合，对于共同提升国际米兰的国际化发展、使其重回欧洲之巅非常重要

Recurring terms like "brand", "industry", "strategic position" and "internationalisation" are consistent with the semantic field of economy, but in the commentaries they are part of a wider frame that includes not only the individual company that signed the deal, but also the whole nation. Investing in football is therefore presented as an act

of internationalisation that is part of the process of the internationalisation of China's football industry. As such, these investments are understood as a highly patriotic activity because they contribute to the triumph of the nation through sport, as the analysis of the semantic field of politics will show.

The political field

When examining the discourse related to the political dimension, which is the most pervasive in the corpus, references to the desire to build a strong and rich Chinese nation emerge. The occurrence in sports-related commentaries of terms used in international relations such as “hard power” (硬实力) suggests a tendency to interpret China's football success as a manifestation of the nation's success. In many cases, the discourse is extremely explicit: the development of football is presented as a sign of national achievement, and a means for China to re-affirm its symbolic heritage in the face of international powers. For this reason, the acquisition of Internazionale unleashes a feeling of pride.

The commentaries celebrate the deal as a milestone, stressing that for the first time a Chinese company has taken control of a football club with international influence. The feeling of achievement is palpable:

- (10) Starting today, Chinese blood is running in the army of the Nerazzurri
从今天开始, 蓝黑军团将流淌着中国的血液

The achievement is directly linked to the Party's governance when the commentaries claim that the deal is the result of “favourable policies” (利好政策) that have started a new era for China's sport industry:

- (11) The publication of these favourable policies has opened up a new era for the Chinese sport industry and defends and protects the development of Chinese football
种种利好政策的问世为中国体育产业开启了新时代, 也为中国足球的发展保驾护航

Suning's acquisition is described as a sign of the newly affirmed supremacy of Beijing in the world, and the realization of a triumph over the "old European continent" (老欧洲). According to this narrative, the countries that humiliated China in the second half of the 19th century through the Opium wars have now been conquered by Chinese capital:

- (12) China's purchasing power is making Europe nervous
中国购买力让欧洲感到紧张
- (13) It has also made the old European continent declare that "it has been subjugated by China's purchasing power"
更是让“老欧洲”发出了“中国购买力正征服欧洲”的惊呼

Some commentators stress the powerful emotional impact that the acquisition of Internazionale had on Chinese football lovers:

- (14) FC Internazionale is one of the most famous European teams, and it was the first to make it to the hearts of Chinese fans when CCTV started to broadcast Serie A
国际米兰是中国最著名的欧洲顶级俱乐部之一，是中央电视台开播意甲后第一批进入中国球迷心灵的球队
- (15) The shock for the Chinese fans has been different, as many of them have told me: "Since I have watched the Serie A as a kid, I never even dreamt that one day in the future a Chinese person could buy the Milan teams!"
它对中国球迷的心理震撼完全不同，正如不少球迷对笔者道出的心声：“我从小看意甲时，做梦也没想过有朝一日中国人会买下米兰双雄！”
- (16) Today's acquisition, which has made [FC Internazionale] the asset of a Chinese, is like the case of a kid who, after staring at a toy in a shop window that he could not afford as a child, having grown up and having made a career for himself has now become able to own that very toy

如今将其收购，变成中国人自己的资产，就好像一个小时候羡慕地盯着玩具橱窗的少年孩童，成为一个成熟壮实的成年人后，有了自己的事业，儿时看得起买不起的玩具，现在可以拥有了。

The same concept is also expressed literally:

- (17) With the growth of China's economic power and the continuous rise of its national power, the attitude of Chinese fans towards the Milan teams has gone from unconditional devotion and admiration to a rational view
随着中国经济的强劲增长，国力日益提升，中国球迷对米兰双雄的态度，也从过去无条件的仰视膜拜变为理性的平视

To some commentators, the effect of Suning's acquisition will go so far as to change China's position in the world. In this view, China has gained more "discourse power" (话语权) in the circles of international football, which is an expression of its soft power (软实力):

- (18) The Chinese must have gained more discourse power on the international football stage, which is an expression of Chinese soft power, and of the vigorous improvement of China's position in football
中国人在国际足坛也必然拥有更多话语权，这是中国国家软实力的体现，也是中国大力提高足球的姿态
- (19) From now on, Europe cannot avoid facing China's power
这些都迫使欧洲人不得不正视中国实力的插足
- (20) FC Internazionale now has legitimate reasons to request that the most important matches will be organised in the week-end prime time, in order to satisfy the Chinese audience
今后国际米兰就有充足理由，要求将重量级对决安排在周末黄金时段，满足中国观众。

The sense of pride in the face of the traditional football powerhouses is clear. This discourse emphasises China's triumph over Europe: the country can now advance "legitimate" requests that will gradually change the football world order, having gained a prominent position on the "international football stage". This power firmly relies on the

economic power displayed by China (through a company owned by a Chinese person): verbs and nouns related to possession, purchasing, buying, affording, and even the image of the shop window all confirm the strong link between China's national power and its economic power. This purchasing power is depicted in a conflictual frame and presented as a tool of resurgence in the face of the European powers. The narrative of conflict that informs the media discourse on the acquisition of FC Internazionale emerges most clearly in sentences and metaphors where terms such as "blood", "army" and "subjugate" are used.

Football as a field for conflict (and supremacy) discourse

This paper aimed to show how a sport-related story has been used by the Chinese periodical press as an opportunity to promote a discourse of conflict and supremacy over European countries, in agreement with the current leadership's political discourse on the "Chinese dream" of a rich and strong country that re-establishes its due position against Europe's past supremacy

While the crucial role played by politics in promoting and developing the globalisation of Chinese football has already been highlighted by scholars (Tan/Bainer 2010), the analysis of the media narrative on a specific case like the acquisition of FC Internazionale highlights the centrality of the political factor in the promotion of the football reform programme.

The narrative emerging from the analysis of the corpus stresses the positive effects of the deal, in line with the leadership's discourse on football. The acquisition of FC Internazionale is portrayed as the symbol of a nationalist resurgence, which is discursively presented as an achievement based on China's economic power and described with words belonging to the semantic field of conflict. The intertwining of economic and political motives that is implicit in the project of globalisation of Chinese football appears where the success of a private

company based on Chinese capitals is described as the success of the entire country, while the financial takeover of a football club is presented as an act of redemption of China from a shameful past. In this narrative, investments made by Chinese companies and individuals embody the “purchasing power” (购买力) of the country. Such commercial and financial power responds to institutional calls and is represented as a collective force that embodies China’s “national power” (国力) in the world, linking the economic and political aspects of the Chinese football development project even more strongly.

The commentaries also suggest that the plan to transform China into a football power is useful to nurture China’s soft power both abroad (by popularizing its image and its business brands through football), and at home. The country’s financial power triggers patriotic feelings and supports the Party’s political project.

The promotion of nationalism and patriotism is obtained through the representation of sport as an arena of power contention, through the interpretation of economic power as national power, and through the presentation of China’s emerging role in football as a symbol of nationalistic triumph over Europe’s past supremacy. This is in fascinating contrast with the use, within the same discourse, of equivalent translations and phonetic loans (Masini 1993; Bulfoni 2009) taken from English, such as “football”, which is translated in Chinese as 足球, where 足 means ‘foot’ and 球 means ‘ball’; and “derby”, which is translated phonetically in Chinese with the word 德比.

As a final remark, it is important to underline that China’s new regulations issued since June 2017 to slow down the football “buying fever” internationally did not lead to a slowdown of the reform of football, as the abundant Chinese academic production on the subject shows.¹³ Chinese scholars’ attention for this theme is a sign of its persisting relevance in the country’s public discourse, and confirms the

¹³ My latest search (19.08.2018) on the Chinese academic papers database www.cnki.net resulted in a list of 2100 and 3581 articles on the subject of Chinese football published in 2018 and 2017 respectively. The numbers were similar in previous years, with 2266, 2960 and 3130 papers on football published in 2014, 2015 and 2016 respectively.

important role played by sport in the political, economic and social life of contemporary China.

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