

Dreams: The Pursuit of Consensus and the Display of National Power:

Chinese Soccer Softpower Narratives

Emma Lupano¹

Abstract:

This chapter discusses sport in Chinese public discourse as a means of internal softpower focusing on the case of soccer. It offers insights into China's current use of sport for internal political purposes through a language based analysis of China's official and media narratives on football. The opening section describes how, during his first mandate, the President of the People's Republic of China and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, presented himself as the main promoter of the comprehensive plan to transform China into an Association Football (soccer) powerhouse and has portrayed these aspirations as part of the "Chinese Dream". The intertwining of China's ambition to become a sports powerhouse with the "Chinese Dream" suggests that China's sports results should match the country's economic and geopolitical performances. The chapter also discusses the relationship between the official and the media discourse in an information system tightly controlled by the government, the Party, or other administrative institutions at central and local level. It highlights how Xi's strategy on soccer appears to build on a tradition, dating back to Mao Zedong, of leaders using sport as a means to create consensus and display national power both domestically and internationally. The "Comprehensive programme for the reform and development of Chinese soccer"-an ambitious 50-point plan (the Programme) issued by the State Council in 2015 to outline the government's all-round strategy to fulfill China's aspiration to

become a leading player in soccer at global level-is presented within the context of China's interpretation of cultural industries as a tool to enhance softpower. A language-based analysis of the Programme is carried out in order to identify the most relevant keywords and thematic frames that characterize the official discourse on the reform of soccer in China. This contribution also examines the acquisition of the Italian soccer club *FC Internazionale* by the Chinese company Suning, a purchase considered one of the most significant deals signed by the government or private business in order to develop Xi's soccer dream. This section analyses how the purchase of the Italian club in June 2016 was discussed by the Chinese press. To do so, it provides a language-based analysis of a corpus of news commentaries published in a selection of Chinese newspapers after the announcement of the deal. In the concluding section, the convergence of the official and the media discourse on soccer is assessed, and their use of soccer as a means to enhance internal softpower is outlined.

Keywords: *China, soccer, softpower, Suning, FC Internazionale, media, official discourse, Xi Jinping, sports industry*

Introduction

This chapter discusses sport in Chinese public discourse as a means of internal softpower focusing on the case of soccer. China's comparatively recent arrival on the global soccer stage

has attracted abundant media coverage in the Western world, especially regarding the financial aspects of the development of soccer at both grassroots and elite levels. Chinese and international research on the political meaning of the phenomenon is fast becoming a prominent phenomenon, as illustrated in this collection.

Since the Mao Zedong era (1949-1976), sport has been used in the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a tool for the promotion of patriotism and nationalism. While, in more recent times, the Chinese leadership has used events like the Beijing Olympics to demonstrate to the world China's impressive modernity and increasing power, this chapter will focus on the current political use of sport for *internal*, as opposed to *external*, softpower. This will be done primarily through a language-based analysis of internal discussions relating to soccer in the Chinese print media.

A core question underlying this analysis is whether a correspondence exists between the official and the media discourse on the subject. This is explored by looking specifically at the media coverage regarding the acquisition of FC Internazionale² by the Chinese company Suning in June 2016 - a deal which was considered politically important and newsworthy as it was the first acquisition of a successful, established European soccer club by a Chinese business.³ This coverage is an illustrative case-study of China spreading its global soccer wings.

It is worth underlining that the term “official discourse” is used in this chapter to refer to the statements issued by the political authorities in China, be they Party organs, administrative organs, or political leaders. This approach is inspired by Perry Link’s study on the relationship between the official (political and politically-correct) language and the unofficial.⁴

The analysis of the Suning-FC Internazionale case study is based on the presumption that the Chinese media, as outlined in a corpus of selected media texts on the event, should echo the Chinese official position on soccer. The expectation of a correspondence (in meaning and intertextual terms) is in the main due to two factors. Firstly, the importance attached by the current Chinese leadership to the development of soccer in the country, and secondly the tight political control still in place in all Chinese media, especially on issues that the political leadership considers to be crucial. Nevertheless, this expectation needs to be verified given the many alterations that have been made in the media system since the launch of the reforms in 1978, which have generated significant changes in the areas of the production and administration of the media and even in the crucial aspect of the language used in journalistic writing.⁵

This chapter aims to demonstrate that both the official and the media approaches to soccer are part of a consensus-building process that aims to enhance public patriotic feelings by delivering a consistent message. This continues the strategy pursued by the country’s leadership since 2007⁶ that considers cultural industries, including the sports industry, as the central agencies

from which national softpower policies radiate.⁷ Since this chapter focuses on Chinese-language media published in China, the discussion is placed within the analytic framework of internal softpower (内部软实力), which Chinese scholars have distinguished from its external counterpart (外部软实力).⁸

It will attempt to show how the media narrative on the purchase of the Italian club in June 2016 echoed the official line on China's re-established national power *vis-a-vis* Western countries conforming with the discourse on the "Chinese Dream" (中国梦), which has been used in recent years to solidify national consensus around the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule. The chapter begins with a discussion on both the reasons behind China's soccer reforms and the characteristics of the official associated statements on the development of soccer, followed by a language-based analysis of the "Comprehensive programme for the reform and development of Chinese soccer" (中国足球改革发展总体方案), issued by the State Council in 2015. Subsequently, a case study will be introduced in which it is argued that in the Chinese media coverage in relation to Suning's acquisition of *FC Internazionale* the building of political consensus has been pursued by stimulating patriotic and nationalistic feelings and by presenting sport as an arena for the display of national power. On the basis of the relationship between cultural industries and softpower, and of the overlap between the institutional and the media commentaries on the subject, it is argued here that this operation is a conscious exercise of internal softpower.

Official Narratives: Xi Jinping's Soccer Dream

As noted in several chapters in this collection, during his first mandate (2012-2017), the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, has put the development of soccer at the fore of the national agenda, presenting himself as the main advocate of a comprehensive plan to transform China into a soccer powerhouse. He has portrayed these aspirations as part of the “Chinese Dream”, his trademark expression used to portray his ambition for a “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.⁹ The rejuvenation, which is realized via China's economic supremacy and other tools of hard power, has to establish itself, according to Chinese theorization, also through softpower,¹⁰ i.e. via China's language and culture-including popular culture, which includes sport.

In this view, sport, and especially soccer, in recent years, represents one of the areas in which China aims to establish its global dominance, following the logic that a correspondence is not only needed between the country's economic power and its “discourse power” (话语权), but also its sporting power.¹¹ But while China has fully showed its capability to compete at the highest levels in Olympic sports at the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, where Chinese athletes won 51 gold medals,¹² as far as soccer is concerned, such success is proving far more elusive.

As far back as 1950, it is reported that Deng Xiaoping's said that he loved soccer, but felt like he was suffocating every time he watched the national team play.¹³ Almost 70 years later, the national team is still far from the top of the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) ranking, and too close to the teams of countries with much less economic and demographic relevance.¹⁴ This situation creates a sense of frustration among the growing number of soccer fans in the PRC¹⁵ and is considered a source of national shame.¹⁶ Unlike the women's national team, which has reached the highest levels internationally and currently ranks among the top twenty in the world,¹⁷ the men's team has qualified for the World Cup only once, in 2002. In addition, the team was defeated in all three of their group matches, scoring no goals and conceding nine.¹⁸

Described as a soccer enthusiast and fan since childhood, and as a decent player in his school team, the image of Xi Jinping has been circulating around the world in a series of pictures that show him either in the company of international soccer champions or kicking a soccer ball.¹⁹ The Chinese media reports that Xi Jinping started to talk about soccer as a national priority when he was still serving as vice-president of the PRC in 2009. He reportedly claimed then that it was necessary to promote elite soccer in China and admitted that he hoped that China would win the World Cup in the future.²⁰ During a State visit to South Korea in 2011 he expressed his now famous "three wishes" (三大愿望) for Chinese soccer: that China would qualify for the World Cup, host the World Cup and win the World Cup.²¹ In 2015 the State Council issued the "Comprehensive programme for the reform and development of Chinese

soccer” (中国足球改革发展总体方案, referred to below as “Programme” or “50-point plan”), a document that outlines, through a long list of detailed instructions organised in 50 points, the government’s all-round strategy to fulfill the aspiration of becoming a leading player in soccer at global level.²²

As discussed and stressed in several contributions to this collection, the importance attributed by Xi Jinping to soccer comes from a range of motivations that exist at sport, economic and political levels. Firstly, at the sport level, the frustration that comes from an ever-unsuccessful national men’s team drives measures to improve the level of the game in the country, stimulated in part by the realization that soccer is not the most popular game to play among the young. Importing foreign talents, players and coaches, acquiring foreign clubs in the hope of also acquiring some of their know-how, and popularizing the game at grassroots level are some of the responses to this frustration. In order to stimulate sport among amateurs, the government has introduced soccer as a compulsory subject in schools and has started to build thousands of facilities in the country, with the aim to promote a healthy lifestyle and to nurture promising athletes to raise the level of the game at national and international level.²³ Among the objectives outlined in the 50-points plan is the aim to produce 100,000 new players and the opening of 50,000 specialized schools dedicated to soccer by 2025. An early example is the Academy created by the club Guangzhou Evergrande in Guangdong province, equipped with forty-eight pitches and twenty-four coaches from Spain to train aspiring champions.²⁴

Secondly, at the economic level, China's decision to invest in the development of soccer stems from the need to promote new promising industries, in the context of the "New normal" (新常态) economic slowdown,²⁵ and in the transition from the "world's factory" model to a model focused on culture and services²⁶ as indicated 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).²⁷ In that document, published in May 2017, the cultural industry is defined as a "pillar" of China's development. This has spurred Chinese companies and clubs to invest heavily in the sector, both domestically and abroad. The result has been a shopping spree of players, coaches and clubs that the Chinese media has referred to using the expression "buy buy buy" (买买买): by repeating the verb "to buy" (买), the string suggests the idea of a "buying fever".²⁸ The country's political system supported this shopping spree particularly until the summer of 2017, when the political atmosphere changed regarding some aspects of the soccer development programme. Huge investments in foreign clubs and players started to receive less institutional support, and even suffered heavy limitations from June 2017 with regulations that discouraged Chinese Super League clubs from making expensive signings from European leagues and other Asia Federation players. Following a new regulation approved in May 2017 by the Chinese Soccer Association (中国足球协会) and implemented from June 2017, Chinese Super League clubs who buy overseas players have to pay the equivalent of 100 per cent of the transfer fee into a national fund for the development of youth soccer in China-unless they are profitable clubs.²⁹ The new rule targeted the internationally-

oriented shopping spree in an attempt to slow down investments abroad, but the main aim of this and further limitations³⁰ was, and still is, to produce home-based players.³¹

Thirdly, at political level, the current leadership believes that success in soccer can be used as a propaganda tool directed at both national and international audiences. Many scholars have already underlined that China's capability to compete in other major sports contributes to a positive and modern image abroad of both the country and its rulers. Domestically, the success of Chinese teams and athletes on the world stage is used to build popular consensus towards the CCP's project and to nurture patriotism. Sport has played this role in the media's political coverage since the Mao Zedong era³²: as shown by iconic movies such as "Woman Basketball Player No 5" (女篮五号 [1957]), by Xie Jin (谢晋); propaganda posters on sport between 1950s-80s³³; and the political use of large-scale events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics.³⁴

The Programme for the Reform and Development of Chinese Soccer: an Analysis

In the 50-point plan, organized in 11 sections, the Programme lays down a long list of instructions on how to promote the institutional reform, popularization, professionalization and internationalization of soccer, and in doing so, essentially outlines Xi Jinping's aspirations for soccer in China over the next three decades.

In the introductory part, the document declares that its aim is to describe the strategy to “build a sports powerhouse” (建设体育强国), since the “revitalization of soccer” (振兴足球) is an “inevitable requirement” (必然要求) in order to “realize the dream of a sports powerhouse” (实现体育强国梦), while also being something that “the masses are eagerly awaiting” (人民群众的热切期盼).

Some sections touch on different aspects of sport and its practice. Sections 2, 3 and 4 discuss the reorganization of the institutions and bodies that control soccer in the country and that supervise the game; Sections 5, 6, 9 call for the promotion of soccer at the popular level and also the need to produce more players able to play at the elite levels; Section 7 outlines measures that could facilitate the effective professionalization of the sector, especially with reference to administrative and support staff. Section 10 presents policies regarding investments, while political and propaganda-related elements can be found in Section 8, dedicated to the national team.

Inspired by Raymond Williams’ approach to keywords,³⁵ this chapter contains a qualitative analysis of the language and content of the document, in order to identify the most significant thematic dimensions and related keywords. The focus is on three key dimensions: the sports dimension, represented by the keyword “sports powerhouse” (体育强国); the economic dimension, represented by the keyword “sports industry” (体育产业) and the political

dimension with regard to the realm of “ideological and moral education” (思想品德教育) (See, Table 1).

Table 1: Programme: Recurring Frames and Related Keywords

Frame	Keyword
Sports dimension	“Sports powerhouse” 体育强国
Economic dimension	“Sports industry” 体育产业
Political dimension	“Ideological and moral education” 思想品德教育

“Sports Powerhouse” (体育强国)

As a general approach, Point 2, in Section 1, suggests the “combination of national characteristics with international experience” (立足国情与借鉴国际经验相结合): “starting from the state of Chinese soccer, learning from the experience of the countries where soccer is more developed” (从我国足球实际出发，学习借鉴足球发达国家经验) should allow China to find “a new way for the reform and development of soccer with Chinese characteristics” (一条中国特色足球改革发展新路). This point underlines the importance to develop a “sport spirit” (体育精神) and stresses that the reform of soccer aims to (also) “promote the health of

the entire population and strengthen the people's constitution" (推动全民健身，增强人民体质).

In Section 5, the emphasis is on the need to develop soccer in schools in order to create a wider base of keen practitioners and potential talent by taking soccer into both primary and secondary schools. The construction of local amateur clubs is also recommended, which would coincide with the creation of hundreds of new soccer fields in the country, as explained in Section 9. These objectives are to be reached in the short or medium terms, during which time China will concentrate on creating the right "environment for the development of soccer" (足球发展的环境)³⁶ and on developing a "model of management with Chinese characteristics" (中国特色足球管理模式).³⁷ After achieving the mid-term objective of becoming a dominant player in Asia, the Programme maintains that in the long term it will be necessary that the men's national team will improve "competitiveness" (竞争力)³⁸ if it is to become one of the top soccer nations.

One of the processes that will help China to become a global sports powerhouse is the professionalization of the game, which, the Programme states, should coincide with the process of internationalization of staff and structures. The document also declares that the quality of the personnel in all areas of the game will need to improve, particularly in the domain of player recruitment, and a "modern-style soccer management" (现代足球管理)³⁹ will need to be adopted by all professional clubs. Section 2 encourages international staff exchanges and

Section 5 states that the level of coaching must be improved also by employing coaches from overseas, as they are better prepared and are more specialized in the technical and tactical areas than those trained in China. Point 28, in Section 7, maintains that there is a necessity to expand the “professional strength” (专业力量) also at the organizational levels of the sport, with staff being able to adapt to the new required levels of “specialization and internationalization” (专业化、国际化) needed for the management of a modern-style professional sport.

In order to promote the professionalization of players the Programme calls for the creation of specialist schools and academies dedicated to soccer. This will require that teachers be trained as soccer specialists, and that international and Chinese “experts” (专业人才)⁴⁰ be employed in order to guarantee the modernization of the game at grassroots level in China, as explained at Point 33, Section 8. Once there are enough players of sufficient quality, selected players should also be sent abroad to advance their skills by playing in the leagues of “developed countries” (发达国家).⁴¹

Section 8, which covers the national team, also states that a very special effort needs to be made regarding the improvement of the national team by embracing all aspects of the most modern “scientific research” (科研)⁴² and by competing at tournaments in Asia and globally. It also focuses on aspects that have little to do with the improvement of the players’ athletic performances, saying that the team has to “enhance the feeling of national glory” (增强国家

荣誉感),⁴³ “promote China’s sport spirit” (弘扬中华体育精神)⁴⁴ and accumulate victories to “stimulate youth enthusiasm” (激发青少年热情).⁴⁵ The selection of the national team, it maintains, should give priority to players who have “a strong desire to serve the country” (为国效力愿望强烈).⁴⁶ Ideological correctness must always prevail over athletic performance.

“Sports Industry” (体育产业)

The cornerstone for the development of a sport industry in China, and of the idea that sport, like other cultural industries, is key to the transformation of the country’s economy, was a document, “Opinions on the acceleration of the development of sport industry and the promotion of sport consumption” (国务院关于加快发展体育产业促进体育消费的若干意见), published by the State Council in 2014.⁴⁷ It pressed for the popularization of sport products and services and for the creation of a Chinese sport industry as an important force driving the transformation of the Chinese economy. The report referred to soccer, basketball and volleyball as the key disciplines to popularize sport in the country.

The 50-point plan of 2015, elaborating on the content of the 2014 document at different points, refers to soccer as an industry. In the introduction, it stresses that Xi Jinping has mentioned many times the need to develop a soccer industry and that, according to studies by the State

Council, developing soccer is an “unprecedented opportunity” (前所未有的大好机遇) for the country.

Point 42, in Section 10, emphasizes the need to “strengthen the development of soccer industry” (加强足球产业开发) through the creation of products related to soccer, cultivating the “market of services linked to soccer” (足球服务市场) and exploring the “convergence between the soccer industry and its related industries” (足球产业与相关产业的融合). In the same section, Point 44 encourages individuals and “powerful and famous companies” (有实力的知名企业) to invest in professional soccer clubs. It is crystal-clear that such initiatives made by private Chinese companies, such as investment in national and international soccer clubs, cannot be viewed as actions that are completely independent from politics.

“Ideological and Moral Education” (思想品德教育)

The Programme contains many references to honesty and morality and to fighting unlawful and even criminal activities in soccer. Corruption, that has been endemic in the sector, is considered among the reasons for the lack of development of soccer in China.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the plea for scaling up control and for the adoption of a code of conduct for professional players and soccer organizations actually points at the consideration of both political and moral principles. This can be seen in the final section of the Programme which look at the ideological

aspects linked to the promotion of soccer. The emphasis is upon the “strengthening of moral and ideological education and on professional ethics” (加强足球领域的思想品德教育和职业道德教育),⁴⁹ on team spirit and determination in sport, but also on the need to “cultivate patriotism, fortitude, solidarity” (培养爱国奉献、坚忍不拔、团结拼搏的作风).⁵⁰ This, the Programme says, has positive effects on “social harmony” (社会和谐),⁵¹ which would be supported by the “maximization of the consensus around the reform and development of soccer” (最大限度凝聚足球改革发展共识).⁵²

So how to build the consensus around the reform of soccer? According to Point 49, Section 11, “propaganda has to guide the masses to understand the current situation of soccer” (宣传引导群众客观认识足球现状) by using an innovative approach. But no innovation is contained in the keywords on media and public opinion supervision presented in this section such as “strengthening soccer news management” (强化涉足球新闻管理) and “channeling public opinion” (舆论引导).⁵³

In the Name of the Nation

As the analysis of the document showed, in the Programme’s discussion, the development of a soccer industry in China (which is needed to support the promotion of the country’s economy) appears strictly connected to the process of professionalization, which is described as linked to

the internationalization of the sector. The acquisition of know-how and talents from abroad and the development of international exchanges are presented as necessary to reach the goal of a modern-style management of soccer.

This logic echoes a principle that has been at the centre of the country's debate on modernization since the late Qing dynasty, i.e. the idea that Western technological and scientific knowledge should be used as a tool, while retaining China's traditional culture and values, as expressed by intellectuals like Zhang Zhidong (张之洞) in the end of 19th century.⁵⁴

As stated in Point 1, Section 1 of the Programme, in the “scientific development” (科学发展) of soccer, China aims to promote the nationalistic goal to transform the country into a sports powerhouse, and plans to reach this objective by relying on knowledge coming from abroad. Nevertheless, the so-called “Chinese characteristics” (中国特色)⁵⁵ should not be overlooked, as the Programme lists the patriotic duties of athletes and other professionals.

The construction of a soccer industry, as has been made clear above, ultimately aims to enhance national power. For this reason, in the Programme, encouragement of companies and private citizens to invest in soccer and the use of their brands abroad sounds like a call to join a political and geopolitical mission in the name of the country.

The popularization of the game at the grassroots level also appears in the Programme. The effort to promote sport in the country was described also in the 2016-2020 Five-year Plan as a

way to support people's health. In the case of soccer, one aim is to ensure more players in order to create more talent; another is to encourage a population of soccer fans. Offering chances for recreation and enjoyment is among the Party's new priorities for the express purpose of promoting the legitimacy of the CCP.⁵⁶

Media Analysis: the Case of FC Internazionale

In this part, the case study will be scrutinized by building upon the language-based analysis of a corpus of articles belonging to the genre⁵⁷ of news commentaries published in a selection of Chinese papers after the announcement of the deal. Suning Commerce Group Co. Ltd. (苏宁云商集团股份有限公司) and Italy's FC Internazionale held a press conference in Nanjing on 6 June 2016 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 the 68.55% of the club's shares.⁵⁸ The deal, as the analysis of the Programme has clearly showed, should be seen as tied to the country's policies. It was publicized widely in the world's media as well as in China's press, and appeared to be one of many steps taken by the Chinese government and by private businesses to develop Xi's soccer dream.

The complexity of China's media system and of the changes occurred over the last 40 years, since the beginning of the media reform in 1978, cannot be summarized here in a few lines. Nevertheless, it is necessary to at least underline that regardless of the reform, China's media

is still firmly controlled by the political authorities both in institutional outlets, which are still financed by the Party or other public bodies, and in commercial outlets, which are not financially supported by public entities.⁵⁹ Administrative and political institutions such as the CCP's Propaganda Department supervise traditional and new media production at different levels.⁶⁰ Journalistic work is also controlled through professional regulations, since the possibility to publish and to retain a position in media organisations is linked to political correctness: journalists are ultimately responsible to the leadership and are officially required to follow and represent the Party line, in order to influence public opinion on behalf of the political authorities.⁶¹

These are the reasons why assumptions can be made about a general consistency between the official and the media discourse, especially in Xi Jinping's China, given the perceived tightening of public opinion control under his rule.⁶²

As explained earlier, this case study is based on a corpus of articles belonging to the genre of news commentaries (新闻评论)⁶³ retrieved on the online archives of respected Chinese newspapers in Chinese. Three types of news outlets were selected: two specialized periodicals (a financial and a sport one); a non-specialized outlet; and a non-specialized outlet with direct links to the political authority.

The specialized periodicals selected are commercial newspapers: the financial magazine *Caixin* (财新 Financial News) and the sports weekly *Titan Zhoubao* (体坛周报 Titan Weekly). The attribute “commercial” or “commercialized” (市场化) is attached to the outlets that are less directly dependent from the institutions, since their financial resources do not come from a State or Party organisation. *Caixin* and *Titan Zhoubao* are both highly respected commercial periodicals. *Caixin* is considered one of the most outspoken outlets in China, due to its bold, yet politically-savvy editor-in-chief (until January 2018⁶⁴) Hu Shuli.⁶⁵ *Titan Zhoubao*, which 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, is one of the most successful sports papers in the country. The commercial daily *Xin Jing Bao* (新京报 Beijing News) is a non-specialized outlet that, at the time of publication, was considered by practitioners as the most independent in the current scenario, especially for the quality of its news commentaries.⁶⁶

A mix of commercial and institutional media (机关媒体) in the corpus should allow a higher degree of variation between the opinions expressed, since commercial papers’ news commentaries tend to express more independent views.⁶⁷ Thus, the government-run Xinhua News Agency is included in the corpus, because of the special role it plays in the Chinese media system. Xinhua is *the* voice of the institutions and, when sensitive topics are being discussed, its articles are imposed as the only legal source of information to all the other media of the country.⁶⁸ The story of the acquisition of FC Internazionale, at a time when soccer was

at the core of the leadership's discourse, is likely to have been guided by the top institutional outlet.

After selecting the sources, their publicly available online archives was selected to search for news commentaries that have been published in the month when the deal was signed, i.e. between 1 and 30 June 2016. The keywords used were “Suning” (苏宁) and “FC Internazionale” (国际米兰). The total number of news items found was 25, corresponding to over 41,000 words, which included genres such as news articles, dispatches, sport commentaries and news commentaries. Analysis of the structure and the content allowed the selection of 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,⁶⁹ amounting to a total of 12,000 words.

Following the same keyword approach used in the case of the Programme, a qualitative analysis of the language and content of the articles was conducted, in order to identify the most significant thematic dimensions and related keywords. Three dominant thematic dimensions were identified: the sports dimension, represented by the keyword “competitiveness” (竞争能力); the financial dimension, represented by the keyword “commercial benefits” (商业利益); and the political dimension, represented by the keyword “national power” (国力) (See, Table

2). They coincide with the areas to which the reform of soccer is linked, and to the frames identified in the analysis of the Programme.

The next three sub-paragraphs will analyze each of them from the least pervasive to the most pervasive dimension in the corpus.

Table 2-Suning-FC Internazionale: recurring frames and related keywords

Frame	Keyword
Sports dimension	“Competitiveness” 竞争能力
Economic dimension	“Commercial benefits” 商业利益)
Political dimension	“National power” 国力

“Competitiveness” (竞争能力)

The sports dimension is the least pervasive of the three in the corpus. Commentaries that look at the story from this angle generally contain positive opinions regarding the acquisition. They consider future soccer exchanges between Suning and FC Internazionale as an element that will help improve the performances and competitiveness of Jiangsu Suning, the other club owned by the company, which plays in the Chinese Super League. The deal, the commentaries say, will have positive effects also on the “Chinese sport system” (中国体育系统) as a whole.

The recurrence of the term “competitiveness” (竞争能力) is particularly meaningful, since the concept of competition in sport was banned in China’s public discourse for a long time, because it was considered an element linked to capitalism.⁷⁰

The general understanding emerging from these commentaries is that, as underlined previously, soccer investments are not a private matter or choice, but part of a systemic effort that aims to develop China’s soccer in order to contribute to the triumph of the nation through sport.⁷¹ They are, therefore, to be considered a highly patriotic activity. For this reason, the commentators also stress that Suning should become an example for other Chinese companies that, within the frame of the now fundamental relationship that links business and politics in China, aim to enter the soccer industry: learning from Suning’s experience, others will be able to find their own way to “develop Chinese soccer” (发展中国足球), and to support the growth of the “Chinese sports industry” (中国体育产业).

“Commercial Benefits” (商业利益)

The first time that Chinese companies were encouraged by political authorities to invest in sport through commercial sponsorship was at the 1987 National Games.⁷² Since then, Chinese companies and public opinion have become increasingly aware of the economic opportunities offered by sport, and one of the recurring aspects of the corpus is to 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 internationalization strategy. In addition to the benefits for the company, the positive impact on the entire Chinese sports system is emphasized.

Regarding this dimension, two contrasting opinions appear in the commentaries. One sees the acquisition of FC Internazionale as a risky venture, stressing that “Serie A is not financially sound” (意甲经济不景). The argument is as follows: FC Internazionale is a “declining” (衰落) club, therefore, in order to gain significant commercial benefits from the investment, Suning will have to interrupt the “vicious circle” (恶性循环) in which the club is now in, where “failure produces a drop in revenue, a drop in revenue produces a drop in investments and a drop in investments produces failure” (战绩差导致收入更差、收入差导致投入更低、投入更低导致战绩越差). Commentaries also warn the company that FC Internazionale could be just a “money-eating slot-machine” (吃钱的老虎机).

The other point of view interprets the acquisition of the Italian team as a sound commercial opportunity for the Chinese company. The operation is believed to produce “commercial benefits” (商业利益) since it will help popularize Suning's brand and improve its “international fame” (在海外的知名度) and reputation. This will give Suning a strategic position in the international market and will help popularize the “Chinese managerial and commercial model” (中国管理和商业模式). These commentaries also maintain that the

investment has “a very important meaning” (意义重大) for Suning’s “internationalization strategy” (国际化战略) as well as for the internationalization of the whole sector.

Some commentaries stress cultural elements as a deciding factor for the success of the investment: the operation will allow the Chinese company to “imprint the brand of its own corporate culture” (打上自己的企业文化烙印), but only if it will base its activity on the “complete understanding of Italian culture” (充分了解意大利文化).

An important point emerging from the analysis of the financial dimension of the corpus is that investing in soccer is an act of internationalization that does not only regard the company involved, but that it is part of the process of the internationalization of China’s soccer sector as a whole.

“National Power” (国力)

When examining the discussion related to the political dimension, which is the most pervasive in the corpus, an implicit desire to build a strong and rich Chinese nation emerges. The use in sports-related commentaries of terms employed in international relations such as “hard power” (硬实力) suggests a tendency to interpret China’s soccer success as a manifestation of the nation’s success. In many cases, the discussion is extremely explicit: the development of soccer

is a 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 FC 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 soccer club with international influence. The feeling of achievement is palpable: “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), an achievement that is due to the Party’s actions, since “favourable policies” (利好政策) have started a new era for China’s sport industry.

The event 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 point of view, the countries that humiliated China in the second half of the 19th century through the Opium wars have now been conquered by Chinese capital: “To catch French and European people by surprise” (让法国人乃至欧洲人措手不及) is the fact that the “buying fever” (买买买) has started to “target the very structure of businesses” (瞄准这些商家本身), as the acquisition of FC Internazionale, “the famous Italian soccer club with more than a hundred years of history” (有 100 多年历史的意大利著名足球俱乐部), shows. For such reasons, China’s “purchasing power” (购买力) is making Europe “nervous” (感到紧张). The

acquisition of FC Internazionale “has made the proud old European continent admit that ‘it has been subjugated by China’s purchasing power’” (更是让的“老欧洲”发出了“中国购买力正征服欧洲”的惊呼).

The phenomenon is explained as rooted in the global economic crisis and in China’s economic slowdown. Both forces, the commentaries argue, have encouraged Beijing to look for know-how and advanced technologies outside of its borders, and European companies are “a good opportunity for China’s explosive shopping” (中国‘爆买’的良机).

Some commentators stress the emotional impact that the acquisition of FC Internazionale had on Chinese soccer lovers. In the past, they argue, when Chinese fans watched Serie A, they were like “kids standing in front of a shop window, looking at toys” (羡慕地盯着玩具橱窗的少年孩童) that they knew they could not afford. FC Internazionale is described as one of the first clubs to win the heart of the Chinese fans when CCTV started to broadcast Serie A, so the posters of *Nerazzurri* stars such as Lothar Matthaus and Jurgen Klinsmann have featured on “the fans' bedheads” (在球迷的床头) for a long time. At that time, Chinese supporters “could not even dream” (做梦也没想过) that the Milan club could become Chinese one day, but now things have changed: FC Internazionale has been bought by a Chinese company, and the kids, having grown up, can now afford those toys in the shop window. The commentaries state further that “with the growth of China’s economic power” (中国经济的强劲增长), and with

the continuous rise of its “national power” (国力) the attitude of Chinese fans has gone from “unconditional devotion and admiration” (无条件的仰视膜拜) to a “rational view” (理性的平视), meaning the end of a subaltern mentality.

The deal is seen to go so far as to have an effect on China’s position in the world. China has gained more “discourse power” (话语权) in the circles of international soccer: Europe will have to face China’s “purchase power” (中国实力) and respond to China’s request to change the schedule of matches “in line with the Chinese prime time to please the Chinese audience” (安排在周末黄金时段，满足中国观众)-a sign of its softpower.

These assertions show even more clearly that, in the eyes of Chinese commentators, Suning’s purchasing power embodies the nation’s financial power, and that the success of one Chinese company is seen as representing the success of the whole nation.

Acquisition of Consensus and Display of National Power

While the crucial role played by politics in promoting and developing the globalisation of Chinese soccer has already been highlighted by some academics who refer for instance to the transformation of the administrative structure of national soccer,⁷³ this analysis of the media

coverage of a specific case like the acquisition of FC Internazionale shows that the political factor is central in the promotion of the soccer reform programme also at discursive level.

The analysis of the corpus of commentaries above revealed minimum variety in the opinions expressed in the articles presented, regardless of the differences between the sources used. The narrative emerging generally stresses the positive effects of the deal, in line with the leadership's position on soccer, with both direct and indirect references to Xi Jinping's "Chinese dream" of a rich and strong country that re-establishes its due position against Europe's past supremacy. As such, the acquisition of FC Internazionale is portrayed as the symbol of a nationalist resurgence.

The Chinese "version" of the story also reveals the intertwining of economic and political motives implicit in the project of the globalisation of Chinese soccer. The success of a private company, based on Chinese capital, becomes the success of the entire country, while the financial takeover of a soccer club is described as an act of redemption of China from a shameful past. In this narrative, investments made by Chinese companies and individuals embody the modern purchasing power of China. This commercial and financial power acts upon political calls and is represented as a collective force that embodies China's national power in the world, thus linking even more strongly the economic and political aspects of the Chinese soccer development project.

The case study provided an example of how the media delivered to the country's audience a representation of sport as an arena of power contention, where the economic power can be interpreted as national power. In this interpretation, China's emerging role in soccer, described as a symbol of nationalistic triumph over Europe's past supremacy, stimulates patriotism and nationalism.

Concluding Remark: Official and Media Discourses and Internal Softpower

This chapter aimed to show how a sport-related story has been used by the Chinese press as an opportunity to promote internal softpower, as a result of a general overlapping between the institutional and the media discourse on the subject. The correspondence between the thematic frames into which the Programme's and the FC Internazionale case study's texts can be divided is a sign of this overlapping, which allows the drawing of parallel between the two discussions. For obvious reasons, the two stories differ in terms of scale: the Programme's stems from a consideration of the whole sector and its future, while in the case of media's is the result of the analysis of a specific news story that has already happened. Nevertheless, strong links can be found between the two.

In the sports dimension, both analysis develop the idea that the goal of building a sports powerhouse is achieved through the strengthening of China's competitiveness in soccer, based on the popularization of grassroots soccer, professionalization and internationalization of the

sector. In the economic dimension, both stories suggest that the initiatives and accomplishments of an individual company have a wider meaning, since they contribute to the nation's success. Finally, in the political dimension, soccer is consistently linked to the possibility (Programme) and the reality (FC Internazionale) of nurturing the people's feeling of national pride via sports achievements. Even if no open reference is made to the softpower implications of the development of cultural industries, including the soccer industry, the Programme's discourse heavily relies on this concept while the commentaries carry it out in practice. Therefore, the analysis presented does suggest that the plan to transform China into a soccer power is being used to enhance China's softpower. This is the case not only abroad but, more importantly, within China, where public opinion is reinforced by patriotic feelings created by the country's sporting power.

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⁶¹ Judy Polumbaum & Lei Xiong, *China Ink. The Changing Face of Chinese Journalism*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008; Emma Lupano, “Freelancers or ‘Public Intellectuals’? Professional Identity and Discursive Representation of Chinese Independent Media Writers in a Fast-Changing Landscape,” in *Languages, Cultures, Mediations*, 4, 1, 2017.

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⁶⁴ See “Editor Hu Shuli steps aside, not down, at China’s Caixin magazine,” *The Associated Press*, 30 January, 2018, at: <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201801300042.html> accessed 12/06/2018.

⁶⁵ Susan Shirk, *Changing Media, Changing China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 12-13.

⁶⁶ Lupano, *Zhongguo Jizhe*, 2016, *passim*.

⁶⁷ On the subject, see Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialisation and Authoritarian Rule in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; Emma Lupano, “Opinioni senza volto: il ruolo dell’autore nel genere del commento giornalistico in Cina,” in *Altre Modernità* 19, 2018, 129-43. For a case study that proves this point, see Emma Lupano, “Wo Shi Zhali ma? The Representation of the Charlie Hebdo Case in Chinese Press News Commentaries,” in *Media and Politics. Discourses, Cultures, and Practices*, Bettina Mottura, Letizia Osti & Giorgia Riboni (Eds.), Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2017.

⁶⁸ See Xin, Xin, *How the Market is Changing China's News. The Case of Xinhua News Agency*, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012: 70, 136.

⁶⁹ For a definition of the characteristics of the two sub-genres of the genre of news commentary in Chinese media, see the already mentioned Zhao Zhengxiang 2012.

⁷⁰ Fan Hong & Xiong Xiaozheng, "Communist China: Sport, Politics and Diplomacy," in *Sport in Asian Society*, edited by J.A. Mangan and Fan Hong, 319-42. London: Frank Cass, 2002; Wang Guanhua, "Friendship First: China's Sports Diplomacy during the Cold War," in *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 12, 2003, 133-53; Chen Yu (陈煜), "中国生活记忆" [Memories of Chinese Life], Beijing: Zhongguo Qinggongye Chubanshe, 2014. Also see Lupano, "Gli slogan sullo sport", 2017.

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⁷² Brownell, *Training the Body*, 101-102.

⁷³ Tan, Tien-Chin Tan & Alan Bairner. "Globalisation and Chinese Sport Policy: The Case of Elite Soccer in the People's Republic of China," in *China Quarterly*, 203, 2010, 581-600.