



Universidade de Aveiro  
2022

**Emanuel Ferreira Leite  
Júnior**

**POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS E SOCIALISMO COM  
CARACTERÍSTICAS CHINESAS: O CASO DO  
PLANO DE DESENVOLVIMENTO DO FUTEBOL**

**(Public Policy and socialism with Chinese characteristics: the case  
of the Football Development Plan)**



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Tese apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Doutor em Políticas Públicas, realizada sob a orientação científica do Doutor Carlos José de Oliveira e Silva Rodrigues, Professor Associado do Departamento de Ciências Sociais, Políticas e do Território da Universidade de Aveiro

To Isabela

## **o júri**

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## palavras-chave

China, hegemonia, soft power, diplomacia do desporto, futebol, Sonho Chinês

## Resumo

Em outubro de 2014, o Conselho de Estado da República Popular da China emitiu as “Opiniões para acelerar o desenvolvimento da indústria desportiva e promover o consumo desportivo”. Desde então, outros documentos de políticas públicas foram publicados para alavancar o crescimento da indústria desportiva no país, promovendo o desenvolvimento de setores estratégicos para cumprir uma meta ousada: até 2025 a indústria do desporto deve gerar US\$ 813 mil milhões para a economia do país e que em 2035, o setor represente 5% do PIB chinês. O principal documento é o “Plano de desenvolvimento do futebol de médio e longo prazo da China (2016-2050)”. Esta política em sua seção “Orientação Ideológica” identifica o futebol como “uma indústria emergente e verde” e que seu desenvolvimento representa um novo setor de crescimento económico, além de representar os Valores Socialistas Fundamentais chineses. O Plano do Futebol representa também um instrumento de promoção do intercâmbio cultural e diplomático com outras nações. Este documento demonstra explicitamente a percepção das autoridades chinesas sobre a importância do futebol como instrumento de diplomacia pública. Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo buscar respostas para quatro questões principais. Discuta o *soft power* à luz da hegemonia em Gramsci. Entender o futebol como recurso de sedução e persuasão, portanto, como instrumento de embate hegemónico. Perceber como o Plano do Futebol nos ajuda a entender o socialismo com características chinesas. Por fim, portanto, demonstrar como o “Sonho do Futebol Chinês” também representa o “Sonho Chinês” de “rejuvenescimento da nação”.

**keywords**

China, hegemony, soft power, sports diplomacy, football, Chinese Dream

**abstract**

In October 2014, The State Council of the People's Republic of China issued the "Opinions for accelerating the development of the sports industry and promoting sports consumption". Since then, other public policy documents have been published to leverage the growth of the country's sports industry by promoting the development of strategic sectors to meet a bold goal: by 2025 the sport industry generates US\$ 813 billion for the economy of the country and that by 2035 the sector will represent 5% of Chinese GDP. The main policy is the "China's medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)". This policy in its "Guiding Ideology" section identifies football as "an emerging and green industry" and that its development represents a new sector of economic growth, in addition to representing the Chinese Core Socialist Values. The Football Plan also represents an instrument for promoting cultural and diplomatic exchanges with other nations. The policy explicitly demonstrates the Chinese authorities' perception of the importance of football as a public diplomacy tool. This research work aims to search for answers to four major questions. Discuss soft power in the light of Gramsci's hegemony. Understand football as a resource for seduction and persuasion, therefore, as an instrument for the hegemonic clash. Realize how the Football Plan helps us to understand socialism with Chinese characteristics. Finally, therefore, demonstrate how the "Chinese Football Dream" also represents the "Chinese Dream" of "rejuvenation of the nation".

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## Introduction

*The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it<sup>1</sup>.*

In February 2016, “China's medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)”- (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050年) had not even been published, and I received an email from Professor Dr. Carlos Rodrigues to ask if I was interested in researching the phenomenon of football in China. The invitation must have come after Professor Rodrigues had probably read some article of mine on television broadcasting rights for football championships, a topic on which I have a book published in 2015. I admit that I knew little about Chinese football, although I worked as a sports journalist for a major newspaper in Recife at that time. I remembered that a newspaper colleague had done an article about the huge amount of player signings by Chinese clubs in the window of the January 2016 transfer market. But I knew little more than that. I responded to the invitation as follows. "The idea of studying the phenomenon of Chinese football seems to me very interesting, especially from the perspective of its economic and social implications". At that time, my first draft research idea was - "We can try to approach it from the Chinese historical perspective, to understand the current context and its future implications." I started my PhD in Public Policy at the Department of Social, Political and Territorial Sciences of the University of Aveiro, under the supervision of Professor Rodrigues, in October 2016. By then, I already knew that in 2014, the Chinese State Council issued a document to boost China's sports industry: “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting 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). And that “The Overall Reform Plan to Boost the Development of Football in China” (中国足球改革发展总体方案) was issued in 2015. Six months before the start of my PhD, in April 2016, the Football Plan was issued. A document that would become the main object of analysis of my research over the last five years and that now materializes in the thesis that is being introduced here.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, in Theses on Feuerbach.

The learning process throughout the PhD is long. It is also pleasurable, but arduous and, at times, distressing. Pleasant because it is always satisfying to acquire knowledge and delve into a topic. In my case, I am lucky enough to investigate something that has always been very attractive and passionate for me, which is football. However, it is hard, of course. First, because in academia, and I speak mainly from what I know in Brazil and Portugal, sport and football in particular are still not seen as subjects of the social sciences. With the exception of physical education and related fields, it still causes a certain surprise when it comes to colleagues - from PhD classrooms to academic events whose theme is not specifically sports. For this type of reaction, I developed the explanation that I use sport and football as an instrument of analysis: sociological, political, geopolitical and political economy, mainly these are found in this thesis. Nevertheless, it is also difficult and then it becomes distressing the fact that the more I read and study, the more I realize that I do not know anything. Moreover, a doctorate has deadlines. Deadlines have to be met. Through this research, in particular, we face a pandemic that took the lives of millions of human beings. Personally, I faced this with a baby at home, my little Isabela, who came into the world in December 2019. In addition to all this, there is also the fact that as time goes by and the more you study and deepen your research in concrete, some of the hypotheses initially raised are being left aside and other points are emerging as more latent and important.

When I defended my thesis project, in June 2017, the research was entitled "State, Sport, Soft Power and Affirmation of National Identity". Initially, I intended to present a thesis in a traditional format - monographic. Both the research took a slightly different path, as the structure of the work ended up being changed. On the subject and the concrete object of analysis, I decided to try to explain how the Chinese Football Plan helps us to understand the unique characteristics of the process of formulating and implementing Chinese public policies, particularly under the scope of socialism with Chinese characteristics and its implications for the development of the Chinese economy - here in both national and international scopes. After all, the development of the Chinese sports industry, particularly with football as a driving force for leveraging this sector of the economy, is, as we will see later, fundamental to the promotion of the Chinese development model. Thus, understanding how socialism with Chinese characteristics operates helps us to understand how this has a decisive impact on the country's international relations, particularly with regard to sport diplomacy as well. Furthermore, when discussing hegemony and discourse, it is public diplomacy through sport diplomacy

that is also under analysis. As for the format, I chose to present the thesis through papers and book chapters already published. I was lucky to have a supervisor who accepted my proposals and worked together so that between 2017 and 2020 we published seven papers and two book chapters, in Portuguese and in English. In addition, another paper should be published in 2021. Of these all, I chose, in agreement with Professor Rodrigues, four texts (all in English), which are attached to this thesis.

This work, then, is structured as follows. The present text, which is divided into three chapters. In this text, in general lines, I make a theoretical and conceptual discussion that are obviously linked to the papers and book chapters that are attached. However, in the first chapter, which I call "Soft Power or hegemony?", I debate some concepts from a different perspective than those presented in the works published so far. It is a more critical analysis of the concept of soft power and the incorporation of other theoretical frameworks to discuss and understand the concepts of power and hegemony. I also go deeper into the issue of soft power with Chinese characteristics, explaining from the initial discussions of the concept by academics and theorists of the Communist Party of China why in China this concept has an interpretation very much to its reality. In this chapter I also introduce the subject of sport diplomacy. In the second chapter, "Sports and Politics in the People's Republic of China", as the title indicates, I seek to demonstrate how sport is intrinsically related to political and geopolitical processes in New China, from the Sovietization of Chinese sport to the Olympic Glory. Here I am also inserting some discussions about the public policy process in China. Finally, the third chapter, "The Football Development Plan", in which, starting from the discussion on the impacts of globalisation on football, I seek to frame the Football Plan to the historical context of contemporary Chinese politics in order to explain why the Plan was released in 2016 and not before. In this context, by dealing with how the plan is formulated and how it is being implemented, I deepen the question of Chinese public policies and socialism with Chinese characteristics. In addition, I discuss the most recent changes in Chinese football between the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021. Finally, I make a theoretical discussion on the concept of soft disempowerment, framed under something that guides the theoretical framework of this thesis, which is the discussion about hegemony.

Next, we have the four works that have already been published. The first is entitled "The Chinese Football Development Plan: Soft Power and National Identity". Published in September 2017, it was not only our first published work, but also very likely the first to address the issue of Chinese football development from the perspective of soft power.

This is a very incipient article in the sense that it presents only general lines, almost starting ideas for the research that would still be developed. Nevertheless, making a survey among Google Scholar, Researchgate and Web of Science, it is seen that this publication has 13 citations (excluding self-citations, of course).

The second paper selected was "The Chinese plan for football development: a perspective from innovation theory" published in *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, in 2019. In this work, we report a critical analysis of the Football Plan. The analysis encompasses the impacted by the new policy at that moment on the Eurocentric trend that configured the power relations in the football realm, as well as the challenges raised by deeply rooted barriers in culture that Chinese authorities should face in order to foster pervasive change and thus create the conditions for success. The analysis of the policy document has been carried out under the light of the theory of innovation, namely, the contributions of Joseph Schumpeter and Peter Drucker, who look at innovation as a means to foster change in the social and economic environment, inducing new patterns of behavior and creating new habits. Interestingly, this paper was on the verge of not being published. This is because one of the two blind-reviewers criticized the theoretical framework, claiming not to agree that the theory of innovation fits in with the reality of the Chinese political and economic system. In his review, the blind reviewer practically described the need to rewrite the paper. What was not done, of course. We added a few more passages from the two referenced authors and argued that the State can indeed be an inductor of innovation, through creative destruction. Coincidentally, a famous scholar, very fond of using Twitter, published a sequence in the aforementioned social network in which he commented on the Chinese Football Plan and based his opinion citing some papers, all of them, without exception, referenced in our paper. The coincidence resides in two facts. First, the Twitter sequel came a few days after we received the paper's distribution confirmation email to the two blind-reviewers. The second, because this scholar, later on, was co-author of a paper on the Chinese Football Plan in which the perspective of promoting the practice of football and the football consumer market is basically analyzed under another theoretical framework. Coincidences from academic life that only reinforce the idea that our analyses and interpretations have some relevance.

The third text is the chapter "Belt, Road and Ball: football as a Chinese soft power and public diplomacy tool", published in the book "The Belt and Road Initiative: An Old Archetype of a New Development Model", Palgrave Macmillan (2020). In this work, in

addition to the Football Plan, we also analyse the document "Action plan for the development of sports tourism 'Belt and Road' (2017-2020)". We focused on the Belt and Road Initiative, its importance for Chinese foreign policy, for China's economic development and for foreign trade, outlining the points of congruence of this ambitious and grandiose Chinese project with football and Chinese business in football. It can be said that this is the first case study, since, from the theoretical framework of sport diplomacy and Chinese geopolitics, we present football as a connecting element, particularly with England, Pakistan and the BRI football tournaments. Finally, the fourth paper is "Chinese Soft Power And Public Diplomacy: Football As A Tool To Promote China-Brazil Relations", published in *Boletim do Tempo Presente*, in March 2020. This work is the result of participation in the II Sino-Brazilian International Seminar, organized by the Confucius Institute in Pernambuco, the Institute of Asian Studies (Federal University of Pernambuco - UFPE), the University of Pernambuco (UPE) and the Central University of Finance and Economics of China (CUFE) and was part of the works selected for publication. Here, in addition to the general framework of the Football Plan, we present a more specific case study, which is the Sino-Brazilian relationship and how football takes on an innovative character for the relations between Brazil and China, presenting examples of Brazilian investments in Chinese football and Chinese investments in Brazilian football.

In terms of methodological framework, this thesis is based on the literature review, the analysis of public policy documents and on discourse analysis. There were plans to conduct interviews with Chinese authorities linked to the formulation and implementation of the Football Plan. The expectation was to take advantage of the trip to the conference "China's External Communication and Relationship Building in the 21st Century" at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), in September 2020, to travel to China to conduct the interviews. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, I was unable to travel to China and I made my presentation online, via video, of the paper "Belt, Road and Ball: football as a Chinese soft power tool and a metaphor for peace". Thus, I was also unable to carry out the interviews, which made the thesis focus on theoretical and documental analysis.



## Chapter 1: Soft Power or hegemony?

*In a given State, history is the history of the ruling classes, just as in the world, history is the history of hegemonic States. The history of subaltern States is explained through the history of hegemonic States<sup>2</sup>.*

### The concept of power

Soft power is one of several attempts to define what the term power means. Rather, when conceptualizing soft power Nye presents his point of view about what power means and, mainly, the ways in which power can be exercised. It is for this reason that Nye seeks to differentiate hard from soft power. However, to understand what soft power represents, first we need to know what is discussed about the definition of what power is. Moreover, this is an old debate. Rothman says that from Thucydides to Machieavelli "power is part of international relations studies" (Rothman, 2011, p. 49). Like Barnett & Duvall put it, "power does not have a single expression or form. It has several" (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 3). For this reason, the concept of "power" is to this day extensively discussed, particularly in the field of international relations and also in political science (Barnett & Duvall, 2005a; Gilpin, 1981; Mistry, 2004; Moon, 2019; H. Xu, Wang, & Song, 2018).

Indeed, Nye himself, in different passages of his vast work on soft power, draws our attention to the difficulty of defining or measuring what power is. In his seminal book "Bound to Lead", in which he first coined the term soft power, the political scientist compares power to weather saying that "everyone talks about it, but few understand it" and adds, still in a metaphorical approach, that "power, like love, is easier to experience than to define or measure" (Nye, 1990, p. 24). The author repeats these comparisons when he says that although the definition of power is difficult to understand, despite everyone feeling it, this does not make it "less real" (Nye, 2004, p. 1). Nye, however, reiterates the importance of understanding the meaning of power (Nye, 2011, p. 3), despite admitting that it is "a contested concept" (Nye, 2011, p. 5).

The classical definition of power (Mistry, 2004, p. 66) is the one by Robert Dahl, who conceptualized power as a relation among people: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957, p. 202-203). In other words, the relational idea behind Dahl's definition is that power is the

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<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci, in *Cadernos do Cárcere*, vol. 4.

ability to get others to do what they otherwise would not do (Mistry, 2004, p. 66; Nye, 1990, p. 25). On the other hand, although admitting that the concept of power is “troublesome”, Gilpin defines power simply as “the military, economic, and technological capabilities of states”, but he recognises that his conception “leaves out important and intangible elements that affect the outcomes of political actions” (Gilpin, 1981, p. 13).

A different framework to comprehend power is presented by Pierre Bourdieu, which proposes a general theory of social practices that combines material and symbolic dimensions. For Bourdieu, all social practices are oriented towards maximizing material interests or symbolic results. Bourdieu conceptualizes power as capital by recognizing different types of capital, "or power, which amounts to the same thing" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 16). That is, power has different origins and manifests itself through different "forms of power". For him, forms of capital can be accumulated and exchanged with other forms, transforming into one another. These resources are transformed into capital when they are characterized as power relations in a structure of social hierarchies. According to Bourdieu, there are four forms of capital. *Economic capital*: "which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 16). *Cultural capital*: derived from education, academic titles, epistemic knowledge and recognised experience as one source of power (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 17). *Social capital*: “made up of social obligations - connections” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 16). And *symbolic capital*: “it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23).

Therefore, as we can see, power has several dimensions. Particularly in the international relations field, power can manifest itself as “economic and military capabilities, national will, internal strength, relative standing versus other states, soft power, fungibility, and an ability to influence others and to control international outcomes” (Mistry, 2004, p. 66). That is why Barnett & Duvall claim that “in general terms, power is the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 8).

### **The concept of Soft power**

Based on behavioural and relational assumptions, Nye defines power as "the ability to control others" (Nye, 1990, p. 26) or "more specifically, power is the ability to

influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants" (Nye, 2004, p. 2). Another important aspect to take into consideration is that "power is conveyed through resources, whether tangible or intangible" (Nye, 2011, p. 8). Thus it is necessary to have resources and, therefore, according to Nye, power can be considered "as the possession of resources", which would be "population, territory, natural resources, economic size, military forces, and political stability among other" (Nye, 1990, p. 26). But, as the author points out, "power conversion is a basic problem", especially because "some countries are better than others at converting their resources into effective influence" (Nye, 1990, p. 27). So, how can this conversion be done? Following the author, "power is the ability to influence others to achieve the results they want, which can be done through coercion, payment or attraction" (Nye, 2012, p. 151). And "you can coerce them with threats; you can induce them with payments; or you can attract and co-opt them to want what you want" (Nye, 2004, p. 2). Therefore, according to Nye, we have two relational dimensions here. The first one is "to command others to change their behavior against their initial preferences" (Nye, 2011, p. 11) - for example when the United States use its military power to compel others to change their foreign policies (Barnett & Duvall, 2005b, p. 41) or the US economic blockade on Cuba. The second dimension is the one that "affect others' preferences so that they want what you want and you need not command them to change" (Nye, 2011, p. 11).

That first dimension which is characterized by coercion (e.g., military force) or pay (e.g., economic force) would be *hard power*, and in contrast to that there would be *soft power*. As Nye explains: "A country can obtain the results it desires in international politics because other countries - admiring its values, emulating its example and aspiring to its level of prosperity - will want to follow it" (Nye, 2004, p. 5). Soft power is what he called "indirect or co-optive power behavior". And a country can co-opt through the "attraction of ones' idea or the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences that others express" (Nye, 1990, p. 32). This is why soft power is deemed as the "power of attraction and seduction" (Nye, 2004, p. 5). In order to set the agenda or determine the framework of a debate a country relies on "intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions" (Nye, 1990, p. 32).

As Brannagan and Giulianotti put (2018), Nye coined the term 'soft power' seeking "to respond to two interlinked shifts in relationships between states and international society. First, following advances in global communications, a growing range of actors had gained the capacity to collate, shape and distribute ever-expanding

volumes of information to different audiences. Second, these diverse actors were transforming how political powers are acquired and exercised." (p. 1140), as "in the contemporary period transnational activists have been able to shame multinational corporations and abusive governments to alter their economic and human rights policies, respectively" (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 8). "In an age of information-based economies and transnational interdependence, power is becoming less transferable, less tangible, and less coercive" (Nye, 1990, p. 32).

The states started to face the 'paradox of plenty'. "A plenitude of information leads to a poverty of attention. Attention rather than information becomes the scarce resource, and those who can distinguish valuable signals from white noise gain power" (Nye, 2002, p. 68 e 69). With the difficulty of standing out in the midst of so much information, of so many actors, which generates the noise of communication, the states have the need to promote their legitimacy and attractiveness. China, by the way, realized the importance of dealing with this paradox, as can be seen in President Xi Jinping's 2014 speech: "Information resources have become important factors in production and social wealth. a major indicator of its soft power and competitiveness" (Xi, 2014, p. 219). Throughout this chapter, we will see how China seeks to communicate its power resources in order to achieve desired results through the exercise of soft power.

Cultural achievements and sports success are also ways to win the admiration of others. This can be done by adapting the state's international agenda in the quest to shape the preference and behaviour of others in relation to the state (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, p. 1141). That is why sports can be a very useful tool in the exercise of soft power (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015, 2018; Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016; Chari, 2015; C. C. Chen, Colapinto, & Luo, 2012; Delgado, 2016; Grix & Lee, 2013; Korneeva & Ogurtsov, 2016; Krzyzaniak, 2016; Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2017; Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, Galily, & Tamir, 2016) as we will see later.

### **Soft power vs hegemony (and consent)**

There is another definition of power that was not addressed previously when we reviewed the concepts of power. I refer to Steven Lukes' three-dimensional view of power (Lukes, 1974). I have left to mention this conceptualization in this section because it has, in some way, to do with the perspective that we will present from now on about soft power as an instrument of dispute for the exercise of hegemony, whether for the conquest or maintenance of dominion, or in search for recognition and legitimacy. After all, as the

Gramscian perspective teaches us, consensus is born out of prestige, that is, trust, and soft power, as we saw earlier, is exactly a way to build and manage reputations.

Lukes, when theorizing about power, identified the existence of "three dimensions of power" and noted that, if considered separately, the understanding of the term and its manifestations would be incomplete. The first dimension concerns "the study of concrete, observable behavior" (Lukes, 1974, p. 12), in short, would be related to Dahlian formulation. The second dimension pointed out by Lukes refers to the criticism that Bacrach and Baratz presented to the perspective of the first dimension. These two authors identify that power has "two faces" (Lukes, 1974, p. 16). The "first face" would be the one in which power would be exercised when A's action affects B's decision, but it would also be necessary to identify the "hidden" social forces that impede the formation of the political agenda. According to the two authors referenced by Lukes, power also manifests itself when the most powerful, with greater or lesser intent, act to prevent their interests from being contested or threatened, thus controlling the agenda setting.

Finally, Lukes identifies that a "third dimension of power" would be missing, the ideological one. Lukes' understanding is expressed in the form of a rhetorical question: "is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences?" (Lukes, 1974, p. 24). The author considers that there are hidden manifestations in society, power operates under various forms, including being hidden from the perception of those subjugated to it – there are "many ways in which potential issues are kept out of politics, whether through the operation of social forces and institutional practices or through individuals' decisions" (Lukes, 1974, p. 24). Power, in Lukes's view, goes beyond getting others to act in your interest or setting the agenda. Power actually embodies these two dimensions in the sense that it gets results through dependence, adherence, alliance or complicity, even when it does not need to be exercised or when there is no conflict of interest. As he put it, "this, moreover, can occur in the absence of actual, observable conflict, which may have been successfully averted - though there remains here an implicit reference to potential conflict. This potential, however, may never in fact be actualized" (Lukes, 1974, p. 24) and he adds that "what one may have here is a latent conflict, which consists in a contradiction between the interests of those exercising power and the real interests of those they exclude" (Lukes, 1974, p. 24-25).

Although Lukes mentions Antonio Gramsci, he does not devote much thought to the concept of hegemony proposed by the Italian philosopher, founder of the Communist Party of Italy. However, when Lukes describes a power that operates in a veiled way, hidden from the perception of those who are subjugated to it, it is evident that this "third dimension of power" is understood as a manifestation of power through the consensus given by the dominated classes to ruling class. That is, the subordination of social classes in relation to the dominant class, adopting the dominant group's conception of the world, allowing this group to maintain its position of domination and leadership. The conceptualization of a "third dimension of power" demonstrates exactly this unequal appropriation of power and the development of a "hegemony" of the most powerful group over the others, including at the cultural level. After all, for Gramsci, ideology is the ground on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position and struggle (Gramsci, 2007a, p. 41). Thus, it is important to emphasise that at the heart of Marxist theory, ideology is part of a natural or social reality as a sign whose meaning refers to something outside of itself. Ideological signs not only reflect social reality, they are also fragments of that reality. Therefore, the awareness that Gramsci refers to, as we can find in Marx and Engels, only becomes awareness when imbued with ideological content. This is how this relationship between discourse and sign is established, which takes place in the ideological dispute. In addition, the hegemonic perspective of the dominant classes markedly influences this clash. After all, ideology, as Lukes himself points out in his definition of power, is directly linked to maintaining the *status quo*. So that idea of power as the active hegemony of the dominant group draws back to Marx and Engels, as we find in *The German Ideology*.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas (...) The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 47).

What is "hegemony" in the Gramscian perspective? "Hegemony" is a Greek word, which, in short, means "domination". In the beginning, the term was used only in the military sense, to designate the domination by force of one people over another. With Gramsci, however, the term takes on a much broader meaning. Hegemony occurs when

a group or a set of groups in society, organized in associations or parties, manage to exert sufficient influence over other people to the point of directing them. The nature of this influence, however, is not physical at all, but rather moral and intellectual.

To explain how this adherence occurs, Gramsci looks to historical and dialectical materialism as the methodological basis to explain the dialectical relationship between structure and superstructure and how it affects economics, politics and social totality, forming the "historical bloc". "If the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation, between rulers and ruled, is given thanks to an organic adhesion, in which the feeling-passion becomes understanding and, in this way, knowledge (not in a mechanical way, but lived), only then is the relationship one of representation, with the exchange of individual elements between rulers and ruled, that is, the life of the whole takes place, the only one that is a social force; the "historic block" is created" (Gramsci, 1999, p. 222).

Gramsci divides the State into two big superstructural dimensions: political and civil society, which combined form what he calls the integral state. Although, as the author points out, modern State "subordinates social groups to the active hegemony of the ruling and dominant group" abolishing some autonomies, but allowing these emerge "in other forms, such as parties, unions, cultural associations" (Gramsci, 2002, p. 139). That is why Gramsci emphasizes that "the fundamental historical unit is the result of the organic relations between State or political society and 'civil society'" (Gramsci, 2002, p. 139) or as he puts into an equation "State = political society + civil society, that is, hegemony armored by coercion" (Gramsci, 2007a, p. 244). According to Gramsci, both correspond to the sphere in which the dominant group maintains hegemony over the whole society. An example of this formation of the State as active hegemony of the dominant group is the case of Italian unity. Which did not take place on a basis of equality, but with the hegemony of the North over the *Mezzogiorno* and the exploitation of this condition by the ruling class, with the North getting rich at the expense of the misery of the South, taking advantage of unequal economic and industrial development (Gramsci, 2002, p. 73).

The state coercion is applied when consensus is not achieved or respected. The coercive methods are actualized through the formal institutions of political society (judiciary, legislature, military, paramilitary, and other institutional structures), "of direct domain or command, which is expressed in the State and in the legal government" (Gramsci, 2001, p. 21). But, in the Gramscian point of view the dominant group seeks to ensure "social hegemony through the 'spontaneous' consensus given by the great masses

of the population to the orientation printed by the fundamental dominant group to social life” and this consensus comes from the “prestige (and therefore trust) gained by the dominant group because of its position and function in the world of production” (Gramsci, 2001, p. 21). For this reason, achieving prestige and trust is fundamental, since the most important thing is to guarantee power from the submission of the dominated. After all “prestige, rather than power, is the everyday currency of international relations (...) prestige is enormously important because if your strength is recognised, you can generally achieve your aims without having to use it” (Gilpin, 1981, p. 31). That is why “when hegemony prevails, coercion remains in no longer necessary, but it is set aside if the need may arise for use in specific situations. Thus, coercive state capacity reflects the development and strength of the civil society” (Lemus Delgado & Valderrey Villar, 2020, p. 3).

Stephen Gill explains that Gramsci’s concept “refers to a historical congruence between material forces, institutions and ideologies, or broadly, an alliance of different class forces politically organized around a set of hegemonic ideas that gave strategic direction and coherence to its constituent elements. For a new historic bloc to emerge, its leaders must engage in ‘conscious, planned struggle’ in both political and civil society, Any new historic bloc must have not only power within the civil society and economy but it also need persuasive ideas, arguments and initiatives that build one, catalyse and develop its political networks and organization” (Gill, 2008, pp. 60-61). After all, “hegemony is always open to contestation, and thus resistant counter-hegemonic formations may emerge” (Giulianotti, 2016) and that's why consensus “is negotiated through civil society” (Gow, 2017, p. 95).

Civil society in Gramscian concept belongs to the “private sphere” such as the church, mass media, schools, universities, chambers of commerce, trade unions, NGOs, etc. In that sense, sport must be understood as an institution of civil society, therefore, a "private" apparatus of hegemony, a *locus* in which worldviews are elaborated, and disputed. So “hegemony theory may be widely applied to explain relationships of domination, opposition and struggle within sport” (Giulianotti, 2016). Meaning that sport is not “politically neutral but is part of the state; hence, sports may become a way to build consent and to create social practices that may lead to the consolidation of hegemonic activities” (Lemus Delgado & Valderrey Villar, 2020, p. 3).

How is this connected to the field of international relations? Gramsci did not write much about it. Even so, it is possible to find passages in which the philosopher reflects



the issue of hegemony beyond the national context. For example, when he states that “in a given State, history is the history of the ruling classes, just as in the world, history is the history of hegemonic States” (Gramsci, 2007b, p. 320). At another point, the Italian emphasizes that it should be taken into account that “the internal relations of a nation-state intertwine with international relations, creating new original and historically concrete combinations” and, he adds, “an ideology, born in a developed country, spreads in less developed countries, influencing on the local game of combinations” (Gramsci, 2007a, p. 42). This excerpt is interesting because it shows how the idea of soft power, using Nye's own considerations, “indirect or co-optive power behavior” (Nye, 1990, p. 32) or “power of attraction and seduction” (Nye, 2004, p. 5), reflects nothing less than Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony. It is even more interesting when we see one of the examples of civil society apparatus given by Gramsci to explain how hegemonic states make their ideology prevail over dominated states: “career diplomacy, which suggest political resources of different historical origin and make them triumph in certain countries, functioning as an international political party” (Gramsci, 2007a, p. 42).

It was Robert Cox who further elaborated the concept of hegemony by extending the level of analysis from a national context to the international realm (Li & Zhang, 2020, p. 78). Based on Gramsci's conception of the dominant state's ideology, Cox elaborates the idea of world hegemony, according to which it would be the “expansion of the internal (national) hegemony established by the dominant social class” (Cox, 1983, p. 171). According to Cox, elements such as “the economic and social institutions, the culture, the technology associated with this national hegemony become patterns for emulation abroad” (Cox, 1983, p. 171). Does that remind you of something? Yes, the idea of emulation and aspiring to the level of prosperity in Nye's soft power concept.

Cox goes further and defines that hegemony at the international level “is an order within the world economy with a dominant mode of production which penetrates into all countries and links into other subordinate modes of production” (Cox, 1983, p. 171). Therefore, he describes world hegemony “as a social structure, an economic structure, and a political structure” which is expressed through “universal norms, institutions and mechanisms which lay down general rules of behaviour for states and for those of civil society that act across national boundaries” and, of course, these rules support the dominant mode of production (Cox, 1983, p. 172). He gives the example of the United States that has been attempting to refashion the international system in a US-shaped “world order”. As a consequence of this understanding of hegemony and world order, Li

and Zhang draw attention to a very pertinent point: in the current context of the rise of China/emerging powers is to what extent an emerging hegemonic actor is well placed to shape the world order (Li & Zhang, 2020, p. 78). This will be discussed later.

Returning to the discussion of hegemony vs soft power, it is curious to note that Nye mentions Gramsci in one of his texts, but in a very brief and superficial way, without bothering to demonstrate how his argument on the basis of soft power concept differs or deepens the concept of hegemony of the Italian. After repeating himself once again on the conception that “soft power rests on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others”, he just says that “similarly, political leaders and thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci have long understood the power that comes from setting the agenda and determining the framework of a debate” (Nye, 2002b, p. 9).

Several authors draw attention to the similarity between soft power and hegemony. One of them is Collin Mercer, who, amidst the popularity in the use the term soft power in academic circles and also in the media, emphasizes the importance of looking back at Gramsci as a theorist. Especially because the concept of soft power, according to him presents a definition of culture that falls short of Gramsci's aesthetic approach to culture (Mercer, 2013). In the same sense, Li and Hong point to the fact that soft power has become "one of the key words in recent years" but that it is not an absolutely new concept. After all, decades before Nye, Gramsci had already analysed elements of soft power conceptualization, which is culture (L. Li & Hong, 2012). Writing about Russian soft power, Xuan Hung Le stresses that "Nye's concept of soft power can be better understood via the lens of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony" (Xuan, 2016).

In Zahran and Ramos, we find an interesting methodological and theoretical analysis of how Nye's term is similar to Gramsci's. Starting with the fact that "both concepts refer to a set of general principles, ideas, values and institutions shared by, consented or as legitimate by different groups" (Zahran & Ramos, 2010, p. 12). According to them, it is easy to see Gramsci's influence on Nye: “hegemony, as soft power, works through consent on a set of general principles that secures the supremacy of a group and, at the same time, provides some degree of satisfaction to the other remaining groups” (Zahran & Ramos, 2010, p. 14). For this reason, they criticize the fact that Nye does not take into account the contributions of neo-Gramscian authors, such as Cox and Gill.

They highlight the fact of “the origin of the concept being deeply related to analysis of US foreign policy” (Zahran & Ramos, 2010, p. 13) and that in the book *The Paradox of the American Power*, Nye takes the existence of the US soft power for granted (p. 16). This centralization in the USA, according to these authors, is also evident in the way Nye “approaches values, principles and ideas as a soft power resource” (p. 24). After all, considering, as explained above, that hegemony is the search for consensus and consent, and that this can be contested, therefore, an attempt to establish a new hegemony would not come without a dispute, “Nye ignores the existence of struggle over ideas and institutions in the international system” (p.24). And they point out as a problematic example “Nye's characterization of US 'universal values' as a soft power resource”, as this implies the “assumption that universal values exist” and if we start from that assumption, therefore the existence of the struggle cannot be conceived for the legitimation of different values and principles (p. 24). Xuan goes in the same direction, criticizing that the concept of soft power is based on the idea of America's 'universalistic' culture (Xuan, 2016). Zahran and Ramos reiterate that the international system is full of examples of disputes for the legitimacy of ideas and give the example of the World Social Forum that was held for the first time in 2001 as an attempt to oppose the World Economic Forum at Davos (Zahran & Ramos, 2010, p. 24-25).

### **Hegemonic war**

Another appropriate example of the contestation in the international sphere is precisely the rise of China as an emerging power. As Li and Zhang put “one central question on hegemony vs world order in the current context of the rise of China is to what extent an emerging hegemonic actor is well placed to shape the world order” (Li & Zhang, 2020, p. 78). As we have seen in recent years, this is a struggle that is already being fought between the global hegemonic superpower, the US, and China. A hegemonic war is a dispute capable of reshaping the International System, promoting changes in the hierarchy of power between States (Violante, Marroni, & Maia, 2020). According to Gilpin, a hegemonic war is characterized, in the first place, by involving “a direct contest between the dominant power or powers in an international system and the risen challenger or challengers” (Gilpin, 1981, p. 199). The second aspect concerns the contestation of the system's legitimacy and, therefore, hegemonic wars “are at once political, economic, and ideological in terms of significance and consequences” (p. 199).

It is important to emphasize that the circumstances of Chinese development led the country to this inevitable hegemonic clash. After all, "during the past decades, China has been engaging in a foreign policy approach based on *Tao Guang Yang Hui* (韬光养晦)<sup>3</sup>" (Li & Zhang, 2020, p. 79), that was "coined and formulated by Deng between 1989 and 1991, functioned as the core doctrine of China's foreign policy" (Zhongying, 2020, p. 2). The concept comes from a Chinese idiomatic expression that means "to hide brightness, and to nourish obscurity" (Li & Zhang, 2020, p. 79). However, the Chinese interpretation of the expression "have not been readily adopted by international scholars" as *Tao Guang Yang Hui* has been translated as "hiding one's capabilities and biding one's time" (Zhongying, 2020, p. 3).

China continues to have as its main guideline in its international relations the principle of "non-interference", enshrined in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; Mutual non-aggression; Mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; Equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; Peaceful co-existence. The Five Principles are considered "the most important diplomatic name card of China in the contemporary world stage, the five principles play a significant role in promoting the peaceful development of China and shaping its image as a responsible power" (Zhengqing & Xiaoqin, 2015, p. 67). Notwithstanding, the transition from *Tao Guang Yang Hui* began in 2002/2003, at the start of the Hu Jintao era when the "peaceful rise" concept was formulated by Zheng Bijian, former vice president of the Communist Party of China's Central Party School (Zhongying, 2020, p. 8). And China's "upgrading its position from a cheap commodity exporter to the largest exporter of high-tech products, from a technology importer to a dominant player in AI technology, mobile, computer and satellite industries is pushing the country to a higher position in the stratification of the world economy" (Li & Zhang, 2020, p. 79).

This Chinese rise in the world system led the country to adopt what Gramsci defined as "war of position": the war of movement becomes increasingly war of position; and it can be said that a state wins a war when it prepares it meticulously and technically in peacetime (Gramsci, 2007a, p. 24). The Italian philosopher considered that in "politics the war of movement subsists while it is a question of conquering non-decisive positions",

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<sup>3</sup> To calmly observe, hold one's ground, react firmly, act but keep a low profile (Zhongying, 2020).

but, for whatever reason, when this cautious movement is no longer enough, it moves on to the war of position, which demands an enormous concentration of hegemony, but which once overcome is definitely decisive (Gramsci, 2007a, p. 255). When China begins to occupy "a pivotal position in global governance as a new and alternative provider of global financial public goods". Or sets strategic plans as "Made in China 2025" and the extremely grandiose and ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, it is clearly embracing a "gradual and protracted political struggle" in order to reshape the existing power structure (Li & Zhang, 2020, p. 79). It is, in the end, embracing war of position strategy. In short, we are faced with what Gramsci, analysing Machiavelli, will define as "high politics", that is, the policy that comprises issues related to the struggle for destruction, defence, and conservation of certain organic and social structures (Gramsci, 2007a, p. 21). It is a question of radical reorganization of the State, which in international politics is characterized by issues related to the relative structure of each State in reciprocal confrontations (Gramsci, 2007a, p. 22).

And, as we will see later in this chapter, the "China's medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)" - (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050年) - as the Chinese Football Dream also represents the "Chinese Dream" of "rejuvenation of the nation" is part of these strategies for Chinese rise on the global stage.

### **Another kind of hegemonic clash**

China's rise provokes another kind of hegemonic clash. Chinese growth and development configure an advancement within the structural boundaries of the modern world system. China's shift from the periphery to the semi periphery in a short period of time and, above all, its relentless advance towards the core constitutes a shock to the stratification of the world-economy system. Since consolidating as a hegemonic power among the countries of the core of the world system and, mainly, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its consecration as the only global superpower, the United States did not see its central position so threatened. This is because, in addition to the amazing Chinese development, China with resources as the Beijing Consensus or the Belt and Road Initiative challenges current hegemony. Mainly by presenting a new economic and political model for development to the semi-periphery and periphery of the system, as well as how recently stated Xi Jinping, claims that is working "to build a new type of international relations and a human community with a shared future" (Xi, 2021a).

In this section, by world system we are adopting Immanuel Wallerstein's conceptualization. According to Wallerstein, in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, there came into existence what can be called a European world-economy, which was the distinctive feature of the modern world-system (Wallerstein, 1974b, p. 15). And this was the result of what? The European colonial expansion that, from the Portuguese navigations onwards, occupied increasingly distant territories until reaching the Americas, which would completely change the destinations of the world from the resulting capital accumulation (Wallerstein, 1974b, p. 41). Or, as Karl Marx puts it more directly. “The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of blackskins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre” (Marx, 1992, p. 915). All this process of primitive accumulation allowed Europe to create a capitalist world economy in the sixteenth century. A system based on two key institutions, a "world"-wide division of labour and bureaucratic state machineries in certain areas. Wallerstein considers three zones of the world-economy: the semi-periphery, the core, and the periphery (Wallerstein, 1974b, p. 63). It is very important that we understand the historical context of dominance/dependence/interconnectedness between the West and the non-West (Amara, 2012, p. 5). As Edward Saïd has noted:

We cannot discuss the non-Western world as distinct from developments in the West. The ravages of colonial wars, the protracted conflicts between insurgent nationalism and anomalous imperialist control, the disputations new fundamentalist and native movements nourished by despair and anger, the extension of the world system over the developing world – these circumstances are directly connected to actualities in the West (Saïd, 2000, p. 295).

The three structural positions in the world system had become stabilized by about 1640 (Wallerstein, 1974c, p. 401). And this is not “a system of free competition” since “competition becomes relatively free only when the economic advantage of upper strata is so clear-cut that the unconstrained operation of the market serves effectively to reinforce the existing system of stratification” (Wallerstein, 1974a, p. 1). Nevertheless, the status of a country is not static or immutable. Quite the opposite, “there is constant and patterned movement between groups of economic actors as to who shall occupy

various positions in the hierarchy of production, profit, and consumption” (Wallerstein, 1974a, p. 1). It is possible to leave the centre of the world system and become a semi-periphery, like Spain (Wallerstein, 1974c, p. 407), or climb from the periphery, passing through the semi-periphery until reaching the centre, as happened with the USA (Wallerstein, 1974c, p. 409, 411).

Wallerstein (2003) understands the process that triggers the conduction of an actor to the post of hegemon as a conjunction of factors. He explains that the rise of the United States to global hegemony, for example, was a long process that began in earnest with the world recession of 1873. At that time, the United States and Germany began to acquire an increasing share of global markets, mainly at the expense of the steadily receding British economy. From this time on, the Americans had with Germany, and no longer with England, the conflict of succession for global power. Wallerstein goes so far as to say that the two world wars can be summarized as a continuous “thirty-year war” between Germany and the United States. And For the sociologist, it was the informal agreements, rather than the formal ones, of the Yalta Conference that actually set the course for world geopolitics after the Second World War (Wallerstein, 2003, p. 18). Furthermore, the United States, as we know, emerged from the Second World War as the only major industrial power whose industries were intact and whose territories had not been badly damaged by wartime destruction (Wallerstein, 2003, p. 47).

As can be seen, as well as in Gramsci's conception of hegemony, for Wallerstein the hierarchical and unequal relationship of the world system is the result of the class struggle. For this reason, the position that each country occupies in this hierarchy is largely determined by the possibilities and limits of development of its productive and social forces. This is why he argues that the existence of the semi-periphery “is needed to make a capitalist world economy run smoothly” notwithstanding “the world-economy with a capitalist market economy, involve markedly unequal distribution of rewards” (Wallerstein, 1974c, pp. 403-404). So, why do not the majority who are exploited simply overwhelm the minority who draw disproportionate benefits? The author questions, and then answers: while internal discontent has been eternal, it has usually taken quite long before the accumulation of the erosion of power has led to the decline of a world-system, and as often as not, an external force has been a major factor in this decline (Wallerstein, 1974c, p. 404).

Notwithstanding, consolidation of the system “does not mean the absence of contradictions and does not mean the likelihood of long-term survival” (Wallerstein,

1974c, p. 414). There are moments of structural imbalance in global markets, “secular developments in the structure of the capitalist world system such that we can envisage that its internal contradictions as a system will bring it to an end in the twenty-first or twenty-second century”, predicted (Wallerstein, 1974a, p. 2). Interestingly, although Wallerstein foresaw the decline of US power, in his predictions within what he called “geopolitical cleavages”, he left out China. The struggle for economic domination between the United States, the European Union and Japan; the struggle between the countries of the North and the South; and the struggle between the spirit of Davos and that of Porto Alegre (Wallerstein, 2003, p. 215). Curiously, the sociologist argued that only an alternative world-system that could maintain a high level of productivity and change the system of distribution would involve the reintegration of the levels of political and economic decision-making and this would be the socialist world system (Wallerstein, 1974b, p. 349, 1974c, p. 15). And “this would only be possible as the outcome of a long struggle in forms that may be familiar and perhaps in very new forms, that will take place in all areas of the world-economy (Mao's continual 'class struggle')” (Wallerstein, 1974c).

The famous Argentinian economist Raúl Prebisch frames the discussion on Eurocentrism using the dichotomy centre-periphery focusing on economic relations. The author argues that the centre of economic power has relegated the periphery of the economic system to the mere condition of supplier of food and raw materials, leaving no room for new countries to develop their industries (Prebisch, 1962). Prebisch points to the fallacy of the countries in the centre of the system when it says that “it is true that the reasoning on the economic advantages of the international division of labour is theoretically sound, but it is usually forgotten that it is based upon an assumption which has been conclusively proved false by facts” (Prebisch, 1962). This is because, according to him, the hierarchical structure of the system generates heterogeneous and unequal relations between the countries of the centre and the periphery. This makes it difficult for countries on the periphery of the system to develop towards the semi-periphery and, later, towards the centre. In the current system, China still occupies the position of a semi-peripheral country, but it is making great strides towards occupying a central position in the world-economy. Will it make it? De Paula and Jabbour believe that China is probably the most egregious example in history of a country consciously and persistently pursuing a long-term development strategy in order to overcome its own peripheral condition (de Paula & Jabbour, 2020, p. 856). While Cheng argues that China is not dependent on the developed countries, and nor is it a peripheral country; therefore, a new concept, that of



a country at the “quasi-centre,” needs to be put forward (Cheng, 2018, p. 313). However, more importantly, will it be able to offer the world a new world system?

With regard to sport, as one of the most prominent sports sociologist, Richard Giulianotti, explains, the world system theory’s basic model may be applied to sport. First, the global sport system directs the best resources from poor to rich nations (Giulianotti, 2016) and this capital concentration is evidently reflected in sporting success (Giulianotti, 2010, p. 127). In that point, Chinese Olympic success, with its consolidation as a hegemonic and unique force capable of rivalling the US in the Olympic Games and as the only Paralympic superpower, is a good example of China's rise to the core of the world (sports) system. Chinese football, during some transfer windows, dared to break the Eurocentric logic of the global football market (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2019b). Experience, however, cooled through the interventions of the Football Association in order to try to keep the development of football healthy financially. Second, world system theory helps to explain the global production chains for sport merchandise, wherein transnational corporations based in core nations establish manufacturing plants in low-wage semi-peripheral and peripheral nations (Giulianotti, 2016). Here, once again, we see the Chinese advance. China is no longer "the factory of the world" or a mere exporter of primary items and cheap manufactures. The country is now the main global hub for productive and technological innovation. This has an impact on the products it exports, as they are increasingly valued. At the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, for example, several Chinese sporting goods brands stood out. Anta, which is already the third largest sporting goods brand in the world in terms of profits and market value, was the official supplier of uniforms for the International Olympic Committee and the Chinese Team. Its main national rival, Li-Ning, which is the fifth largest in the world, supplanted Adidas and supplied the equipment of the entire Mexican delegation, including the national football team, as well as the Indonesian delegation. Peak, which is only the fifth largest Chinese brand (behind Anta, Li-Ning, Xtep and 361 Degrees), was the sponsor of the Brazilian Olympic Committee as well as the national teams from Slovenia, New Zealand, Iceland, Ukraine and Romania.

### **Soft power with Chinese Characteristics: from Jiang Zemin to Xi Jinping**

Despite our critical understanding of the concept of soft power and, mainly, despite our understanding that this term does not exactly represent a new conceptualization of a phenomenon that not only precedes its definition, but, above all,

has already been analysed and conceptualized for decades before (hegemony), we will continue to address the issue of soft power in this chapter. This choice is because since 2007 China has adopted the use of soft power in its official language and as this thesis also deals with Chinese narratives, thus, it is important to understand what the Chinese authorities understand by soft power and how it was the process until the application of that term by the Chinese state. That is exactly what we are going to cover in this section of this chapter.

After the publication of Nye's *Bound to Lead* in 1990, the concept of soft power is introduced to China in 1992 and has since generated a number of discussions and became a central concept in the political formulation in the Communist Party of China (Xu et al., 2018, p. 4). In 1993, Wang Huning<sup>4</sup>, then a scholar with Communist Party links, published the first paper on soft power in China entitled "Culture as National Power: Soft Power" (Chinese: 作为国家实力的文化: 软权力; Pinyin: *zuò wéi guójiā shí lì de wén huà ruǎn quán lì*) (Glaser & Murphy, 2009, p. 12; Nantulya, 2020, p. 493). The article was published in the journal of Fudan University where Wang was a professor and discussed Nye's theory regarding the resources of soft power. As the title of the paper demonstrates, Wang considered culture as the main source of a state's soft power: "if a country has an admirable culture and ideological system, other countries will tend to follow it...It does not have to use its hard power which is expensive and less efficient" (Glaser & Murphy, 2009; Lahtinen, 2015). According to Nantulya, Wang's publication brought two major arguments. First, soft power provided unique opportunities to wage ideological and political warfare and spread China's influence without using military force. Second, culture was the key to fostering domestic cohesion, legitimacy, and harmony while increasing the state's appeal and attraction overseas (Nantulya, 2020).

A search by Wang and Lu in the China Academic Journals database, which covered more than 4,000 academic and policy journals since 1994, found that the term soft power appears for the first time in the abstracts only around in 1997 and that the

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<sup>4</sup> Wang Huning is a member of the Politburo, advisor to three Chinese leaders (Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping) and important contributor to major political conceptual formulations in contemporary China (Patapan & Wang, 2018, p. 47). Wang is currently the First Secretary of the Central Secretariat of the Communist Party of China and has served as the Director of the Central Policy Research Office from 2002-2020. Wang has also "been credited by the Chinese media with masterminding the major ideological banners of the three leaders he has served (or has been serving), such as Jiang's 'Three Represents' (*sange daibiao*), Hu's 'Scientific Outlook on Development' (*kexue fazhan guan*) and Xi's 'Chinese Dream' (*zhongguo meng*)" (Patapan & Wang, 2018, p. 58).

discussions took off after 2002, but mostly in 2006 (H. Wang & Lu, 2008). In the 1990s, the discussion was largely theoretical and confined to academic circles in China (Glaser & Murphy, 2009) and it was also debated how the term should be translated - *ruan shi li*, *ruan li liang*, or *ruan quan li* (Glaser & Murphy, 2009; H. Wang & Lu, 2008). While Wang Huning's pioneer paper referred to soft power as "*ruǎn quán lì*", but when Hu Jintao delivered his political report to the 17th Communist Party Congress, when soft power first appeared in the official public discourse of China, the term adopted was "*ruan shi lì*".

Among Chinese academics three schools of thought were formed. The first, the mainstream one, mainly composed by sociologists and philosophers, followed the precursor of the concept in the country, Wang Huning, and considered that culture is the core of soft power. That was known as the "Culture School" and had more impact on policymaking. Yu Xintian, director of the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, claimed that "Soft power consists of ideas and principles, institutions and policy measures that operate within the nation's culture and cannot be separated" (Glaser & Murphy, 2009; Nantulya, 2020). The rapid spread of Confucius Institutes around the world is a direct outcome of this thinking (Nantulya, 2020, p. 493).

The second school of thought, called the Political School, accepts the importance of culture but considers that the political power is the core of soft power. In that point of view, China should focus its soft power on strengthening overseas solidarity, building a harmonious society at home, and reforming its social institutions (Glaser & Murphy, 2009; Nantulya, 2020). Yan Xuedong, one of the minds behind this conception, considers that China should thus focus its soft power on strengthening overseas solidarity, building a harmonious society at home, and reforming its social institutions (Nantulya, 2020, p. 493).

More recently a third school has emerged. And its followers argue that China's soft power should focus on the goal of transforming the structures of the current international system to facilitate China's resurgence as a Great Power. Zhao Tingyang, one of the most important representatives of this point of view, is a great defender construction of a new international society known as *tiānxià* (Chinese: 天下) or "All Under Heaven" (Nantulya, 2020, p. 494).

Despite the different interpretations that Chinese academics have about soft power and how it should be applied or what are its main resources by China, the reality is that in the end there is a prevalence of the cultural aspect. That is, the general lines presented

by the Culture School, whose origin, as we have mentioned already, is found in the pioneering analysis of Wang Huning. Or, as Wang and Lu put it, at the most abstract level, Chinese scholars and analysts define soft power as intangible, non-quantifiable, non-material or spiritual power. More specifically, they view it as the ability to persuade others with reason and to convince others with moral principles (Wang & Lu, 2008, p. 427). China's ancient history and traditional culture are viewed by most scholars as a valuable source of soft power to improve Beijing's global "appeal" and "attraction" (Glaser & Murphy, 2009; Nantulya, 2020). Many equate soft power with the power to subdue the enemy without a fight (Wang & Lu, 2008, p. 427). At this point, it is inevitable to emphasize that this aspect of Chinese soft power, after all, reproduces not only the concept of power in Lukes, but mainly the exercise of power through consensus, as taught by Gramsci - "social hegemony through the 'spontaneous' consensus" (Gramsci, 2001, p. 21). Having as a philosophical and moral reference their Confucian heritage, the Chinese develop principles such as "Harmonious Society" and "Harmonious World" or China's recent foreign policy concepts such as the "Community with a shared future for mankind".

Other scholars, as Glaser and Murphy demonstrate, go even further and hold that traditional Chinese values such as giving priority to human beings [*yi ren wei ben*], harmony between humankind and nature [*tian ren he yi*], and harmony but difference [*he er butong*] — repackaged by the CPC as the concepts of harmonious society and harmonious world (Glaser & Murphy, 2009, p. 14). This is also related to another philosophical concept from ancient China, as soft power is seen as what the Chinese Confucian philosopher Mencius called the "kingly way" (*wang dao*) to exercise power rather than the *physical way* or "bully's way" (*ba dao*) (Glaser & Murphy, 2009; H. Wang & Lu, 2008). Here, once again, we see the correlation of the application of Chinese soft power with the concepts of Gramsci and Lukes, since the kingly way symbolizes the exercise of sovereignty that relies on moral values and examples in opposition to the governance that is legitimated through brute force. The nature of this influence, as we have seen when Gramsci's lessons on hegemony were analysed, is not physical at all, but rather moral and intellectual. This is one way how China can portray itself as an alternative to Western values, for example.

In addition to Confucianism, another aspect that differentiates soft power with Chinese characteristics from that propagated by Nye is precisely Chinese Marxism. The first element is that interpretation of power as hegemony, as we saw above, which is also

highlighted through the projection of its “image that its version of Marxism has generated sustained economic growth and has raised living standards” (Sayama, 2016, p. 6). But it is also evident in the clarity that soft power is not limited to interstate relations, but also to “domestic mobilizing strength” (Xiao, 2017, p. 30). As “it goes beyond a country’s ability to influence other countries through its attractiveness to include, for example, the ability to generate compliance in a society by moral example and persuasion” (Wang & Lu, 2008, p. 427).

An unmistakable example of this manufactured consent or internal cohesion through consensus from the combination of political society + civil society efforts are the efforts we have seen in relation to the pursuit of the Common Prosperity. Once achieved the first of the “Two Centenary Goals”, a moderately prosperous society, poverty eradication (fulfilled as aimed at the Centenary of the Communist Party), China moves towards the realization of the second goal: a modern socialist society, a strong, prosperous, democratic, harmonious and culturally advanced country at the Centenary of the People’s Republic of China in 2049. In his speech at the Communist Party centenary celebration, Xi Jinping assured that “China's national rejuvenation has already become a historic inevitability” (Xi, 2021a). And to achieve that Xi said that the whole nation "must unite and lead the Chinese people in working ceaselessly for a or a better life" which means "safeguard social fairness and justice, and resolve the imbalances and inadequacies in development and the most pressing difficulties and problems that are of great concern to the people". In doing so, Xi considers that China “will make more notable and substantive progress toward achieving well rounded human development and common prosperity for all” (Xi, 2021a). The centrality of this goal is not new in Xi Jinping's speech. Still in 2012, in a speech at the first group study session of the Political Bureau of the 18th CPC Central Committee, he stated: Common Prosperity is the fundamental principle of Chinese socialism (Xi, 2014, p. 14). In fact, in his speech at the ceremony marking the 95th anniversary of the CPC, he stressed the necessity of improving living standards, benefiting all the people in a more equal way, and moving towards realizing the goal of common prosperity for all people (Xi, 2017, p. 41). Undoubtedly, in the last few years there is something that has changed in the dialectical historical process, which the Chinese define as their primary stage of socialism (社会主义初级阶段) and which is expressed in the 14th Five-Year Plan: the change in the main contradiction in Chinese

society<sup>5</sup>. As China is not a backward country anymore and Chinese people has already accomplished material and cultural needs the most important task of the country is now overcome the inequalities and asymmetries caused by imbalanced capital accumulation. After all, as Marx already said, social contradiction makes politics a competition between possible non-equivalent histories and is set in the incessant movement of change, characteristic of social reality. “The development of the contradictions of a given historical form of production is the only historical way in which it can be dissolved and then reconstructed on a new basis” (Marx, 1992, p. 619). Finally it is also worth remembering, that according to Xi the realization of the “Two Centenary Goals” counts on the strengthening of the soft power cultural to be achieved (Xi, 2014, p. 178).

I will return to the sources of soft power with Chinese characteristics later on. Rather, I would just like to trace the origin of the term in China. From Wang Huning in the Jiang Zemin era to show how academic and internal Party debate evolved to the use of the expression for the first time in an official public discourse, by Hu Jintao in 2007, until we reach its instrumentalization in the Xi Jinping era.

As previously mentioned, from 1993 onwards, after the publication of Wang's paper, soft power started to be debated in the Chinese academy. According to Nantulya, China's leaders paid very close attention to Chinese soft power debates. In 1995 Wang Huning was appointed by Jiang Zemin to lead the political unit of the Communist Party's Central Policy Research Office and under Hu Jintao leadership Wang would become the head of CPRO (Nantulya, 2020, p. 494). Nonetheless, it was not until the 16th Communist Party Congress in November 2002 that culture became part of the strategic policy objective (Nantulya, 2020, 495; Sayama, 2016, p. 4). In that occasion, the then propaganda chief, Liu Yunshan spoke of China's “Cultural Power”: “The power of culture is becoming an important component in integrating national power and international competitiveness ... China must turn itself into a ‘cultural power’” (Nantulya, 2020, p. 495).

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<sup>5</sup> In his Report to the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping defined the "main contradiction" (主要矛盾) in Chinese society as "the contradiction between the people's ever-increasing need for the good life on the one hand and imbalanced and insufficient development on the other" (人民日益增长的美好生活需要和不平衡不充分的发展之间的矛盾). The Party's previous formulation of "the main contradiction during the initial stage of socialism" (社会主义初级阶段主要矛盾), announced at the Sixth Plenum of the 11th Party Congress in 1981, was: "the contradiction between the people's ever-increasing material and cultural needs and China's backward social productive forces" (人民日益增长的物质文化需要同落后的社会生产之间的矛盾) (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2021).

President Jiang Zemin appealed for cultural development and reform in his political report at 16th Party Congress: “Socialist spiritual civilization is an important attribute of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Basing ourselves on China's realities, we must carry forward the fine tradition of our national culture and absorb the achievements of foreign cultures in building socialist spiritual civilization. We should unceasingly upgrade the ideological and ethical standards as well as the scientific and cultural qualities of the entire people so as to provide a strong motivation and intellectual support for the modernization drive” (Jiang, 2002). Once again, if we analyse the discourse through the lens of Gramsci’s hegemony we identify that Chinese promotion of its culture is intrinsically related to moral, intellectual and ideological values.

Also at the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress Zheng Bijan, former vice president of the Communist Party of China’s Central Party School, gave a speech in which he presented China’s "Peaceful Rise — a New Path" narrative: “Our brand new path relies upon the following factors, namely: relying on our own development; relying on the opening up of markets; relying on institutional innovation; relying on getting connected with economic globalisation instead of being isolated from it; and relying on reciprocity and mutual benefit with other countries for the purpose of win-win relations” (B. Zheng, 2005). According to Zhongying, this represents the transition from *Tao Guang Yang Hui* to *Xin Xing* (Zhongying, 2020). However, the term rise was not well accepted, because it was understood as a message that contradicted Deng Xiaoping's narrative of “will not challenge”. In 2004, at Boao Forum for Asia, Hu Jintao used instead the phrase China's peaceful development. And in 2005 a white paper was issued on “China’s Path to Peaceful Development (Glaser & Murphy, 2009).

In May 2004, the concept of soft power was exposed in the 13th Group Study Session of the Politburo of the CPC (Lahtinen, 2015). In a speech in August 2006, the then Premier Wen Jiabao stated: “We should expand cultural exchanges with other countries. Cultural exchanges are a bridge connecting the hearts and minds of people of all countries and an important way to project a country's image... We should use various forms... to promote Chinese culture and increase its appeal overseas” (Wen, 2006). In November 2006, Hu Jintao declared: “The one who takes a commanding point on the battlefield of cultural development will gain the upper hand in fierce international competition” (Nantulya, 2020, p. 495).

Finally in 2007, 'soft power' was introduced into China's official language in President Jintao Hu's speech to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of

China (Lahtinen, 2015; M. Li, 2009; Sayama, 2016; H. Xu et al., 2018). As Nantulya points out, Wang Huning's thesis on "Cultural Soft Power" prevailed (Nantulya, 2020, p. 495). After all Hu Jintao's political work report to this Congress stated that: "In the present era, culture has increasingly become an important factor in the competition of overall national strength; we must stimulate the cultural creativity of the whole nation and enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country" (J. Hu, 2007).

On October 18th, 2011, at the Party's Central Committee convention, President Hu again called for "striving to build a strong socialist country through connecting the world and enhancing its cultural soft power" (Xiao, 2017, p. 30). After Xi Jinping's arrival at the leadership of the Communist Party and the PRC Presidency the effort to promote the country in an attractive and convincing manner was intensified. In December 2013 in a speech at the 12<sup>th</sup> group session of the Political Bureau of the 18th CPC Central Committee Xi dedicated special attention to soft power, in a talk entitled "Enhance China's Cultural Soft Power". In this text, Xi claimed that the strengthening of Chinese "cultural soft power is decisive for China to reach the Two Centenary Goals and realize the Chinese Dream of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Xi, 2014, p. 178) and oriented that to strengthen Chinese cultural soft power its fundamental to "disseminate the values of modern China" (p. 179). Xi Jinping returns to the topic, for example, in a speech to the 19th CPC Congress on October 18, 2017: "Our country's underlying values hold greater appeal than ever before, and the wave of positive energy felt throughout society is building. We, the Chinese people, have greater confidence in our own culture. China's cultural soft power and the international influence of Chinese culture have increased significantly" (Xi, 2020, p. 5).

### **The sources of soft power with Chinese characteristics**

As we have seen, Wang Huning's thesis on "Cultural Soft Power" prevailed and became the heart and soul of the official speeches by the country's leaders. Therefore, China's soft power comprising culture and ideology gained great importance (Lahtinen, 2015; Lai, 2012b). Hence, in the last years, culture has been an important tool for China to increase its soft power, which, taking advantage of its unique culture promotes cultural exchanges seeking attraction and to grow its international influence (Lai, 2012a, p. 83).

By the way, it is worth remembering that the use of culture as an instrument of attraction and persuasion is not new. In fact, as Snow puts it, "soft power is a new concept for an old habit", giving the example of countries that, long before the United States,



which is the focus of the author's analysis, already used their cultures as a way to obtain advantages for their national images like France, Italy, Germany and the UK (Snow, 2009, p. 4). Which also applies to China. Confucius, for example, is credited with asserting that foreigners from afar should be persuaded and pursued through culture and moral values (Liu, 2020, p. 3). Rawnsley observes that since dynastic times, China has resorted to its cultural dimension as a way to project its image and to try to exercise power in the relations it establishes with other peoples and other nations (Rawnsley, 2009, p. 284). In the same vein, Nantulya points out that soft power has been the primary means through which China has interacted with Africa since the Tang Dynasty (Nantulya, 2020, p. 482). In the Tang dynasty, by the way, Empress Wu Zetian sent a pair of pandas to the Japanese Emperor Tenmu, anticipating by 14 centuries what Mao Zedong would adopt as "panda diplomacy" (Rawnsley, 2009, p. 285).

However, returning to contemporary China and the use of "Chinese cultural soft power" as a way to build an image of "a responsible big nation" in the international community (Xiao, 2017, p. 31), China has actively promoted cultural exchange programs, festivals, movies, music, religious forums, sports, and tourism with the outside world in the 2000s (Lai, 2012a, p. 83). One example is the internationalization of Chinese media, particularly, the "Big Four" Beijing media agencies - Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), and China Daily/Global Times (Becard & Filho, 2019). Xinhua News Agency, for example, currently has 180 international offices (surpassing Associated Press, Reuters and Agence France Press) and publications in eight languages (Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, and Japanese). China Central Television was rebranded as China Global Television Network (CGTN), broadcasts in 6 channels (2 in English and the others in Arabic, French, and Spanish), in 171 countries (Becard & Filho, 2019, pp. 4-5).

Another good example is the Chinese film industry. The development of this cultural industry in the country is notorious. China is already the country with the largest number of movie theatres in the world. Furthermore, there is a huge investment in local production, either through co-production (especially with Hollywood) to increase their know-how, or through investment in local studios and productions (Becard & Filho, 2019, pp. 5-6). When it comes to local production, the film "Wandering Earth" is an excellent case to be regarded. First of all, because it is considered China's first science fiction blockbuster, winning a double harvest at the box office and word of mouth and the cumulative box office of the film has exceeded 4.6 billion Yuan (Ye, 2019, p. 151) a

worldwide total of US\$ 700,8 million (the film budget was around US\$ 50 million). “Wandering Earth” has had also a major impact on the improvement of Chinese cultural soft power, promoting the core values of Chinese tradition, and reshapes China's national image (Ye, 2019, p. 151).

The film is set in 2075, when the sun is about to be destroyed and in order to survive, human beings will start the "Wandering Earth" plan, trying to escape the solar system with the earth and find a new home for humankind. The film's narrative contradicts the US hegemony in international film production, mainly by presenting to a global audience (the movie was available on Netflix in several countries) completely different cultural values, breaking the hegemonic thinking of universal values and culture. Let's not forget that consensus comes from the prestige and therefore trust (Gramsci, 2001, p. 21) and in the world, history is the history of hegemonic States (Gramsci, 2007b, p. 320). In Wandering Earth we see that hegemonic clash, for instance, in the exaltation of collectivism with the collective effort to ensure the salvation of human life. Something that is directly opposed to the promotion of individualism so much present in the West and which in films is presented through the figure of the hero or superheroes. We find collectivism when people from all over the world that “do not have same skin colour and use different languages have united to form a coalition government and also when they build a planetary engine on a global scale with people from all over the World” (Ye, 2019, p. 153), and not only one country being posed as the saviour of mankind. Unlike many American movies, where the US is not only the heroes, the saviours of the world and humankind, but always acts as the universal leader, the guardian of global values, in Wandering Earth we see "people-oriented" values, not placing China as the leader, but all peoples acting in communion to build a shared future.

In terms of cultural soft power, undoubtedly the greatest and most emblematic Chinese resource are the Confucius Institutes (Lahtinen, 2015; Nantulya, 2020; Rawnsley, 2009; Xiao, 2017; H. Xu et al., 2018). Interestingly though, as Xiao rightly notes, long before the “soft power” concept was brought to light, teaching of Chinese as a foreign language was promoted by the country as an important source to build up international relations (Xiao, 2017, p. 32). Besides, the first Confucius Institute was established in 2004 while the concept of “cultural soft power” only became part of the official language in 2007. According to the Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes, the Institutes are devoted to deepening friendly relationships with other nations, promoting the development of multi-culturalism and constructing a harmonious world

(Lahtinen, 2015, p. 12). There are 541 institutes and nearly 2,000 Confucius classrooms operating in 162 countries at the primary, secondary, and university levels (Sands, 2021).

As Li and Worm argue, China can build its soft power through three diplomatic channels - formal, economic and public diplomacies (Xin Li & Worm, 2010, p. 75), but also through the promotion of its political values (Xin Li & Worm, 2010, p. 77). That is why Li Mingjiang puts that China's soft power is best illustrated by the "China model": multilateralism, economic diplomacy, and a "good neighbour" policy (M. Li, 2009, p. 6).

It is important to remind that the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, in its preamble, state that "the future of China is closely linked to the future of the world", also enshrines principles as the peaceful development, mutual beneficial strategy, opening up, economic and cultural exchanges, and, the opposition to imperialism, hegemonism, and colonialism. In 2021, it was published the white paper "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era". In that document China reinforces its vision that the unprecedented level of interconnection and interdependence among countries binds them into a global community of shared future (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021b). According to Staiano, the concept of Community of a Shared Future for Mankind is adopted by China from Morin's "community of planetary destiny", originally theorized by Otto Bauer – *Schicksalgemeinschaft* (Staiano, 2020, p. 217). She argues that this foreign-policy goal reflects Chinese "neo-humanist" thought (p. 216), something that goes beyond Confucian humanism, corresponding to an encounter among Confucianism and Taoism (p. 219). Staiano adds that the Community of a Shared Future for Mankind represents a key objective of China's international relations towards the creation of a new international order, which also includes the three expressions of "relationality", "human authority" and "symbiosis (p. 228).

Chinese multilateralism presents itself under two great fields of action and influence. The first concerns to the spirit of international solidarity, which is enshrined in cooperative internationalism and in the aforementioned Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The second refers to economic development, whose message to the world is precisely one of respect for national sovereignty while the Chinese development model serves as an aspiration and, therefore, persuades a large part of the international community. That is, the so-called Beijing Consensus.

The Beijing Consensus, a term popularized by Joshua Cooper Ramo through the Foreign Policy Centre in the UK, is a development formulation that China presents to the

world in opposition to the Washington Consensus (Amado Mendes, 2010; Lahtinen, 2015; Xin Li & Worm, 2010; H. Wang & Lu, 2008). Although the Chinese government has shunned the more provocative phrase of ‘Beijing Consensus’ because it ‘does not want to raise a different banner that competes with the Washington consensus’, Chinese officials have not been shy to speak of the Chinese development model (Wang & Lu, 2008, p. 440). Amado Mendes says that “the limited success of the Bretton Woods institutions in Africa and Latin America and the arrogant stance that Washington knows best how others should govern themselves have contributed to the acceptance of the Chinese development approach” (Amado Mendes, 2010, p. 42).

I go further Amado Mendes, as I understand that Washington policies to the countries of the semi-periphery and periphery of the World failed in large extent. The history of the US with these countries is often plagued by cases of military intervention, support for coups and dictatorships and the imposition of economic models, in addition to the experimentalism of economic theories in certain countries that resulted in greater inequality and dependence. Furthermore, there is also the US economic blockade on Cuba, which has been condemned by the near unanimity of UN countries for 29 years in a row but the resolution that demands its end is systematically ignored. As Wallerstein puts it, “today, the productive efficiency of U.S. enterprises faces very extensive competition, principally from the enterprises of its closest allies. As a result, the world-political agenda of the United States is no longer so warmly endorsed and is often clearly contested, even by its allies, especially given the disappearance of the Soviet Union. What remains for the moment is military superiority” (Wallerstein, 2003, p. 204).

That is also why the Chinese development model has become widely appealing to other countries, especially developing countries (Wang & Lu, 2008, p. 429). After all, as Wen Jiabao stated, "China can offer the developing world 'a new model for South–South cooperation' which is based on 'peaceful coexistence, equality, and respect for the social systems, sovereignty, and independence and China's willingness 'to provide assistance without any political strings attached" (Xin Li & Worm, 2010, p. 81). In this sense, let us remember that power is also prestige. As Khong puts it, "the economic capabilities of states are central to all discussions of international power" (Khong, 2019). China has a great asset in this regard. After all, it was the first country that managed to go from being an “emerging country” to an “emerging donor” (Vadell, Lo Brutto, & Leite, 2020). Not by chance, one of China's most attractive and appealing selling points in Africa is

perceived as successful in transitioning from a poor country to a wealthy, powerful, and developed one in less than five decades (Nantulya, 2020, p. 504).

Another resource in which China can rely on in promoting its economic development as a role model. When dealing with power as prestige, Khong, as said above, places economic power as a resource, but the author also considers the technological strength as part of a country's economic capabilities as well as a fourth dimension of power (Khong, 2019, p. 122). It is unavoidable to say that part of the hegemonic war that the world has seen in recent years is waged, mainly, because of the scientific and technological development of China, which not only reached the core of the world system countries in various sectors, but also is ahead and most advanced in many aspects and industries.

Finally, we cannot forget the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), one of the most ambitious geopolitical and economic projects in the contemporary world, which began in 2013. A global integration plan, having the former “Middle Kingdom” (literal translation of the Chinese country name, *Zhōngguó* - 中國) as the link of union and interconnectivity. BRI is an initiative that draws inspiration from the ancient Silk Road as a conceptual reference for policies that seek to promote the rapprochement and integration of China with Asian, European, African and, more recently, also Latin American countries. Therefore, we consider that this project, due to its magnitude, is the greatest manifestation of the international projection of the Chinese model. After all, in it we find the three diplomatic channels - formal, economic and public diplomacies (Xin Li & Worm, 2010, p. 75), but also political values (Xin Li & Worm, 2010, p. 77), the promotion of multilateralism and the dissemination and appreciation of culture and cultural exchange. From an economic and foreign trade point of view, in addition to promoting China as a global partner, reinforcing its position as the top trade partner for most countries in the world, it also has, for example, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. According to Van der Putten et. al China's objective is to contribute to the development of the country's international and economic relations, strengthening 'connectivity' (van der Putten, Huotari, Seaman, Ekman, & Otero-Iglesias, 2016) – a word that, as we have already seen in this chapter, is key to Chinese diplomacy. Regarding the question of culture, it should be stressed that China is not only intending to re-establish the old trade route, but to use the Silk Road's cultural message as a basis for international cooperation. The Silk Road would be a metaphor for peace and cooperation, openness and inclusion, mutual learning and mutual benefit (W. Liu & Dunford, 2016). The BRI also serve as an essential

corollary to building a Community of Shared Future for Mankind (Staiano, 2020, p. 229). Sport is also increasingly important exports of Chinese culture (Rawnsley, 2009, p. 285). In fact, the Chinese Football Plan also connects with BRI (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2020). The importance of sport as a public diplomacy tool is a topic we will cover in greater depth from now on in this chapter.

### **Sports diplomacy and soft power**

Diplomacy is the politics at the state level. It's "the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of relations between the governments of independent state" (Satow, 1957, p. 1). As Snow defines it, traditional diplomacy means "government-to-government (G2G) relations", while traditional public diplomacy, in turn, would represent "governments speaking to global audiences (G2P)" (Snow, 2009, p. 6). According to Dubinsky, "the term public diplomacy was applied during the Cold War referring to the process of international organizations trying to achieve foreign policy goals by engaging with foreign publics" (Dubinsky, 2019, p. 1). The author adds that "new public diplomacy refers also to non-state actors" (p. 1) and explains that public diplomacy comprehends communications and interactions by governments, policymakers, organizations, and individuals to influence foreign publics to achieve a more favourable image of the nation and ultimately achieve foreign policy goals (Dubinsky, 2019).

In contrast, Snow points out that, more recently, public diplomacy involves the way in which both governments and private individuals or groups directly or indirectly influence public attitudes and opinions that have a direct bearing on the foreign policy decisions of other governments. "P2P". She explains that this change is due to the development of communication technologies that facilitate the participation of the public, who speak about foreign policy issues and the subsequent influence of public opinion in the formulation of foreign policies (Snow, 2009, p. 6). Opinion corroborated by Rawnsley, who alludes to the fact that public diplomacy increasingly involves the activities of non-state agents as protagonists in the communication of foreign policies (Rawnsley, 2012, p. 123).

Like Snow and Rawnsley, Dubinsky also talks about the "new public diplomacy", arguing that it refers "to non-state actors as well". Explaining that public diplomacy comprises the communications and interactions of governments, policy makers, organizations and individuals who influence the international public to obtain a more favourable image of a nation that can thereby achieve its foreign policy objectives

(Dubinsky, 2019). Essentially, public diplomacy seeks to exercise influence by building positive and resilient affiliations, which other parties consider to be attractive and valuable (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

Considering that public diplomacy comprises actions that aim to produce positive engagements, the "conscious act of communicating with the external public" (Rawnsley, 2012, p. 123), we can say that public diplomacy is a 'soft power' facilitator. Nye himself considers public diplomacy as a soft power tool. As mentioned before, soft power is the ability to entice and attract and its resources are the assets that produce such attraction, so Nye argues that governments use public diplomacy to mobilize the resources applied to produce soft power in order to "communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments" (Nye, 2008, p. 95). After all, if 'soft power' presupposes the exercise of power through values, examples and legacies to be emulated, it is necessary that these virtues are known, as it is not possible to exercise power of attraction when no one even knows their qualities (Mattern, 2008, p. 588).

Freeman (2012) argues that nations use 'soft power' as a way to build and manage their reputations, adding that this is a mode of 'soft public diplomacy', which serves for states not only to make themselves attractive to foreigners but also for its citizens. Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018) state that "soft power aligns more with strategies of 'public diplomacy', which also include creating and maintaining mutual understandings, long-lasting relationships and active cooperation" (p. 1141).

Elite sport is used as an ideological tool for a long time. As Gupta puts it, an instrument to show the country to the world (Gupta, 2009, p. 1782). For this reason, it has served political interests, thus becoming an important arena for public policy (Korneeva & Ogurtsov, 2016), being used by many countries to increase their visibility and create influence (Jarvie, Murray, & Macdonald, 2017, p. 1). Sport however does not only serve as a foreign policy instrument, being also used as a domestic policy tool, because it serves as a 'soft power' mechanism both in the search for external and internal legitimacy and influence (Nygård & Gates, 2013, p. 236).

In the field of foreign policy, sport is applied as part of its diplomacy, a process in which states represent, communicate and carry out their culture, values and interests (Jarvie, Murray, & Macdonald, 2017, p. 10). When governments deliberately use sport as an instrument of diplomacy, we are faced with the diplomacy of sport in its traditional character (Abdi, Talebpour, Fullerton, Ranjkesh, & Jabbari Nooghabi, 2018, p. 366), which can happen within sport or through sport (Jarvie, Murray, & Macdonald, 2017, p.

1). However, as in the “new public diplomacy” or “P2P” (Snow, 2009), there is also the “non-traditional sport diplomacy”, which is characterized by representation, communication and negotiation not exclusively by states, but also by agents non-state organizations, such as in international organizations of sports competitions (Abdi et al., 2018). Something, by the way, that many Chinese companies have done in recent years, as in the case of the last FIFA World Cup, played in 2018, in which Chinese companies stood out among the main global and regional partners of the highest football entity (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2019a).

Legacies and cultural achievements, in addition to sporting success, are ways to gain the admiration of others. After all, culture is an important source of power and promoting a convincing culture is one of the main ways to build an external national image (Nye, 2008, p. 95). As mentioned earlier, by the way, China is quite aware of this. And according to Giulianotti (2015), sport mega-events, such as the World Cup and the Olympic Games, “can be considered one of the most powerful contemporary manifestations of globalisation”. This is because these mega-events have impact in the economic, social and political spheres. It is by no mere chance that all the BRICS<sup>6</sup> countries have hosted sports mega events in the last years. Beijing, the Chinese capital, hosted the 2008 Summer Olympics. Delhi, the Indian capital, hosted the Commonwealth Games in 2010 and South Africa, in the same year, became the first African country ever to host the FIFA World Cup. Brazil, in a period of two years, organized the two largest world sport events, the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics (Rio de Janeiro). And Russia organized the 2014 Winter Olympics (Sochi) and more recently the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Furthermore, China was again on the spotlight as organizers of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games.

That is why sport, as an instrument of persuasion being intentionally used as sport diplomacy, constitutes a very useful tool in the exercise of soft power (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016; Chari, 2015; C. C. Chen et al., 2012; Delgado, 2016; Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Grix & Lee, 2013; Korneeva & Ogurtsov, 2016; Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2017; Samuel-Azran et al., 2016). In China specifically, according to Lai, “public diplomacy often assumes the form of cultural diplomacy, as publications, motion pictures, cultural exchanges, radio and television, as well as sports, are classified as culture in China” (Lai, 2012, p. 13).

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<sup>6</sup> Acronym of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, countries whose economic growth gained global recognition as cooperative links established among them grounded their (re)positioning in the geopolitical global settings.





## Chapter 2: Sports and Politics in the People's Republic of China

*Raise both your hands. New China is ours!*<sup>7</sup>

### Sports and Politics in the People's Republic of China

As we have mentioned before, “soft power is a new concept for an old habit”, (Snow, 2009, p. 4). In sports is not different. It is no novelty to affirm that the economic, political and social roles of sports are focus of a great deal of attention in the politics and policymaking realm (Korneeva & Ogurtsov, 2016). After all, elite sport has long been used both as an ideological tool and, as Gupta puts it, as an expedient to show its country to the world (Gupta, 2009a, p. 182). This is because sports have proved “uniquely effective” in defining national identity and the sense of belonging (G. Xu, 2008, p. 1). Hobsbawm, one of the most referenced theorists about nationalism, wrote, “the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven people with a name. The individual, even one that just supports, becomes the symbol itself of his nation” (Hobsbawm, 1991). Here Hobsbawm borrows from Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” as the later defines the idea of nation as “an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6), and imagined because people live in the same country nurture the idea that they are connected to each other, even without ever meeting each other. Further, Amara claims, “the values of national identities are perceived to be the core values of modern sport. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sport has become the vehicle par excellence for national sentiment, because sport involves a competition that is based on the very system of the nation-state” (Amara, 2012, p. 10).

China, obviously, is not an exception. Sports, particularly since the 19th century, did not play second fiddle in the Chinese power structures (Hwang & Chang, 2008). Mao Zedong himself, about 30 years prior to the 1949 revolution, wrote an essay entitled "A Study of Physical Culture" (体育之研究), in which he praised physical education as necessary to counteract something he diagnosed as follows: “Our nation is wanting in strength. [...]. The physical condition of the population deteriorates daily [...]. If our bodies are not strong, we will be afraid as soon as we see enemy soldiers, and then how can we attain our goals and make ourselves respected?” (Mao, 1917). The attention paid

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<sup>7</sup> Mao Zedong, in *On New Democracy*, 1940.

to sports and physical education would permeate the post-revolution years under the motto “Keep fit, study well, work well”. As argued by Jarvie et al. (2008, p. 64), physical culture “stood for clean living, progress, good health and rationality and was regarded by the authorities as one of the most suitable and effective instruments for implementing new social policies as well as the relative degrees of social control implicit within many programmes”. Since the proclamation of the People's Republic of China on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1949, the political use of sport has been recurrent. The 1950s were also marked by the first steps taken towards the setting up of an elite sports system in China (Hong, 2008). As we will see in this section, the politicisation of sport has continued over the decades and remains a reality to this day.

### **The Sovietisation of Chinese sport**

Soon after the PRC foundation, it was initiated a plan of socialist modernization based on the Soviet model. During his visit to the Soviet Union in the winter of 1949, Mao Zedong suggested to Stalin that a new treaty be signed by the two countries to replace the outdated Sino-Soviet Treaty. Premier Zhou Enlai led a Chinese Government Delegation to the Soviet Union for the negotiations and the “Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance” was signed on 14 February 1950 and “under the agreement the Soviet Union would provide China with military support and economic and technological assistance” (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012, p. 7). At that time, the Soviet Union was the most advanced and developed experience of the “real socialism”. Naturally, it became a role model and inspiration for New China, just born from the triumph of the Communists. A model not only to the economic structures and political institutions, but also in the culture field. “More important fundamental changes were brought to urban space in the process of disseminating various Soviet cultural imports: school education was reformed, new architectural designs emerged in city topography. The entire conceptual inventory was transformed within a decade of Sino Soviet alliance” (Y. Li, 2012, p. 5). Actually, the assistance of the USSR started even before the proclamation of the PRC. In the summer of 1948, the USSR had already dispatched a specialists' technical group to the help the Chinese Communists. During the next year Liu Shaoqi came back from his visit to Moscow with a group of specialists in economic recovery planning and on the eve of the establishment of the People's Republic of China, there were already more than 600 Soviet experts in China (Shen, 2002. pp. 394-395). Soviet experts in the most diverse areas were sent to China as advisors. Between 1950

and 1956, 5,092 experts were dispatched to China alone (Shen, 2002. pp. 377). By the end of 1958, 11,527 experts worked in China's economic, cultural, and educational sectors, of which 89 percent (10,260) were from the Soviet Union. Between 1958 and 1960 the Soviet Union dispatched 915 (1958), 699 (1959), 410 (1960) industrial and technical experts to China (Shen, 2002. pp. 377).

From this period of Soviet material, intellectual and technical advice and support, the Chinese maintain to this day one of their main characteristics in public policies: state planning. Contrary to what is often said in the West about the Chinese economic model or political economy, there is no way to question whether planning still exists, but just what kind of planning China currently applies (Huang, 2013). After all, China's planning system evolved alongside the economic transition and remains central to almost all domains of public policy making and the political institutions that have fostered China's high-speed growth and economic stability (Heilmann & Melton, 2013). That is why the most visible features of this development planning continue to be the national five-year plans in which the CPC and the government establish their priorities (Heilmann, 2018, p. 8). The truth is that China has taken a very special path of economic transition. Unlike most other socialist countries, which have thoroughly discarded the planned economy system and the "five-year plan" approach, the five-year plan is thus one of three fundamental approaches to governmental macro-regulation, including self-adjustment and self-reform, in the course of innovation in the socialist market economy (A. Hu, 2013). It is evident that the functions, procedures, and instruments of development planning have diverged dramatically from the traditional socialist economic planning that China's Communists originally borrowed from the Soviet Union (Heilmann, 2018, p. 8), but it is undeniable that the five-year plans are one of the most visible legacies of the times of Soviet support. As stated above, the Soviets were role models for the New China. The Soviet inspiration in Chinese state planning was not only reflected in the structural model, but also in the planning itself and, above all, in the established goals. The first Five Year Plan (1953-1957), published in 1955, reflects this. The Communist rulers of China have set themselves the goal of transforming the country into a major industrial power, largely in the image of the Soviet Union (Shabad, 1955).

Logically, Chinese sports were also deeply influenced by the Soviet system, the so-called "Sovietisation of Chinese sport" (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012c; J. Zheng, Chen, Tan, & Lau, 2018). In fact, just as Soviet assistance to the Chinese Communists had begun even before the establishment of the PRC, so in sports, too. When the Chinese Soviet

Republic was established in Ruijing in November 1931, the government launched a policy of sport and sports leadership. Mao set the principle of physical education: 'Training iron bones and muscles of workers and peasants, then, defeating all our enemies' and 'Developing red sports, cultivating a team spirit and strong physique for the masses of workers and peasants necessary for the class struggle' (Jarvie et al., 2008, p. 54). And sports organizations were affected by a group of Moscow-trained '28 Bolsheviks', during the Jiangxi Soviet period (Jarvie et al., 2008, p. 59). For Marxism, by the way, physical education is an integral and fundamental part of the socialist system. And that the system would consist of three elements combining training of mind with training of body (James Riordan, 1976). Writing the "Instructions for the delegates of the provisional general council. The different questions", Marx and Engels advised: "First, mental education, second, bodily education, such as is given in schools of gymnastics, and by military exercises and third, technological training, which acquaints the pupil with the basic principles of all processes of production and, simultaneously, gives him the habits of handling elementary instruments of all trades" (Marx & Engels, 1977, p. 81).

Returning to the People's Republic of China, a centralized sports administration system, based on the pattern of the Soviet Union, was established (Whitby, 1999). The All-China Sports Federation (ACSF) was established in June 1950. On 15 November 1952, a new sport governing body was announced, the "State Physical Culture and Sport Commission" (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012, p. 8). The sports system was so modelled on that of the Soviet Union that even the name of the organization was borrowed from the Soviets: Sport Commission. The Commission was established in Beijing in 1954. Vice-Premier He Long was appointed chairman of the Sports Commission. Following He Long's instructions, a complete, top-down organisational system was soon established nationwide, with each province, municipality and autonomous regions creating their own sports commissions in the 'relevant bureaus of the Ministry of Education, the Central Youth League, and the General Political Department of the Military Commission' (J. Zheng et al., 2018, p. 4). But not only that, sports schools were established at national and provincial level, for those with high sporting potential (Jones, 1999, p. 110). In 1954, just after arriving from Moscow He Long even declared that China would "learn from the Soviet Union" by translating Russian sports books into Chinese, by sending Chinese athletes to Russia, and by inviting Russian teams to visit China (G. Xu, 2008, p. 49). The Chinese elite sport system, officially launched by the Sports Commission in 1956, was a copy of the Soviet one, pyramidal, centralized-hierarchical from the Central Government

to the provincial governments, from these to the municipal ones, etc. Up to the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), China operated a scheme of physical tests for students, covering the ages 12 to 18, that was a close match with the GTO/PWD scheme of the former Soviet Union (Whitby, 1999, p. 96). The first graduate programmes in sports medicine and sports physiology were implemented after a visit of a delegation of Soviet sports medicine experts to the Beijing Institute of Physical Culture in 1956 (Fu, 1999, p. 234). China also inherited the Soviet sports structure, with its professional coaches, sports medicine and science, major sports clubs sponsored and financed by the armed and security forces, for example. Nevertheless, China took the system further. Whereas the Soviet Union had forty-six sports boarding schools in 1990, and East Germany twenty, China had 150, whereas the USSR had 15,000 professional coaches, China had 18,173 in 1991 (Riordan & Jinxia, 1999, p. 168).

When it comes to the sovietisation of sport in China, one is also talking about the establishment of diplomatic relations. In the early years of the PRC's existence, sport diplomacy was at the service of building bridges and establishing friendships with countries in the Communist camp. Thus, fulfilling what was determined by The Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference<sup>8</sup>, document adopted by the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's PCC on September 29th, 1949, two days before the proclamation of the PRC. “The People's Republic of China shall unite with all peace-loving and freedom-loving countries and peoples throughout the world, first of all, with the USSR, all Peoples' Democracies and all oppressed nations. It shall take its stand in the camp of international peace and democracy, to oppose imperialist aggression to defend lasting world peace” and “the central people’s government of the People’s Republic of China may negotiate and establish diplomatic relationship on the basis of equality, mutual benefit, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity with whichever foreign government that cut off its relationship with the Kuomintang reactionaries and adopt a friendly attitude towards the People’s Republic of China.”

Thus, there was an enormous flow of exchanges and tours between Chinese delegations to Eastern European countries and the latter to China. In 1950, for example, Chinese volleyball and basketball teams went to Czechoslovakia and Romania, in the same year the Soviet Union team went to China. In 1953 and 1954, Chinese delegations

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<sup>8</sup> The Common Program of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference was one of two documents that formed the basis for the 1954 Constitution of the People's Republic of China.

participated in international competitions in Romania and Hungary, respectively (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012, p. 17). In September 1953 a Soviet senior gymnastic coaching delegation went to China and the visit had profound impact on the establishment of the Chinese gymnastic training and ranking system (Wei et al., 2010, p. 2383). Football was also part of these exchanges and diplomatic ties. From 1954 to 1955, Chinese football team with 24 players trained in Hungary (Wei et al., 2010, p. 2384). At that time, the Hungarian football team was known as the *Golden Team* or *Magical Magyars*: they were the Olympic Champions (1952), imposed England first home defeat to non-British or Irish opposition (1953) and between 1950 and 1956, the team recorded 58 victories, 10 draws and just one defeat, in the 1954 World Cup final against West Germany. Another example was the relation with Yugoslavia. In 1956, Mao Zedong received a Yugoslavian team, asked the team to pass on his regards to Josip Tito, and suggested that a Chinese squad would pay the visit back. Which happened five months later and the Chinese delegation was received by Tito (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012, p. 17).

Soviet influence on Chinese sports led the People's Republic of China to engage with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The former Republic of China had participated in the editions of the Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles 1932, Berlin 1936 and London 1948, but the ACSF had not decided whether the PRC would be present in Helsinki 1952 or not. In fact, the top Communist leaders were so busy consolidating their power, building their nation, and fighting the United States in the Korean War that the upcoming 1952 Helsinki Olympics was not even on their radar screen (G. Xu, 2008, p. 77). This is despite the fact that the Foreign Ministry was already aware since 1951 that Finland intended to invite the PRC to participate in the Helsinki Games (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012, p. 4). Let us not forget that the Sports Commission, which would have Sports Ministry status, would not be founded until 1952. Despite this, under the influence of the Soviet Union, China would decide to participate in the 1952 Olympic Games. The Soviets soon realized the importance of international sports competitions as another arena of confrontation with the West in an attempt to show the superiority of their model of society (Leite Junior, 2018, p. 100). In addition, there was also the clear perception of the dimension of sport diplomacy, as V. Balshov wrote: "Sport effectively helps to break down national barriers, create international associations, and strengthen the international sports movement. It is an immense social force helping to establish and promote international contacts between national sports associations of countries with different political systems" (Jim Riordan, 1988, p. 574). Then, the Soviet's Ambassador to China

informed the Chinese government that the Soviet Union would participate at Helsinki 1952 and asked China to join (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012c; G. Xu, 2008). However, there was a problem. The PRC was not yet a member of the IOC. It is from the moment that China communicates to the IOC that it intends to join that an even bigger stir begins, of proportions far beyond sports, involving the issue of the "Two Chinas".

When the Communists triumphed and established the People's Republic of China, the Kuomintang fled to Taiwan and continued to call themselves the Republic of China. It turns out that the former RoC was not only a member of the IOC, but the entity recognised the transfer of the China National Amateur Athletic Federation (CNAAF) from Nanjing to Taiwan, that is, it recognised the RoC as the Chinese representative in the Olympic movement. When the PRC communicates to the IOC that it intends to attend at the entity's meeting in February 1952, it asks that the ACSF to be recognised as the representative of all of China and, therefore, calls for non-recognition of Taiwan as the Chinese representative (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012c; G. Xu, 2008). In the midst of the Cold War, the US supported Taiwan. Beijing and Taiwan started a backroom dispute with diplomatic interventions to secure the recognition of just one representative from China. As Taiwan was recognised as RoC, in technical terms, the question that arose was whether ACSF would be recognised as a representative of the PRC. After tough communications between representatives of the PRC and the IOC, in particular its president, Sigfrid Edström, an IOC session voted 29–22 to allow both teams to participate in Helsinki, the IOC put off a decision on whether Beijing could become a member. On July 18, one day before the opening ceremony of the Helsinki Games, the IOC finally extended invitations to both Beijing and Taipei (G. Xu, 2008, pp. 82-83). Taiwan immediately withdrew from the Games in protest (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012, p. 7). The PRC sent a delegation of 40 athletes. However, only swimmer Wu Chuanyu participated, becoming the only representative of the People's Republic of China at the Olympic Games in 32 years. Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai, called the Chinese participation a 'Great Victory' as China had won an important political battle, after all PRC flag was the only Chinese flag to flutter in Helsinki. Furthermore, the Soviet success – which debuted in second place with 22 gold medals – made the Chinese authorities realize the enormous potential of elite sports.

The political dispute for the recognition and legitimacy of the PRC as the only China, however, would lead the PRC to withdrawal from the IOC in 1958 and, before that, to be absent from the Melbourne Games 1956. This is because although the IOC, in



May 1954, recognised ACSF as a representative of the PRC (in a narrow vote, 23-21), the entity continued to recognise Taiwan as RoC. Despite this, Beijing confirmed that it would go to Melbourne and began preparing its athletes. A delegation of 92 athletes was selected to represent China in Australia. However, an incident in the arrival of the Taiwanese team caused China to give up sending its delegation to Melbourne. When the Taiwan delegation arrived in the Olympic Village, the PRC flag was raised, the Taiwanese dragged the flag down (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012, p. 15). As the IOC refused to recognise the PRC as the only China and with the escalating tone in communications between the Chinese and the entity, the Chinese accused the IOC president Avery Brundage of being a servant of US imperialist interests and for that reason supported Taiwan and the "Two China" issue (G. Xu, 2008, p. 86). On August 19, 1958, ACSF issued an official statement to the IOC announcing its withdrawal from the Olympic movement. Also in 1958, the PRC stated that it would refuse to cooperate with any organization that recognised the Two Chinas and, therefore, withdrew from 10 international sports federations (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012, p. 16), including FIFA. One exception was the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF). Because the RoC's Chinese Table Tennis Association failed to join the ITTF, the PRC joined ITTF as the 'first' and only China in 1953 (Qingmin, 2013).

### **The Sino-Soviet conflict and its consequences: GANEFO and Ping Pong Diplomacy**

This scenario of rupture with international sports organizations and the geopolitical situation of the late 1950s, and in particular the divergence within the communist camp that would culminate in the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, obviously reflected in a profound change in Chinese foreign affairs. Which had direct effects on sports, being responsible for two important moments in the history of international sports and sports diplomacy: the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO) in the 1960s and the so-called Ping-Pong Diplomacy in the 1970s.

1956 was a decisive year for the beginning of a crucial ideological struggle within the communist movement. It all started with Nikita Khrushchev's historical revisionism at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). In his speech and report, the Soviet leader delivered a report criticizing Stalin and began his efforts to de-Stalinize the USSR. The Chinese Communists profoundly disagreed with Khrushchev's position, initiating what became known as The Great Debate. In April 1956, the CPC published "On the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat"

in which it presented great divergences. Among them, the CPC objected to the CPSU de-Stalinization campaign, arguing that the general line of the International Communist Movement had been correct during Stalin's tenure. And the question of peaceful coexistence, in which the USSR saw coexistence with the West as in the mutual interest of both systems and the Chinese considered that a capitulation - "it took a series of momentous decisions on the steadfast implementation of Lenin's policy in regard to the possibility of peaceful co-existence between countries with different social systems". For Chinese Communist leaders, Khrushchev's attitudes betrayed not only Stalin's legacy but also Marxism-Leninism. The Soviet communists, on the other hand, accused the Chinese of not being really Marxists. It is interesting to note that, in December 2012, in a speech entitled "Several questions on maintaining and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics", Xi Jinping stated that the end of the Soviet Union was linked to the denial of Marxism-Leninism and historical revisionism. Without mentioning Khrushchev, it is evident in the discourse analysis to which (or to whom) Xi referred: "Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate? Why did the Soviet Communist Party fall from power? An important reason was that the struggle in the field of ideology was extremely intense, completely negating the history of the Soviet Union, negating the history of the Soviet Communist Party, negating Lenin, negating Stalin, creating historical nihilism and confused thinking" (Tiffert, 2019).

However, in addition to this huge disagreement in ideological interpretation and praxis, the episodes in Poland and Hungary, in October 1956, would definitively place Chinese and Soviets in opposing camps in the communist movement. First, the way Moscow intervened in the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP) that Mao found worrisome, as he considered the Soviet attitude as a 'big-power chauvinist' policy toward Eastern European (J. Chen, 2001, p. 146). At a plenary session of the CPSU presidium at the Kremlin, Liu Shaoqi delivered a speech in which he argued that the tensions originated in Moscow's "big-power chauvinism" and claimed that the problems with Poland should be solved through comrade-style criticism and self-criticism by both the Soviet and the Polish sides (J. Chen, 2001, p. 152). A different position, however, was taken in relation to Hungary. Although Liu and Deng Xiaoping realized that there was a *contradictio in terminis* in relation to what they had recommended to Poland and Eastern Europe - refrain from using military forces to intervene in the internal affairs of a fraternal country - they understood that what was going on in Hungary it was a *sui generis* situation. The Chinese considered "the Hungarian crisis was different from the Polish crisis in nature—while the

latter is anti-Soviet, the former is anti-Communist” (J. Chen, 2001, p. 155), and thus supported the need for the Red Army's presence. From this resulted the declaration by the Soviet Government on the “Principles of Development and further Strengthening of Friendship and Cooperation between the Soviet Union and Other Socialist States” and the interpretation of Chinese leaders was that China played a fundamental role in Moscow's decisions. The CPC leaders also believed that a vulnerable, confusing, and inconsistent attitude on the part of the Soviet leaders (J. Chen, 2001, p. 159). This led CPC leadership to see China's centrality in the world proletarian revolution and strengthened the belief that they should occupy a more prominent position in the international Communist movement, China's centrality in the world proletarian revolution (J. Chen, 2001, p. 161). This, of course, further deepened the cleavages between the Chinese and the Soviets.

Disagreements with the USSR and the positions of the CPSU deepened over time. After the Moscow Declaration of November 1957, the CPC moved to the left while the CPSU moved toward the right (D. Li & Xia, 2018, p. 1). Mao, for example, advocated a stepped-up assault on the imperialists in the so-called national liberation area: "I think the characteristic of the current situation is that the east wind prevails over the west wind; Socialism exceeds the strength of imperialism". While Khrushchev had greater confidence in the possibility of making gains by negotiations, he was also not as optimistic as Mao about the balance of power between East and West (Zagoria, 1961). This became even clearer after the XXI CPSU Congress in February 1959. The Soviets defended the possibility and importance of avoiding war, the peaceful coexistence and peaceful transition to socialism, while the Chinese stressed the inevitability of war, the likely transition to socialism via armed struggle, and the impossibility of peaceful coexistence with imperialism (D. Li & Xia, 2018). In September 1959, Khrushchev paid a State visit to the USA (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012d), which was not well regarded by China. When the Sino-Indian border conflict broke out in August 1959, China expected support from the USSR, which did not come. On 22 January 1960, the CPSU informed China that the Soviet Union would continue strictly observing neutrality (D. Li & Xia, 2018, p. 4). In 1960 that revealed to the world the Sino-Soviet signal was Khrushchev the recall of all from China split announcing specialists (Shen, 2002).

The Sino-Soviet split led China to abandon, at that historical moment, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, its trademark in international relations up to the present day. Turning the country to a more radicalized interpretation of the primacy that the Bandung Conference had attributed to the cultural and economic cooperation between

Africa and Asia and Asia and to the fierce combat against colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism (Sousa, 2020). Bringing China closer to the Non-Aligned Movement, formed in 1961, opposing Soviet "revisionism" and US imperialism, seeking to position itself as an alternative leadership with new emerging forces. It is in this context that sport serves as an instrument of "revolutionary diplomacy" (Qingmin, 2013). In the 1962 Asian Games, also known as the Fourth Asian Games. China had good relations with the Indonesian government of Sukarno and persuaded Indonesia to withdraw Taiwan's invitation, claiming it would not participate in an event with "imperialists and their followers who wanted to use the Asian Games to create 'Two Chinas'" (Hong & Xiaozheng, 2002; Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012d). On 24 August 1962 the Foreign Minister of Indonesia formally announced that it would reject Taiwan and Israel from the fourth Asian Games (Lutan & Hong, 2005). As a result, the IOC suspended Indonesia for an indeterminate period of time (Qingmin, 2013). In response, Indonesia announced the organization of the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO), an initiative that was immediately praised by China (Hong & Xiaozheng, 2002; Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012d; Lutan & Hong, 2005; Qingmin, 2013). That put the Soviets in an especially difficult position – wanting to dominate the Olympics but not wanting to cede GANEFO to China. By contrast, China through its financial patronage only stood to benefit from GANEFO (Field, 2014), after all Chinese policies at that time were aimed "to win the sympathy of Third World countries, supporting the anti-imperialist movements of Eastern Europe and the African Continent" (Madeira, 2017, p. 123). Due to economic problems the poorer countries from Africa and some countries from Asia (e.g. North Vietnam and Cambodia) were not going to be able to afford the expenses for transportation (Lutan & Hong, 2005). The PRC government came on the rescue. It agreed to give the Indonesians an US\$18 million gift for the games and to pay the transportation costs of all delegations at GANEFO (Hong & Xiaozheng, 2002). Despite pressure and threats from the IOC and various international federations, the 1<sup>st</sup> GANEFO took place in Jakarta in November 1963 with the participation of 2,404 athletes and officials from 48 countries and regions, including France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Finland and the Soviet Union. The Chinese athletes set two world records, won 68 gold, 58 silver and 45 bronze medals, followed by the USSR with 27, 21 and 9 respectively. A 2<sup>nd</sup> GANEFO edition was planned to be held in Cairo, Egypt, in 1966, but due to financial constraints, it took place in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on 25 November – 6 December 1966. The Second GANEFO

ended up being an Asian GANEFO. Its aim was to reinforce China's leadership in the Third World. 17 Asian nations and 2,000 athletes attended it.

Among the various sports venues, China donated the GBK stadium to Indonesia for the first GANEFO and built the 50,000 seat Phnom Penh National Olympic Stadium as well as other sport facilities in Cambodia, for the second edition. That financial and equipment contribution for the two editions of GANEFO practically started the so-called Stadium Diplomacy - a term that refers to the Chinese practice of gifting sports stadium as a diplomatic tool, as part of the country's strategies of competing for international influence and aligning possible partners (C. Q. L. Xue, Ding, Chang, & Wan, 2019). In the words of Will (2012), "the stadium projects function largely as means of cultivating soft power in China's dealings with developing nations" (pp. 42, 43). Since then, China has managed to build more than 100 stadiums in the developing countries (C. Q. L. Xue et al., 2019). Among the most recent cases, there is the case of Costa Rica, which shortly after ending diplomatic relations with Taiwan and officially recognizing the PRC, inaugurated in 2011 the Estadio Nacional de Costa Rica, which was built entirely by the Chinese, at the cost of US \$100 million (Will, 2012, p. 35). In 2020 and 2021, China donated US\$11 million to modernize the stadium. Chinese stadiums can be found in nearly 35 African nations. In 2010, Angola hosted the African Cup of Nations and the Chinese built all four stadiums (Estádio 11 de Novembro in Luanda, Estádio Nacional do Chiazzi in Cabinda, Estádio Nacional de Ombaka in Benguela and Estádio Nacional de Tundavala in Lubango) used in the competition. By most projections, the stadiums alone cost US\$ 600 million (Will, 2012). Something similar happened in 2011, when Mozambique's capital Maputo hosted the All-Africa Games. The total cost of the Games summed up to US\$ 250 million. It is estimated that China financial involvement was about US\$ 156 million (Njal, 2012). Also in Maputo, the Chinese were responsible for the construction of the Estádio Nacional do Zimpeto, which costed around US\$ 65 million - in front of the stadium, a sign in Chinese characters and Portuguese, states: "The friendship between China and Mozambique will last forever like heaven and earth".

However, going back to the Cold War times, the Sino-Soviet split, as mentioned before, decisively contributed to one of the most classic examples of sport diplomacy, the so-called Ping Pong Diplomacy (Abdi et al., 2018; Z. Chen, 2016). In 1966, China initiated the so-called Cultural Revolution. In the view of the Chinese leaderships, the country needed to re-establish communist ideology and oppose revisionist ideas and practices in some sectors of its superstructure. Sports were not left out. It started to be

questioned whether sport should be at the service of elite athletes and in search of medals or of the people, for their well-being, health and defence of the country. In 1968, the Ministry of Sports became an army headquarters office. As already mentioned, the only exception to China's international isolation from sports competition, apart from GANEFO, was table tennis tournaments. The Chinese won 15 gold medals at the 1965 Worlds, for example. However, during the Cultural Revolution, the country absented itself from the competition in 1967 and 1969 as well as winning medals at international sports competitions came to be seen as a practice of the capitalist road<sup>9</sup>. This changed with the resurgence of Sino-Soviet tensions. It all starts in 1968 after the resolution of Operation Danube, as the Chinese leaders saw the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine as a threat to China. However, it is important to emphasize that China, while defending Czechoslovakia against Soviet intervention, also accused the Prague Spring of being revisionist. In 1969, the tension between the two countries was heightened with border disputes. In March, an armed conflict on Zhenbao Island (Damansky) on the Ussuri River caused deaths on both sides. In August, another dispute with deaths, on the Xinjiang border. Mao and Zhou Enlai were convinced that would probably be incapable of defending China if the Soviet Union were to launch a major attack (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012c, p. 55). At the same time, Sino-American relations were not the best either. According to Chen Jian, the contention between China and the United States seemed more intense than ever before. As the author recalls, the escalation of the Vietnam War and increasing American military involvement in it, Beijing dispatched large numbers of engineering and antiaircraft artillery forces to North Vietnam while providing the Vietnamese Communists with substantial military and other support (J. Chen, 2001, pp. 239-240). At that time, the CPC leadership considered that a rapprochement with the US was necessary to ensure the interests of national defence. For this, as Chen points out, an ideological justification was needed, since the establishment of the PRC, the US was considered the imperialist enemy. So there was a radical redefinition of their concept of imperialism by identifying the Soviet Union as a "social-imperialist country" and there was no contradiction there with the Leninist term 'imperialism', since the Chinese, in the midst of the Great Debate, accused the Soviets of having restored capitalism (J. Chen, 2001, pp. 242).

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<sup>9</sup> About this period, read Hong & Zhouxiang (2012e) and Zhouxiang (2016).

Policymakers in Beijing and Washington spent the early months of 1971 assessing diplomatic options and formulating negotiation strategies and In the meantime, both the Chinese and Americans were waiting for the opportunity to take the next step (J. Chen, 2001, pp. 258). The opportunity arose when the chairman of the Japanese Table Tennis Association, the organizer of the thirty-first World Table Tennis Championships (held in Nagoya from March 28 to April 7, 1971), went to Beijing and invited the PRC to attend (Hong & Xiaozheng, 2002; Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012e). Despite doubts among Chinese leaders whether or not they should accept the invitation, Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong decided that the Chinese team should go. However, under one condition. The Chinese delegation should be guided by the motto of “friendship first, competition second”. The Chinese team went to the World Cup as the country's diplomatic representation, open, if sought, to dialogue with delegations from other countries. It is said that the ice between the Chinese and the Americans was broken by chance. Glenn Cowan mistakenly got on the Chinese bus on his way to practice. After 10 minutes of silence, three-time world champion Zhuang Zedong approached and started a conversation. After that, Graham B. Steenhoven, manager of the American delegation, asked Song Zhong, general secretary of the Chinese delegation “if the American players could have the opportunity to visit China to learn from the Chinese players” (J. Chen, 2001, pp. 259). The invitation was made and on April 10, a delegation of 15 athletes from the USA arrived in Beijing. They were the first Americans to set foot in China in almost 25 years. On 14 April 1971 Premier Zhou Enlai at the People’s Hall, Beijing, received the US table tennis players. He said: “You have opened a new chapter in the relations of the American and Chinese people. I am confident that this new beginning of our friendship will certainly meet with majority support of our two peoples. We welcome you” (Hong & Xiaozheng, 2002, p. 334). A few hours after Zhou met with the American players, Washington announced five new measures concerning China, including the termination of the twenty-two-year-old trade embargo (J. Chen, 2001, pp. 261). On July 11, Henry Kissinger, the US National Security Adviser, met with Zhou in China. Kissinger's trip served to settle the details of US President Nixon's official visit to China. On February 21, 1972, Mao and Nixon met in Beijing. The People's Daily newspaper reported that China was back to the international family. At the end of Nixon's visit to China, which established the beginning of China-US relations, the Joint Statement of the two nations explicitly stated that their relations would be based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Zhengqing & Xiaoqin, 2015), been reaffirmed in 1979, when diplomatic relations were officially established.

Ping Pong Diplomacy has not only served to establish China-US relations. The Chinese seized the opportunity to renew ties broken by the start of the Cultural Revolution, especially with developing and non-aligned countries. Inspired by GANEFO, the Afro-Asian Friendship International Table Tennis Tournament emerged. Its first edition was held in November 1971, in Beijing, and attended by representatives from 51 Third World countries. Some Latin American countries were also present. The second edition, in 1973, was expanded and renamed “Tournament of Friendship... Afro-Asiatic-Latin American”. Premier Zhou received the delegations in a ceremony at the Great Hall of the People, which was also attended by leaders such as Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping. The 1975 edition of the Friendship Tournament was held in Abuja, Nigeria and was attended by athletes from 70 countries. The competition had two more editions, in 1976 in Mexico City and in 1980 in Japan (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012e). Ping Pong Diplomacy has also brought China closer to international sporting bodies. In 1973, the country returns to the Asian Games Federation (AGF), being invited to participate in the Asian Games. The AGF executive committee's Bangkok meeting in 1973 concluded that China should be represented by the All-China Sport Federation in the AGF and that Taiwan be expelled (Qingmin, 2013). China further sought to reconnect with the Olympic Movement and unsuccessfully plead to participate in the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games. In 1979, the IOC adopted a resolution determining Taiwan's Olympic Committee to be renamed the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee and the People's Republic of China returns to the IOC.

### **Back to the IOC and the quest for Olympic Glory**

China's return to the IOC coincides with Deng Xiaoping's rise to the country's leadership, marking the beginning of the period of economic reforms and the deepening of a process initiated by Mao, of returning to the international community and opening up to the world. At this point, China sets as its goal the achievement of national modernization and the quest to catch up with Western capitalist countries. Sport played a fundamental role in this modernization process. In 1978, the Sport Commission organized a national conference at which the State Council stated that sport development was an important mission because it promoted not only “the drive to catch up and even overtake other sporting superpower countries” and thus it would contribute “for establishing a modern socialist superpower” (T.-C. Tan & Green, 2008). The Sport Commission would also organize two other fundamental conferences. In February 1979, it was decided that



new sports policies would be implemented so that it would serve to carry out the “Four Modernizations”<sup>10</sup>. In 1980, a new conference officially established a strategy for sport development. According to the Sports Minister, Wang Meng, elite sport would be an effective way to boost the country's image on the international stage. The government sought to use sport to enhance national self-esteem, self-confidence, and national dignity (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012f). Wang also recognised the country's economic limitations. He stated at the National Sports Conference that forging a relationship between sport and the socialist economy was crucial to the development of Chinese elite sport, which could assist in the distribution of the limited resources of the whole nation to medal-winning sports (Hong, 2008; Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012f; Wei et al., 2010).

The first plans outlined for elite sports in China were presented in 1980. A short-term plan set the goal of finishing in the top 10 of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games and in the top 6 of the 1984 Los Angeles Games. While the long-term plan set the ambitious goal of placing the country at the level of sporting power at the end of the 1980s. China, however, was one of the 65 delegations that boycotted the 1980 Moscow Games under US leadership (in the same year, however, China attended to Lake Placid Winter Games, in the US). The first Chinese participation in the Summer Games took place in Los Angeles in 1984. Taking advantage of the boycott led by the Soviet Union and the absence of Olympic powers such as the German Democratic Republic, Cuba and some Eastern European countries, China reached an honorable 4th place with 15 gold medals.

China's Olympic trajectory from 1984 to 2021<sup>11</sup> is a unique case, because after 32 years of absence from competition, the country managed to catch up with the sporting powers and, for the sake of true, become the only real contender to the US after the of the USSR. The case of China's rise in Olympic sports allows us to understand socialism with Chinese characteristics, the centrality of the state and its capacity to generate the chain of productive sectors. In short, the Chinese Olympic success helps us to understand how State planning works through public policies. Since returning to the Olympic community, several public policies have been presented through Projects aimed at Olympic success and glory: Olympic Strategy (1985) (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012f); Strategic Plan for Olympic Glory: 1994-2000 (1995); 2001-2010 (2002); 2011-2020 (2011) (J. Zheng et al.,

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<sup>10</sup> The Four Modernizations were goals first presented by Zhou Enlai in 1963, but were only implemented by Deng Xiaoping in December 1978, at the 3rd plenary of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party. They consisted, in short, in the search for the modernization of agriculture, industry, technology and defense. Its implementation is considered to mark the beginning of reforms in the Deng era.

<sup>11</sup> Due to the covid-19 pandemic Tokyo 2020 was postponed to 2021.

2018); Project 119 (J. Zheng & Chen, 2016) and Strategy “Invite In and Go Out” and Several Five-Year Plans for Sport Development (China Sports Commission 1995; General Administration of Sports, 2002, 2006, 2011a, 2011b, 2016; PRC State Council 2014, 2016) (J. Zheng et al., 2018).

All these mentioned policies have a central axis. The entire elite sport system in China is based on the '*juguo tizhi*' (举国体制), which in English can be understood as, “the whole country support for the elite sport system”. A political strategy that can be summarized as the quest for glory at the Olympic Games in which all resources for sports in the country were channelled towards the identification of talents, production and training of elite athletes (Hong, 2008; Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012b). In Sydney 2000, China tasted for the first time something close to the long-awaited Olympic Glory. With 28 gold medals, rising to the podium of the medals table, trailing only the US and Russia. Which led then-President Jiang Zemin to exalt the *juguo tizhi*: “The success of American sport depends on its economic power; the success of Russian sport depends on its rich resource and experience of training elite athletes; the success of Chinese sport depends on *Juguo tizhi*” (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012b; Wei et al., 2010). This system is based on two fundamental foundations. This system is based on two fundamental foundations. Both result from socialism with Chinese characteristics. The first has to do with the budget. As already mentioned, in the 1980s the objective was to channel the limited resources of a still poor country, from the beginning of the 1990s on, the Chinese economic reality was different. With the growing development of Chinese socialism, the state budget for sports had a substantial increase. Most of the sports budget is financed by the State, whether the central government or provincial governments, another significant part comes from lotteries (not just sports) and, finally, also through resources obtained by commercial and sponsorship (Tan & Green, 2008, p. 328). The second foundation is the centralized administrative and management system of Chinese sport. A legacy from the times of the Sovietisation of sport in the country. In 1998, the Sports Commission was renamed the General Administration of Sport (GAS). The GAS was simplified, with the previous 20 departments merged into nine departments. An organizational reform that accompanied the wider context of the restructure of government ministries of the Central Government in the 1990s. “The model of the Chinese sports administrative system reflected the wider social system in China: both the Communist Party and state administrations were organised in a vast hierarchy with power flowing down from the top” (J. Zheng et al., 2018, p. 8).

It should also be added that this model is also adopted for Paralympic sports, in which China has become the only superpower. But, more than competitive goals, investment in Paralympic sport is based on the integration of people with disabilities into society. And it has in Deng Pufang, the oldest son of China's former leader Deng Xiaoping, founder and promoter of the China Disabled Persons' Federation, a key figure (Guan, 2015; Guan & Hong, 2016).

### **Beijing 2008 and the Olympic Glory**

After the failed bid in 1993 to host the 2000 Olympic Games, the Chinese capital city was chosen on its second attempt, in 2001, to host the 2008 edition. Hosting the Games was an important part of the whole Olympic strategy: "Beijing's success was regarded as a milestone on the road of national revival" (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012a, p. 153). This choice evidently influenced all state sport projects for the first decade of the 2000s. A series of plans were published to prepare the realization of the Beijing Games and, mainly, for China to triumph in their territory. In July 2002, the government issued the policy document "Further Strengthening and Progressing Sport in the New Era", which stressed the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as the paramount priority for the whole country (J. Zheng et al., 2018, p. 7). The use of the term the whole country was no accident because that was it: success in Beijing 2008 went far beyond sporting success. We need to understand this feeling considering its historical situation. The issue of national pride has always been present in the construction of New China, since the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, under the leadership of the Communist Party. This is because when the Communists came to power, China had gone through the so-called "Century of humiliation", when after the Opium War of 1840, the country was gradually relegated to a semi-feudal and semi-colonial condition, divided, and exploited by Western imperialist forces and also for Japan. The search for economic and technological development, for social transformation, the search for modernization and the goal of catching up the Western powers have always served not only as a stimulus, but also as a guide. The determination to catch up and even surpass the countries at the core of the world system has always been part of the construction of the Chinese people's imagination in restoring confidence in the nation, in national pride. The Chinese government and people saw in elite sport, in international competitions with a global audience, a platform to promote the image of this reinvigorated New China. Reaching the top in a sporting mega-event like the Olympic Games, in Chinese eyes, would be a way of proving to the

world its economic development, prosperity and modernization. Hosting a successful competition, providing state-of-the-art stadiums and sports equipment, presenting an organized, thriving city would be China's strengths.

Therefore, on the sports field, the General Administration of Sport issued two internal documents: The “Outline of the Strategic Olympic Glory Plan: 2001–2010” and “The 2008 Olympic Glory Action Plan”, the dominant features of both were the emphasis placed on the Olympic medal success – “winning is not everything; it is the only thing” (J. Zheng et al., 2018, p. 7). Among other projects, there are the aforementioned Project 119 and the “Invite In and Go Out” Strategy. Beijing 2008 was planned to the smallest details, thinking about the projection of the country's image to the world. The opening ceremony was an example (Delgado, 2016; Giulianotti, 2015). Beijing 2008 was planned to the smallest details, thinking about the projection of the country's image to the world. The opening ceremony was an example: harmony, Chinese Culture, peace, power, innovation (C. C. Chen et al., 2012).

Amid a huge capitalism crisis, with economic recession in the countries of the core of the world system, China transmitted to the world the message of a rejuvenated, modern nation, in indisputable economic and social development. The strength of the Chinese economy and the image of prosperity it conveyed to the world allowed Hu Jintao to reinforce China's message of peaceful development. Appealing to the Olympic spirit of solidarity, friendship and peace, Hu highlighted that, given the serious international crisis, the moment showed more than ever "the need to understand, accommodate and cooperate with each other" and concluded by highlighting the Chinese vision of shared future by stating “we must deepen mutual understanding, strengthen friendship, overcome differences and thus promote the construction of a harmonious world, of lasting peace and common prosperity”. The resounding sporting success at the Olympic Games reiterated China's sense of demonstration of capacity and strength and, further, evidenced its new position in the world. The Chinese delegation won 51 gold medals, 15 more than the US, and for the first time reached the highest place in the medals table of an Olympics. Since the end of the Soviet Union and the triumph of the Commonwealth of Independent States (former USSR) team, only the US had won the Olympic Games. The Chinese triumph, therefore, was even more significant. China established itself as a world sporting power. In other words, and drawing on the centre-periphery dichotomy of Prebisch (1962), we have argued before (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2019b), the Chinese triumph over the United States in the medal accounting can be seen as a metaphor for the

possibility of having a peripheral state challenging the dominance of the most powerful nations. The Chinese, however, know that something else is still missing. It is this broader perception that we are going to talk about from now on.

### **Chapter 3: The Football Development Plan**

*China's national rejuvenation has become a historical inevitability (...) We will achieve the goal of building a great modern socialist country in all respects and fulfill the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.*<sup>12</sup>

#### **Globalisation and football**

In November 2019, in a speech at the China International Import Expo 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated, “economic globalisation is a historic trend” as unstoppable as the course of a river, which “is always moving forward” although, “sometimes, some waves go backwards”. The statement is not surprising. After all, since 2013, China has been promoting one of the most ambitious geopolitical and economic projects in the world, a global integration plan, the aforementioned Belt and Road Initiative. As we have shown throughout this text, sport is not dissociated from the politics and geopolitics of a country. On the contrary, sports can be extremely useful civil society tools for a nation to seek legitimacy and recognition (Allison & Monnington, 2002), both internally and externally, as well as sports public policies that can both promote social inclusion and the development of the sports industry – at the national and international levels. Therefore, elite sport and the sports industry have their historical evolution closely linked to globalisation processes (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004, 2009; Markovits & Rensmann, 2010).

According to Markovits and Rensmann, only a very limited number of sports attain the heights of genuine popular culture and reach well beyond the niche of their immediate producers and consumers. They call it “hegemonic sports culture” (Markovits & Rensmann, 2010, p. 13) and, today, football may very well represent one of the very few “languages” that is understood on a global scale (Markovits & Rensmann, 2010, p. 15). Also according to them, football may be considered the global hegemonic sport culture, as they put football is the single most prominent and ubiquitous sports language in the world (Markovits & Rensmann, 2010, p. 43). Giulianotti and Robertson state that “sport, in particular football, constitutes one of the most dynamic and sociologically enlightening domains of globalisation” and that being “the global game”, football helps

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<sup>12</sup> Xi Jinping, in Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China, July 2021.

us to theoretically and empirically explore multidimensional and long-term processes of globalisation (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004). According to these same authors, “football at the same time reflects and contributes to the advancement of globalisation processes in various ways”. After all, “the genealogy of the game is closely linked to globalisation processes”, since the expansion of modern football, encoded in England, which is confused with the global influence of English commerce and, more recently, the cultural interpenetration by economic institutions and ideologies in football (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009). In the same vein, Markovits and Reinsmann explain that modern sports, whose birthplace was the United Kingdom, expanded to the world following the expansion of modern capitalism, also born in the United Kingdom (Markovits & Reinsmann, 2010, pp. 16-17). They also add that sports are going global for the second time, entailing an age of global capitalism and trade, new transnational migration, global communications networks, and cosmopolitan norms and institutions never previously imagined (Markovits & Reinsmann, 2010, p. 24). The example of diplomatic and trade relations between China and the United Arab Emirates (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2020) helps us to demonstrate only how contemporary capitalist globalisation has affected football, transforming clubs into large transnational corporations (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009, p. 82), such as City Football Group. Also shows how, through the lenses of football, we can analyse the phenomenon and dynamics of globalisation. After all, “football is one of the great cultural institutions, such as education and the mass media, which form and consolidate national identities around the world” (Giulianotti, 2010, p. 42).

At this point, it is necessary to explain what we understand as globalisation, in the context under analysis. We assume that the concept of globalisation is complex and controversial (Hirst & Thompson, 2003), a phenomenon that has more to do with processes than with a state of affairs (Ietto-Gillies, 2003, p. 139). Academic production on the subject is wide and heterogeneous. For this reason, it is not our intention to seek to discuss globalisation theoretically and conceptually. What we intend here is to bring some discussions that present concepts or reflections that seem to us to be key to trying to understand how this complex phenomenon is intertwined with football. Several authors point to the understanding that globalisation presupposes the idea of interconnectivity and interdependence. Anthony Giddens, for example, alludes to the concept of “living in one world”, highlighting the growing interdependence between individuals, groups and nations, which, therefore, makes globalisation a result of processes of globalisation and

internationalization (Giddens, 2009, p. 126). In the same sense, Nayan Chanda describes that the “globalisation process” starts from the growing awareness, throughout the world, since ancient times, of “interconnectivity and interdependence” (Chanda, 2007). Grazia Letto-Gillies also reiterates this prism of interconnectivity and interdependence between people, when referring to the geographic/spatial aspect of the globalisation process (Letto-Gillies, 2003, p. 139). These processes, however, are not new. They have occurred throughout human history, not restricted to the contemporary world (Giddens, 2009, p. 126).

One example is Wallerstein's world system theory, already presented and discussed above. Wallerstein looks at globalisation as a process that finds its origins in the colonialist expansion of Europe. This process allowed European countries to accumulate capital by exploiting the resources of the territories they colonized. The world system as "world-economy" is integrated through the market, in which two or more regions are interdependent. This division of labour refers to the forces and relationships in production in the world economy, which leads to the existence of interdependence. Because of colonial exploitation and capital accumulation, there is an unequal division of gains, allowing these exploiting countries to control wealth and technological advances, generating a hierarchy of power: composed of “core, semi-periphery and periphery”. In this sense, Aníbal Quijano states that “the ongoing globalisation is, in the first place, the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern and Eurocentric capitalism as a new pattern of world power” (Quijano, 2000). This logic of a globalized world centred on power relations established in colonial times, the “coloniality of power”, is still evident in world football: Eurocentric, football is an unmistakable manifestation of the reproduction of the Wallersteinian “world system”. Therefore, the rise of non-Western countries somehow represents a shake-up in the power hierarchies and in the geopolitics of football (Gupta, 2009b; Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2019a, 2019c). This conception that globalisation has its first stage in colonial expansion is shared by Xi Jinping, by the way. In a speech at a study session on implementing the decisions of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee Xi outlined what he considers the three stages of globalisation. The first, colonisation, responsible for the formation of the world market, in which Western countries through plunder, occupation by force had completed the carve-up of the world before the outbreak of WWI. The third stage would be the current one, marked by the growth of interdependence between countries, with the acceleration of economic globalisation (Xi, 2017, p. 232).



The Wallersteinian conception stands out when Xi points out the three phases of China's relationship with the world. When the Chinese leader points to the Opium War as Western aggression against China and responsible for the country's fall in status to the condition of poor and weak (Xi, 2017, p. 233). Here he refers to stratification. China in the East, for centuries, was at the core of that system, but after the Opium War, it moved to the periphery of the world system. This understanding on the part of Chinese leaders, combined with ancient Chinese philosophical precepts and Marxism-Leninism, is what is behind China's proposal to the world based on harmonious relations and a shared future for humanity. In fact, the idea of the Chinese Dream, as we shall see, which goes a long way towards the Shared Future and Common Prosperity, also finds its reason in this understanding of global class struggle, a reality through which China suffered a lot during the Century of Humiliation.

Richard Giulianotti and Roland Robertson also present globalisation as a process that finds its beginning in European colonial expansion (although they do not use this Wallersteinian expression). For these authors, globalisation would have five phases. The first, the germinal, goes from the beginning of the 15th to the mid-18th century and is characterised by transoceanic connectivity and colonial subjugation and by the emergence of national communities (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009). Here it is important to remember Quijano, who explains, for example, how terms like "Spanish", "Portuguese" or "European", which previously meant only a geographical or national origin, through the domination of the colonial model started to represent a relationship of domination, including with the constitution of "hierarchies, places and social roles" (Quijano, 2000, p. 534). The second phase would be the incipient one, remaining largely European (from the mid-18th century to the 1870s). The third phase, the take-off, is when the process of globalisation starts, in the view of these authors, to interrelate with football, from the 1870s to the 1920s, and it is when the "four reference points" of globalisation become crystallised: individual being, national (male) societies (nation states), the world system of societies (international relations) and humanity. The next phase would be the struggle-for-hegemony, still marked by the four reference points, but with the intensification of political-ideological conflicts, increasingly global (from the 1920s to the 1960s). Finally, the fifth phase, that of uncertainty, from the 1960s to 2000: in which the "world system of society becomes even more fluid and complex (...), with an exponential growth of new global and social institutions, such as international governmental and non-governmental

organizations, transnational corporations and new social movements" (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009).

It was from the 1990s onwards, at an advanced stage of *uncertainty*, that the term globalisation came into fashion, becoming widely used in many debates in the world of politics, business and media (Giddens, 2009). For Manuel Castells, a new economy emerges on a global scale in the last quarter of the 20th century. Castells will look at the transformations in the social organisation of communication and information to explain that globalisation is a network of production, culture and power, which is constantly being altered by technological advances, especially in information technologies. Productivity and competitiveness are, in general, a function of knowledge generation and information processing. Companies and territories are organised in production, management and distribution networks; the main economic activities are global - that is, they have the capacity to work as a unit in real time, or at a chosen time, on a planetary scale (Castells, 2009, p. 77). Let us recall here what was discussed above about hegemonic war, which is the result of the development of the Chinese economy and the scientific and technological advancement of China. The Western reaction is a quest to maintain a hegemonic status, as it perceives the threat of China in the reconfiguration of the balance of forces based on the domain of technology, especially information technologies.

David Harvey is one of the first theorists to point to changes in our experiences of "time and space" as an effect of "globalisation". Harvey coins the term "time-space compression" to explain how the flow of capital, which moves faster and faster, driven by increasingly accelerated economic activities (production, circulation and exchange), mainly due to advances in technology. communication and transport, leads to the breaking of spatial barriers and distances (Harvey, 1989). For Harvey, "Going global was facilitated by a radical reorganization of transportation systems, which reduced circulation costs. (...) The new communication systems allowed the rigorous organization of the productive chain of goods in the global space" (Harvey, 2011). The term globalisation, from the 1990s onwards, came to be associated with the "world expansion of capitalism", representing a "new world order" (Chanda, 2007; Duffey, 2009). Castells points to the liberalisation of the financial market with the "Big Bang of the City of London" in 1987 as a determining factor for "capitalist globalisation" (Castells, 2004, p. 16). Harvey argues that this "deregulation of finance, which began in the late 1970s, accelerated after 1986, became unstoppable in the 1990s" (2011). This rise was characterised by the transformation of corporations with national identities into

transnational investments and properties (Duffey, 2009, p. 331). These transnational corporations have represented a constant and enormous increase in foreign direct investment since the 1970s, most of them originating from developed countries and aimed at benefiting this same group of countries (Letto-Gillies, 2003, p. 141). This capitalist globalisation, with international capital markets having short reins to advance in unregulated speculations, international institutions imposing pro-Western policies and transnational corporations having free reign, was a direct result of policies elaborated and applied by Western governments and financial corporations and from other spheres (Michie, 2003, p. 11) involved in this neoliberal hegemonising process.

It is noteworthy that finance is "a well-defined field of capitalist economic activity" (Lapavitsas, 2013, p. 798) and "the financial system is a set of ordered economic relations, comprising markets and institutions with characteristic profit-making motives which are necessary to support capitalist accumulation" (Lapavitsas, 2013, p. 799). The problem is that with the neoliberalisation of markets, finance became a relatively autonomous field of capitalist profitmaking with its own rules and internal life, causing the financial profit to have a predatory aspect setting it apart from profit in the sphere of production and this predatory dimension of finance has placed its mark on financialisation (Lapavitsas, 2013, p. 799). Lapavitsas argues that financialisation, moreover, represents a historically specific transformation of capitalist economies (p. 799). Harvey, however, is more incisive when analysing the role of financialisation in the capital accumulation process. He says that the strong wave of financialisation that set in after 1973 has been every bit as spectacular for its speculative and predatory style (Harvey, 2003, p. 147). Rosa Luxemburg, when analysing the process of capital accumulation, considers that for capitalism to expand (and capitalism is an expansive mode of production, of expanded reproduction), it needs an external frontier, something outside it. The external market is the non-capitalist social environment, which absorbs the products of capitalism and supplies producer goods and labour power for capitalist production (Luxemburg, 2003, p. 347). Based on this assumption, Harvey (2003) argues that capital itself produces new externalities (or dispossession sources, in his terms). As Luxemburg, Harvey points that capital needs an "exteriority". He considers, like Luxemburg does, that capitalism needs an externality, an "outside of itself" (Harvey, 2003, p. 141). For him, financialisation is one of these mechanisms of "accumulation by dispossession" and exemplifies that "stock promotions, structured asset destruction through inflation, asset-stripping through mergers and acquisitions, and the promotion of levels of debt incumbency that reduce

whole populations to debt peonage, to say nothing of corporate fraud and dispossession of assets by credit and stock manipulations” characterise contemporary capitalism. Furthermore, he considers that “above all we have to look at the speculative raid carried out by hedge funds and other major institutions of capital finance as the cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2003, p. 147).

Once again, it is necessary to underline how the Chinese model stands as a real alternative to neoliberal globalisation. After all, as Jabbour and Paula explain, China built a "powerful socialist state". Based on huge state-owned business conglomerates and a well-spread public long-term financing system. Without relinquishing controls on the flow of capital that enabled the state to isolate the monetary policy of external capital flows, increasing, as we will see later, the room for manoeuvre for the adoption of autonomous economic policies in relation to international financial conditions (Jabbour & de Paula, 2018, p. 18). We saw this recently, both in the anti-monopoly and data security crackdowns to tighten State’s control over internet giants, including e-commerce platform and social media operator, and in private education companies.

Football was not left out of these neoliberalisation processes. After all, as we have already mentioned, “football at the same time reflects and contributes to the advancement of globalisation processes in a variety of ways”, since “the genealogy of the game is closely linked to globalisation processes” (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009, p. 29). For these authors, football has not escaped the growing interpenetration of dominant economic ideologies and institutions (p. 29), especially from the 1970s onwards, when the global sphere of football underwent a rapid commercial transformation (p. 63). Directly influenced by the worldwide escalation of the “free market” and neoliberal political-economic guidelines (p. 64). The commercialisation of football, which began between the 1960s and 1970s, that is, precisely in the period that Giulianotti and Robertson define as uncertainty in globalisation, deepened in the 1990s, a period that Giulianotti will define as “post-modern football ” (Giulianotti, 2010, p. 137).

The globalisation of capital made it “increasingly difficult to resist the 'privatisation' of football clubs in the free market” (Giulianotti, 2010, p. 118). In a world “without barriers”, the ‘*enterprisation*’ of clubs, in some cases even the ‘*financialisation*’, with shares on stock exchanges, facilitated the metamorphosis of many of these associations into true transnational corporations (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009, pp. 83-84). Regarding the influence of financialisation on contemporary football, it is enough to remember the US hedge funds onslaughts on European clubs. In 2018, the vulture fund

Elliott Management Corp. took the control of AC Milan. In May 2021 Oaktree Capital Management, LP acquired at 31% stake in Inter Milan (over a loan worth €275 million), in June funds managed by Ares Management Corporation acquired at 34% stake in Atlético de Madrid, in September it was Miami-based 777 Partners' turn to announce that it would purchase Italian club Genoa. In August 2021, CVC Capital Partners' venture with Spain's La Liga by paying €2.7 billion for 10% of the Spanish league. In 2021, the traditional French club Girondins de Bordeaux was close to bankruptcy after the hedge fund King Street Capital Management simply left the club to its own devices. The KSCM had purchased Bordeaux in 2019 from another hedge fund, General American Capital Partners. Six times French champions, the last time in 2009, the club did not go bankrupt only because Gérard López (who holds a majority position in the Sociedade Anônima Desportiva (SAD) of the Portuguese Boavista) acquired it. Finally, it is worth mentioning the role of JP Morgan Chase & Co. as the main source of funding for the attempt to create the failed breakaway European Super League. A league that intended to completely subvert the logic of football governance, proposing to create a closed league and exclusive to multi-million clubs, in the mould of cartel leagues as in North American sports.

Another significant change, resulting from the "breaking of barriers", on the one hand due to the rise of new communication systems, on the other, benefiting from market deregulation, was the "revolution" of television broadcasting rights, which made it easier to broadcast each time most global football. Football post-modern stage, characterised by financial growth after the 1990 FIFA World Cup (Giulianotti, 2010, p. 137), has deepened the gap that separates the core from the periphery at all scales – global, continental and national. This is because the “unequal distribution of payments made by television between clubs results in an even greater concentration of financial wealth and success in football” (Giulianotti, 2010, p. 127).. Naturally, the concentration of resources took place in Europe, widening the abyss of the core of world football in relation to the semi-periphery and periphery. However, even within Europe such phenomenon also occurred between its centre and its periphery. The Bosman Ruling opened the borders for the free transfer and free movement of “community” players in the territory of the European Union and the possibility for a club to choose any athlete with community citizenship, regardless of nationality. But allowed English, Spanish, Italian giants and Germans, holders of more financial resources, became unattainable competitors for clubs even in the European semi-periphery (Giulianotti, 2010, p. 139).

In 1978 at the Third Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party, China initiated its economic reforms, also known as reform and opening-up, a historical process that combines continuity and rupture (Jabbour, Dantas, & Espíndola, 2021). However, it was not until the 14<sup>th</sup> CPC Congress in October 1992 that socialist market economy system gained official approval and established Deng Xiaoping Theory on socialism with Chinese characteristics as the guiding theory. As we have argued before, the Chinese Olympic sport is a centralized administrative and management system, and football was like that. In line with the economic reforms, the GAS restructured the elite sport system, driving the move towards the commercialisation and professionalisation of sport (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2013). Before 1992, there was no sports commercial activities in China, so Chinese sports industry really kicked off after the establishment of the socialist market economy (Zhan, 2016). Football was the pioneer of the reform in sport and Chinese Football Association took the lead in the sports community 'self-managing' its own affairs (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2013; Jinxia & Mangan, 2001). The CFA introduced a series of laws and regulations since 1992, and the development of professional football is also subject to and protected by other laws and regulations, such as Contract Law, the Law against Unfair Competition, Antitrust Law, Corporation Law, Civil Law, Criminal Law, and Regulations on Management of Agents (H. Liu, 2017). In April 1994, the Chinese professional football league began. The Division One League had two levels: Division 1 A (*Jia A*) and Division 1 B (*Jia B*). Chinese football has looked to the West for ideas. Among other things the Western-style professional football league matches, double round robin system was adopted. So although the professionalisation of Chinese football has been a consequence of the restructuring of the country's sports system in order to adapt to market socialism, it is clear that the path adopted for the professional football league, despite the due differences of the characteristics of the Chinese market system, did not escape the logic of commercialisation and *enterprisation* that dominated the football world at that time. More recently, after the State Council of China issued some policies aimed at the development of the sports industry and football in particular, there are scholars who consider there is a "Westernization of Chinese professional football" (Ma & Kurscheidt, 2019) in a "post-socialist China" (Yu, Newman, Xue, & Pu, 2017). I do not agree with these definitions. As we will see below, the process of the football industry development in China is more complex than the mere conceptual simplification that reduces this experience to *Westernisation* or simply speak of "post-socialism" to describe socialism with Chinese

characteristics. Here, we align with Jabbour et al. market socialism is a complex social formation that associates - via coexistence and cohabitation - the modes of production from different historical periods in a dialect unity of opposites. Further, as they put, the main question is: “which class and/or political force has the political and economic control over objectively strategic factors?” (Jabbour et al., 2021, p. 6). We can also find the answer to this through the Chinese Football Plan.

### **The Football Plan: why now**

In 2014, the Chinese State Council issued a document to boost China's sports industry: “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting 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). This strategy is commonly deemed as the milestone marking the take-off of the Chinese sports industry (D. Liu, 2017). To meet that challenge, the Chinese government sees the development of football as the driving force behind this growth process. For this reason, “The Overall Reform Plan to Boost the Development of Football in China” (中国足球改革发展总体方案) was issued in 2015, a kind of preamble to the main document, from April 2016: “China’s medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)”- (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050年). The question that arises is: why now?

However, first, a point needs to be made clear. Yes, it is true that Xi Jinping, current General Secretary of the Communist Party and President of the PRC, is a football fan and since 2009 has made his Chinese Football Dream public. However, it is necessary to understand that in China decisions are not individual and much less personal. The Chinese Football Dream, as we will see below, is linked to the Chinese Dream of rejuvenating the nation, which is a national objective, designed to fulfil the first phase of socialism with Chinese characteristics, to be completed on the Centenary of the People's Republic of China. In the West, largely because of cultural and ideological hegemony, there is this common refrain about “who can even challenge Xi Jinping”. It is evident that there are those who repeat this commonplace out of sheer ignorance, unaware of how internal decision making in the Communist Party central leadership actually works. However, it is also obvious that there are those who propagate this perspective in order to confuse and, above all, to draw an "authoritarian" profile not only to the Communist Party of China, but also particularly to its current leader. In the case of the Football Development Plan, we see this repeatedly. Nevertheless, the CPC has never been a one-

man dictate, not even under Mao, and always ran by deliberative process. What has changed from era to era is the specific ways deliberation process and its dynamics unfold. However, what has always remained constant is that there is actually quite a dynamic deliberation and debate process. For this reason, in order to answer the question, "the Football Plan, why now?" we need to understand public policies in China and the policy making process, as well as understand what medium, medium and long-term development plans are, as is the case in the Football Plan. Thus, we will be able to answer not only "why now", but to see through the lenses of the Football Plan how the dynamics of Chinese development operate and how the centrality of political and economic power in the state is applied in a dialectical process with the private initiative.

The definition of what "public policy" means is not consensual. Clarke E. Cochran et al., understand that "the term public policy always refers to the actions of government and the intentions that determine those actions" (C. E. Cochran et al., 1999). While Dye considers it as "what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it makes" and adds that "public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do" (Dye, 2013, p. 3). Charles L. Cochran and Eloise F. Malone go further when they say that "public policy consists of policy decisions for implementing programs to achieve societal goals" (C. L. Cochran & Malone, 1995). In the same sense Guy Peters says that "public policy is the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens" (Guy Peters, 1999). As we can see, there are many possible ways to define public policy. For this reason, and to avoid that this search for the definition of public policy may degenerate into a word game that, eventually, adds little more understanding (Birkland, 2015, p. 7), here we will only draw general lines so that from there we can approach the policy making process in China.

Thus, the important thing to consider from these definitions is that there are two fundamental points. First, that public policies refer to "the public and its problems" (Parsons, 2007, p. 31) that is, "public policy making is public - it affects a greater variety of people and interests than private decisions" (Birkland, 2015, p. 9). Secchi sums it up well: a public policy is a guideline designed to face a public problem (Secchi, 2013, p. 2). Here it is important to understand that "public" says I respect the collective dimension, the society. As Parson puts it, "public" encompasses that dimension of human activity that is believed to require governmental or social regulation or intervention, or at least the adoption of common measures (Parsons, 2007, p. 37). Second, policy is "a statement by government—at whatever level—of what it intends to do about a public problem"



(Birkland, 2015, p. 9). In this regard, there are different understandings about the protagonist of the actions. In short, about the centrality of power: whether the policy should belong to the government or can comprise other main actors. From the perspective of *state-centred policymaking*, there is state exclusivity; public policy has to emanate from a government or government agencies. From the perspective of *policy networks*, in which State and society are articulated to solve public problems, the idea that there are multiple decision-making centres is accepted (Secchi, 2013, pp.2-3). The *state-centred policymaking* does not exclude the interaction of state and non-state actors and the participation and influence of civil society in the process of formulating and implementing a public policy. After all, as Dye claims, most public policies are a combination of rational planning, incrementalism, competition among groups, elite preferences, public choice, political processes, and institutional influences (Dye, 2013, xi). The question is who directs or leads the process and in this point of view, it is always the State.

In China, too, the policymaking is as an open-ended process with an uncertain outcome, driven by conflicting interests, recurrent interactions, and continuous feedback (Heilmann, 2018, p. 2). Conflicts of interest in China are of yet another nature, as the country is undergoing a dialectical process of socialist transition. After all, in the country, the contradiction pointed out by Mao Zedong between the working class and the national bourgeoisie persists: the Chinese national bourgeoisie has a dual character in this transition period it exploits the working class and takes profits from it, but at the same time supports the Constitution and is willing to accept socialist transformation (Mao, 1957a). In addition to the peculiarity of the Chinese political and economic system, which imposes on us an analysis methodology that avoids pre-established concepts (very common in analyses in the West, which seeks to frame China based on Western assumptions), it is necessary to understand another particular aspect of Chinese policymaking. China has a great capacity for trajectory correction when the situation makes it necessary. This is a reflection, according to Heilmann, of the almost three-decade revolutionary process for the Communist Party to come to power, which created a “guerrilla-style policymaking”: this policy style allows constant adaptation to changes in the surrounding environment and justifies continual adjustments during implementation (Heilmann, 2018, p. 4). Let us not forget that this “guerrilla style policymaking” it was being built and improved not only due to the revolutionary and Civil War process, but also due to the experiences of power of the Communist Party in the midst of this whole

bellicose process. As Losurdo remembers. “Although the Communist Party of China seized power at the national level in 1949, 20 years earlier it had already started to exercise its power in one region or another, whose size and population were comparable to those of a small or medium-sized European country” (Losurdo, 2017, p. 17). That is why, according to Heilmann, this guerrilla style also underlies both the Mao era government directives (“socialist construction,” “permanent revolution”) and the post-Mao era (“reform and opening”, “socialist market economy”, “joining the WTO”) (Heilmann, 2018, p. 5).

As already mentioned, from 1978 onwards, China began a process of economic reforms. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), for example, was founded in 1977 to serve national policymaking (Weber, 2021). This gave way to decentralized reform initiatives and local reform experiments. These experiments characterize a particularity of Chinese policymaking, as these innovative measures often occur ahead of the national legislation. Thus, is in a constant state of flux, approved plans of action are subject to change, and corridors for action by the state can be modified (Heilmann, 2018, p. 13). Heilmann also draws attention to the fact that the Chinese political system decisions, policies, and plans cannot be regarded as a single, distinct, or formalized outcome but rather as a chain of statements, documents, and iterative rounds of implementation trials and adjustments (Heilmann, 2018, p. 14). However, something remained unchanged: the centralisation of decision-making is still in the hands of the State. After all, in China “the State is endowed with a high degree of direct and indirect control of the means of production, and, as a result, social production relations are different from those prevalent in capitalism” (Gabriele & Schettino, 2012).

Furthermore, there is another feature that differentiates the Chinese policymaking process: state planning. As we mentioned before, to this day China continues with the Five-Year Plans, a legacy of the country's Sovietisation times. It turns out that China's planning system evolved alongside the economic transition and remains central to almost all domains of public policy making and the political institutions that have fostered China's high-speed growth and economic stability (Heilmann & Melton, 2013, p. 581). The five-year plan is thus one of three fundamental approaches to governmental macro-regulation, including self-adjustment and self-reform, in the course of innovation in the socialist market economy (A. Hu, 2013, p. 629). It is still curious to note, as Huang points out, that the term *planning* in Chinese has undergone changes over the past few years.

From *jihua* (计划) and *zhilingxing jihua* (指令性计划) or “commandist planning” to *zhidaoxing jihua* (指导性计划) or “guidance planning,” and, more recently, to abandoning the old term *jihua* completely in favor of *guihua* (规划), as used in the new National Development and Reform Commission (国家发展和改革委员会) (Huang, 2013, p. 576). Huang emphasizes the importance of this change when explaining that in Chinese the terms *jihua* and *guihua* have slightly different connotations: *guihua* gives the idea of something more comprehensive and longer term than *jihua*, thus highlighting that aspect of contemporary planning (Huang, 2013, p. 576).

This differentiation made by Huang is important because when we understand the connotation of planning as *guihua*, we also understand *medium- and long-term development planning* (*zhongchangqi fazhan guihua*), which play a key role in coordinating and directing state activity across various policy areas in the PRC (Heilmann, 2018, p. 8). This is an open, flexible and adaptable process. Since the official establishment of market socialism, this process of formulation, evaluation, and adjustment of development plans has included many more government departments and scientific advisers as well as corporate and social interests than in previous decades (Heilmann, 2018, p. 8). According to Sullivan et al., the aim of the medium-and-long term development plans was to prevent inconsistencies in policy design and implementation during periodic changes in party and state leadership positions (Sullivan, Chadwick, & Gow, 2019, p. 501). Beyond that, multi-year plans in present-day China do not consist of a single, standardized planning period for all policy areas and administrative levels; rather there is a variable and continuous cycle of coordination and evaluation (Heilmann, 2018, p. 8), as we have Ten-Year Plans or Fifteen-Year Plans, for example. Since the year 2000, China’s development plans have included complex lists of indicative targets (*yucexing zhibiao*, that is, targets that are desired by the government, but at the same time remain flexible) and strictly binding targets (*yueshuxing zhibiao*) that serve both as administrative benchmarks and sources of cadre assessments (Heilmann, 2018, p. 8). Precisely as we find in the “China’s medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)” - (*Zhōngguó zúqiú zhōng cháng qī fāzhǎn guīhuà* 中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050年). As Sullivan et al. note, the Football Plan will last over a projected seven full Five-Year Plans and was published under CPC and PRC leadership cycles

formulated at the 18th CCP National Party Congress (2012-2016) and 12th PRC National People's Congress (2013-2018). It will end during the leadership formulated at the 25th CCP National Party Congress (2047-2051) and 19th PRC National People's Congress (2048-2052) (Sullivan et al., 2019, pp. 501, 503)

To talk about the Football Plan, we need to identify the public problem or problems that led the Chinese authorities to formulate strategic planning - public policies - aimed at the development of football industry and practice in the country. Also, why now and not before. This is important to understand, after all, remembering what Parsons explains public policies refer to "the public and its problems" (Parsons, 2007, p. 31). What is a problem in that context? Secchi considers that a problem is a discrepancy between reality and what is understood as a possible ideal. A public problem, therefore, is the difference between what is and what one would like public reality to be (Secchi, 2013, p. 44). Besides, what makes an idea's time to come or to put it another way, what drives decision-makers to pay attention to one issue rather than another (Kingdon, 2014, p. 1). Secchi argues that a public problem can appear suddenly, can gradually gain importance, and may even be present for a long time, but not receive due attention (Secchi, 2013, p. 44). Kingdon, on the other hand, draws attention to the difference between condition and a problem (Kingdon, 2014, p. 109). In this point of view, condition would be, for example, the poor performance of the Chinese national football team. But conditions become defined as problems when one comes to believe that something should be done about them (Kingdon, 2014, p. 109). This happens, according to the author, from a three-dimensional perspective: when values, comparisons, and categories contribute to this condition-problem transition. The value is related to the importance a person give to the condition. For instance, the poor performance of the Chinese football team should be addressed by the government to solve it (thus, this is seen as a problem). Comparing the performance of the Chinese football team with those of Japan and South Korea, for example, constitutes a problem. People will see a problem quite differently if it is put into one category rather than another. For instance, the categorisation of the need for football development in China as a economic issue (it could play a significant role in the development of the whole sports industry) may influence the level of political interest and attract policy resources. For this reason, Kingdon considers it important to identify the timing of policy making because developing an understanding of the forces that move policy formulation processes in one direction or another helps to grasp the reason for choosing that particular problem and the moment (Kingdon, 2014, p. 2).

So, what are the problems that can be identified relating to Chinese football and the sports industry in China? The country aims to have one of the largest national sports economies in the world. The sports industry is expected to become one of the key industries in the national economy by 2035, representing a GDP share of 5%. In 2014, the year “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption” was published, it corresponded to 0.64% of GDP (Lai Lin, 2021a). Football, in addition to being identified alongside basketball and volleyball, as one of the three sports that should be developed as the starting point for the development of the sports industry, was placed as a priority, with the need to develop a medium-and long-term development plan due to lagging in development (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2014). To address these problems, in March 2015, the Chinese government initiated a programme for football reform, which was characterised by a new public policy entitled “The Overall Plan for Chinese Football Reform and Development”. As the Government outlined in the 50-point document: Since Comrade Xi Jinping has become General Secretary in the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, he has placed the development of football on the agenda in order to build China as a great sports nation (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2015). With this report, China recognized another problem: the need to develop football at all levels, not only elite level but also youth participation in football as a mid-term goal. In the following year, the Government issued “China’s medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)”. This document turned the issue into an even greater and more important problem by placing the development of football as part of China's national strategy. The policy make it clear the role of football development to the sports industry in the country stating: “football has a leading role for China’s sports development and reform” (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2016). As Yu et al. put it, the new policy represents the update of substantial central planning and sizeable resources allocations (Yu et al., 2017, p. 3). The Football Plan also draws attention to the living standards of the people and to the crucial period of building comprehensively a society in which the material needs of most citizens are adequately met. While also connects the revitalisation and development of football with the construction of a powerful sports nation, the promotion of social development and the realisation of the Chinese Dream (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2016). Therefore, as we can see, the Football Plan serves as a tool for the fulfilment of two of the most important Chinese national strategies: Common Prosperity and Chinese Dream.

Thus, following Kingdon's understanding of the timing of policymaking, we can understand first why Chinese policy makers opted for this policy and not another, but mainly because the Football Plan is different from other football plans that have already been formulated and implemented previously. As already mentioned, with the implementation of market socialism, sports went through a process of commodification, commercialisation and professionalisation. Football was a pioneer in this transition to professionalism. However, the two Ten-Year Plans for Chinese Football Development (1993–2002, 2003–2012) did not have the same grandeur and ambition as the Football Plan. The first Ten-Year Plan because it aimed to establish professional football and create the necessary commercialization to match this sport with the reforms implemented in various sectors of the economy (Peng et al., 2019, p. 8). The second Ten-Year Plan did little to alter the first in the essence of policies, only adjusting identified errors, in addition to trying to solve the serious problems of match-fixing and illegal gambling (Peng et al., 2019, p. 9). However, as the “Overall Plan for Chinese Football Reform and Development” recognizes, these “reforms were effective to some extent, but the insufficient appreciation of football, ignorance about the rules and the eagerness for quick success led to negative results. The organisation and management system was underdeveloped. The development and competition of the industry have been disturbed and the sporting success has declining” (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2015). For that reason, as already mentioned, the State Council has approved and formulated the Football Plan in order to promote the sustainable and healthy development of Chinese football. With a much bolder goal. The football industry development is considered as the driving force for the Chinese sports industry to leverage. The aim is to reach the highest level in the sector at a global market and have a significant share in the national GDP.

### **The Football Plan: its targets and execution**

As we said above, Chinese authorities want the country to consolidate itself as a powerful sports nation. Considering the success of the country's Olympic and Paralympic strategies, what is meant by "powerful sports nation" has two immediate meanings: success in sports of great international popularity, such as football, and the Chinese sports industry reaching the goal level of the largest market in the sector in the world. Without a doubt, these are audacious targets. With regard to sports industry indices, the objective is to reach 5 trillion Yuan by 2025 (about US\$ 813 billion) and that by 2035 the sector

will represent 5% of Chinese GDP. In 2015, the year prior to the launch of the Football Plan, the sports industry represented 0.8% of GDP and in 2016 the short-term goal of reaching US\$460 billion by 2021 was established. A target achieved two years early, in 2019, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (Xinhua, 2021). In 2021 the sector reached 1.14% of the GDP. According to an estimate, in 2020 it would represent 1.2% (Lai Lin, 2021b). No wonder, the Football Plan is a public policy under the tutelage of the State Council's Office of the Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference on Football Reform and Development, created solely for its execution. Which brings together, among others, 11 ministries, State Council commissions, local and regional government bodies and the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. The various authorities specifically referenced in the Football Plan are:

Table 1: Chinese Authorities with responsibilities according to the Football Plan

<b>Chinese state institution</b>	<b>Organizational level</b>
<b>Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference on Football Reform &amp; Development (足改部际联席会议办公室)</b>	State Council Office
<b>China Insurance Regulatory Commission (保监会)</b>	State Council Commission
<b>China Securities Regulation Commission (证监会)</b>	State Council Commission
<b>National Health and Family Planning Commission (卫生计生委)</b>	State Council Commission
<b>National Reform and Development Commission (国家发展改革委)</b>	State Council Commission
<b>Ministry of Civil Affairs (民政部)</b>	Ministry
<b>Ministry of Commerce (商务部)</b>	Ministry
<b>Ministry of Culture (文化部)</b>	Ministry
<b>Ministry of Education (教育部)</b>	Ministry
<b>Ministry of Finance (财政部)</b>	Ministry
<b>Ministry of Foreign Affairs (外交部)</b>	Ministry
<b>Ministry of Housing and Urban–Rural Development (住房和城乡建设部)</b>	Ministry
<b>Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security</b>	Ministry

(力资源和社会保障部)	
<b>Ministry of Industry and Information Technology</b> (工业和信息化部)	Ministry
<b>Ministry of Land and Resources</b> (国土资源部)	Ministry
<b>Ministry of Public Security</b> (公安部)	Ministry
<b>China National Tourism Administration</b> (国家旅游局)	Government Agency
<b>State Administration for Industry and Commerce</b> (国家工商行政管理总局)	Government Agency
<b>State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television</b> (国家新闻出版广播电视电影总局)	Government Agency
<b>State Administration of Taxation</b> (国家税务总局)	Government Agency
<b>State General Administration of Sport</b> (国家体育总局)	Government Agency
<b>People's Bank of China</b> (人民银行)	Central Bank
<b>Local and Provincial Government</b> (各级地方政府)	Provincial/Municipal Government
<b>CPC Propaganda Department</b> (中央宣传部)	Communist Party
<b>Supreme People's Court</b> (最高人民法院)	Judiciary
<b>Supreme People's Procuratorate</b> (最高人民检察院)	Judiciary

Source: (Sullivan et al., 2019)

Accordingly, to transform China into a future global football power, the original plan proposed three development stages, each one establishing goals to be fulfilled in 2020, 2030 and 2050, respectively:

- By 2020: 20,000 specialised football schools, 70,000 football fields, 30 to 50 million primary and secondary school students practicing football.



- By 2030: 50,000 specialised football schools<sup>13</sup>, the Chinese Men team being one of the best in Asia, and the Women team established as "world-class".
- Until 2050: the Men team in the top-20 of the FIFA ranking, established as a global football power.

It is worth to mention that the overarching goal to establish China as a “world-class football power” by 2050 aligns with broader national objectives culminating with the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 2049.

According to Wang Dengfeng, the director in charge of football at the Ministry of Education of China, by 2020 30,000-specialised schools have been developed with 30 million football students playing at least once a week and participating in football training and competitions; 60,000 football fields have been built or renovated. As the numbers demonstrate, and despite fighting the covid-19 pandemic in 2020, China managed to meet two of its main football plan targets by last year. In this sense, the project remains firm and strong, foreseeing 50 thousand schools by 2025 and that by 2030 there will be a football field for every 10 thousand inhabitants.

As noted, the formulation of this audacious medium and long-term plan involved a complex process, with several stages and the participation of several sectors, not restricted to the Government, including the participation of civil society (e.g. scholars). However, it is the Football Plan’s implementation that demonstrates to us how Chinese public policies work and how China's complex political and economic system operates. Looking at the Football Plan and its execution is an interesting way to understand how the Chinese State works – from Central Government to Provincial and Municipal Governments – as well as the interaction between State and Market within the context of Chinese market socialism. As the Football Plan states the Chinese central government will lead the “reform and innovative development” and will be the responsible for fully displaying that “football has a leading role for China’s sports development and reform”. However, the policy also highlights the role of provincial and municipal governments and even non-governmental partners. In other words, from the central leadership, which sets out the grand vision and establishes the targets, there is a necessary decentralization of competences, with the delegation of responsibilities, so that the policy is operationalized and implemented. This also allows the constant adaptation to change that may occur in

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<sup>13</sup> In 2017, the People's Daily (人民日报) reported that China's sporting authorities had altered the original goals of the football development plan. Instead of waiting until 2030 for 50,000 specialized football schools, the goal became to reach the mark by 2025 (People's Daily, 2017).

the surrounding environment, justifying the continual adjustments during implementation (Heilmann, 2018, p. 4). This highlights the observation we have already brought from Huang about the change of the term "planning" in Chinese, from *zhilingxing jihua* (指令性计划) or "commandist planning" to *zhidaoxing jihua* (指导性计划) or "guidance planning" (Huang, 2013, p. 576). This is because the centralisation of decision-making is still in the hands of the Central State, but planning serves as a guide for other actors to implement it. In relation to the sphere of government power at the provincial or municipal level, we can find various football plans at the local and provincial levels. Provinces generally issue a medium-to long-term football development plan (足球中长期发展规划), while cities at the municipal, sub-provincial (prefecture), and county (sub-prefecture) levels issue a document called the Overall Program of Football Reform and Development (足球改革发展总体方案) (Sullivan et al., 2019, p. 503). An example of responsibility at the local level are the specialised football schools, which are closely linked to training academies that are typically attached to public primary and middle schools.

However, one of the most interesting aspects to observe in the implementation of the Football Plan is the active participation of State-Owned Enterprises (SOE), and private businesses. That is, how this plan operates in market relations. If we look at the three main policies issued to develop the sports industry since the "Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption" (2014), we will notice that all of them foresee an active participation of the private sector. In fact, both the policy from 2014 and the "The Overall Reform Plan to Boost the Development of Football in China" (2015) in their *Guiding Ideology* section state the influence and guidance of Deng Xiaoping Theory, while the Football Plan mentions the "Four Comprehensives"<sup>14</sup> and the necessary use of the reform and innovation as a driving force. We can also find the guidelines of market socialism in the basic/fundamental/development principles of the three policies under analysis. The "Opinions on Accelerating" and "The Overall Reform Plan" address more the issue. Both bring as guiding fundamentals "reform and innovation", "further simplify administration and decentralization", "strengthen market supervision", and "create a market

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<sup>14</sup> The Four Comprehensives or the Four-pronged Comprehensive Strategy is a list of political goals for China, put forward by Xi Jinping. Xi spoke of them for the first time in December 2014. The Four Comprehensives are: complete a moderately prosperous society; further reform; to advance the rule of law; strengthen the Party discipline (Xi, 2017, p. 22).

environment with competitive and equal participation”. At the market role, both consider the importance of improving “the market mechanism, actively cultivate multi-market entities, attract social capital participation”. Furthermore, both reinforce the role of the State “on overall coordination, giving full play to the positive interaction between the sports industry and the industry, promoting the integration of the sports industry and other industries, and achieving the coordinated development of the sports industry and the economy and society”. While in the Football Plan, we find the prerogatives of creating a development environment of equal participation and fair competition, in addition to the development of opening-up, increasing the level of domestic and foreign opening up.

We therefore realize that the government limits its action to the guiding and supporting the development of the industry while fostering a structure that allows for setting forth a competitive market structure (Zhan, 2013). As Tan et al. put it, “the interactions between government and society are led by the government” and, more than that, as “the policy-maker, the government tends to mediate between interest groups with specific aims”. They add “the formation of interest groups in society is frequently manipulated by government and interest groups are commissioned by, as well as subordinate to, government for the propagation of its policies” (T. Tan, Huang, Bairner, & Chen, 2016, p. 2-3). Let’s not forget that under market socialism, “the Chinese government continues to draft long-term policy agendas that are designed to anticipate, utilize, and shape domestic and global market trends” (Heilmann, 2018, p. 131). After all, as Heilmann also explains, developing planning “was fundamentally reorganized to give room to market coordination, while also preserving overall state control”, since “planning was redefined as one of three key mechanisms of ‘macro-control’, together with fiscal and monetary policies” (Heilmann, 2018, pp. 132-133).

We see that in “The Overall Reform Plan” that places as one of its fundamental principles: “a combination of a national system and market mechanism, using the superiority of the socialist system”. In other words, it takes advantage of the private initiative to reach the intended development goals, but the domain over the strategic means of the economy it held by the State. In China, there are different modes of production, experiencing the coexistence of different social structures/formations (Jabbour, 2019, p. 106). That is why what is important is to identify which mode of production is dominant and which class and/or political force has control over objectively strategic factors (Jabbour et al., 2021), as Lenin called, “the commanding heights of economy”. In the Chinese case, they are still state-owned and play a very important role

in China's economic development. Similar situation occurred in Soviet Russia during Lenin's time. After all, as the Bolshevik leader observed, if you took a close look at the actual economic relations in Russia, we would find at least five different economic systems, or structures (Lenin, 1973, pp. 295-296). In 1918, at the Report of the Council of People's Commissars to the Fifth All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers, Peasants, Soldiers and Red Army Deputies, Lenin had already recognized the difficulty Soviet Russia would face in this process of social and economic transformation. The country was poor and needy and it was necessary to transform it into a rich country. "The country is poor, the country is poverty-stricken, and it is impossible just now to satisfy all demands; that is why it is so difficult to build the new edifice in the midst of disruption" (Lenin, 1965, pp. 516-517). In October 1920 in a speech entitled "The Tasks of the Youth Leagues", delivered at the Third All-Russia Congress of the Russian Young Communist League, Lenin once again addressed to the economic tasks. "You all know that, following the military problems, those of defending the republic, we are now confronted with economic tasks. Communist society, as we know, cannot be built unless we restore industry and agriculture, and that, not in the old way. They must be re-established on a modern basis, in accordance with the last word in science" (Lenin, 1966, p. 289). Nevertheless, not without drawing attention to the fact that the new would not be built without assimilating what already existed.

"The old schools produced servants needed by the capitalists; the old schools turned men of science into men who had to write and say whatever pleased the capitalists. We must therefore abolish them. But does the fact that we must abolish them, destroy them, mean that we should not take from them everything mankind has accumulated that is essential to man? Does it mean that we do not have to distinguish between what was necessary to capitalism and what is necessary to communism?" (Lenin, 1966, p. 288).

In March 1921, as Losurdo put it, the New Economic Plan (NEP) took over from war communism, as it was essential "to overcome the desperate mass poverty and starvation that followed the catastrophe of World War I and the civil war, and to restart the economy and develop the productive forces" (Losurdo, 2017, p. 16). That is why, when explaining the NEP, Lenin asserted "state capitalism in a state with proletarian power can exist only as limited in time and sphere of extension, and conditions of its application, mode of supervision over it, etc." (Lenin, 1970, p. 444).

It is also worth mentioning that although it was with Deng Xiaoping that the PRC entered its reform and opening-up phase in its primary stage of socialism, the idea of

submitting the bourgeoisie and capitalist development to the construction of socialist society finds its origins still in Mao Zedong. As in “On the People's Democratic Dictatorship”, from June 1949:

“To counter imperialist oppression and to raise her backward economy to a higher level, China must utilize all the factors of urban and rural capitalism that are beneficial and not harmful to the national economy and the people's livelihood; and we must unite with the national bourgeoisie in common struggle. Our present policy is to regulate capitalism, not to destroy it. But the national bourgeoisie cannot be the leader of the revolution, nor should it have the chief role in state power. The reason it cannot be the leader of the revolution and should not have the chief role in state power is that the social and economic position of the national bourgeoisie determines its weakness; it lacks foresight and sufficient courage and many of its members are afraid of the masses” (Mao, 1949).

In a speech on January 18, 1957, “Talks at a Conference of Secretaries of Provincial, Municipal and Autonomous Regions Party Committees”, Mao talks about the Chinese model, explaining that at the economic level there would be a coexistence of different forms of ownership, but reaffirming that the Communist Party would exercise the political leadership.

As for the charge that our urban policy has deviated to the Right, this seems to be the case, as we have undertaken to provide for the capitalists and pay them a fixed rate of interest for a period of seven years. What is to be done after the seven years? That is to be decided according to the circumstances prevailing then. It is better to leave the matter open, that is, to go on giving them a certain amount in fixed interest. At this small cost we are buying over this class. At this small cost we are buying over this class. The Central Committee has given this policy very careful consideration. (...) By buying over this class, we have deprived them of their political capital and kept their mouths shut. The way to deprive them is to buy them over and make arrangements to give them jobs. Thus political capital will not be in their hands but in ours. We must deprive them of every bit of their political capital and continue to do so until not one jot is left to them. Therefore, neither can our urban policy be said to have deviated to the Right (Mao, 1957b).

In February 1957, in “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People”, Mao again addresses the issue of the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the working class. Mao draws attention to the fact that “there have always been contradictions among the people, but they are different in content in each period of the revolution and in the period of building socialism” and that is why “the Chinese national bourgeoisie has a dual character. In the period of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, it had both a revolutionary and a conciliationist side to its character. In the period of the socialist revolution, exploitation of the working class for profit as one side of the character

of the national bourgeoisie, while its support of the Constitution and its willingness to accept socialist transformation as the other”. Mao, however, stressed the importance of “educating the national bourgeoisie” (Mao, 1957a). This is precisely the spirit of the law, so to speak, of article 31 of “The Common Program of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference”, 1949. “Whenever necessary and possible, private capital shall be encouraged to develop in the direction of state-capitalism, in such ways as processing for state-owned enterprises and exploiting state-owned resources in the form of concessions” (Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, 1949). It was, then, as Losurdo put it, a matter of distinguishing between the economic expropriation and the political expropriation of the bourgeoisie (Losurdo, 2017, p. 18).

Here we cannot ignore an important passage in the history of the PRC that somehow marks a break with the logic of coexistence with other forms of ownership. I'm referring to the Great Leap Forward of 1958–59 and especially the Cultural Revolution unleashed in 1966. As I referenced earlier, the Cultural Revolution had an impact even on Chinese sports. For Losurdo, this period was a dramatic moment of breakthrough time (Losurdo, 2017, p. 19). However, as we see, this was clearly a point outside the curve in the dialectical formulation of the Chinese model throughout the history of the Communist Party. Deng Xiaoping recognises this tactical error and recalls that “the fundamental principle of Marxism is that the productive forces must be developed” and that “the ultimate goal of Marxists is to achieve communism, which must be built on the basis of highly developed productive forces” (Deng, 1985c). Deng, then, reconnects the trajectory of the PRC with the principles of Marxism-Leninism and with what Mao defended throughout its entire trajectory, with the exception of the period from 1958-1976, as we have shown so far, reintroducing “in China the model that we already know” (Losurdo, 2017, p. 20).

The primary task in the socialist period is to develop productive forces and gradually improve people's material and cultural life. Our experience in the 20 years from 1958 to 1978 teaches us that poverty is not socialism, that socialism means eliminating poverty. Unless you are developing productive forces and raising people's living standards, you cannot say that you are building socialism (Deng, 1985c).

That is why I consider that Deng Xiaoping, by promoting the reintroduction of the Chinese model designed by Mao and applied in the early years of the PRC, promotes a logical continuity to the theory and praxis of Chinese socialism. After all, this fundamental base lead Deng Xiaoping to develop his Theory. Moreover, defend reform

as a stage in China's development, as part of the fulfilment of its first stage of socialism, a long process of transition to communism. "In order to accomplish communism, we have to accomplish the tasks set in the socialist stage. They are legion, but the fundamental one is to develop the productive forces so as to demonstrate the superiority of socialism over capitalism and provide the material basis for communism" (Deng, 1985a). Two years later, Deng would reinforce the idea of the necessary stage of transition, asserting that China was still in the primary stage of socialism. "Socialism itself is the first stage of communism, and here in China we are still in the primary stage of socialism" (Deng, 1987).

That socialism is a transitional stage to communism, no one questions. After all, this is basic in Marxist theory. However, what we also find in the classical literature of Marxism are the basic principles that justify the market socialism economy as a way of making this transition. First, in the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels set the foundations of the conception of the transition from capitalism to communism. "The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible" (Marx & Engels, 1969, p. 126). From this statement, three points stand out. Marx and Engels recognise that the transition will be "by degrees" but at the same time emphasise the importance of "the commanding heights of the economy", when they state that "the proletariat will use its political supremacy to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State". The third point has to do with recognizing the coexistence of different modes of production in this transitional period. After all, in addition to being a change by degrees they pose the need "to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible", which means that until then there will be at least more than one productive force. In 1875, writing *The Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx refers once more to the transition to communism in which he describes that communist society will inevitably be stamped with the birth marks of the old society. "What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges" (Marx & Engels, 1976b, p. 17).

The socialist experience we see in China today, socialism with Chinese characteristics, is a unique construction. Not only because it is a new economic and social

formation that is in the making in contemporary times (Jabbour, 2019, p. 113). In addition, because market socialism is a process of transition in China itself, as it reflects an analysis and a response to concrete situations imposed by the Chinese reality the Communist Party of China and the Chinese people. As Mao put it in his 1956 speech *On the Ten Major Relationships*. “Don't copy the experience of the Soviet Union mechanically anymore. We should think with our own mind. The basic principles of Marxism-Leninism should be combined with the concrete reality of China's socialist revolution and construction to explore the road of building socialism in China” (Mao, 1956). In the same vein, almost 30 years later, Deng Xiaoping declared. “We are now building socialism with Chinese characteristics. That is the only way we can become better able to apply the basic principles and methods of Marxism to the solution of the fundamental questions arising in the political, economic, social and cultural fields” (Deng, 1985b). 30 years after Deng's declaration and nearly 60 years after Mao's, Xi Jinping added, in November 2015, “the CPC has enriched Marxist political economics by combining its basic principles with new practices in reform and opening-up and made many key theoretical achievements since the Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee” (Gu, 2018).

Thus, our point of view is in line with Jabbour et al., who classify the People's Republic of China as a society led by a political force determined to make the transition to socialism, which does not mean—in any way—recognizing the present economic order as socialist (Jabbour et al., 2021, p. 5). We understand that the Chinese catching-up process built its own economic-social formation, based on its concrete reality, through the dialectical process called market socialism, which allowed the country, by adopting elements of the market economy, to undertake its impressive development and capital accumulation process. As Gabriele puts it, “these processes cannot be adequately interpreted as a pure manifestation of the simple State vs. Market opposition” (Gabriele, 2020, p. 1). After all, the Chinese state sector has not been marginalized; its influence in the economy has been strengthened and its international competitiveness increased (S. K. Cheng, 2020). The Chinese Communists always detained “the commanding heights of economy”. The several reforms in China “did not undermine the prevalence of State-Owned and State-Held Enterprises and the hegemonic role of public ownership and of the state-led economic development leadership” (Gabriele, 2020, p. 7). In fact, China strategically utilizes trade and industrial policies with the central role played by SOEs as ancillary instruments to foster the country's socioeconomic development and its global projection (Gabriele, 2020, p. 66). That is why socialism with Chinese characteristics is



a complex social formation (Jabbour et al., 2021), which reorganized the development planning in terms of content, processes, and methods to give room to market coordination, while also preserving overall state control (Heilmann, 2018, p. 132). So planning can be seen as the human deliberate action for stability that makes sense under in the form of an essential economic logic in market socialism (Jabbour, 2019, p. 112). Heilmann considers that China's development dynamics requires the use of analytical perspectives that go beyond preconceived typologies (Heilmann, 2018, p. 2). Jabbour talks about a new economic-social formation (Jabbour, 2019, p. 113), while Gabriele and Schettino point to a Modern Mode of Production (Gabriele & Schettino, 2012). As of 2009, in response to the crisis of globalized capitalism, which began in 2008, a new stage in this process takes place, with an "advancement of the state sector in the Chinese economy" (Jabbour, 2019, p. 97). Although government and private conglomerates are interdependent, the State still exerts great power over resources, after all, the "Communist Party has the political force that controls the State which, in turn, has control over objectively strategic factors" (Jabbour, 2019, p. 107). Furthermore, "under socialism, foreign trade is a public, planned and state institution" (Jabbour, 2019, p. 109). This new mode of production, Jabbour has called "New Projectment Economy" (Jabbour & Dantas, 2021, p. 290).

The implementation of the Football Plan is a good example for us to observe how the "New Projectment Economy" operates in a specific case. On the one hand, because the propagation of the Chinese government's football policies, in the execution of the Football Plan, has been largely driven by private initiative. That is because many of the Chinese investments that have been made around the world, including within China, since the Plan's launch have been through private companies. From real estate development (e.g., Evergrande Group, Wuhan Zall, China Fortune Land Development Company, R & F Properties, Sinobo, Henan Haolin Investment, Greenland, Rehne, Kaisa Group), consumer electronics (Suning), e-commerce (Alibaba) to financial services (Yifang Group, CITIC, TEDA Investment Holdings). From pharmaceuticals (Quanjian Natural Medicine Group, Huanhai Pharmaceutical) to public utilities (Luneng, Shanghai International Port Group, Menjian Mechanical and Electrical) (H. Xue, Watanabe, Chen, Newman, & Yan, 2020). We saw this in the acquisition of European clubs (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2017), as well as in the shake-up of Eurocentrism in the world football market in 2016 and 2017 (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2019b). Also in an attempt to influence on football governance through sponsorship of FIFA and its World Cup (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2019a), or in investments made throughout the BRI (Leite Junior &

Rodrigues, 2020). On the other hand, since 2017 we have seen the government and the Chinese Football Association (CFA) intervening to ensure that the development of football and the football market in China takes place in a financially sustainable manner.

In early 2017, Pan Gongsheng, the head of the State Administration of Foreign Exchange (SAFE) said:

Last year (2016), Chinese firms bought lots of football clubs overseas. If these purchases help improve the standard of Chinese football, then I think that's a good thing. But is that what's really happening? A lot of Chinese companies already have high levels of debt and then borrow another large sum to make overseas purchases. Others pretend to be investing but are actually just moving their assets out of country (Yu et al., 2017, p. 16).

The director of the People's Bank of China, Zhou Xiaochuan, went on the same track:

Some of the foreign investments are overheated, which do not fit our national condition and system. The investment on sport, entertainment and clubs have not do much good to China and have caused some complaints outside. We think it is necessary to give a certain degree of policy guidelines

Also in early 2017, Also in early 2017, General Administration of Sport prosecution of clubs of "burning money and paying very high salaries to foreign players". As early as January, there was a change from the 3+1 rule (three foreigners plus one Asian) per game to only three foreigners in each match (regardless of nationality). In May came the determination to line up at least one Chinese Under23 player. Finally, in June, a fee of 100% on the value of international transfers above €5.9 million was implemented (rate reverted to finance training centers). This measure had a huge impact. In 2016, Chinese clubs broke the transfer record in Asian football history by spending €416 million. In 2017, the amount spent dropped to €239 million and in 2018 it went to €175 million. In the same year, when Suning purchased Inter Milan government officials called "irrational" overseas investment by several domestic companies on a CCTV program. Between the second semester of 2016 and April 2017, the Chinese businessperson Li Yonghong negotiated the acquisition of AC Milan, Inter's rival. Li, however, only got a loan (€300 million) from the American hedge fund Elliott Management. In 2018, the entrepreneur defaulted on a €32m loan and the fund took over the control of the club. Simultaneously with criticism of Suning for the purchase of Inter Milan, the Dalian Wanda Group, facing loan suspensions, was forced to sell 17% of the 20% of the shares it held in Atlético Madrid, of Spain, in February 2018. In the same month, it bought the

Chinese club Dalian Yifang FC. Wanda CEO Wang Jianlin did not hide that the company's decision to save the financially struggling Dalian Yifang FC prior to the 2018 season as fulfilling a "request of the municipal party committee and government" (Sohu.com, 2019).

In December 2020, the CFA tightened the belts on football clubs again. The Chinese Super League clubs spent 10x more than the South Korean K-League and 3x more than the Japanese J-League, for example. The arrival of foreign stars has helped to put CSL in the media spotlight globally, but has contributed little to the strengthening of national football. The regulation of wages and payrolls became stricter. A foreign player can only earn up to €3 million annually and a Chinese player up to €628 thousand. Club sheets cannot exceed €75 million, with only €10 million for foreigners. This regulatory measure, by the way, goes against the logic of hyperinflation in the world football market that began in the 1990s and deepened in the 2000s. The club that does not comply with the rule may lose six to 24 points and the athlete may be banned from Chinese football for up to two years. CFA president Chen Xuyuan warned: "no matter how big the club or how famous the player, don't test our efforts". Another measure implemented in early 2021 was changing the names of clubs. A decision that generated some opposition from several fans, but whose spirit of the law is the attempt to create roots and identities. One of the biggest challenges of the Chinese Football Plan is cultural. For this, it is necessary to create an organic relationship. It is important to note that the change in the names of the clubs was already provided for in the Football Plan, which stated, with the intention of establishing the links of the clubs to their locations, to their regions, that "the names of companies in the names of clubs should be abolished". This measure was reiterated in December 2019 in the CFA Action Plan, which called for a change of names by the end of 2020. Apparently, many (including Western Chinese football analysts) did not believe that the authorities would comply with their guidelines.

All these changes in just over five years of execution of a planning thought to last almost 35 years is empirical evidence of how medium- and long-term development plans are an open, flexible and adaptable process. But the best example China's capacity for trajectory correction when the situation makes it necessary, the result of the aforementioned "guerrilla-style policymaking", was the response to the financial crisis of several elite Chinese football clubs between the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021. The question that arises is will it be enough?

The cash spree of the owners of Chinese football clubs had the obvious consequence of financial unsustainability, which triggered a crash between several clubs from the Chinese Super League to the second and third tiers. The most emblematic case, without a doubt, was that of Jiangsu Suning. Shortly after becoming the 2020 Chinese champion, the club announced in March 2021 that it would “cease operations”. In the five years between 2015 and 2019, Suning.com Co. Ltd.'s investments totalled 71.6 billion yuan. Including 4 billion yuan of equity investment in a state-backed telecom giant China Unicom, 4.8 billion yuan to acquire an 80% stake in Carrefour China, €270 million (US\$322 million) to acquire 70% of Italian football club Inter Milan and 523 million yuan to buy Jiangsu Football Club. All these investments led the company to a liquidity crisis. Heavily indebted, Suning had to restructure its finances and concentrate its activities. Of course, football is no longer a priority. The company even tried to find a buyer for Jiangsu FC. As no one to buy the club appeared, the Chinese champion closed its doors. In the midst of the crisis, the company also sought an investor for the sale of the Italian Inter Milan (which purchase, let us remember, was heavily criticized on CCTV in 2017). Despite the turmoil, Inter would be Italian champions. It also did not show up any company or investor willing to pay what Suning asked for the club. Then came Oaktree Capital Management, an American global asset management, which acquired 31% of the Italian champion's shares. In 2020, at least 11 clubs in China's second and third division were unable to meet licensing standards, mostly due to financial difficulties, and shared the same fate as Jiangsu FC.

Not all clubs had the same dreadful fate. Some CSL clubs have been bailed-out by Provincial and Municipal Governments. One of the cases was that of former Shijiazhuang Ever Bright FC. Amid a serious financial crisis for the club, the club's owners, real estate firm Ever Bright Group, announced a new investor: the state-owned Cangzhou Construction Investment Group. Thus, the club not only changed its name, but also its city. The club was rebranded as Cangzhou Mighty Lions FC and moved 230 kilometers east from Shijiazhuang to Cangzhou. At the ceremony to announce the move, several Cangzhou local authorities were present and gave speeches. A curious situation was that of Henan Songshan Longmen F.C., formerly Henan Jianye Football Club. After years of spending more than it could, the club's owner, Jianye Residential Group (China) Co., Ltd., had to seek out investors to save the club from bankruptcy. The curious thing is that two municipal governments came to the rescue. The Zhengzhou Municipal Government now owns 40% of the club's shares, while the Luoyang Municipal

Government owns 30% (and Jianye Residential Group the other 30%). 2020 China Cup champion, former Shandong Luneng Taishan, now Shandong Taishan Football Club, also had to be bailed out by a municipal state-owned company to save himself, as Shandong Electric Power struggles to maintain the club's accounts. Jinan Cultural Tourism Group Co., Ltd., one of the six municipal investment and financing platforms established by the municipal Party committee and municipal government, now holds 40% of the club's shares. The transfer was free of charge for the state company. Another club saved thanks to the intervention of municipal agencies was Tianjin Jinmen Tiger F.C. (former Tianjin TEDA). With salaries in arrears and unable to enrol in CSL, the club was even considered closed. However, after intervention by the Tianjin Municipal Sports Bureau and the Tianjin State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission, the club was enrolled in the League. Its future is still uncertain, but it is speculated that Tianjin Cultural Tourism Group will take over the club. Finally, just one more example. At the end of 2020, Wuhan Municipal Sports Bureau informed that the provincial and municipal governments respectively arranged 20 million Yuan (€2.53 million) to support the then Wuhan Zall FC, current Wuhan FC.

Much is said and written about the difficulties faced by China in developing its football industry. Earlier in this text, I disagreed with Ma and Kurscheidt, but somehow they are right when they talk about “*Westernization* of Chinese professional football” (Ma & Kurscheidt, 2019). My disagreement had more to do with the Chinese characteristic that was just discussed: the centrality of decision-making in the State and the ability of adaptation of the project according to concrete reality. Interventions in the Chinese football market – wage caps, 100% transfer tax and even name changes – are hardly seen in Western football. Just remember the joke that is UEFA's financial fair play. In addition, the growing financial discrepancy between a small number of clubs from a few countries and everyone else. With a ripple effect, following the logic of the centre/semi-periphery/periphery world system, that is, inequality within Europe, seen in the Champions League, and then in the rest of the world, with the complete domination of the wealthy Europeans in the FIFA Club World Cup. Nevertheless, I must agree with them when it comes to the commercialisation, the ‘*enterprisation*’ of clubs, in some cases even the ‘*financialisation*’ of professional football in China. In this aspect, the Football Plan does not escape the hegemony of the football industry. Of course, I reiterate, there is no empire of neoliberal capitalism, as in the West, that is, there are more restrictive regulatory measures, some of which are unthinkable in European football. However, the

hyperinflation of the domestic market, mainly through large investments by club owners, is not an exclusive feature of Chinese football, on the contrary, it is a practice that has been increasing in the West, especially since the 1990s, “post-modern football” (Giulianotti, 2010, p. 137). Chinese clubs are private ownership, so if their owner or the company they belong to go bankrupt or even face financial problems, the club-company is dragged along. There has been much debate now about the future of Guangzhou FC. Given the situation of its main shareholder, Evergrande Real Estate, it is still uncertain what will happen to the most successful Chinese club in the last 10 years (twice champion of the Asian Champions League and eight times Chinese champion since 2011). It is important to remember that Alibaba Group owns 37.81% of the club shares and the National Equities Exchange and Quotations (NEEQ), 5,48%.

Italian football, by the way, is prodigal in cases of traditional clubs that went bankrupt and had to start over under another legal personality from the lowest divisions, like Napoli, Fiorentina and Parma. In 2004, SSC Napoli, where Maradona wrote some of his most glorious lines, was declared bankrupt with debts totalling €79m. Aurelio De Laurentiis bought the club for €34m and enlisted them in Serie C under the new title, Napoli Soccer. In August 2002, AC Fiorentina was liquidated; a new club was founded in its place: Associazione Calcio Firenze Fiorentina, ACF Fiorentina, which started down in Serie C2. In 2006, Cecchi Gori was found guilty of illegally withdrawing \$32m from AC Fiorentina and funneling it into his holding company, Finmavi, to help support his other business interests. Finally, Parma Football Club, which in 2004 had to be re-formed as Parma Football Club SpA, after starting to operate in controlled administration, dragged down by the bankruptcy of its former owner, Parmalat. The "new" Parma would still go bankrupt in 2015, being refounded as S.S.D. Parma Calcio 1913.

Still on the issue of investments by private companies and businesspeople in football clubs in China and their interests other than the development of football itself, it is necessary to put this in context. Yes, it is true, after the policies for the development of the Chinese sports industry, especially the documents related to football, “attention turned to many private enterprises beginning to echo government policy by demonstrating a willingness to promote elite football” (T. Tan et al., 2016). Some say that this willingness would have to do with *guanxi*<sup>15</sup> (Sullivan et al., 2019; H. Xue et al., 2020). The private

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<sup>15</sup> *Guanxi*, according to Xue et al., is one of the most foundational principle of Chinese social relationships. Guan (关), the first character of the Chinese term *guanxi*, means “close” while the second character xi (系) refers to “tie up” or “link.” *Guanxi* is loosely translated as personal relations. This kind of relationship is

investment in State projects, such as in football, is seen as an investment gifted to the State with assumed reciprocity in the form of favourable regulatory practices or market positioning (H. Xue et al., 2020, p. 8). Here I do not even question the role of *guanxi* in motivating some of the private investments in Chinese football. However, it is important to emphasize that the use of football for personal or business interests is not exclusive to the Chinese reality. Once again, this relationship between individuals or companies who see football as an opportunity to prosper their businesses, or rise in the political arena or even exert influence is a consequence of what post-modern football has become.

Just remember C. Wright Mills' concept of the “power elite”. For this author, American society was controlled by a powerful minority at the expense of a powerless majority. According to Wright Mills, the “power elite” would be made up of people whose position allows them to transcend the common environment of ordinary men and women, and make decisions of great consequence. Whether or not they make such decisions is less important than whether they occupy such key positions. The elite, therefore, would correspond to whoever occupied these positions of power, that is, those capable of commanding and deciding, belonging to the most important institutions of the country's social structure: large corporations, the state machine, the military, for example (Mills, 1956, pp. 3-4). Wright Mills also says that we are facing unaccompanied representatives. In other words, a network of advisers, consultants, spokespersons and opinion makers is formed who contribute to the formulation of thoughts and decision-making (Mills, 1956, pp. 4). Football, as we have seen, is a useful instrument for exercising power. The acquisition of a football club, for example, may allow, in line with Mills' argument, the occupation of strategic positions that would allow greater decision-making influence. That's what happens, for example, in the Italian power elite, according to Mark Doidge, between business, politics, and football extends into football governance (Doidge, 2018, p. 118). Let us not forget, too, the cases of Chelsea, Manchester City, Paris Saint-Germain, the money from US private equity investors that had flooded European football and even the purchase of Wolverhampton by the Chinese from Fosun.

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more complicated than simple interpersonal relationships or friendships, as *guanxi* suggests a long-lasting exchange of favors and “implicit reciprocal obligations to respond to requests for assistance” (H. Xue et al., 2020).

## **The Chinese football dream is (also) the Chinese Dream**

Throughout the text, references were made to Chinese Dream, Shared Future and Common Prosperity. It was also mentioned that the development planning for the Chinese sports industry, which has the Football Plan as its main execution tool, is directly related to these concepts and objectives of the Chinese State. The realization of the Chinese Dream ideal involves the realization of the advancement of Chinese society, which means achieving a Common Prosperity, which is, at the domestic level, full prosperity with a less unequal society, based on the redistribution of wealth. But, externally, it is necessary to understand that China, from its dialectical formulation in which Confucianism and Marxism guide its actions, has as its goal a world in which prosperity is common to all, that is, in which there is a Shared Future for Mankind. The Football Plan can contribute to achieving these targets, both in terms of the development of the national economy - generating wealth to be redistributed - and in the aspect of promoting external relations based on friendship, harmony and the exchange of knowledge. Before detailing the role of the Football Plan, it is necessary to understand the broad meaning of the Chinese Dream.

President Xi Jinping brought the “Chinese Dream” expression into the Communist Party official language. Appointed as Hu Jintao's successor as Party General Secretary at the CPC's 18th Congress on November 15, 2012, Xi spoke on the topic for the first time in his speech “Achieving rejuvenation is the dream of Chinese people” on November 29, when visiting the exhibition “The Road to Rejuvenation”. At the time, Xi expressed his views on the Chinese Dream, stating that the rejuvenation of the nation would be the greatest dream of the Chinese people (Xi, 2014, p. 38). In his inaugural address at the 12th National People's Congress on March 17, 2013, as President of the People's Republic of China, Xi speaks nine times about the “Chinese Dream”. Emphasizing that realizing the "Chinese Dream" of great rejuvenation of the nation means transforming China into a prosperous and strong country, achieving the revitalization of the Chinese nation and increasing the quality of life of the Chinese people (Xi, 2014, p. 41). Two days later, on March 19, 2013, answering to a question in a joint interview with reporters from BRICS countries, Xi once again states that the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation as long-cherished dream of the Chinese people since modern times. Here, Xi connects this desire of the Chinese people to overcoming the extreme misery and pain that the people suffered after the Opium War of 1840 (Xi, 2014a, p. 6). The Opium War of 1840 and everything that happened after that is precisely the focal point for understanding what the Chinese



people understand by rejuvenation of the nation. The concept of national rejuvenation has been used by many Chinese leaders (Z. Wang, 2014) and relates to the dream to make China rich and strong again after decades of warfare against internal and external enemies dominated the political, economic and cultural agendas (Landsberger, 2014). The nation's rejuvenation, therefore, relates to the desire to overcome the Century of Humiliation and the eagerness to make China rise again. For the Communists, for the realization of this rejuvenation, the emergence of New China would be necessary. In January 1940, that is, almost 10 years before the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, Mao Zedong wrote about the desire to build New China.

“Not only do we want to change a China that is politically oppressed and economically exploited into a China that is politically free and economically prosperous, we also want to change the China which is being kept ignorant and backward under the sway of the old culture into an enlightened and progressive China under the sway of a new culture. In short, we want to build a new China” (Mao, 1940b).

Mao again mentions New China in a speech delivered at the Yanan Association for the Promotion of Constitutional Government, in February 1940. On that occasion, he even alludes to foreign oppression and the semi-colonial and semi-feudal condition to which China had been relegated: “What is the purpose of our meeting? It is to facilitate the full expression of the popular will, the defeat of Japan and the building of a new China” (Mao, 1940a).

Thus, as we can see from Mao's asseverations, the Chinese Dream finds its roots in the Opium War of 1840, which gradually relegated the country to a semi-feudal and semi-colonial condition, divided and exploited by Western imperialist forces and Japan, the so-called Century of Humiliation. Both humiliation and rejuvenation are intertwined in such a way that they are a crucial part of the construction of Chinese national identity and nation building. This is central to Chinese nationalism to this day (Gries, 2004, p. 45). The idea of rejuvenating the nation, therefore, builds on the shame driven by humiliation. After all, “no aspect of political, social or cultural life was to be excluded from the endeavour to bring the nation's backwardness to an end and rid of the country of the humiliating label of ‘Sick man of Asia’” (Landsberger, 2014, p. 246). As Marx put it, shame by itself already is a revolution. “I assure you that even if one can feel no national pride one does feel national shame. (...) Shame is a revolution in itself. (...) Shame is a kind of anger turned in on itself. And if a whole nation were to feel ashamed it would be like a lion recoiling in order to spring” (Marx, 1843). That is why the Chinese Dream is

centred in the idea of curing the “Sick Man of Asia” (Landsberger, 2014, p. 256). We can find reference to this when Deng Xiaoping mentioned that “for more than a century after the Opium War China was subjected to humiliation and the Chinese people were looked down upon” (Deng, 1994). Also in the recently published White Paper “China's Epic Journey from Poverty to Prosperity”, which points out that China now stands tall and proud. “Over the past hundred years, China has emerged from poverty and the scourge of war, and become a dynamic and prosperous country, standing tall and proud in the East” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021a). More than that. The document talks about the “glorious achievement for the Chinese nation” which was the realization of moderate prosperity. Stressing that “once subjected to oppression and humiliation China now stands firm among the nations of the world, which represents one significant step closer to the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021a).

The achievement of a “moderately prosperous society” brings us to The Two Centenary Goals. On May 4 2013, in a speech to young representatives, Xi mentions the Two Centenary Goals for the first time. Each goal to be reached in one of the two fundamental Centenaries for New China: the centenary of the Communist Party, in 2021, and the centenary of the People's Republic of China, in 2049. Here, just an aside, it is important to remember that it is no accident that the Plan of Football runs from 2016 to 2050. The first goal calls to complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects by the centenary of the CPC, a feat achieved, as Xi Jinping congratulated on in his speech at the celebration of the centenary of the Communist Party. “We have realized the first centenary goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects. This means that we have brought about a historic resolution to the problem of absolute poverty in China” (Xi, 2021a). The second goal means the realization of a modern socialist society, a strong, prosperous, democratic and culturally advanced country. That is, the transformation of China into a nation characterized by the Core Socialist Values<sup>16</sup>. Fulfilling the first goal allows China to move towards the second goal, as Xi also emphasized. “We are now marching in confident strides toward the second centenary goal of building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects” (Xi, 2021a). Xi also stated that the Chinese nation has achieved a formidable transformation,

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<sup>16</sup> The Core Socialist Values are prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equity, and justice, rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship.

rising and growing successfully, becoming strong, and assured: “China's national rejuvenation has already become a historic inevitability” (Xi, 2021a). Thus, we can conclude that the realization of the “Chinese Dream” implies modernization and economic success, but even more, the consummation of the rise of China as a protagonist at the global scene, that is, a rejuvenated, reinvigorated China. In other words, China completes the long march of transition from the periphery of the system, subjugated by imperialism and colonialism, and reaches the core of the system.

This amazing Chinese development and the attainment of a modern socialist society, a strong, prosperous country will only be effectively achieved if China "social security, fairness and justice, and resolves the imbalances and inadequacies in development and the most pressing difficulties and problems that are of great concern to the people," as Xi addressed the CPC centenary celebration. Here, as we mentioned before, what is at stake is the fulfilment of Common Prosperity. As Xi put it China “will make more notable and substantive progress toward achieving well rounded human development and common prosperity for all” (Xi, 2021a). After all, according to the Chinese point of view “a moderately prosperous society in all respects is a society in which all people share the fruits of development, a society where no individual, region or ethnic group is left behind, and a society that promotes the well-rounded development of all” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021a). The first time Xi Jinping speaks on Common Prosperity was on November 15, 2012. “Our responsibility is to bring together and lead the whole Party and the people of all ethnic groups to free their minds, carry out reform and opening up, further unfetter and develop the productive forces, solve the people’s problems in work and life, and resolutely pursue common prosperity” (Xi, 2014, p. 5). Two days later, in a speech at the first group study session of the Political Bureau of the 18th CPC Central Committee, Xi talks about it again: Common Prosperity is the fundamental principle of Chinese socialism (Xi, 2014, p. 14). In his speech at the ceremony marking the 95th anniversary of the CPC, he stressed the necessity of improving living standards, benefiting all the people in a more equal way, and moving towards realizing the goal of common prosperity for all people (Xi, 2017, p. 41).

The idea of common prosperity is something that finds its roots in Confucianism and Marxism. Xi Jinping recognizes that. “In nature, the philosophy of shared development represents the idea of people-centred development. It reflects the demand of achieving shared prosperity in stages. Shared prosperity is a primary goal of Marxism;

it has also been a basic ideal of the Chinese people since ancient times” (Xi, 2017, p. 236). As Angang Hu et al. note, “more than 2000 years ago, Confucius visualized a dream for China of “great harmony” and a “prosperous society”: ‘When the perfect order prevails, the world is like a home shared by all. Every man and woman has an appropriate role to play in the family and society. These are the characteristics of an ideal world, a world of great harmony’” (A. Hu, Yan, & Wei, 2014, p. 4). However, in addition to Confucianism, common prosperity is also found in Marxism. After all, as Ernest Mandel writes in the introduction of *Capital*, “centralization of the means of production and objective socialization of labour create the economic preconditions for a society based upon collective property and free co-operation by associated producers” (Marx, 1992, p. 83). In the words of Marx:

“The further socialization of labour and the further transformation of the soil and other means of production into socially exploited and therefore communal means of production takes on a new form. (...) The centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument” (Marx, 1992, pp. 928-929).

Xi Jinping was not the first Chinese leader to speak of Common Prosperity. Xi himself quotes Mao Zedong on the topic. “Since we are implementing such a system, such a plan, the country can grow more prosperous and powerful year by year, and we will see that happen. The prosperity is shared prosperity and the power is also shared by all the people” (Xi, 2017, p. 237). At different times, Deng Xiaoping spoke about common prosperity. In 1985, for example, Deng points out that “the predominance of public ownership and common prosperity are the two fundamental socialist principles that we must adhere to so ultimately we shall move on to communism”. In the same year, when differentiating socialism from capitalism, he highlighted that “socialism means common prosperity, not polarization of income wealth created. The wealth created belongs first to the state and second to the people”. In 1990, Deng is even more emphatic. “Since the very beginning of the reform we have been emphasizing the need for seeking common prosperity”. It goes on to anticipate what we are currently seeing under Xi Jinping's leadership. “That will surely be the central issue someday”. Explaining that “socialism does not mean allowing a few people to grow rich while the overwhelming majority live in poverty. No, that is not socialism. The greatest superiority of socialism is that it enables all the people to prosper, and common prosperity is the essence of socialism” (Deng, 1994). Deng recognized that the transition process that China needed to go through at his

time implied that some areas and some people would get rich first, but this would be a step so that, further, this wealth could help other regions and people to get rich first and gradually achieve common prosperity. An understanding that is consistent with what Marx advocated about inequality in the first stage of socialism.

“The individual producer receives back from society exactly what he gives. Hence, equal right here is still in principle—bourgeois right, although principle and practice are no longer at loggerheads, while the exchange of equivalents in commodity exchange only exists on the average and not in the individual case” (Marx & Engels, 1976b, pp. 18).

A perfectly understood contradiction within a process of transformation and overcoming of a dominant mode of production. As Marx already said, social contradiction makes politics a competition between possible non-equivalent histories and is set in the incessant movement of change, characteristic of social reality. “The development of the contradictions of a given historical form of production is the only historical way in which it can be dissolved and then reconstructed on a new basis” (Marx, 1992, p. 619). Marx, however, reiterates that this occurs in the phase of transition from capitalism to communism:

“These defects are inevitable in the first phase of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society. (...) In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly— only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” (Marx & Engels, 1976b, pp. 19).

It is therefore evident, as Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping acknowledge, common prosperity is something that is achieved in stages, through stages. Upon reaching The Two Centenary's first goal, the challenge of concrete reality points out that China is already charting its path towards a new stage in this long march, which is the transition process characterized by socialism with Chinese characteristics. Let us recall what I already mentioned before, the 14th Five-Year Plan points to a change in the main contradiction. Before, the main contradiction was "the contradiction between the people's ever-increasing material and cultural needs and China's backward social productive forces", now it is "the contradiction between the people's ever-increasing need for the

good life on the one hand and imbalanced and insufficient development on the other". Again, drawing back to Marx, who emphasize the economically determined nature of societal change. We find that:

No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it for development have developed; and new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions for their existence have matured in the room of the old society itself (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 504).

Gramsci, moreover, based on what Marx wrote about the relationship between social formations, had already recognized that "no society sets itself tasks for the solution of which the necessary and sufficient conditions do not yet exist or at least are not in the process of appearing and developing" (Gramsci, 2007a, p. 36). This explains what we have seen in China recently. Borrowing an expression used by Xi Jinping in 2015, the cake of development grew larger, but as the portions of the cake are not being shared evenly (Xi, 2017, p. 220), the time to share the cake has arrived. The natural movement of the Chinese socialist journey leads to the search for overcoming this contradiction. Something that led David Harvey to a recent self-criticism of the view he held for several years about China being "neoliberal" and not socialist. In a video he stated that "there seems to be almost a revolutionary reconfiguration going on in China" (Harvey, 2021).

As Xi Jinping stressed in his speech at the CPC's Centenary commemoration ceremony, China does not intimidate, threaten, subjugate, or oppress other nations. It is not by chance that the Constitution of the People's Republic of China enshrines both the search for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the construction of an international community with a shared future for all of humanity. In that speech, Xi emphasized that China "must continue working to promote the building of a human community with a shared future" (Xi, 2021a). This means that the Chinese Dream is not an isolated, protectionist dream exclusively for the Chinese people. In the understanding of Chinese leaders, the Chinese Dream will only be fully achieved if shared with the world. "To realize the Chinese Dream, we must pursue peaceful development. We will concentrate both on China's development and on our responsibilities and contributions to the world as a whole. We will bring benefits to both the Chinese people and the people of the rest of the world" (Xi, 2014b, p. 62). The idea of peaceful development and community of common destiny, however, was initially advanced under the leadership of Hu Jintao. As the White Paper China's Peaceful Development states, "China has declared to the rest of the world on many occasions that it takes a path of peaceful development and is

committed to upholding world peace and promoting common development and prosperity for all countries”. And goes on “Countries of different systems and different types and at various development stages are in a state of mutual dependence, with their interests intertwined. This has turned the world into a community of common destiny in which the members are closely interconnected” (The State Council The People’s Republic of China, 2011).

Xi Jinping, however, developed the concept and presented the idea of the “Community with a shared future for mankind” (Staiano, 2020; Vadell, 2021). The first time Xi talked about it was in a speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, in March 2013. “Mankind, by living in the same global village in the same era where history and reality meet, has increasingly emerged as a community of common destiny in which everyone has in himself a little bit of others” (Xi, 2014b, p. 298). As we can see, in 2013 Xi still addressed to the concept of “community of common destiny”. It was only in 2015, in a speech entitled "A New Partnership of Mutual Benefit and a Community of Shared Future", at the General Debate of the 70th Session of the General Assembly at the United Nations headquarters in New York, that Xi first expressed the idea of building “a community of shared future for mankind”. Arguing that it is necessary to build a new model of international relations with mutually beneficial cooperation, Xi invokes the need to create a community of shared future for mankind (Xi, 2017, p. 571). A few weeks later, in November 2015, in a speech at the opening ceremony of the Paris Conference on Climate Change, when talking about global efforts to combat climate change, Xi again mentions that it is necessary to build a community of shared future for mankind (Xi, 2017, p. 578). China's grand vision is again presented to the international community in January 2017. In a speech at the UN Office in Geneva in which Xi even referenced the English theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking, saying that for now "there is only one Earth and we humans have only one home", the Chinese president affirms that great visions can be realized only through actions and urged: “actions hold the key to building the community of shared future for mankind” (Xi, 2017, p. 592). In October of that same year, Xi reiterates his conception in his report the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party, mentioning it three times (Xi, 2020, pp. 21, 63, 65), in one of them referring to diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, whose objective should be to foster a new type of international relations and build a global community of shared future (Xi, 2020, p. 21). It is interesting to note that, precisely two years earlier, in October 2015, Xi Jinping referred to the Belt and Road Initiative, which

is one of the most concrete actions in favor of shared development, as a major strategic measure to boost opening up and provide a top-level design for economic diplomacy (Xi, 2017, p. 219).

In March 2018, Xi's thinking about the shared future was incorporated into the Constitution of the PRC and the Communist Party of China, as well as the conception of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, both as part of Xi Jinping's thought on "Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era". In 2021, the term appears in at least five very important documents/declarations. The White Papers "China's Epic Journey from Poverty to Prosperity" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021a) and "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021b) and Xi Jinping's speeches, in order, at the CPC's 100th Anniversary Celebration, at the CPC and World Political Parties Summit (Xi, 2021c) and at the general debate of the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly. In the speech at the Centenary of the CPC, Xi addressed, for example, China's commitment to building "a new new type of type of international relations and international relations and a human community with a human community with a shared future" (Xi, 2021a). While in his speech at the UN General Assembly, the Chinese President assumed an important commitment to not build new coal-fired power projects abroad and, in this context, stated that "we need to improve global environmental governance, actively respond to climate change and create a community of life for man and nature". As part of advancing "on a priority basis cooperation on poverty alleviation, food security, COVID-19 response and vaccines, development financing, climate change and green development, industrialization, digital economy and connectivity, among other areas", Xi reiterated the importance of building "the global community of development with a shared future" (Xi, 2021b).

As well as the objective of Common Prosperity, the principle of Community of Shared Future for Mankind also finds roots in Confucianism, related to the idea of prosperous society and great harmony (A. Hu et al., 2014, p. 4). After all, we live in an interdependent World and "only when the world has become fully developed will it be possible for China to achieve greater development; once the world has become equally prosperous, it will be possible for China to obtain higher levels of prosperity" (A. Hu et al., 2014, p. 9). We also find the issue of interdependence in Marx and Engels. In *The German Ideology*, when talking about the division of labour and how this implies the contradiction between the individual interest or individual family interest and the



communal interest of all individuals, they allude to the idea of socialization of labour to assert that "this communal interest does not exist merely in the imagination, as the "general interest", but first of all in reality, as the mutual interdependence of the individuals among whom the labour is divided" (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 34). Here, it is identified how a mutual relationship is more advantageous through the socialization of work, in order to guarantee a common future.

It is curious to note how sport is intertwined with social, political and geopolitical concepts and principles. Let us see, then, as Landsberger recalls the example of Chinese Dream, as “the use of the term “dream” (*mengxiang*) in itself emerged around the turn of the century, often in conjunction with China's desire to host the Olympic Games as proof of its level of development and modernity” (Landsberger, 2014, p. 271). Or the slogan for the Winter Olympics Beijing 2022 which is “Together for a Shared Future”. This only reinforces what we have argued in this text and in other publications about the importance of sport for economic and social development. The Football Plan also connects the revitalisation and development of football with the construction of a powerful sports nation, the promotion of social development and the realization of the Chinese Dream, as in its “Guiding Ideology” section football is identified as “an emerging and green industry” and that its development represents a new sector of economic growth, in addition to representing the Chinese Core Socialist Values.

In fact, if we look at the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, the Constitution of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping's speech at the celebration of the Centenary of the CPC and the Football Plan we can identify keywords of the concepts and idealizations presented by China in its international relations such as "Rejuvenation", "Shared Future" and "Common Prosperity" are found in all documents. While the term Chinese Dream, to which the principles of Common Prosperity and Shared Future are intrinsically connected, is just not present in the Constitution of the PRC. Here, it should be noted, it is not directly present since Chinese Dream will only be consummated with the achievement of Common Prosperity and Shared Future.

Table 2: Number of times keywords for Chinese international relations are found

<b>Constitution of the People's Republic of China</b>	<b>Constitution of the Communist Party of China</b>	<b>Xi Jinping's speech at the Centenary of the CPC</b>	<b>Football Plan</b>
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<b>Rejuvenation/ Rejuvenate</b>	1	10	26	3
<b>Shared Future/ Common Prosperity/ Cooperation</b>	2	7	6	2
<b>Chinese Dream</b>	-	3	4	3
<b>The Two Centenary Goals</b>	-	2	3	-

Source: the author

The Football Plan also represents an instrument for promoting cultural and diplomatic exchanges with other nations. The document explicitly demonstrates the Chinese authorities' perception of the importance of football as a tool to exert influence and attraction. For example, the Plan discusses the need to intensify international exchange, stating that football activities are “a fundamental part of sport diplomacy”. It also draws attention to the need to strengthen “international cooperation and exchanges of talent in the football industry”, adding that international football exchange channels should be expanded, encouraging all bodies to promote various forms of international activities and football specialists abroad for studies and training, in addition to encouraging the participation of representatives in international organizations. The Plan also refers to the importance of increasing openness ('opening up') and advantage ('win-win') in cooperation. Looking at the Football Plan, we realise how “exchange” and “cooperation” are paramount to the development of football and the Chinese sports industry. Both are keywords in the political discourses of the Belt and Road Initiative. After all, as have already been said, the BRI is one of the most ambitious geopolitical and economic projects in the world, a global integration plan, with China as the link of union and interconnectivity. The Silk Road fits like a metaphor for peace and cooperation, openness and inclusion, mutual learning and mutual benefit. The discourse around BRI is consistent with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. It was in this context, by the way, that the BRI was mentioned by Xi Jinping in his speech at the Centenary of the CPC. The Chinese leader said they will continue to work to build a new kind of international relations and community with a shared future for mankind, promote the high-quality development of the Belt and Road Initiative through joint efforts, and use

China's new developmental achievements to provide the world with new opportunities (Xi, 2021a).

For this reason, we can see how football initiatives can play a key role in Chinese geopolitical aspirations, in addition to showing consistency with The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The “China Football Association 2020 Action Plan” reinforced this understanding, renewing the goals set out in the 2016 Football Plan. One of its main goals is the popularization of football and the promotion of this sport as a cultural construction, which relies on international exchanges to expand Chinese influence and promote China's image around the world (Chinese Football Association, 2020).

In recent years, we have seen Chinese diplomacy documents mention cooperation in the field of sport as an important part of exchanges and cooperation, particularly in Joint Statements between the PRC and other nations.

- **Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Spain** (November 2018). “Spain and China express their desire to boost exchanges between the two countries both within the framework of the Cooperation Program for Culture, Youth and Sport (...) signed in 2018, as well as the Memorandum on Exchange and Cooperation in the Matter of Historic Heritage of 2015 (...). Spain and China are committed to strengthening sports cooperation, favouring the exchange of knowledge, mobility of sports professionals - especially for the training of young people and teenagers in various sports disciplines, such as football, among others, and promoting the exchange of experiences in the development of sports infrastructure.”
- **Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Argentine Republic** (December 2018). “Both Parties will continue exchanges and cooperation in areas such as culture, education, tourism, environment, science and technology, media and sports.”
- **Joint Statement between the Portuguese Republic and the People's Republic of China on Strengthening the Global Strategic Partnership** (December 2018). “The two Parties attached great importance to the relevant role of cultural exchange between peoples to strengthen the long-term development of bilateral relations, namely cooperation in the areas of culture, education, tourism, sport, among others. (...) Portugal was willing to share its experience in football and other sports, and to develop cooperation in the field of youth sports.”

- **Joint Statement on the 9th Meeting of the China-Italy Joint Government Committee** (January 2019). “The two Ministers support bilateral exchanges and cooperation in the sports sector, encourage direct contacts between the two Countries’ sports organizations at all levels, as well as strengthening dialogue and the coordination of international sports events, in order to contribute to promoting cooperation in sports and friendly relations between Italy and China.”
- **Joint statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the development of a comprehensive strategic partnership for collaboration in the new era** (June 2019). “to deepen sports exchanges and cooperation, and to hold good summer and winter youth games between China and Russia, the "Silk Road" international rally, the "Silk Road Cup" hockey league and other brand sports exchange activities. Strengthen cooperation in the preparation for the Winter Olympics and improve the level of winter sports together. The Russian side supports the Chinese side in organizing the XXIV Winter Olympic Games in 2022. China will provide good conditions for Russian athletes to stay in China on the eve of and during the Winter Olympics.”
- **Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Federative Republic of Brazil** (October 2019). “The role of cooperation in the fields of culture, education and sports, to increase mutual knowledge and understanding, in particular on matters related to football...”

The Chinese Football Dream (中國足球夢) is also part of the country's developmental and geopolitical strategies, as the Football Plan itself attests, when referring to diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges. But beyond that, The Chinese Dream (中國夢) seeks the rejuvenation of the nation, which means a modern socialist society, a strong, prosperous, democratic, harmonious, and culturally advanced country by 2049. Which implies the need for full Chinese economic and social development. The Football Plan, in fact, aims to make great efforts to make real “the dream of the rise of football, the dream of the powerful sports nation and the dream of rejuvenating the nation”. The Chinese Football Dream is also the Chinese Dream. In addition to the component of diplomatic relations and the use of football as a resource for exchange and

knowledge, it also means the country's economic development, as it is considered a paramount for development of the country's sports industry, whose goal is to represent 5% of the Chinese GDP by 2035. Thus, it can contribute to the pursuit of Common Prosperity. Chinese Football Dream also represents the search for the Community of Shared Future for Mankind, because through its values of cooperation and knowledge exchange, football also serves as a facilitator for business establishment, for example in the cases of the so-called stadium diplomacy.

### **Soft Disempowerment and its *Westernized* “credible attraction filter”**

Finally, as throughout this work we discuss the concept of soft power and critically analyse it based on the concept of hegemony in Gramsci. As well as the development of China and its inevitable evolution from the periphery to the core of the world system and the implications that this has in the sphere of the hegemonic dispute, we believe it is necessary to deal with one more concept. I refer to ‘soft disempowerment’. It is a concept, as you will see in the following papers, which we have even referred to in some publications, without, however, actually delving into its meaning. By meaning, we are not just talking about the conceptual aspect, but what is underlying it, that is, what underlies this type of understanding. Therefore, what is the hegemonic thought that explains not only the reason for the existence of the concept, but we recognize beforehand, its effective finding from the reality of the facts, from the empirical analysis of reality. Therefore, it is not a question here of denying the concept or even rejecting its validity. After all, the concrete analysis of the reality in the light of a given context demonstrates that, in fact, soft disempowerment exists and has effects on countries that try to exert attraction and obtain recognition or legitimacy through a dispute of attention for the promotion of their values to a global audience. The question on which it seems essential to reflect is: what are the core values under which the values presented by different and different countries and peoples are evaluated and measured? That is, what is the dominant ideology that serves as a filter in the “credible attraction filter” in the soft power–soft disempowerment nexus? In our point of view the answer is like Samir Amin puts it, “the culture of capitalism” (Amin, 2009) and its hegemonic apparatus that reproduces itself in the domain of Eurocentrism, Occidentalism and Orientalism. In other word, it is the *Westernized* “credible attraction filter”.

Paul Michael Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti introduced the concept of soft disempowerment. When analysing Qatar's bet on sports as an instrument of soft power,

the British authors drew attention to a risk inherent in this type of exposure at a global level. This is because, according to them, wherever there is the attempt to accumulate soft power, there is always the possibility of soft disempowerment (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015). Then explain that soft disempowerment refers to those occasions in which you may upset, offend or alienate others, leading to a loss of attractiveness or influence (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015, p. 706). Giulianotti uses a very pertinent expression to describe what the risk of soft disempowerment is: the backfire. “Soft disempowerment may occur when the attempt to gain soft power backfires, so that influence and prestige are undermined rather than enhanced” (Giulianotti, 2015). Joseph Nye himself warns of this risk when he says that if the content of a country's culture, values and policies is not attractive, the public diplomacy that promotes them is not capable of producing soft power, and may result in exactly the opposite (Nye, 2008). Brannagan and Giulianotti thus suggest that we should move beyond thinking only of how soft power is positively accumulated; instead, this term enables us to examine how social actions may have positive and negative outcomes that are empowering and disempowering respectively (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Giulianotti, 2015). Both, by the way, cite China when they exemplify the risk of a backfire. Brannagan and Giulianotti mention that “the Beijing 2008 Olympics also placed China in the critical spotlight with regard to the occupation of Tibet, the treatment of minorities such as the Uyghur peoples, high pollution levels, human rights and democracy” (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015). And Giulianotti observes that “for the Beijing Olympics, the reputational risk was centred in particular on issues relating to the environment, political freedoms, legal rights, the treatment of minority nationals, and China’s role in Tibet” (Giulianotti, 2015). It is interesting to note the reflection that Giulianotti makes when referring to “some Chinese politicians and media later took the opportunity to turn the issue of human rights back onto the West, for example by highlighting incidents of torture and forms of institutionalized racism in the United States” (Giulianotti, 2015). This fact only reinforces our point of view that soft disempowerment and its credibility filter are protective measures, defensive, of the hegemonic power in the face of competition in the dispute of narratives, or, in the hegemonic clash.

Later, Brannagan and Giulianotti present an interesting analysis of how soft power and soft disempowerment intertwine. From their research on Qatar, these authors draw up a scheme to illustrate the nexus between soft power and soft disempowerment. In this

perspective, they present three stages that are crucial to the process of soft power acquisition by a state.

The ways in which states' soft power resources lead to possible power outcomes (stage 1); the ways in which conversion of these resources into successful outcomes depend on the (inter)subjectivities of soft power audiences (stage 2); and the impact of soft disempowerment (stage 3) on audience evaluations of foreign and domestic policies (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

In times of “network society”, with extremely advanced communication and information, technologies and the influence of social networks on the way people communicate and opinions are formed, power is also built and represented by the media. As we have already seen, in the contemporary globalized world, there are several interlocutors and communicators in the global sphere. As Brannagan and Giulianotti argue, “attraction” is dependent on intersubjective and cultural factors, forcing the message to be attractive and credible to the audience (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). This message, in an environment of international competition for attention, passes through filters. The media is just one of the filters, alongside States, non-governmental organizations, corporate sectors and civil society. It is here that the authors present the idea of ‘credible attraction filter’, which enters precisely in stage 2, serving as a mediation and being decisive for the acceptance or rejection of the soft power resources put into play (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, p. 1144). Brannagan and Giulianotti remind us that “the materialization of soft disempowerment depends, of course, on the perceptions of specific audience” (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, p. 1145).

That said, we realize that the attempt to build a credible international image is also part of the dispute for hegemony as a negotiation of consensus. Which leads us to question which are these filters that resources go through to obtain results - which can be positive (desired) or negative (unwanted, frustrated). After all, there is an unequivocal tendency in our view: non-Western countries, when constructing their global profiles in search of legitimacy in the international sphere, emulate and promote hegemonic concepts that are nothing more than Westernized concepts. This is the case of recent onslaughts by countries like Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Those countries seek legitimacy in the international public arena, promoting an image of “modernity” through the dissemination of the rapid development of their cities and the region as, for example, their hypermodern stadiums and sports equipment and their impressive skyscrapers, thus spreading, this representation of the region as “cosmopolitan”, “modern”, and

“globalised” (Koch, 2018, p. 2012). This attempt to conform to Western standards and values as a form of nation branding is evident in these countries' quest to market the "new", "open" and "liberal" Arabian Peninsula as a place to be visited, whether by tourists or business people, and build this new identity as an emerging model of “liberal” monarchy (Amara, 2012, p. 29). This of course does not free them from rejections, such as the constant criticism of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the properties of football clubs such as PSG (Qatar), Manchester City (Abu Dhabi/UAE) and more recently Newcastle (Saudi Arabia) or the Formula 1 Grand Prix of Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. However, when a country proposes to the world ideas, ideals and concepts that are beyond what is seen as "universal" conceptions (Western), such as China, there is a clear hegemonic clash, as we have seen in recent times.

However, as Wallerstein stated, this is not in the least surprising, after all Social science, for example, is a product of the modern world-system, and Eurocentrism is constitutive of the geoculture of the modern world. By Eurocentrism we understand like Wallerstein, in which Europe here is more as a cultural than as a cartographical expression; in this sense, in the discussion about the last two centuries, we are primarily referring and along to Western Europe and North America (Wallerstein, 1997). For Samir Amin, Eurocentrism is synonymous with capitalism, since the new world that emerged from colonial expansion and exploitation is capitalist. This new world it defines and recognizes itself according to the characteristics of this mode of production (Amin, 2009, p. 155). Couze Venn uses another term to explain the same phenomenon of cultural and ideological hegemonic domination, Occidentalism, the making of Europe as the modern west. “Occidentalism thus directs attention to the becoming-modern of the world and the becoming-West of Europe such that Western modernity gradually became established as the privileged, if not hegemonic, form of sociality, tied to a universalizing and totalizing ambition” (Venn, 2000, p. 19). Like Amin, Venn also considers that this process was “inflected by the fact of colonialism and capitalism” (Venn, 2000, p. 19). Call it Eurocentrism or Occidentalism, the fact is that there is a European dominance of the modern world, which has been built over the last few centuries through the narrative of virtue of specific European historical achievements (Wallerstein, 1997). This domain is evident, for example, in the way in which “Occidentalism has culminated today in the establishment of global forms of regulation and of the exercise of economic, political, cultural and military power” (Venn, 2000, p. 19).



These domination apparatuses underpin the ideological dominance of capitalism/Eurocentrism. Amin states that this dominant ideology of the new world fulfils three complementary and indissolubly linked functions.

Ideology obscures the essential nature of the capitalist mode of production. Indeed, it replaces a lucid awareness of the economic alienation on which the reproduction of a capitalist society is founded with a discourse of transhistorical, instrumental rationality. (...) Ideology deforms the vision of the historical genesis of capitalism, by refusing to consider this genesis from the perspective of a search for general laws of the evolution of human society. (...) the dominant ideology refuses to link the fundamental characteristics of actually existing capitalism—that is, the center/periphery polarization, inseparable from the system itself—to capitalism's worldwide process of reproduction (Amin, 2009, p. 155).

Amin also states that “this European ideology is constructed in stages from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment up until the nineteenth century by the invention of the eternal truths required for this legitimation” (Amin, 2009, p. 155). I take this point from the “eternal truths” to link to the idea of universalism, which also underpins Western hegemony. After all, eternal truths are essentially universal truths. As Wallerstein puts “universalism is the view that there are scientific truths that are valid across all of time and space. European thought of the last few centuries has been for the most part strongly universalist” (Wallerstein, 1997, p. 96). Here we have a key issue regarding the “credible attraction filter” that mediate resources in search of the exercise of attraction, persuasion, legitimacy by countries that are not part of the Western hegemonic field. It is because the resources spent in the search for the formation of a conviction through consensus are, in essence, values that are presented by the countries. While in these “credible attraction filter”, the values are the ones taken as universal - the Western values - are underlying, they are implicit in this evaluation and filtering process. Let us not forget that Cox has defined hegemony as “the temporary universalization in thought of a particular power structure, conceived not as domination but as the necessary order of nature” (Cox, 1982, p. 38) and a fit between material power, ideology and institutions (Cox, 1981, p. 141).

Take the case of China as an example, in particular the call to boycott the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. Politicians, the press, civil society organizations, for example, have criticized China for alleged human rights abuses. Isn't helping more than 800 million people to lift themselves out of poverty, recognition made by the UN Secretary General (Guterres, 2019), a great human rights feat? Isn't transforming one of the poorest, semi-feudal and semi-colonial countries in the world into one of the richest, most advanced and

prosperous in seven decades an achievement for all of humanity? Inserting 400 million people in the condition of the middle class, isn't that a demonstration of human rights (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021a)? No, apparently none of this is enough. This is because, as Saïd well observes, the West "has given itself an internationalized and normative identity with authority and hegemony to adjudicate the relative value of human rights". He proceeds "all the discourse that purports to speak for civilization, human rights, principle, universality, and acceptability accrues to it, the United States managed its fortunes, so to speak, mobilized on its behalf, took it over" (Saïd, 2002, p. 360). In May 2021, U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi called for a U.S. diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, and said global leaders who attend would lose their moral authority. It is curious to point out what Saïd argued on how the US "invested even the vocabulary of universality that the search for "new ideological means" to challenge it has become, in fact, more difficult, and therefore more exactly a function of a renewed sense of intellectual morality" (Saïd, 2002, p. 360). It is precisely this moral and intellectual superiority that those promoting a boycott against China appeals to, as we see. Still within the scope of intellectual superiority, Saïd sums up the issue of human rights well.

For the intellectual, to be "for" human rights means, in effect, to be willing to venture interpretations of those rights in the same place and with the same language employed by the dominant power, to dispute its hierarchy and methods, to elucidate what it has hidden, to pronounce what it has silenced or rendered unpronounceable (Saïd, 2002, p. 360).

Finally, the dominators themselves throughout the centuries, and through a still ongoing violent process of expropriation and exploitation, consecrated Western hegemony and Western values as universal and true. Because of that, it is important to mention that when it comes to analysing the filters used to mediate the Other's resources and values, there is also the component of Orientalism. The same way as terms like "Spanish", "Portuguese" or "European", which previously meant only a geographical or national origin, through colonial exploitation started to represent a relationship of domination, including with the constitution of "hierarchies, places and social roles" (Quijano, 2000, p. 534), the term Orientalism also has an artificial, antithetical connotation in its construction (Amin, 2009, p. 156). Orientalism refers to a stylized and abstracted statement of the characteristics of non-Western civilizations (Wallerstein,

1997, p. 99). In this sense, Saïd claims that the Orient does not exist. It is merely imaginative. Result of the self-ordering of Europe (West) as the civilizational centre.

The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles (Saïd, 2003, p. 2).

Saïd adds that the Orient, like the West itself, are Western constructions. In other words, European ethnocentrism defined, from the relation of the rest of the non-Western world, what would be the Western and *Oriental* values, traditions and history. “The Orient was *Orientalized* not only because it was discovered to be “*Oriental*” in all those ways considered common-place by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental” (Saïd, 2003, pp. 5-6). This idea of what Orient is from the mere non-Western position and how these concepts were artificially constructed from this ethnocentric relationship is exemplified, for example, in the fact that Australia (or New Zealand) is not seen as an Orient, but like Western countries.

As a conclusion with regard to Eurocentrism and the intellectual domination and hegemonism of Occidentalism over Orientalism, I would just like to exemplify with a term that has been recurrently used in recent times to describe the actions of non-Western countries in sports. I refer to *sportswashing*. It is noteworthy that this term is not found in research on Scopus or Web of Science platforms - whether *sportswashing* or *sportwashing* - limiting itself to discourse found in Western and Westernized media, as well as activist entities and non-governmental organizations, for example. I would say more. In addition to being a typically Eurocentric and Orientalist conception, it represents, between the lines, the dangerous discourse of emptying the political sense of politics and geopolitics: depoliticized, therefore, although with an enormous ideological and moral charge. Here it is important to emphasize that Eurocentrism, in this case, is not restricted to the idea of the dominant West that proclaims itself true and universal values. There is a component of ideological hegemony, in addition to cultural hegemony. This is because *sportswashing* is presented whenever it relates to the non-Western as synonymous with non-followers of the “universal” values of bourgeois liberal democracy. It is enough to note that the Russian, Qatari, Abu Dhabi and now also the Saudis’ (at Newcastle United FC) money in football is labelled as *sportswashing*, while the influence of hedge funds

and vulture funds in football clubs and leagues are not treated as such.. As well as Beijing 2022 is treated as *sportswashing* by the West. Curiously, the 1934 FIFA World Cup in Italy is also often referred to as an example of *sportswashing*, after all, although Italy is part of this imagined idea called the West, Italian fascism is not. While, on the other hand, I have never seen the term *sportswashing* to refer to the use of sport, particularly football, as an instrument of ideological dissemination of *Lusotropicalism*<sup>17</sup> by the Portuguese fascist regime (Lima, 2021). As well as when Germany hosted the 2006 FIFA World Cup and had as one of its goals to build a different image to the world and erase the marks left in the world imagination of Nazi atrocities, there was no mention of *sportswashing*. Finally, to cite just one more example, there is no mention of *sportswashing*, the clear intention of England, right after Brexit, to place itself as a competitor to host the FIFA World Cup in the next decade.

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<sup>17</sup> *Lusotropicalism* forged a self-image of an indivisible Portugal, without discrimination and segregation, creating the fallacious idea that the Portuguese colonialism, unlike others, was not bad, but harmonious and fraternal (Marques, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

I believe I am not exaggerating in saying that this is a bold thesis. Audacious because in it I make a theoretical and intellectual effort to critically analyse a concept that has been massively disseminated in academia, which is soft power. I believe there is a hegemony of this concept in analyses of state actions in the way they communicate with the global audience, particularly in sport. It has become an almost universal value to treat soft power as a mechanism for exercising power in any issue that concerns sport and international relations, namely public diplomacy and even in foreign trade. Middle East airline sponsorship of sporting events and football club jerseys? Soft power. Brazilian football team sent to Haiti for an international friendly match while Brazilian Armed Forces troops are in the country? Soft power. Germany used FIFA World Cup 2006 to shape international public opinion in order to promote a new image of the country to the world dissociated from the traumatic memory of Nazi atrocities? Soft power. Does China use public diplomacy and its cultural wealth to interact and engage with the global audience and seek to exert attraction, create admiration in order to become persuasive? Soft power. I do not deny that all these examples are indeed cases in which resources from the so-called soft power are resorted to. However, in this thesis what was sought was to question what exactly power is how power is formed and consolidated and, consequently, how power is exercised. Therefore, we can understand what soft power is. What, essentially, this manifestation of power represents. Therefore, this was the first big challenge of this work. In exploring Chinese state planning, particularly the Chinese sports industry development project, I sought to explore the concepts of power and soft power, in order to demonstrate that there is a dimension of power that Joseph Nye ignores or despises in his conceptualization. A third dimension of power, as Lukes (1974) demonstrates - ideology - makes us realize that an older conceptualization to define what the concept of soft power intends to represent: hegemony. At this point, of course, I base the argument on Marx and Engels. When they state that, “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas”. And that “the ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance” (Marx & Engels, 1976a, p. 47).

Thus, I turned to Gramsci and Gramscian authors to demonstrate how some values are consolidated as hegemonic, that is, they come to be treated as universal values, the standard values that must be reproduced by all who seek international acceptance. I

demonstrate, therefore, that if soft power is the power that materializes through persuasion, prestige and the desire for emulation, we are facing nothing less than the negotiation of consensus through persuasion. Power, in this perspective, therefore, consolidates itself as the active hegemony of the dominant group (Gramsci, 2002, p. 139) and the nexus of power in international relations reflects the history of the ruling classes and of this class struggle, history is forged as the history of States hegemonic (Gramsci, 2007b, p. 320). Based on Gramscian authors or authors who explain Gramsci in international relations, such as Cox, Li & Zhang and Gilpin, I tried to support, then, how this world hegemony takes place and how the dialectical process of history that is underway leads to a potential war of position (Gramsci, 2007a, p. 24, 79). This helps us to understand the context of the current hegemonic war.

With regard to the hegemonic clash, I turned to authors such as Marx, Wallerstein, Quijano, Prebisch, Saïd, Amin, among others, to demonstrate how the world system and its contemporary stratification were forged. As the colonial expansion, the exploitation of peoples, and the expropriation of wealth are at the base of the primitive accumulation of capital and that, for this reason, capitalism was, over the last centuries, consolidating itself as hegemonic. Hence the concepts of Western universal values, which through its ethnocentrism invests in a central position - Eurocentric - from which arises, in a contraposition created by the very Occidental self-definition, Orientalism. China, with its amazing economic, technological and social development, contradicts the hegemony of the world system and challenges stratification, which enshrined itself as status quo, when leaving the periphery of the system, passing through the semi-periphery and now contradicting this status quo, the established powers, consolidating themselves at the core of the system. I called this dispute another kind of hegemonic clash. This conflict, of course, leads to narrative clashes. Therefore, I presented another huge intellectual challenge, which was to demonstrate that the credible attraction filter, which helps us understand how soft power can become soft disempowerment, reproduces the values of the ruling classes. In other words, the filter is made from Western concepts, it is the hegemony of the dominant group (Gramsci, 2007a, pp. 41-42), in the same way, for example, that hegemony in Italy, until today, is Northern hegemony over the *Mezzogiorno* (Gramsci 2002, p. 73).

I repeat, I do not deny the existence of soft power. I only seek to demonstrate that by soft power we must understand the dispute for hegemony. In the same way, I do not deny the empirical evidence of concrete reality that demonstrates how filters can mediate

the resources used to exercise attraction and persuasion and, thus, result in a backfire, that is, soft disempowerment. I only argue that these filters are essentially Westernised, therefore, they start from an already established consensus, thus being a defence mechanism for the hegemony of the ruling group or ruling States.

To express and prove this point of view, I resorted to sport as an instrument for analysing the reality of the concrete. I argued how sport is a powerful cultural manifestation and how the institutionalized organization of elite sports are also political manifestations and, consequently, are reflected in geopolitical dynamics. Therefore, because China has adapted the concept of soft power to its reality, and that this Chinese conceptualization, as I have shown, is also based on the concept of hegemony in Gramsci, I analysed the Chinese Football Plan. A study that understood this Chinese public policy as an instrument to drive the development of the country's sports industry, promote foreign relations and promote the country's image to the world. First, I provided a historical context of how sport allows us to understand China's political and geopolitical dynamics. From the sovietisation of Chinese sport (which reflects the process of sovietisation of China in the early days of the People's Republic of China), through the Sino-Soviet split and its importance for historical moments such as GANEFO and Ping Pong Diplomacy. Until we get to China's return to the IOC, its quest for Olympic Glory, including *juguo tizhi*.

Chinese State Planning and Projectment are the foundation of Chinese Olympic and Paralympic success. For this reason, in this work I sought to explain socialism with Chinese characteristics through sport, particularly the Football Plan. The Chinese sports industry development project, the goal that this sector of the economy represents 5% of GDP by 2035, demonstrates the process of formulating and implementing public policies in China. The execution of the Football Plan demonstrates how China uses elements of the market to promote its development. Here we turn to Jabbour, Heilmann, Gabriele, Huang, Angang Hu, among others, to show how market socialism is the instrument that China has found to guide its journey in this complex dialectical process of socialist transition. This presented me with another intellectual challenge, which was to demonstrate how the Football Plan effectively illustrates and exemplifies Chinese socialism, while this project highlights how this transitory Chinese stage finds its foundations in Marxism. I showed how Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao help us understand Deng. More than that. I show how there is a logical and ideological continuity, based on essential principles for Chinese formulations such as Confucianism and Marxism,

between Mao, Deng, Jiang, Hu, until we reach Xi, Common Prosperity, the Community of Shared Future for Mankind, in short, to the Chinese Dream.

A first contribution of this thesis is to shed light on the Chinese Football Plan from the perspective of Chinese public policies and international relations. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, at the beginning of this research, in 2016, there was little about Chinese football, especially in the perspective examined in our investigation. What else there was, and I say based on an initial literature review based on searches on platforms like Scopus and Web of Science, was about China and Olympic sports or about the Chinese sports industry in general., like Fan Hong, Lu Zhouxiang, Xiong Xiaozheng and even Giulianotti. About Chinese football, what was published was related to the evolution of this sport, mainly about the professionalization process and the projects trying to popularize and organize football in the country. It is noteworthy that although the Football Plan in the second half of 2016 was something very recent, the “The Overall Reform Plan to Boost the Development of Football in China” had already been launched a year ago and the “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption” for two. Even so, the literature was almost non-existent, especially with regard to Chinese public diplomacy through football. There was, yes, a lot about Qatar, due to the huge exposure mainly due to the FIFA World Cup 2022. Part of what was being produced throughout this PhD has already been published. Some of the ideas presented seem to have good acceptance considering the citations. After the first publication, in 2017, in co-authorship with my supervisor, more publications on the subject began to appear, especially in the same sense as the one we pioneered. This seems to us to highlight the importance of this thesis and the arguments presented here. After all, the objective of a scientific investigation, in addition to seeking to understand the world, must always be to seek to transform it. As his work raises reflections, his contribution to academic discussion becomes evident. Four of these publications, as explained in the introduction, complement the sequence of this thesis.

However, in my view, the main contribution of this thesis was to explain, in the light of dialectical historical materialism, how the Chinese Football Dream represents, in essence, the Chinese Dream. How Chinese Football Dream is the Chinese Dream. How the “China’s medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)” allows us to understand the challenges that New China faces in transforming a country that until the mid-20th century was impoverished, semi-feudal and semi-colonial into a thriving



socialist society, a global superpower. In short, the contribution of this thesis is to present socialism with Chinese characteristics from the dynamics of sport and football.

Finally, it is necessary to remember that the Football Plan is for the medium to long term. It is only in the fifth year of its implementation. It still has 29 years of execution ahead of it. Therefore, the present work is unable to conclusively assess the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the Football Plan and its implementation. I evaluated, as I argued in this thesis and as can be seen in the following papers, what has been implemented and its political and geopolitical implications so far. As well as what has been accomplished and achieved so far when this thesis is completed, by coincidences of life, on an October 1, National Day of the People's Republic of China. In this thesis, I address the adjustments that have already been made (and here, I remember, we have one more feature of Chinese public policies and a difference between Chinese socialism and capitalism, as has been argued), the challenges that are posed and the difficulties to be faced. However, as is evident, there is no way to exercise forecasting the future, as that would fall into futurology. This means, therefore, that there is much to be explored and investigated about this topic. Starting with monitoring the implementation of the Football Plan and its developments. Finally, these are challenges that we can face from now on, in future research.

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## Appendix: index cards of the attached papers

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## THE CHINESE FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT PLAN: SOFT POWER AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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### ABSTRACT

In April 2016, the People's Republic of China (PRC) launched the "football development plan in the medium and long term (2016-2050)." The Chinese Government's goal is clear: making the Asian country a worldwide football superpower. This article will show how the Chinese strategy is organized in its three stages, with commitments and goals to be reached at the end of each one of them. Including the President Xi Jinping "three World Cup dreams" audacious plans: to qualify for another FIFA World Cup edition, host a World Cup edition and, finally, win a World Cup by 2050 to thus consolidate the country's football power in the most popular sport on the planet. The article also intends to demonstrate how the Chinese state induces private investment in football and sports industry. Showing that the large Chinese conglomerates have been collaborating in a crucial manner so that the government achieves the objectives outlined in its plan. And while China is moving towards the development of the most popular sport on the planet, the article brings to the theoretical discussion issues such as soft power and sport's influence, especially football, in the identity and national pride. Brought to a conclusion that the Chinese state has taken advantage of the football popularity to exercise 'soft power', strengthening diplomatic ties and placing the country in the Asian and worldwide context, but also to reinforce their people sense of national identity. For this, the article resorts to the bibliographic review, comparative study, in addition to analyzing the football development plan.

**KEYWORDS:** development, football, China, national identity, soft power.

## O PLANO DE DESENVOLVIMENTO DO FUTEBOL CHINÊS: SOFT POWER E IDENTIDADE NACIONAL

### RESUMO

Em abril de 2016, a República Popular da China lançou o "Plano de desenvolvimento do futebol a médio e longo prazo (2016-2050)". A meta do Governo é clara: fazer do país uma superpotência do futebol mundial. Este artigo vai mostrar como se organiza esta estratégia. Em suas três etapas, com compromissos e metas a serem alcançados ao fim de cada uma delas. Que incluem os audaciosos planos dos "três sonhos da Copa do Mundo" do presidente Xi Jinping: voltar a disputar uma Copa do Mundo FIFA, sediar uma edição do torneio e, por fim, conquistar um Mundial, consolidando, assim, o país como uma potência global. O artigo pretende, também, demonstrar como o Estado chinês induz o investimento privado no futebol e na indústria desportiva. Mostrando que os grandes conglomerados chineses têm colaborado de forma primordial para que o Governo atinja os objetivos traçados em seu plano. E enquanto a China caminha na direção do desenvolvimento do futebol, o artigo traz à discussão teórica questões como 'soft power' e a influência do desporto, em especial do futebol, na identidade e no orgulho nacionais. Conclui que o Estado Chinês tem tirado proveito da popularidade do futebol para exercer o 'soft power', reforçando laços diplomáticos e inserindo o país no contexto asiático e mundial, bem como se aproveita para fortalecer a afirmação do senso de identidade nacional. Para isso, o artigo recorre à revisão bibliográfica, estudo comparado, além de analisar o plano de desenvolvimento para o futebol.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** desenvolvimento, futebol, China, soft power, identidade nacional.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 20th century sports, as a cultural phenomenon and mass spectacle that it is, was consolidated as a manifestation of international dimension. As reminds us the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1991), it was during the period between the two world wars that sports has become definitely an "expression of national struggle, with athletes representing their states or nations, fundamental expressions of their imaginary communities" (p. 171). So it is impossible to dissociate the history of modern sports from elements such as national pride, international prestige and diplomacy (Cha, 2016).

In the context of the international competition high performance sports, thus, have the ability to reaffirm the national identity, while it can be used as a tool for promoting the country's image - both in the pursuit of international acceptance (Allison & Monnington, 2002), as in the establishment of international relations through the so-called 'soft power' (Brentin & Tregoures, 2016; Giulianotti, 2015; Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, Galily, & Tamir, 2016).

It was not by accident, therefore, that since returning to the International Olympic Committee in 1979, China established an "Olympic strategy", which was implemented from 1980 on (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012d). Introduced by the Ministry of Sports, the strategy was deepened after the bad results in the Seoul Games (1988). In the years 1990 and 2000 with the implementation of elite sport system that Chinese named 'Juguo Tizhi' (举国体制 in Chinese Mandarin), which in English means 'the whole country support for the elite sport system'. This system aimed to channel the maximum resources possible for the Olympic Games. The Chinese government, in fact, always made sure to emphasize the political importance of the country's Olympic project success (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012b). The Chinese strategy worked. The culmination of the high investments system in elite sport took place in the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, when China won 51 gold medals against 36 of the United States.

However, the success of the Chinese Olympic sports never came close to be replicated in the most popular sport in the world: football. According to FIFA, the historical origin of football lies in Ancient China and in the practice of *cuju* (蹴鞠) (Simons, 2008, p. 46). The *cuju* (蹴鞠), that literally means "kicking a ball", dates back to the times of the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AC). Liu Bang (刘邦 256 BC – 195 BC), the founding emperor of Han Dynasty, was a big *cuju* (蹴鞠) fan. Simons (2008) says that watching this ancient football was the favourite hobby of Han's emperors and also became a popular national pastime among both elites and commoners.

Centuries later, the popularity of football further soared during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). According to Simons (2008, p. 47 e 48), the innovation in the way of manufacturing the ball (no longer filled with feather or hair, but air, which allowed the ball to be bounced high) helped players to improve their skills making spectators to enjoy even more the game. Historical records demonstrate that *cuju* was also quite popular during the Song Dynasty (960–1279), the technologically most advanced era in the ancient China. It is from this time the creation of the first *cuju* club (Simons, 2008, p. 48).

It is not clear when football is no longer practiced in China. It is believed that it was during the Qing Dynasty in the 17th century, with the occupation of China by Manchus. A few centuries later, the modern game, codified in England in 1863, reappears in China in the 19th century. "The



first documented game in China using the rules of the Football Association was played in 1879 in Shanghai" (Simons, 2008, p. 157).

Football would only become professionalized in the "Middle Kingdom" in the 1990s and was in the wake of the great economic reform that the country went through in that period. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China entered the era of "market socialism" and China's elite sports system underwent a thorough restructuring to suit the new reality. Football was the pioneer in sports reform. Thus, in 1994, the first professional championship of the country appeared. The competition experienced a brief period of popularity, but faced various adversities. Mainly the successive corruption scandals and match-fixing with vicious results. This made the credibility of the competition fade, causing sponsors and viewers to lose interest. After a few unsuccessful attempts by the Chinese authorities to combat football fraud, 2011 is seen as the paradigm of a new phase of professional football in the country (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2013).

Despite being the first sport to be professionalised in China in the wake of the economic reform process by which the country went through in the early 1990s - "market socialism" (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2013) -, and its development in recent years, the Chinese football has represented not only a disappointment, as sometimes exposes the feeling of national pride to humiliation as the 5 to 1 defeat to Thailand in their own territory in June 2013 (Giulianotti, 2015; Hong & Zhouxiang, 2013; Tan, Huang, Bairner, & Chen, 2016).

At the end of the Beijing 2008 Olympic, the then Chinese President Hu Jintao ordered actions to be taken for the country to move forward from "a country of major sporting events to a sports world power" (Tan et al., 2016). This statement as a sporting power, of course, means the conquest of international respect in the most popular sport of all: football.

Known for his enthusiasm for football the current Chinese President Xi Jinping nurture "three World Cup dreams": participate in the World Cup; host the World Cup and to win the World Cup (Tan et al., 2016).

To make China into the future world football power, the Chinese government launched in April 2016 the "football development plan in the medium and long term (2016-2050)."

This article aims to analyze the role of the Chinese state in the promotion of sports policies, particularly in football, and its contribution to the affirmation of national identity as well as its relevance in the field of international diplomacy, in promoting the country's image vis-a-vis other nations and contributing to the establishment or strengthening of relations with other states – "soft power".

## 2. THE AMBITIOUS CHINESE PLAN

The global sports industry moved around \$ 1.5 trillion in 2015, according to Plunkett Research estimates. US \$ 498.4 billion only in the United States (Plunkett Research, 2016). In its football development medium-term plan, the Chinese state sees the most popular sport on the planet as the driving force for the growth of the entire country's sports industry. Making the country into a powerhouse of world football, in the Chinese view, would be a way of contributing to the economy, society and culture development. The goal is that in five years the country's sport industry will generate \$ 460 billion (The State Council, 2016) and in 2025 to reach a value of around US \$ 813 billion (Sports, 2016).

Currently occupying 62nd in the International Federation of Selections ranking Football – FIFA (FIFA, 2016), Chinese football team was only present in a final edition of the World Cup: in 2002, at the World Cup played in South Korea and in Japan. With three defeats in three games and nine goals conceded and none scored, China flew home early from the event. The Chinese national football team failed to qualify for FIFA World Cup 2018 that will be played in Russia.

Aware of the hard work that lies ahead in promoting the country's football development, the Chinese government has established three stages in the medium to long term.

- Until 2020: 20 000 specialized football schools, 70 000 football fields, between 30 to 50 million primary and secondary students practicing the sport.
- Until 2030: 50 000 specialized football schools, male Chinese team to be one of the best in Asia, and the women's team established as "world class".
- Until 2050: first step selection in world football (male) in the FIFA's top-20 ranking, having hosted and won the World Cup.

Recently, according to the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party The People's Daily, "Chinese sports authorities have upped their objectives to try to fast-track football development": instead of 20 thousand football schools by 2020, they now expect to achieve this goal by the end of the current year; and instead of 50 thousand football schools until 2030, the Chinese authorities raised that bar to 2025 (People's Daily, 2017).

This is because in order to get to the top of the world football, you need something basic: people who practice this sport in the country so that it is possible to select the best 23 athletes every four years to be competitive in the World Cup (unlike what happened when their national team visited South Korea in 2002). They need to popularize football. To make this sport a daily practice of the children and young people of this country. To create, therefore, a soccer culture among its people. In Europe, which exported the practice to the world, "the federations arose because there were players who formed teams and teams that became clubs that sought power in unity" (Simons, 2008, p. 221).

And education can play a very important role in this. The football development plan is well aware of this. For this reason, it aims to promote the strengthening of grassroots football and community football, talent training, increasing the scale of youth participation in football, developing football schools to promote interest and cultivating fans (China, 2016, pp. 3, 4, 5).

That is also why the plan gives special attention to the Chinese educational system. To greatly increase the scale of teenagers football participation the plan establishes that there must be an improvement of the level of physical education teachers in order to absorb core football teachers into the national training program for primary and secondary school teachers and also to adhere to combination sports skills and cultural education (China, 2016, 6).

### 3. THE STATE AS A GUIDE

To meet these objectives, the Chinese state counts on the private sector participation in implementing the plan. It's the same model to be followed since the "Guide to sports industry

development acceleration" was adopted. That is, the government doesn't intervene directly in the sports market, only guiding and supporting the industry development, creating a structure that allows the coexistence of various properties and competitiveness in the market and may also participate collaboratively in the industry promotion (Zhan, 2013).

In terms of 'top-down' investments, the Chinese private sector has responded in a very positive way to the state actions. Only in the winter transfer window of 2016, Chinese clubs spent \$ 298 million, according to the FIFA Transfer Matching System (TMS, 2016). In the 2016 summer window, Shanghai SIPG paid around € 55 million to Russia's Zenit to sign the Brazil international forward Hulk, who became one of the best paid players in world football.

Since 2011, private groups such as Dalian Wanda Group and Evergrande Real Estate Group have made investments in the country 's football (Tan et al., 2016). Wanda Group has made available RMB 500 million for three years for the Chinese sports restructuring. More recently, the Wanda Group acquired 20% of Atlético Madrid (Spain) – also signed with the *colchonero* club an agreement to be the naming right of their new stadium - and became Infront Sports & Media AG owner, one of the most respected sports marketing companies in the world and which has as one of its clients nothing less than FIFA. The Dalian Wanda is also, since 2016, a major sponsor of FIFA (Chadwick, Widdop, & Parnel, 2017).

On the other hand the Evergrande Real Estate Group, owner of the current Chinese six-time Champion in a row Guangzhou Evergrande (coached by Luiz Felipe Scolari), will give, for 10 years, RMB 100 million annually to a poverty alleviation fund, with part of the grant being used to fund talented young people without financial conditions. The club also have a football school in partnership with Real Madrid (Evergrande Football School)

Owner of 50% stake in Guangzhou Evergrande, the Alibaba Group has signed a deal to sponsor the next six Olympic Games. The group "will also provide technology services to the games organisers, and will establish the Olympic Channel, a new digital television service intended to promote the games to younger sports fans" (Ahmed, 2017). Since 2016, The Alibaba Group negotiates with FIFA to become one of its major sponsors (Reuters, 2016).

Not only these groups have been investing in world football. The company Suning, owner of Jiangsu Suning, acquired Inter Milan in June 2016, one of the Italians biggest clubs (Jourdan, 2016). In April 2017, AC Milan, seven times European champions, has been bought by Chinese investors. Rastar Group from Guangdong province paid about 17 million euros to buy 54% of the shares of the Catalan club Espanyol, while in 2015 CEFC China Energy Company bought 59.97% Slavia Prague, Czech Republic The conglomerate Fosun signed in early 2016 a partnership with the Portuguese Jorge Mendes' Gestifute players agency that has Cristiano Ronaldo among its intermediateds (Jing, 2016). Fosun also owns Wolverhampton Wanderers from England and is investing 10 million euros in the Portuguese club Rio Ave.

It is speculated that the China Everbright state group is likely to purchase Liverpool, the second greatest champion of England. Chadwick warns, however, that such deal could generate a conflict. This is because the state - owned China Media Capital also owns 13% of Manchester City and in England the owners of more than 10% of a clubs' shares may not have 9.9% of another (Chadwick, 2016).

In terms of 'bottom-up' investments, there are, for example, the already mentioned Guangzhou Evergrande football academy, in partnership with Real Madrid. And the Chongqing Sports Campus.

#### 4. SPORTS AND SOFT POWER

Joseph Nye defined that "power is the ability to influence others to achieve the results you want, which can be done through coercion, payment or attraction" (Nye, 2012). In contrast to the "hard power" of coercion (military force) or payment (economic strength), which are able to make others change their position, Nye conceptualized that you can get results without having to resort to threats or financial exchanges. It was what he called 'soft power'. It would be the power of seduction over the other. "A country can get the results wanted in international politics because other countries - admiring its values, emulating its example and aspiring to its level of prosperity - will want to follow him" (Nye, 2004).

Sports can be a very useful tool in the exercise of soft power (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Brentin & Tregoures, 2016; Giulianotti, 2015; Korneeva & Ogurtsov, 2016; Samuel-Azran et al., 2016). The recent history of China and sport in the country is full of examples of how the Chinese state capitalize on this feature in terms of diplomacy.

By winning the Nationalist Party (KMT) in 1949, the Communist Party ended the civil war and established the People's Republic of China. Since then, the Chinese government has been using sports for its international relations. Since the country's "sports Sovietization" in the 1950s (fundamental in establishing contacts with the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries), through the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF), by the "ping pong diplomacy" (which allowed the rapprochement with the United States in a period of tension in Sino-Soviet relations) to the Olympic strategy and the quest for glory at the Olympics games (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012a, 2012c).

Hosting Beijing 2008 Olympic Games allowed China to show the world their development and enabled the country to stand as a world power - at the economic and sports levels. "The image of a highly modern nation, efficient and increasingly prosperous" (Giulianotti, 2015).

It is this demonstration of economic, technological and cultural strength, in our view, that integrates part of Chinese President Xi Jinping's "dream" to see his country hosting the biggest competition of the most popular sport on the planet: the FIFA World Cup. It would be the perfect opportunity to reaffirm the position of the country as a global power in the international arena, particularly in Asia. Besides, of course, to put the country once again in the eyes of foreign investors, business partners, tourists and other consumers (Giulianotti, 2015).

Still in the field of diplomacy, international relations and foreign trade, the Chinese football development plan can also serve as a way to bring the country closer to trading partners. It is what researcher Simon Chadwick draws attention regarding a possible alliance between China and Iran in the sports field, from the Chinese project "One Belt and One Road". What would not be a novelty, as Chadwick alludes, once the Chinese state-owned China Media Capital acquired 13% of the English club Manchester City, which is controlled by investors from Abu Dhabi. Such acquisition came after a high investment agreement between China and Abu Dhabi, in the oil and gas area (Chadwick, 2016).

Giulianotti, however, draws attention to the risk of 'soft disempowerment', which is when "trying to get 'soft power' backfires, influence and prestige are shaken rather than expanded" (Giulianotti, 2015).

## 5. SPORTS, IDENTITY AND NATIONAL PRIDE

Hobsbawm, one of the most referenced theorist about nationalism, wrote that "the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven people with a name. The individual, even one that just supports, becomes the symbol itself of his nation" (Hobsbawm, 1991). As noted by Duerr, the historian uses the Benedict Anderson's term - "imaginary community" - to support the idea that people living in the same country are connected to each other, even without ever meeting each other. Which becomes latent when the national football team enters the field (Duerr, 2016). In another work, Hobsbawm goes back to highlight what he considers football catalyst power. "Practically since it acquired a mass audience, this sport [football] has been the catalyst of two forms of group identification: local (with the club) and national (with the national team, composed with the clubs players)" (Hobsbawm, 2007).

This helps us to understand what took nine million Dutch, about 60% of the Dutch population then, to the streets on a Tuesday night, June 21, 1988. The most popular celebration since the liberation of Germany in 1945 happened just after the Dutch national football team winning the German team by 2 to 1 in the UEFA Euro 1988 semi-final. The triumph on German soil made millions of young people - the generation that has never suffered from the German invasion was more effusive than the one who lived the dark period of war - to shout on public roads - "We took our bikes back" (German troops confiscated bikes during the occupation the Netherlands) (Ward, 2009).

In contrast, however, another study in the Netherlands questions the discourse that associates the need to increase investment in high competition sports to the growth of national pride and sense of national identification. Based on a public consultation conducted in the country in the summer of 2008, the effects on the Dutch people's national pride were measured from the sports results in sporting events and major events of that year: Euro 2008 (football), the Beijing Olympic Games, Tour de France (cycling) and Wimbledon (tennis). There were 300 respondents for each measurement (12 in total) in the period between May and October 2008. The authors concluded that there is no empirical evidence to demonstrate the existence of an intrinsic relationship between sporting success and the importance played by sport in a country when it comes to national pride, thus refuting the argument of those who advocate an increase in public investment in sport in order to win medals, as a mechanism of elevation of the national pride (van Hilvoorde, Elling, & Stokvis, 2010).

This study diverges not only from the empirical evidence of the biggest Netherlands popular expression since the end of World War II (Ward, 2009), but also, for example, diverges from the analysis that the anthropologist Roberto Da Matta made regarding the importance of football in the formation of Brazilian national identity. When comparing Brazil with European countries and the United States, Da Matta notes that these had as sources of social identity consolidated institutions such as the constitution, the political system, the financial order, and the

university system, while Brazil, in the absence of political and social structures, formed its identity from secondary sources such as carnival, samba, football and religion (as quoted in Lovisoló & Soares, 2011).

Other authors, such as Cha, reinforce the idea that sports have been used in the construction of national identity. And the author gives the example of the Olympic team of the unified Germanies that in the 1956, 1960 and 1964 Games, despite all the differences and the Cold War atmosphere, played in competitions under the same flag (Cha, 2016). Germany, by the way, used FIFA World Cup 2006 to change their negative image because of the two World Wars and the Holocaust, at the same time that experienced a euphoric sense of nationalism (Kersting, 2007; Samuel-Azran et al., 2016; Ward, 2009).

It is no coincidence, therefore, that in their "football development plan in the medium and long term (2016-2050)" the Chinese state points out that "football is a sport of global influence" and that "the realization of the dream of becoming a football power" would be a clear demonstration of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and a source of "national pride" (China, 2016).

To Giulianotti "football is one of the major cultural institutions, such as education and the mass media, which forms and consolidates national identities worldwide" (GIULIANOTTI, 2010, p. 42). This was the case of the Kosovo football team. When Kosovo's team entered the field of play for the first time on March 5, 2014, for a friendly match with the selection of Haiti, the feeling that their people had was as if, finally, their nation was recognized. And it was precisely football that gave the Kosovars a sense of international recognition of their national identity (Brentin & Tregoures, 2016).

This feeling is in line with the Chinese proposal, that wants to "revitalize and develop football" for being "a burning expectation of the people," and adds that this is because this development "cultivates in people physical and psychological health and excellent culture" (China, 2016).

## 6. CONCLUSION

The launch of "football development plan in the medium and long term (2016-2050)" is a milestone in the history of not only football professionalization but all the sports industry in China. As stated, the Chinese state acted directly to induce the private sector to foster and develop the most popular sport in the world's most populous country, in order to increase the sports industry in the country.

But not only that. China wants to become a powerhouse of world football. Its president, Xi Jinping, dreams of returning to see the national team of his country - which is the same to say 'see his country' in the field of play (Hobsbawm, 1991, 2007) - in a FIFA World Cup edition. Xi wants more. He longs that China repeats the achievement of Japan and South Korea rivals. The Chinese president wants China to host football's biggest competition: the World Cup. As if all this was not enough, taking into account a national team that takes up only the 62nd place in the FIFA rankings, the Chinese president hopes of becoming a World Champion by 2050, consolidating its position as a football superpower.

Xi isn't an ordinary person. He is probably one of the most powerful people in the world. And you can see how impressive is Xi's power measuring the great impact of his whim. It is

amazing to see such a powerful country undertaking so much efforts to heed its leader will. One man's dream and hobby has become a nation's goal – and a private sector's duty.

For this, the Chinese state has launched a public policy strategy that aims to make football part of Chinese citizen's culture. In addition to acting directly, opening football schools, increasing hours of physical education classes (most notably football, of course), the Chinese government plan calls for cooperation from the private sector to also invest in developing the sport in the country.

As seen, the largest Chinese private conglomerates have responded to the call of its government, investing in the total sum values that already exceed billions of dollars - if we consider the millions signings of players and high-level foreign coaches in the Chinese Super League, purchases of big European clubs like the Milanese Internazionale and AC Milan, the percentage of clubs like Manchester City and Atlético Madrid, and partnerships with major international marketing and players agencies.

The goal of becoming a world football superpower, while sought, allows China to exercise soft power, through their diplomatic relations on behalf of football. As well as the goal to host the FIFA World Cup, aiming to repeat what was obtained with the organization of the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008.

All this contributes directly to China's national statement as a world power, which generates therefore the increase of Chinese people identity and national pride.

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# The Chinese plan for football development: a perspective from innovation theory

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Football  
development

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to report a critical analysis of the plan recently launched by the Chinese Government for the development of the football industry in China. The analysis encompasses the impact exerted by the new policy instrument on the Eurocentric trend that configured the power relations in the football realm, as well as the challenges raised by barriers deeply rooted in culture that Chinese authorities should face in order to foster pervasive change and thus create the conditions for success.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The analysis of the policy document has been carried out under the light of the theory of innovation, namely, the contributions of Peter Drucker, who looks at innovation as a means to foster change in the social and economic environment, inducing new patterns of behaviour and creating new habits. This theoretical framework provides ground to the analytical endeavour because the Chinese plan for football development presents the overall goal of shifting the habits of sporting practice and consumption.

**Findings** – The first and most visible “innovative” effect of the policy took the form of a shock provoking an unprecedented change in the geopolitics of football and the inherent disturbance in the traditional Eurocentric structure of football power relations. At the domestic level, the Chinese Government is assuming the “educating” role in order to change behaviour and habits, that is, to ensure the transformative power necessary to overcome barriers deeply rooted in culture. Accordingly, rather than the availability of financial resources, the capacity to materialise this pervasive switch in behaviour and habits in terms of football practice and consumption is the major challenge, the one of a social innovation endeavour.

**Originality/value** – The research reported in this paper provides an original and innovative approach to the analysis of a sports relevant public policy document, namely, because of the theoretical framework wrapping up the analytical endeavour.

**Keywords** China, Football, Innovation, Eurocentrism

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The economic growth of emerging countries such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa gave rise to a new distribution of the world financial power. The acronym BRICS gained global recognition as cooperative links established among those countries grounded their (re)positioning in the geopolitical global settings.

This development has also occurred in the sport related geopolitical context. A good illustration is provided by the simple observation that all the BRICS have hosted mega sporting events in recent years. Beijing, the Chinese capital, hosted the 2008 Summer Olympics; Delhi, the Indian capital, hosted the Commonwealth Games in 2010, and South Africa, in the same year, became the first ever African country to host the FIFA World Cup; Brazil, in a period of two years, organised the two largest world sporting events, the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics (Rio de Janeiro); and Russia organised the 2014 Winter Olympics (Sochi) and more recently the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Furthermore, China will be again on the spotlight in the near future, as organisers of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

The growth of BRICS global influence, rather than by coincidence and much less by chance, can be seen as stemming from the combined effect of an increase in economic power and deliberate policy strategies designed with basis on the acknowledgement that the organisation of sport mega events allows for further demonstration of a strengthened global



political, social and cultural status. As such, a new context in the hierarchical structure of sports geopolitics fostered the possibility of BRICS to establish themselves as powers in the international arena (de Almeida *et al.*, 2013; Cornelissen, 2010; Grix and Lee, 2013). Accordingly, one can argue that the BRICS countries found in sports the opportunity to exercise what Joseph Nye calls soft power (Nye, 2012). Following the author, “power is the ability to influence others people to achieve the results they want, which can be done through coercion, payment or attraction” (Nye, 2012, p. 151). In contrast to hard power, which would be characterised by coercion (e.g. military force) or pay (e.g. economic force), there would be soft power. As Nye (2004, p. 5) explains: “A country can obtain the results it desires in international politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example and aspiring to its level of prosperity – will want to follow it”. The relevance of the links between sports and soft power are being explored in the literature, as in Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015), Brannagan and Rookwood (2016), Chari (2015), Chen *et al.* (2012), Delgado (2016), Giulianotti (2015), Grix and Lee (2013), Korneeva and Ogurtsov (2016) and Krzyzaniak (2018).

It is worth mentioning that other emerging countries, such as Qatar, have also sought in sport a soft power tool. In 2008, the Emirate launched Qatar National Vision 2030, a strategic plan for the country to change its image in the international scenario. It is in this broader strategy that we can find Qatar sports policies. Since December 2010, when Qatar was awarded the right to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the emirate has been in the spotlight of world football (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015; Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016; Dorsey, 2014, 2015; Reiche, 2014; Samuel-Azran *et al.*, 2016). Krzyzaniak (2018) draws attention to Qatari soft power through football sponsorship, what he calls “nation branding”: in 2010 Qatar Foundation became the first commercial sponsorship of history on FC Barcelona shirt (a brand that was later replaced by Qatar Airways), and in 2011 Qatar Sports Investments bought the French team Paris Saint-Germain. However, despite all the Qatari effort, especially with regard to its communication strategy, the country cannot escape the risk of “soft disempowerment” – when “trying to get ‘soft power’ backfires, influence and prestige are shaken rather than expanded” (Giulianotti, 2015, p. 290).

In this context, China can be deemed as a good case study. In fact, the success of its Olympic strategy, which found its apex at the 2008 Olympic Games held in Beijing, when the country reached the top of gold medals, thus showing that it was possible to shift the world sport power basis. In other words, and drawing on the centre-periphery dichotomy of Prebisch (1962), the Chinese triumph over the USA in the medal accounting can be seen as a metaphor for the possibility of having a peripheral state challenging the dominance of the most powerful nations.

Although able to prove itself equipped to compete with the dominant sporting international powers in the Olympics, China misses the overall conditions to join the competitive elite in football, the most popular sport on the planet[1], and, concomitantly, the one that can be expected to enclose a higher potential as soft power source. Football in China, in fact, still lacks the resources to be, even minimally, competitive at the international level. By acknowledging this weakness, the Chinese authorities, more specifically the National Development Reform Commission (NDRC, 2016, April), launched the “China’s mid to long-term football development plan (2016-2050)” – (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016–2050年), the “Plan” hereafter.

This paper aims to analyse the Plan by assessing its power, on the one hand, to introduce change and novelty in the environment within which Chinese football is expected to develop, and, on the other hand, to challenge Eurocentrism in the world of football. In order to do so, it takes stock on insights from the innovation theory, namely, on the conceptualization of the innovation criterion provided by Drucker (2011, p. 148): “Innovation is not a technical term. It is an economic and social term. Its criterion is not science or technology, but a change in the economic or social environment, a change in the behavior of people as consumers or producers, as citizens, as students or as teachers, and so on”. The achievement of the Plan’s great objectives

is assumed as dependent upon a far-reaching process of economic and social change and, concomitantly, acknowledges innovation in shaping the necessary new behaviour patterns. As such, whereas taking the risks inherent to a novel theoretical framing, the paper found in Drucker's innovation theory is grounded to accommodate the analysis of that policy document.

### Three Dreams of the World Cup

Any critical examination of China's Football Development Plan implies the consideration of a broader change framework underpinning the sports-related policy developments and the breakthroughs (and setbacks) of policy implementation, namely, since the late 1970s. In other words, the path towards Xi's "Three Dreams of the World Cup" and the inherent planning instruments that are being set up cannot be detached from the far-reaching reforming dynamics pioneered by Deng Xiaoping.

The profound change introduced by Deng Xiaoping leadership and the development of the so-called "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and the inherent "socialist market economy" introduced a sea of change in the Chinese sports system, in order to suit the new political, social and economic environment. Since then, Chinese authorities have been prolific in issuing a number of reforming policies, fully acknowledging that sports, of high cultural and economic relevance, could not be apart from the changing dynamics (Hu and Henry, 2017). As soon as the country re-joined the International Olympic Committee in 1979, China established an "Olympic strategy", which was implemented from the 1980s (Hong and Zhouxiang, 2012a). Introduced by the Ministry of Sports, the strategy was deepened after the bad results in the Seoul Games (1988). The 1990s and 2000s would witness the implementation of the elite sport system, "*juguo tizhi*" (举国体制), which, in English, literally, means "the whole country support for the elite sport system". This system aimed to forward the maximum resources possible for the Olympic Games, mirroring the emphasis put by the Chinese Government on the political importance of a successful Olympic project (Hong and Zhouxiang, 2012b). The system worked. The culmination of the high investments system in elite sports took place in the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, when China won 51 gold medals against 36 of the USA. However, the success of the Chinese Olympic sports never came close to be replicated in football, the most popular sport in the world.

The professionalisation of football in China has occurred only during the 1990s. The first professional championship was launched in 1994, and, for a brief period, it gained popularity (Hong and Zhouxiang, 2013). However, due to problems such as the successive corruption scandals and match-fixing, the credibility of the competition faded, causing sponsors and viewers to lose interest. After a few attempts of the Chinese authorities to fight football fraud, 2011 is commonly seen as the beginning of a new phase of professional football development in the country (Hong and Zhouxiang, 2013).

At the end of the Beijing 2008 Olympic, the then Chinese President Hu Jintao ordered actions to be taken for the country to move forward from a country of major sporting events to a sports world power (Tan *et al.*, 2016). This statement obviously included the search for international recognition in the most popular sport of all: football. However, as Rome was not built in one day, the same can be said about the rise of Chinese football competitive status. A fair dose of disappointment, let alone a number of humiliations as the 5 to 1 home defeat to Thailand in June 2013 (Giulianotti, 2015; Hong and Zhouxiang, 2013; Tan *et al.*, 2016).

Against this background, known for his enthusiasm for football, Xi Jinping, the current Chinese president, has resumed and increased Hu's ambitions, putting forward his "three dreams of the World Cup": to participate in the World Cup; to host the World Cup in China; and to be world champion (Tan *et al.*, 2016). There is, though, a long way to go, as acknowledged in the development plan prepared by the NDRC. Accordingly, to transform

China into a future global football power, the original plan proposed three development stages, each one establishing goals to be fulfilled in 2020, 2030 and 2050, respectively:

- by 2020: 20,000 specialized football schools, 70,000 football fields, 30–50m primary and secondary school students practicing the sport;
- by 2030: 50,000 specialized football schools, the Chinese male team being one of the best in Asia and the female selection established as “world-class”; and
- until 2050: first-team selection in world football (men), in the top-20 of the FIFA ranking, having hosted and won a World Cup.

*People's Daily* (2017), the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, reported that China's sporting authorities had altered the original goals of the football development plan. This change actually brought an even more ambitious set of goals. Instead of waiting until 2030 for 50,000 specialized football schools, the goal became to reach the mark by 2025 (*People's Daily*, 2017). Nevertheless, the enthusiastic approach of the Chinese towards the football development project should be scrutinised going beyond Xi's “three World Cup dreams”. China has put into practice its daring football project, not only because its president willingness to see the Chinese national team to enter the football world elite, but, rather, as a means to take advantage of the popular sport as an instrument to promote the growth of the whole national sports industry, and, concomitantly, to contribute for developing the economy, society and culture. The Plan, in fact, establishes a link between football development and the implementation of the “Four comprehensives” that configure the political goals of Xi Jinping[2]. Despite the official statement that the new football policy is ideologically guided by Deng Xiaoping theories (together with the “Three Represents” and the scientific development concept) (see State Council, 2014), the new policy and practice is often presented as mirroring an evolution characterised by the receding of Deng's approach to sports, namely, its deregulation-prone dimension, in favour of a more state-centric stance. China, however, represents a complex social and economic system, requiring, as Ostrom (2010) would argue, a new theory that goes beyond the state and market dichotomy. The relationship between state and market in China's political-economic context is much more complex and cannot be fully explained by the classic dichotomous division. As Tan *et al.* (2016) note, the government tends to be a kind of mediator of interest groups, which, though, end up becoming propagators of government policies. The state still has great power over resources, and private enterprises needs to maintain a good relationship with the government, as argue Tan *et al.* (2016, p. 3), “the government and corporations are now more interdependent, thereby blurring the boundary between state and society. Nevertheless, the main resources are still controlled by the state. The private corporations are required to establish a good relationship with the government if they are to gain access to resources”.

Yu *et al.* (2017, p. 20), in this regard, refer to “a new socialist/centralist approach”, using football to promote both political and cultural nationalisms. This point can be inserted into the power centralisation tendency underpinned by Xi's leadership. Lee (2017, p. 326) states that Xi's power over broad policy areas “significantly surpasses previous leaders' intentions and efforts to avert an over-concentration of power and to ensure a decentralization of power during the 30-year period of the reform era”. Accordingly, the new football policy is part of what the same author considers as an “unusual phenomenon in Chinese reform-era politics”.

What is the Plan about? The far-reaching nature of the Chinese plan is well illustrated by figures such as the stated aim to ensure that the national sports industry will generate US\$460bn by 2020 (NDRC, 2016) and US\$813bn by 2025 (Nielsen Sports, 2016). For a comparative reference, it is estimated that the global sports industry traded around US\$1.5 trillion in 2015, US\$498.4bn of which in the USA alone (Plunkett Research, 2016).

Accordingly, the Chinese plan makes explicit the ambition to foster its national sports industry in ways that will allow China, in a five-year period, to draw near the current size of the US market.

In order to achieve such ambitious goals, among other measures, the football development plan establishes that the Chinese Football Association's (CFA) main function is to organise and manage the development of all football in the country, in sustainable and market viable ways and guaranteeing a competitive and fair environment. An additional prescription concerns the need for professional teams to adopt modern management structures (NDRC, 2016). Furthermore, the plan counts on an active participation of the private sector, thus closely following the established in the strategy "Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting 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), issued by the State Council (2014, October). This national strategy is commonly deemed as the milestone marking the take-off of the Chinese sports industry (Liu, 2017). According to the spirit of the novel strategy, the government ceases to intervene directly in the sports market, limiting its action to the guiding and supporting the development of the industry while fostering a structure that allows for setting forth a competitive market structure (Zhan, 2013).

As soon as the Plan was launched, large Chinese corporations, (e.g. Alibaba, Dalian Wanda Group, Jiangsu Suning and Fosun) started to make significant investments in both domestic and overseas football markets (Chadwick *et al.*, 2016, 2017). The developments in the domestic side have drawn considerable attention, mainly due to the hiring of foreign players, involving highly inflated transfer prices and salaries. Overnight, the Chinese Super League was under the spotlight. Still, the extent to which these developments prefigure an implementation scenario for Xi's Word Cup dreams is far from clear.

### Insights from the innovation theory

Can the innovation theory inform the discussion of the Plan implications? Joseph Schumpeter, a notable innovation theory pioneer, argues that "the means of production and the productive process have in general no real leader, or rather, the real leader is the consumer" (Schumpeter, 1982, p. 21). Later, in the same book, he writes that "it is [...] the producer who as a rule initiates economic change, and consumers are educated by him if necessary; they are, as it were, taught to want new things, or things that differ in some respect or other from those which they have been in the habit of using" (Schumpeter, 1982, p. 65).

Schumpeter's insights provide a purposeful starting point for discussing the Plan. In fact, his reference to the need for educating consumers to change their consumption habits finds some parallel in the policy document under scrutiny. The State, which takes the role of "producer", establishes aims whose implementation requires new consumption habits. Accordingly, consumers need to be taught in order to match the change associated to the challenges of two major goals of the Plan: to foster a widespread practice of football and to expand football-related consumption.

In the line of Schumpeter, Drucker (2011) reinforces the idea that innovation implies the creation, not only of something new, but also of new habits and new desires. The author (Drucker, 2011, p. 92) states that the "most productive innovation is a different product or service creating a new potential of satisfaction, rather than an improvement". He gives the example of a salesman who is successful in selling refrigerators to Eskimos and, as such, would be considered "as much as an innovator as someone who had developed brand-new processes or invented a new product". The implications are that innovation is not invention and non-technological innovations, namely, social or economic innovations, are "at least as important as technological ones" (Drucker, 2011).

This view endorses the idea that innovation is an economic and social term, rather than a technical one. Accordingly, following Drucker's vein, innovation introduces change in the economic or social settings and establishes new behaviour patterns, and, as such, it creates

new wealth or new potential of action rather than new knowledge. By establishing innovation as a change in the wealth-producing potential of existing resources (Drucker, 1985), the argument assigns an innovative nature to the Plan. In fact, it aspires to boost football mass-practice and consumption as a driving force for developing the national entire sports industry and thus for improving the potential of wealth creation.

The view of innovation as an eminently economic and social notion also grounds Drucker's (2011) argument that "the bulk of innovative efforts will have to come from the places that control the human resources and the money needed for development and marketing, that is, from the existing large aggregation of trained people and disposable money – existing businesses and existing public-service institutions" (p. 148). The legitimization of the Chinese Government role in promoting innovation in the football industry, which somehow could be found in this last statement, is significantly bolstered when bringing over Drucker's acknowledgement of the dominant position of the public sector in the social, economic and political landscape and the inherent need for ensuring that public institutions become innovative themselves.

At this stage, it is worth noticing that Drucker's argument is not completely free of contradictions. In fact, the author, while acknowledging the high relevance of the public sector realm, i.e. the state, both as promoter of (social) innovation and as subject of (much needed) innovation, refers to the incompatible relationship between "planned" societies (meaning societies subject to a strong intervention of the state) and entrepreneurial societies. He argues (Drucker, 1985, p. 255) that innovation, "almost by definition, has to be decentralised, *ad hoc*, autonomous, specific, and micro-economic" and "better start small, tentative, flexible". Obviously, this contradictory ground becomes more noticeable when using Drucker's theory in the Chinese context, marked by the high level of State intervention and centralisation of the governing structure. Still, three major arguments produced by Drucker can be brought up to bear the possibility of using his approach as theoretical frame of reference when analysing the Plan: first, Drucker's view on innovation as an economic and social term, rather than a technical one; second, the idea that innovation is essential to introduce change in the economic and social domains; and, finally, the acknowledgement of the central role of innovation in establishing new behaviour patterns and thus nurturing new wealth or new potential for acting.

The Plan makes clear that the Chinese state will be the leader of "reform and innovative development" and the responsible for fully displaying that "football has a leading role for China's sports development and reform". Besides the provision of relevant public services, according to the Plan, the government should also take a leading role in creating a favourable environment to the development of a competitive market and strengthening management and supervision. Moreover, the document clearly prescribes a distribution of tasks which seems to be regarded as a means to ensure the conditions for an innovative public action. For instance, to the sport administration departments, the Plan attributes the tasks of consolidating policy research and providing macro guidance to the football reform and development, as well as of promoting synergies and cooperation between the various functional departments; the educational administration departments are made responsible for the development of the "campus football" initiative. Nevertheless, the Plan does not neglect the role of non-governmental partners. Indeed, it predicts an "extensive" participation of civil society in its implementation (NDRC, 2016). Thus, the policy document, though implicitly, acknowledges the need to replace old habits of community cooperation, most likely averse to change, by new change and innovation-prone habits. It refers to a "virtuous cycle of social and economic benefits" that can be accrued to football development, whose recognition by society should help to "fully mobilise the social forces" for change and "break the barrier of interests" that hampers it.

The notion of social innovation, as defined by Drucker (1959) in the 1950s (p. 32) – "the diagnosis of social needs and opportunities and the development of concepts and



institutions to satisfy them” – matches this analysis. The Plan portrays, in a crude but seemingly realistic manner, the shortcomings, the potentials, and the expected outcomes, outlining the conceptualization of the presiding ideology, the strategic positioning, and the development principles, as well as the institutional mechanisms perceived as required to achieve “the dream of football emergence, the dream of a powerful sports nation and the dream of national rejuvenation” (NDRC, 2016). The analysis and interpretation of the text under the light of the definitional ground of social innovation provided by Drucker (1959) brings forward the perception that the Chinese football development policy somehow contradicts Drucker, at least partially, in its argument that social innovation, rather than curing a defect, aims at creating a new reality and, at the same time, rather than disrupting, aims at taking advantage of existing values, beliefs and habits. The Plan gives indication that the creation of a new reality implies the cure of existing defects in the football system. It also points to the need for subverting deeply rooted habits in the football institutional structure. The reasons highlighted in the document as justification for the policy provide good evidence: “the development concept lags behind, the knowledge about the value and development pattern of football is insufficient, the thinking of looking only for fast returns is relatively serious; the organisation mechanism is fallen behind, there is still the problem that politics and society, control and management and matter and business are not divided; the level of rule of law is inadequate, behaviours and customs are not correct and the competition order is in disorder, there is a lack of effective supervision”.

The outcomes of the Plan are to be assessed. As in Drucker (2011, p. 304), the impacts of social innovation “are just as hard to predict until they have emerged and can be identified, evaluated, and measured”. Seemingly, the Chinese authorities are aware of the need for monitoring the Plan’s implementation. Accordingly, the policy provides the establishment of a “dynamic mechanism to follow monitoring and examine evaluation”, directed at ensuring “the duty to implement in place, carry forward the assignments smoothly and achieve the objectives of the plan as scheduled”. It also attributes to a set of State-related institutions, such as the NDRC, the Office of the Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference on Football Reform and Development of the State Council, the General Administration of Sport and the Ministry of Education, the responsibility for “the inspection and supervision of this plan”.

Bearing in mind the expected outcomes, the value of the Plan will be judged with basis on the impacts exerted on the economy (e.g. the growth in the whole Chinese sports industry), on the national culture (e.g. the massification of football practice and consumption), and on the overall quality of life of Chinese people (e.g. the improvement of education, and of mental and physical health). Still, the assessment will certainly not be complete without an approach to ways the policy will affect the global football geopolitical structure, namely the Eurocentric predominant mind frame. This is the aim of the next section.

### **China and the current football Eurocentrism...**

On 14 May 2017, Grêmio FBPA and Botafogo FR faced each other for the first day of the Brazilian Championship. The game was broadcasted by the Portuguese TV channel SIC Radical. The sportscaster, as the game was unfolding, praised Luan, Grêmio’s forward and Olympic champion with the Brazilian team in 2016 – “Luan, a player who could already be in European football. Nothing against Brazilian football, but Luan deserves an opportunity in Europe”. Most surely without realising it, the speaker has provided a good illustration of the ethnocentric view that grounds Eurocentrism in football. Although having “nothing against Brazilian football”, he implicitly conveyed the idea of European football superiority.

Wallerstein (1997), referring to the dominance of Eurocentric views in social sciences, explains it by talking about the influence of a geocultural element of modernity. Therefore, social sciences would be subject to the colonial, ethnocentric and parochial idea of metropolitan centre (Connell, 2007). In the realm of football, it is also possible to verify this

conception of the world. Prior to entering the more prosaic world of football, having in mind that the Eurocentrism origins can be traced back to the colonial expansion and the resulting power relations, it becomes necessary to know more about the “coloniality of power” (Quijano, 2000), a determinant force imposing the European identity.

Quijano (2000, p. 533) states that “the power model that today is globally hegemonic presupposes an element of coloniality” and goes on to explain, for example, terms such as “Spanish”, “Portuguese” or “European”, which formerly meant only a geographical or national origin, were transformed into a representation of power relation marked by domination, including the constitution of hierarchies, places and social roles. With the rise of capitalism as a new structure of labour control, following the same author, the Europeans, because concentrating the control of “gold, silver, and other commodities produced by labour without wages” (p. 537), took the lead in the dispute for global trade domination and made to emerge a new geocultural identity that placed Europe at the centre of the global capitalist system, imposing thus its dominion over the rest of the world.

This sense of superiority can be devised in the history of football. A good example is the refusal of major European teams to participate in the 1930 FIFA World Cup, which took place in Uruguay. Only Belgium, France, Romania and Yugoslavia crossed the Atlantic to play the tournament in the country that had won two football Olympic titles in a row (Dietschy, 2013). Additional evidence is provided by the resistance of European football authorities to accept, in the 1960s, the decision of opening the World Cup to the participation of African countries, some of them freshly independent (Darby, 2017).

While Quijano takes the historical and sociological approach to Eurocentrism, Prebisch (1962) frames the discussion using the dichotomy centre-periphery and focussing on economic relations. The author argues that the centre of economic power has relegated the periphery of the economic system to the mere condition of supplier of food and raw materials, leaving no room for new countries to develop their industries. This approximates the reality of contemporary football, marked by the concentration of economic power in Europe. In this context, peripheral countries continue to supply European clubs in the form of players. In addition, many countries outside Europe are compelled to consume the products which are the major, and economically dominant, European leagues, such as the Premier League (England), the Bundesliga (Germany), the La Liga (Spain) and the European Champions League.

Postmodern football, featuring a significant financial growth in the aftermath of the 1990 FIFA World Cup (Giulianotti, 2010, p. 137), started to be largely driven by profound changes in television rights regulations, which would deepen the divide between the periphery and the centre at the global, continental and even national levels. This was the result of an uneven distribution of television payments between clubs, which, in turn, gave rise to an increased concentration of financial wealth and sporting success (Giulianotti, 2010, p. 127). As expected, the concentration of resources has taken place in Europe, or, more accurately, in some European countries and even regions, coinciding with the location of the wealthier clubs' headquarters. Football apartheid, as called by Leite Junior (2015), mirrors social and regional inequalities and creates an insurmountable gap between included and excluded.

At the sporting level, the Bosman ruling opened the frontiers for free movement of “community” players in the then European Economic Community, allowing wealthier English, Spanish, Italian and German teams to recruit the best European players, almost regardless their nationality, and to become practically unreachable opponents *vis a vis* counterparts from the European “semi-periphery”, to use the term of Giulianotti (2010, p. 139). The “semi-peripheral” Portuguese, for example, turned mainly to the South American market and attempted to anticipate dominant European clubs in spotting promising players using efficient scouting networks.

To what extent can China and the recent policy developments in the football realm affect the dominance of Europe?

The huge investments in the football industry made by large Chinese corporations, such as Alibaba, Dalian Wanda Group, Jiangsu Suning and Fosun, are one of the most visible effects that can be accrued to the Plan. Those firms, acknowledging the signalling of the government pointing to football as an industry to be cherished and developed, are not investing only in China, but also in other countries (Chadwick *et al.*, 2016, 2017). The injection of large amounts of money in most prominent European clubs provides a good illustration of these developments. For instance, the Italian AC Milan and FC Internazionale, together with the seven times English champion Aston Villa, are now property of Chinese firms. Nevertheless, rather than the increasing Chinese presence in the capital of European top clubs, which, indeed, matches China's outbound investment dynamics in other economic sectors, the hiring of a large number of foreign players by Chinese teams, namely in the European market, gave rise to a turmoil in the world of football.

FIFA/TMS (2017) reported that the amount of money invested by Chinese clubs in foreign players reached US\$168.3m in 2015, approximately 10 per cent more than the costs supported by all the other clubs of the Asian Football Confederation. According to the same source, in 2016, the amount increased ca. 168 per cent, reaching US\$451.3m. Actually, in the two first months of 2017, coinciding with the opening of the European Winter transfer market, Chinese buyers spent around US\$411m, ensuring the transfer to China of top players acting in European leagues, such as the Brazilian Oscar (former Chelsea FC, bought by the Shanghai SIPG for US\$70m) and the Argentinian Tévez, transferred from Manchester City FC to Shanghai Shenhua, becoming the highest-paid player in the world (until Neymar Jr joined Paris Saint-Germain) (Fernandes, 2017).

These operations, as expected, had an enormous repercussion in Europe. A good illustration is provided by the reaction in England, looking at the Chinese moves as a threat to the Premier League. Chelsea's coach, Antonio Conte, was quoted as having said that the Chinese operations were not only a menace to his team, but to every team in the world (Fifield, 2016). Arsenal's former coach, the French Arsène Wenger, has shown concerns about the inflation that the "excessive spending" of Chinese investors might provoke in the European football market, as well as, the danger associated with the possibility of inflated bids for players coming from China emerge as market reference in Europe (Wright, 2017).

In sum, "central" football contexts such as the English one, typically consumers of inputs supplied by the periphery, saw their centrality significantly compromised by a powerful nation which, despite the ancient *cujū*, is far from being part of the world football elite. Chinese investment in football gave rise to a significant displacement of power centrality, thus changing the geopolitics of the sport. One can argue that a wave of (creative) destruction, as Schumpeter (1942) would say, induced by a new public policy, caused a shock in the global *status quo*. Somehow, this shocking effect puzzles the assessment of the Chinese football policy. In fact, the set of targets and resources put forward by the Plan to affirm China as an equal within the world football elite are not in line with what, actually, was reported as its major impact. In other words, China was able to swiftly enter as a powerful player in global football, strongly challenging the hitherto Eurocentric establishment not because of any significant achievement in terms of increasing football practice and consumption in the country, but due to the investment promptness of a number of private actors.

It is worth mentioning that, although the stated intention of a mitigated direct intervention in the sports market, the Chinese Government considered the possibility of limiting the spending with players' acquisitions and even restraining high wages (Guardian Sport, 2017). The expression "burning money" was echoing in China's General Sports Administration. As a result, the CFA determined that each team may have only three foreigners in the field (previously four foreigners, but including one Asian player) and that a Chinese sub-23 player should be part of the initial eleven (Chadwick, 2017). In addition, in May 2017, a new tax of 100 per cent was introduced on the transfer value of foreign players.

The CFA has justified the measure as a way to limit the search for short-term results and prevent market inflation, in order to allow professional football to develop in a healthy and stable manner (Porteous, 2017).

It is thus predictable that the frantic Chinese investment wave will cool down, although there was speculation about the possibility of seeing top players like Rooney or Diego Costa in China. However, at least while the imposition of limits to the wage levels does not come into effect, the attractive power of the Chinese Major League is kept high, thus maintaining the pressure on the Eurocentric market[3]. In addition, the Eurocentrism-driven idea that a player would see his value, both at market and sporting levels, eroded because playing in China is waning. In fact, there are plenty evidence showing that several players saw their careers improve while or after competing in the Chinese League.

Nevertheless, it is hard to forecast what is going to happen in the near future. What can be stoutly argued is that the Chinese authorities will continue to strive for implementing the Plan in the in the pursuit of “stable and healthy” growth not only of football, but also the overall sports market. That, with additional financial resources, those stemming from the new tax imposed on the value of transfers. It was established that these amounts will support the development of training schools for new footballers, as well as the promotion of community football and charitable initiatives related to this sport.

### **External vs internal change**

As put by Scutti and Wendt (2016), football stands alongside demography, technological development, economy and military power as criteria to judge an international power. As such as the same authors argue (p. 105), “geopolitics and football have become a universe now inseparable”. The Chinese Plan is there to prove it. In fact, the Plan has fuelled a significant shift in the geopolitics of football. In this sense, under the light of Drucker’s conceptualisation of innovation, the shaking of the Eurocentric power structure can be regarded as an innovative move that sparked change, creating a new environment and inducing new behaviour patterns, though doubts can be raised about the creation of improved conditions for wealth-production. More importantly, the incidence of the innovation has been eminently external to China. Thus, the question here is the extent to which the transformative power of China to fulfil the aspirations put down on paper in the Plan, which are eminently domestic, can level the power exerted on the external side. Even taking as granted the commitment of Chinese authorities towards the implementation the policy, one can argue that the road to implementation is far from easy.

The implementation challenges faced by China are manifold. At the sporting level, it can be judged as arduous to guarantee the critical mass of players needed to ensure that, every four years, there are 23 athletes with the talent, skills, and competitive spirit and fitness to put together a world-class national team. Atkins (2017) states that “China is not a country where football culture is immediately visible in general life”. As such, the formation of the necessary critical mass depends on a process of cultural change. The same author adds a problem, which exacerbates the need for this change: “it is a problem worsened by many of the country’s younger generations largely avoiding any activity which could cause harm”.

Chinese authorities seem to be fully aware of these hampering factors. In fact, the creation and consolidation of grassroots football, community football, talent training and football schools, as well as the promotion of the sport within the formal education system (NDRC, 2016), may be deemed as mirroring a perception of the barriers imposed by culture to a massive participation of youth in football. Yet, the design and implementation of the Plan clearly configures a top-down approach to football development. Simons (2008) questions the effectiveness of this approach when the development of football from the grassroots, hence a bottom-up dynamics, is the crux of the matter. The author talks about a

crucial flaw: “the fundamental problem of trying to impose football reforms from the top when there are no foundations at the bottom”. Accordingly, one can list a political problem, very much rooted in cultural factors, to be faced while endeavouring to implement the Plan.

Reminding Schumpeter lessons about the role of producers as the initiators of economic change, the issue here is to know whether the Chinese authorities are able to assume the role of “producers” and, as such, to foster social change by “educating” practitioners and consumers. The availability of money, namely, private, which has the basis for igniting the global shock hitting Eurocentric trend in global football, seems to be out of the listing of barriers to implementation. Hence, the major challenge is to pave the way for social change or, similarly, social innovation.

### Concluding remarks

This paper takes stock of the insights of the innovation theory in order to analyse the content, aims, flaws and effects of the plan aiming at hoisting Chinese football up to the world elite of the sport. An ambitious piece of public policy to be carried out in a national context where the practice of football is far from being massive and its popularity, though increasing, is still low, at least relatively. Bearing in mind the obvious implementation challenges, the conceptualisation of innovation as a means to create something new, to act differently and to establish new habits provides a purposeful frame of reference to study the policy endeavour.

The first and most visible “innovative” effect of the policy took the form of a shock that caused an unprecedented change in the geopolitics of football. The huge flows of private money that made top players swap major European leagues, namely, the English Premier League, for the Chinese Super League, have strongly shaken the old and deeply rooted economic power structure of football. In other words, the Eurocentric trend that has wrapped up power relations in the football realm was stoutly challenged for the first time in decades by an investment dynamics, many times judged as excessive and even unfettered, which can be deemed as marshalled by the development plan.

This external effect, though, cannot be fully acknowledge as an innovation, since it has indeed induced (pervasive) change at the external level, creating a new global environment and inducing new behaviour, namely defensive, patterns, but missed the crucial dimension of capacity building at the domestic level, needed to nurture improved potential for wealth creation and action.

The Schumpeterian view on the role of producers in educating consumers to allow for a change in habits, matches the part that the Chinese Government has assumed in the football development plan. In fact, the policy makes clear the “educating” role that the public institutional settings should play in order to bring on the transformative power necessary to deal with a set of hurdles that, because deeply rooted in culture, are not easy to overcome. Accordingly, the crux of the matter, rather than the promptness of financial resources, is the ability to materialise a pervasive switch in behaviour and habits in football practice and consumption. This can be translated as the ability to foster social innovation in Drucker’s vein.

Obviously, there is always the risk of having a gap between discourse and practice. Still, China has proven to respond well to what is (centrally) planned. The case of the implementation of the elite sport system, “*juguo tizhi*”, is a good demonstration of the ability to successfully execute a state-run strategic plan in the field of sport. In any case, and as Drucker (2011) himself argues, “the measure of innovation is the impact on the environment” (p. 150). So, time will be needed to assess any impacts of the Plan. This gives ground to multiple lines of investigation to be pursued in the future. A particular field of interest, as far as the authors are concerned, relates to tensions between state and market, whose balance, in the end, will be crucial for the Plan implementation.

## Notes

1. According to FIFA, the historical origin of football lies in Ancient China and in the practice of *cuju* (蹴鞠). The *cuju* (蹴鞠), which literally means “kicking a ball”, dates back to the times of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AC). Historians present Liu Bang (刘邦 256 BC–195 BC), the founding emperor of Han Dynasty, as a big *cuju* (蹴鞠) fan.
2. The “Four Comprehensives” are: building a moderately prosperous society; deepening the reforms; governing the nation according to law; and strictly govern the Party.
3. Five of the world’s top 10 salaries concern players who compete in China – Carlos Tévez, Oscar, Hulk, Axel Witsel and Graziano Pelle.

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# The Belt and Road Initiative

An Old Archetype of  
a New Development Model

*Edited by* Francisco José B. S. Leandro  
Paulo Afonso B. Duarte

palgrave  
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Editors

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# Belt, Road and Ball: Football as a Chinese Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Tool

*Emanuel Leite Junior and Carlos Rodrigues*

## INTRODUCTION

In September 2013, in a speech delivered at Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan, Xi Jinping evoked the history of Silk Road. Recalling Zhang Qian’s travels to Central Asia “on missions of peace and friendship” (Xi, 2014, p. 315), Xi emphasized how those journeys helped to open “door to friendly contacts between China and Central Asian countries” (p. 315). Further on Xi extols the ancient Silk Road as the “exchanges and mutual learning” provided by the interactions among the Eastern and Western civilizations along the route contributed to “the progress of human civilization” (p. 315). The ancient Silk Road was as

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an inspiration because it demonstrated that through mutuality and cooperative interaction, “countries of different races, beliefs and cultural backgrounds are fully able to share peace and development” (p. 316). This historical perspective presented by Xi had a rationale. The Chinese president used the ancient Silk Road as a basis for his analysis: the geopolitical scenario in 2013 demonstrated the right conditions to revitalize the old transnational route. For Xi, it was the ideal time to strengthen the “friendship and cooperation” (p. 316) between China and Eurasian countries. Therefore, Xi calls on the countries of the Eurasian region to have “an innovative approach and jointly build an economic belt along the Silk Road” (p. 317), thereby laying the foundations of what would initially be called “One Belt One Road”, now the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). The Chinese leader’s political discourse, based on promoting the strengthening of “trust, friendship and cooperation, and promoting common development and prosperity” (p. 316), follows the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.<sup>1</sup> This is evident when Xi affirms China’s commitment not to interfere in either the internal affairs or the foreign policies of the countries (p. 316).

There is no doubt that the BRI is currently the most ambitious strategy pursued by the Chinese government. But China is also looking at other scenarios in international geopolitics. Sport is one of the targeted fields. The Chinese intend to have one of the world’s largest national sports economies. To do this they have been implementing public policies aimed at developing their sports industry. In 2014, the Chinese State

<sup>1</sup>The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence first appeared as an international agreement, that is, the Agreement between the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India, concluded between China and India in Beijing in April 1954 (Zhengqing & Xiaoqin, 2015, p. 70). It was Premier Zhou Enlai who first connected the idea of “peaceful coexistence” with the Chinese diplomacy. In a statement in support of the recommendation for peace submitted to the United Nations General Assembly by Soviet Union, he pointed out the principles of equality, mutual benefit and mutual respect for territorial sovereignty (p. 72). The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are: mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence. The Five Principles are considered “the most important diplomatic name card of China in the contemporary world stage, the five principles play a significant role in promoting the peaceful development of China and shaping its image as a responsible power” (p. 67).

Council issued a document to boost China's sports industry: "Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting 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). This strategy is commonly deemed as the milestone marking the take-off of the Chinese sports industry (Liu, 2017). To meet that challenge, the Chinese government sees the development of football as the driving force behind this growth process. For this reason, "The Overall Reform Plan to Boost the Development of Football in China" (中国足球改革发展总体方案) was issued in 2015, a kind of preamble to the main document, from April 2016: "China's medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)"—(中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050年), thereafter "the Plan".

It is no novelty to affirm that the economic, political and social roles of sports are focus of a great deal of attention in the politics and policy-making realm (Korneeva & Ogurtsov, 2016). Elite sport has long been used both as an ideological tool and, as Gupta puts it, as an expedient to show its country to the world (Gupta, 2009a, p. 182). China, obviously, is not an exception. Sports, particularly since the nineteenth century, did not play second fiddle in the Chinese power structures (Hwang & Chang, 2008). Mao Zedong himself, about 30 years prior to the 1949 revolution, wrote an essay entitled "A Study of Physical Culture" (体育之研究), in which he praised physical education as necessary to counteract something he diagnosed as follows: "Our nation is wanting in strength. [...] The physical condition of the population deteriorates daily [...]. If our bodies are not strong, we will be afraid as soon as we see enemy soldiers, and then how can we attain our goals and make ourselves respected?" (Schram, 1989, p. 15). The attention paid to sports and physical education would permeate the post-revolution years under the motto "Keep fit, study well, work well". As argued by Jarvie et al. (2008, p. 64), physical culture "stood for clean living, progress, good health and rationality and was regarded by the authorities as one of the most suitable and effective instruments for implementing new social policies as well as the relative degrees of social control implicit within many programmes". Since the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, the political use of sport has been recurrent. The 1950s were also marked by the first steps taken towards the setting up of an elite sports system in China (Hong, 2008). As we will see later, the politicization of sport has continued over the decades and remains a reality to this day.

More than one hundred years after Mao's first written concerns on the matter, the Chinese leadership personified in Xi Jinping is making efforts to materialize a whole new context for both elite sports and physical education, hoisting them to the core of the Chinese Dream as part of the so-called rejuvenation pursuit, something that has to do with modernization of the country and economic success (Peters, 2017, p. 1302). As we have mentioned before, football, the world most popular sport, could not be left out of the picture. Besides Xi's personal enthusiasm for football—his “China football dream” (中國足球夢) was first expressed in 2009 (Tan et al., 2016, p. 8) and reiterated in 2011 with the revelation of his “three World Cup dreams”, participate in the World Cup, host the World Cup and to win the World Cup (Tan et al., 2016, p. 2), the Plan is not a policy aimed at satisfying the president's personal dreams. There is the political and geopolitical aspect of the Plan. After all, elite sport can be used as a tool for promoting the country's image—both in the pursuit of international acceptance (Allison & Monnington, 2002) as in the establishment of international relations through what Joseph Nye calls “soft power” (Nye, 2012). This chapter explores the role of sports, in particular football, in the developments associated with the BRI.

### ABOUT THE PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE TIES...

The political, infrastructural, trade, economic and financial aspects seem to occupy central stage in the BRI overall international debate. One can argue that the attention paid to the cultural dimension, that is to say the people-to-people ties, is not so close as in the case of the other pillars of BRI. Nevertheless, this relative inattention does not match the relevance attributed by the Chinese political settings, both as a discursive and as a strategic asset.

The Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (推进“一带一路”建设工作领导小组办公室)<sup>2</sup> reckons people-to-people bonds as “*the cultural foundation for building the Belt and Road*”, as well an ingredient needed to materialize “*the common dream of all peoples to enjoy a peaceful and prosperous life*” (China's National Development and Reform Commission, 2019, p. 26). Xi Jinping (2014, pp. 318, 319),

<sup>2</sup>The Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative operates under the National Development and Reform Commission and aims at providing BRI with guidance and coordination.

in turn, considers people-to-people ties as “*key to good relations between states*” and “*to pursue productive cooperation*” in all areas of the BRI. To cap it all, the Chinese leader claims for “*more friendly exchanges between our peoples to enhance mutual understanding and traditional friendship, and build strong public sport and a solid social foundation for regional cooperation*”. The expectation is that people-to-people ties can bring international public support to the BRI principles and implementation (China’s National Development and Reform Commission, 2015), outlining the desired “*broad consensus on the Belt and Road Initiative*” (ibid.).

What are people-to-people bonds under the BRI framework? Liu and Dunford (2016, p. 13) offer a concise and clear answer: “*People-to-people bonds means increasing support and capacity for BRIs through cultural and academic exchanges, student exchanges, media, tourism and medical cooperation, joint research, cooperation between nongovernmental organizations, etc.*”. Mismatching the inattention in the public debate, as mentioned before, an approach to the implementation realm shows that, even *vis-à-vis* the BRI-related multibillion infrastructure developments, the people-to-people bonds do not play the second fiddle. This is well evidenced in progress reports issued by Chinese official sources (e.g. CNDRC, 2019). Cultural exchange draws on a wide range of activities, from art, music and film festivals to jointly established TV, radio and publishing programmes, as well as the shared heritage along the Silk Road (Winter, 2018). The same can be said about education and training. Besides the more and more active work carried out by Confucius Institutes in disseminating Chinese language and culture all over the world, the scholarship schemes set up by the Chinese government have allowed for a significant increase in the number of foreign people studying in China. In addition, China has signed 24 agreements with BRI participating countries concerning the mutual recognition of higher education degrees. The Silk Road Tourism Promotion Union, the Maritime Silk Road Tourism Promotion Alliance or the Tea Road International Tourism Alliance are BRI-driven organizational arrangements that serve as good examples of the cooperation mechanisms grounded in tourism. From visa exemption agreements to streamline application procedures, a number of initiatives have been developed under the light of the BRI people-to-people pillar, thus adding up the tourism quantitative potential inherent to the population magnitude. In the health-related fields, to the 56 agreements signed with several BRI countries and NGOs, one should add on Chinese-led cooperation in preventing and controlling diseases like, among others,



AIDS, malaria, dengue and tuberculosis, as well as the presence of Chinese medical teams and the establishment of Chinese traditional medicine centres in several countries. Finally, the more than RMB 3 billion (ca. € 384 million) invested in emergency food assistance and relief and in the South-South Cooperation Fund, supporting health improving and poverty alleviation programmes in many countries.

It is obvious that the varied dimensions of implementing the people-to-people pillar, as briefly reported above, have a feeding effect on the power of Chinese cultural diplomacy and soft power, or, at least, a counteracting effect on the risks of Chinese “soft disempowerment”. What is the role of sports, in particular of football, in this cultural foundation to build up the BRI?

### THE PLAN

According to FIFA, the historical origin of football lies in Ancient China and in the practice of *cuju* (蹴鞠), dating back to the times of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AC). It is believed that it was during the Qing Dynasty, in the seventeenth century, that football stopped being practiced in China. Modern football, codified in England in 1863, reappears in China in 1879. Throughout the twentieth century, despite some attempts, China was unable to succeed in this sport (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2018). And the improvement of Chinese football competitive status will take a while. The professionalization of football in China has occurred only during the 1990s. The first professional championship was launched in 1994, and, for a brief period, it gained popularity (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2013). Despite being the first professional sport in China, Chinese football continues to lack competitiveness. Due to problems such as the successive corruption scandals and match-fixing, the credibility of the competition fades, causing sponsors and viewers to lose interest. After a few attempts of the Chinese authorities to fight football fraud, 2011 is commonly seen as the beginning of a new phase of professional football development in the country (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2013).

Issued in April 2016, the “China’s medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)” —(中国足球中长期发展规划 2016–2050年)—is the latest Chinese effort to try to improve and develop football in the country. The Plan represents a public policy strategy formulated and implemented by the Chinese government, under the competence of the State Council’s Office of the Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference on Football Reform and Development (足改部际联席会议办公室). This body brings together, among others, 11 Ministries, 4 State Council Commissions and 5 government agencies, as well as the Chinese Communist Party’s Propaganda Department and a range of bureaus, agencies and commissions at the provincial and local government levels.

Currently, the Chinese men’s team is only 73rd in the FIFA World Men’s Rankings.<sup>3</sup> There is, therefore, a long way to go, as acknowledged in the plan. Accordingly, to transform China into a future global football power, the original plan proposed three development stages, each one establishing goals to be fulfilled in 2020, 2030 and 2050, respectively (China’s National Development and Reform Commission, 2016):

- By 2020: 20,000 specialized football schools, 70,000 football fields, 30–50 million primary and secondary school students practising the sport;
- By 2030: 50,000 specialized football schools,<sup>4</sup> the Chinese Men team being one of the best in Asia and the Women team established as “world-class”;
- Until 2050: the Men team in the top-20 of the FIFA ranking established as a global football power. It is worth to mention that the overarching goal to establish China as a “world-class football power” by 2050 aligns with broader national objectives culminating with the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 2049.

<sup>3</sup>FIFA World Rankings as of 14 June 2019.

<sup>4</sup>In 2017, the *People’s Daily* (人民日报) reported that China’s sporting authorities had altered the original goals of the football development plan. Instead of waiting until 2030 for 50,000 specialized football schools, the goal became to reach the mark by 2025 (*People’s Daily*, 2017).

The scope of the Plan is broad, aiming at points such as the educational system (CNDRC, 2016, p. 6), increasing the physical education's academic load, with emphasis on football, and encouraging the practice of football as a public health issue (aiming at the well-being physical and mental development of young people, as well as strengthening the physical conditioning of the masses). Here, we see the importance of implementing public policies that integrate such an ambitious plan with the promotion of education as a springboard of for emerging talents by promoting new cultural habits, such as the practice of football. The football development plan is well aware of this. For this reason, it aims to promote the strengthening of grass-roots football and community football, talent training, increasing the scale of youth participation in football, developing football schools to promote interest and cultivating fans (CNDRC, 2016, pp. 3, 4, 5).

The Plan, however, also covers points such as the promotion of cultural and diplomatic exchange with other nations (as we will address later in this chapter). As well as aspire making football the driving force behind the development of the entire sports industry in the country, so that this will become a relevant sector in the national economy, helping the country to continue to grow and thrive, as mentioned before.

The far-reaching nature of the Chinese plan is well illustrated by figures such as the stated aim to ensure that the national sports industry will generate USD 460 billion by 2020 (CNDRC, 2016) and USD 813 billion by 2025 (Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption). For comparative reference, it is estimated that the global sports industry traded around USD 1.3 trillion in 2017, USD 519.9 billion of which in the United States alone (Plunkett Research, 2018). Accordingly, the Chinese plan makes explicit the ambition to foster its national sports industry in ways that will allow China, in a five-year period, to draw near the current size of the US market.

## SPORT, PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER

Diplomacy is the politics at the state level. It's "the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of relations between the governments of independent state" (Satow, 1957, p. 1). According to Dubinsky, "the term public diplomacy was applied during the Cold War referring to the process of international organizations trying to achieve foreign policy goals by engaging with foreign publics" (Dubinsky, 2019, p. 1). The

author adds that “new public diplomacy refers also to non-state actors” (p. 1) and explains that public diplomacy comprehends communications and interactions by governments, policymakers, organizations and individuals to influence foreign publics to achieve a more favourable image of the nation and ultimately achieve foreign policy goals (Dubinsky, 2019). Essentially, public diplomacy seeks to exercise influence by building positive and resilient affiliations, which other parties consider to be attractive and valuable (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). Finally, we can say that sport diplomacy happens when international sport is consciously employed by governments as an instrument of diplomacy (Abdi et al., 2018).

As we have mentioned in the introduction, since the proclamation of the PRC sports has been used as a political and diplomatic tool. It all started with the so-called sovietization of sport in the 1950s, fundamental in the establishment of contacts with the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012d); the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF0)—through GANEF0 China aimed at strengthening its leadership in the Third World as an alternative to the powers of the United States and Soviet Union (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012e) and also promoted sport as a revolutionary diplomacy (Qingmin, 2013); the emblematic and historical case of the “ping-pong diplomacy”, which allowed Chinese rapprochement with the United States during a period of tension in Sino-Soviet relations (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012f); the Olympic strategy which was implemented from the 1980s (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012g) and deepened after the bad results in the Seoul Games (1988) with the implementation of the elite sport system, “juguo tizhi” (举国体制), which in English, literally, means “the whole country support for the elite sport system”, a political strategy that can be summarized as the quest for glory at the Olympic Games (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012b, c).

That glory was achieved in 2008, when Beijing hosted the Summer Olympic Games. After the failed bid in 1993 to host the 2000 Olympic Games, the Chinese capital city was chosen on its second attempt, in 2001, to host the 2008 edition. Hosting the Games was an important part of the whole Olympic strategy: “Beijing’s success was regarded as a milestone on the road of national revival” (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012a, p. 153). China believes that through the 2008 Beijing Games it was able to show the world its development and that it has managed to position itself as a world power: economic and sports. “The image of a highly

modern nation, efficient and increasingly prosperous” (Giulianotti, 2015, p. 290) was what the country tried to sell to the world, seeking not only the establishment of diplomatic and commercial relations, but also the development of tourism. According to Giulianotti (2015), mega-events, such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup, “can be considered one of the most powerful contemporary manifestations of globalization”. This is because, according to this sociologist, these mega-events have repercussions in the economic, social and political spheres. In economic terms, Giulianotti alludes to the billionaire figures involved in these tournaments and the possibility that the cities and countries hosting the events can be “sold”. Regarding the social question, the researcher recalls that these competitions are accompanied by billions of people across the planet. Finally, the political aspect, since “these events attract politicians from all over the world, particularly in the opening ceremonies” (Giulianotti, 2015, p. 288).

And that brings us to a key concept to understand the Plan and how this public policy is connected to the BRI, as a diplomatic tool. We are talking about what Joseph Nye calls soft power (Nye, 2012). Following the author, “power is the ability to influence others to achieve the results they want, which can be done through coercion, payment or attraction” (Nye, 2012, p. 151). In contrast to hard power, which would be characterized by coercion (e.g. military force) or pay (e.g. economic force), there would be soft power. As Nye (2004, p. 5) explains: “A country can obtain the results it desires in international politics because other countries - admiring its values, emulating its example and aspiring to its level of prosperity - will want to follow it”.

As Brannagan and Giulianotti put (2018), Nye coined the term “soft power” seeking “to respond to two interlinked shifts in relationships between states and international society. First, following advances in global communications, a growing range of actors had gained the capacity to collate, shape and distribute ever-expanding volumes of information to different audiences. Second, these diverse actors were transforming how political powers are acquired and exercised” (p. 1140). The states started to face the “paradox of plenty”. “A plenitude of information leads to a poverty of attention. Attention rather than information becomes the scarce resource, and those who can distinguish valuable signals from white noise gain power” (Nye, 2002, pp. 68, 69). With the difficulty of standing out in the midst of so much information, of so many actors, which generates the noise of communication, the states have the need to promote

their legitimacy and attractiveness. It is in this context, then, that Nye presents the concept of “soft power”. Cultural achievements and sports success are ways to win the admiration of others. This can be done by adapting the state’s international agenda in the quest to shape the preference and behaviour of others in relation to the state (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, p. 1141). That is why sports can be a very useful tool in the exercise of soft power (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015, 2018; Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016; Chari, 2015; Chen et al., 2012; Delgado, 2016; Grix & Lee, 2013; Korneeva & Ogurtsov, 2016; Krzyzaniak, 2016; Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2017; Samuel-Azran et al., 2016).

The concept of “soft power” was introduced in China in 1992 and has since generated a number of discussions and became a central concept in the political formulation in the Chinese Communist Party (Xu et al., 2018), having been adopted in the official language of the CCP in 2007, in the then President Hu Jintao’s speech at the party’s 17th National Congress. Cultural legacies and achievements besides sports success are ways to win the admiration of others. After all, culture is an important source of power and promoting a compelling culture is one of the main means to build an external national image (Nye, 2008, p. 95). In a speech at the 12th group study session of the Political Bureau of the 18th Central Committee, Xi Jinping stated that “the strengthening of our cultural soft power is decisive for China to reach the Two Centenary Goals and realize the Chinese Dream of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (Xi, 2014, p. 178).

Freeman (2012) explains that soft power is a way for nations to build and manage their reputations and adds that this is a form of “soft public diplomacy”, which serves for states not only to become attractive to foreigners also for their own citizens. Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018) add that “soft power aligns more with strategies of ‘public diplomacy’, which also include creating and maintaining mutual understandings, long-lasting relationships and active cooperation” (p. 1141).

It is by no mere chance that all the BRICS<sup>5</sup> countries have hosted sports mega-events in the last years. Beijing, the Chinese capital, hosted the 2008 Summer Olympics; Delhi, the Indian capital, hosted the Commonwealth Games in 2010 and South Africa, in the same year, became the

<sup>5</sup> Acronym of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, countries whose economic growth gained global recognition as cooperative links established among them grounded their (re)positioning in the geopolitical global settings.

first ever African country to host the FIFA World Cup; Brazil, in a period of two years, organized the two largest world sporting events, the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics (Rio de Janeiro); and Russia organized the 2014 Winter Olympics (Sochi) and more recently the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Furthermore, China will be again on the spotlight soon as organizers of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

The Emirate of Qatar is another good example of a country that sought to exercise its soft power through sports. In 2008, it was issued Qatar National Vision 2030, a strategic plan for the country to change its image in the international scenario. It is in this broader strategy that we can find Qatar sports policies. Since December 2010, when Qatar was awarded the right to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the emirate has been in the spotlight of world football (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015, 2018; Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016; Dorsey, 2014, 2015; Reiche, 2014; Samuel-Azran et al., 2016). Krzyzaniak (2016) draws attention to Qatari soft power through football sponsorship, what he calls “nation branding”: in 2010 Qatar Foundation became the first commercial sponsorship of history on FC Barcelona shirt (a brand that was later replaced by Qatar Airways), and in 2011 Qatar Sports Investments bought the French team Paris Saint-Germain. Qatar also explores Barcelona and PSG brands and its global stars, players like Messi, Neymar, Iniesta, Thiago Silva, among others, as *poster boys* of some of its advertising campaigns to promote tourism in the emirate.

As far as public diplomacy is concerned, the Plan explicitly demonstrates its perception of football as an instrument of sport diplomacy. For example, the policy paper discusses the growth of the international exchanges, seeing the rise of football activities as “an important part of sports diplomacy” (CNDRC, 2016, p. 2). It goes further and draws attention to the need to strengthen the “international cooperation and exchanges of talent in the football industry” (CNDRC, 2016, p. 10), adding that the foreign exchange channels of football must be expanded, encouraging all bodies to host various forms of international football exchange activities and all kind of football experts to go abroad for study and training, and, finally, supporting the more outstanding experts to work in international organizations (CNDRC, 2016, p. 16). The Plan also refers to the importance of increasing “the level of domestic and foreign opening up and develop win-win cooperation” (CNDRC, 2016, p. 5). As we can observe, “cooperation” and “exchanges” are two key-words both in the Plan and in the Xi’s speech from 2013, showing how

both initiatives play a fundamental role in the Chinese geopolitics and are consistent with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, that are “the most important diplomatic name card of China in the contemporary world stage” (Zhengqing & Xiaoqin, 2015, p. 67).

To what extent has sport, in particular football, contributed to China’s BRI? This is what we will discuss in the next section of this chapter.

## FOOTBALL AS A CONNECTING ELEMENT

The Plan states that the Chinese government will lead the “reform and innovative development” and will be the responsible for fully displaying that “football has a leading role for China’s sports development and reform”. The document also highlights the role of non-governmental partners. Indeed, it foresees an active participation of the private sector, thus closely following the established in the “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption”. According to the spirit of this novel strategy, the government limits its action to the guiding and supporting the development of the industry while fostering a structure that allows for setting forth a competitive market structure (Zhan, 2013). In that sense, it is important to remember that investments in football can provide the possibility of establishing trade and diplomatic relations. We must also consider that investing in sports at an international level brings the possibility of creating a state brand, helping to establish a national brand name (Gupta, 2009b, p. 1786). There is also the influence exerted by what Mills called the Power Elite. He argues that “the power elite are not solitary rulers. Advisers and consultants, spokesmen and opinion-makers are often the captains of their higher thought and decision” (Mills, 1956, p. 4). According to Mills, these include professional politicians, administrators and celebrities. Football business can be that political and economic tool, as a means through which to accumulate and exert power, to acquire legitimacy and credibility, and to exert influence over the governance of sport. That’s what happens, for example, in the Italian power elite, according to Doidge, between business, politics and football extends into football governance (Doidge, 2018, p. 118).

As soon as the Plan was published, large Chinese corporations made significant investments in both domestic and overseas football and sports markets. Alibaba owns 50% stake in Guangzhou Evergrande, is also the main FIFA Club World Cup sponsor until 2023 and will sponsor the



Olympic Games until 2028. Dalian Wanda Group bought Infront Sports & Media AG (one of the most respected sports marketing companies in the world and which has as one of its clients nothing less than FIFA) and also sponsors FIFA. They also hold 3% of the shares of Atletico Madrid (whose stadium has its naming rights Wanda Metropolitano Stadium) and own the Chinese Super League (CSL) club Dalian Yifang FC. But in the present section, we will look at some more specific deals and investments that we identified to be more connected to the BRI.

### THE ENGLISH CONNECTION

In 2014, China signed a major oil and gas deal with Abu Dhabi, the capital city of the United Arab Emirates and also capital of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, the largest of the UAE's seven emirates. The UAE is a strategic partner to China, since the country is close to both overland and maritime Belt and Road routes. In October 2015, Xi Jinping visited the UK. The Chinese president has been to Manchester with the then British Prime Minister, David Cameron. During his stay in Manchester, Xi went to the Etihad Campus, the training centre of Manchester City, a club owned by City Football Group, which belongs to Abu Dhabi United Group. In that occasion, Xi took a selfie with the Argentinian striker Kun Aguero and Cameron. Two months later, on 1 December 2015, group of Chinese investors, headed by China Media Capital, acquired a 13% stake in the company that owns Manchester City football club for \$400 million. On 17 December 2015, during the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Shaikh Mohammad Bin Zayed, state visit to China, it was launched of a US\$10 billion UAE-China joint strategic investment fund. Last February 2019, City Football Group bought Sichuan Jiuniu Football Club a football club based in Chengdu, Sichuan, China. The club currently plays in the China League Two, the third tier league of the country. Just days before that acquisition Abu Dhabi's Etihad Airways announced a new fleet of Boeing 787's to service its routes into Chengdu. Finally, on 26 June 2019, it was announced that Etihad Rail, the developer and operator of the UAE's national railway, has awarded \$1.2 billion of civil and rail engineering work to the China Railway Construction Corporation and Abu Dhabi-based infrastructure company Ghantoot Transport & General Contracting. The deal concerns to Packages B and C of the UAE's national railway network. Package B runs for 216 km, and Package C runs for 94 km, and the two are part of the 605 km line from Ghuweifat

on the western border with Saudi Arabia to the Port of Fujairah on the eastern border with Oman.

Manchester City is not the only English club that has Chinese investments. As well as it is not just in the UAE that there are Chinese companies interested in railway construction. The four biggest clubs from the West Midlands in England—Aston Villa, Birmingham City (both from Birmingham), Wolverhampton Wanderers and West Bromwich Albion—belong to Chinese companies. And what is so special about that particular region of Britain? Phase 1 of the High Speed 2 (HS2), a planned high-speed railway in the UK, will create a new high-speed line between London and Birmingham by 2026. It just happens that according to the property schemes maps the railway will run through Aston Villa's training ground, wiping out all the academy pitches and two first-team pitches. It is told that Tony Xia, who owns Aston Villa, might be interested in investing in the HS2 project. Xia is not alone, however. The conglomerate Fosun International Ltd, owner of Wolverhampton, is the first private company to own majority stakes than the government in a high-speed railway project.<sup>6</sup> Fosun is reportedly interested in HS2 contracts.

## THE PORTS ALONG THE WAY

In March 2019, after a meeting of the Pakistani Senate Committee to Football Development, Chairman Senate Muhammad Sadiq Sanjrani said that promotion of football would be encouraged at national level. The Senator said that, to boost the development of Pakistani football, two football stadiums of international standard would be constructed in the cities of Quetta and Gwadar: with the assistance of the Chinese government. Since Mao Zedong's era "China uses stadiums as diplomatic means to demonstrate its cultural, economic and socio-political engagement in less-developed nations" (Xue et al., 2019). According to Xue et al., the RPC built more than 100 stadiums in developing countries. This is called the "stadium diplomacy". And in the case of the two announced stadiums in Pakistan, the choice of the two cities does not seem to be the result of chance. Quetta and Gwadar are located in the route of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and, moreover, integrate the sketch map of

<sup>6</sup>Fosun Group will own a 51% stake in the Hangzhou-Shaoxing-Ningbo High-Speed Railway, which is to be built in Zhejiang Province. Four State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), including China Railway Corporation, the one operating in the UAE.

China–Pakistan railway. Gwadar, in particular, is even more important to the Chinese interest, because of its port. The Gwadar Port is a deep-sea port situated on the Arabian Sea at Gwadar in Balochistan province of Pakistan. The port features prominently in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor plan and is considered to be a link between the ambitious BRI and Maritime Silk Road projects.

Football also appears on the route of BRI's maritime interests in the Mediterranean Sea. The Port of Barcelona, a world-class port, is in a strategic location, as well as being in a city that is also served by a good international airport. In November 2015, the Chinese company Rastar Managerial Group acquired 56% stake in RCD Espanyol, from Barcelona. Recalling Mills' argument, football business, owning a local football club, can be a persuasive political and economic tool, serving as a good instrument to try to exert influence or to establish contacts.

### SPORTS TOURISM AND BRI FOOTBALL TOURNAMENTS

The Football Plan is not the only Chinese public policy that has been published to leverage the growth of the country's sports industry. In July 2017, the China National Tourism Administration and the General Administration of Sport of China issued the “Action plan for the development of sports tourism ‘Belt and Road’ (2017–2020)” (一带一路”体育旅游发展行动方案 2017–2020): a strategic document that aims to promote the acceleration of the development of sports tourism within China and along the BRI. The “Sports Tourism Plan” has five “Principles of action”. Three principles emphasize the need to promote sports tourism along the “Belt and Road Initiative” as a mechanism of peaceful cooperation among nations, Chinese openness and tolerance to partner countries, mutual learning and benefits, and multilevel and multiform exchange (China National Tourism Administration and General Administration of Sport of China, 2017, pp. 1, 2). Studies point to the political importance of tourism, including tourism as a means of both promoting and consolidating the vision it creates regarding the culture and values of a country (Hollinshead & Hou, 2012). Tourism is also seen as a force capable of influencing public policies and international relations (Xu et al., 2018).

We are not going into details about the “Sports Tourism Plan” in this chapter.<sup>7</sup> What is worth to mention to the matter of the present analysis is that China’s the integration of sports tourism, football and BRI has been happening through several football exhibitions and tournaments.

- 2017, Shenyang: One Belt One Road Football Tournament—9 African countries, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Zambia, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Somalia, Zimbabwe and Ghana.
- 2017, Haikou: The “Belt and Road” Haikou Youth Football Tournament—8 teams from Croatia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and China.
- December 2017, Mangshi: “Colorful Yunnan, Belt and Road” International Football Open—Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Cambodia, East Timor, Croatia and China.
- 2017, Guangxi Zhuang: China-ASEAN International Youth Football Tournament—China, Taiwan, Australia, Russia, Vietnam, Indonesia and the People’s Republic of Korea.
- January/February 2018, Shanghai: “Belt and Road” Culture and Soccer Winter Camp—sought to promote China through cross-cultural interaction among children from BRI countries, including Serbia, Sri Lanka, Kenya and Panama.
- 6 April 2018, Hainan: “Belt and Road” Cup (“一帶一路” 杯)—teams from China, Azerbaijan, the Czech Republic and Hungary competed in friendly matches.

## CONCLUSION

BRI is undoubtedly an extremely grandiose and ambitious Chinese project, in particular from the president, Xi Jinping, responsible for launching this initiative in September 2013. It is an endeavour in which the Chinese seek deepen its process of opening up to the world, seeking to establish deals and trades across all continents. Building on its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, China stands as a promoter of globalization, proposing to countries along the BRI—overland and maritime routes—a model of economic, political and cultural cooperation and exchange.

<sup>7</sup>For further reading please check Emanuel Leite Junior and Rodrigues (2019).

In this chapter, we analysed this initiative by crossing it with other Chinese public policies, which are also audacious. China intends to boost its sports industry in order to make this sector one of the largest markets on the planet. To do so, it mainly counts on the Football Plan, another document that shows the Chinese ambition to be back in the centre of the world. Without a football tradition, accustomed to defeat and humiliation in the grass fields, China wants to become, by 2050, one of the superpower of the most popular sport in the world. And so we proposed to demonstrate in this chapter how the Plan conforms or connects with BRI.

What we noted in this chapter was that the “Chinese Dream” (中國夢) seeks the “rejuvenation” of the nation, which means the modernization of the country and economic success. And the “Plan”, in fact, aims to make great efforts to make real “the dream of the rise of football, the dream of a powerful sports nation and the dream of rejuvenating the nation” (CNDRC, 2016, p. 3). But this “China Football Dream” (中國足球夢), expressed by President Xi Jinping, also fits into the country’s geopolitical strategies, as the “Plan” attests by referring to diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges. Something that is also expressed through the BRI discourse, as we have shown in this chapter.

As we have seen in this chapter, football can be a “soft power” and therefore a public diplomacy tool. This potential comes from analysing the relationships of China and Chinese companies and investors from and/or through football all over the World. Through the “Football Plan” and also the “Sports Tourism BRI Plan”, China seeks not only to develop its sports industry, but also to establish diplomatic and trade relations, to promote exchange and exchange of knowledge, to bring the country closer to other nations, thus strengthening its economy and its leadership role in international geopolitics.

The Plan advocates the establishment of the international exchanges, seeing the rise of football activities as an important part of sports diplomacy (CNDRC, 2016, p. 2), defending the “international cooperation and exchanges of talent in the football industry” (CNDRC, 2016, p. 10), adding that the foreign exchange channels of football must be expanded and encouraged. We selected in this chapter cases that demonstrate that the Plan has in fact fostered relationship between China and countries like England, Spain, UAE, Pakistan and several other countries through sports tourism football friendly tournaments and exhibitions.

Finally, we understand that the contribution of this chapter lies in the fact that we analyse the BRI from the prism of the Chinese strategies for football and also for sports tourism from a different perspective (China's geopolitical aspirations and these phenomena as soft power tool). Bearing in mind that this is not an exhausted theme, especially considering that the Football Plan has a final goal by 2050, we understand that we have been able to demonstrate, bringing some cases as examples, that football can not only open doors and serve as a link or instrument of power and influence, but also has already been contributed to the China's BRI.

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## Chinese Soft Power And Public Diplomacy: Football As A Tool To Promote China-Brazil Relations

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### Abstract

Since the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), 70 years ago, sports have been used as a political and diplomatic tool. In October 2014, China issued the policy “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting 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). Since then other public policy documents have been published to leverage the growth of the country's sports industry by promoting the development of strategic sectors to meet a bold goal: by 2025 the sport industry generates \$ 813 billion for the economy of the country. One of these public policies is the “China’s medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)”- (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050年), thereafter ‘The Plan’. That plan is also relevant for China's diplomatic and trade relations, as explicitly demonstrate the perception of sports as an instrument of public diplomacy and soft power. 45 years ago, the PRC and Brazil established their diplomatic relations. Since 2009, China has become Brazil’s main trading partner. And more recently, since the release of ‘The Plan’, football has served as a form of exchange between the two countries. This paper, based on the literature review and the analysis of the mentioned public policy documents, aims to analyze the Plan trying to understand the innovative character of this public policy, from the perspective of innovation theory, especially in the contributions of Peter Drucker, who sees innovation as “an economic and social term”. As well seeks to identify how the Plan contribute to the development of the Chinese sports industry and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while serving as a public diplomacy and soft power tool, and in that way how football can contribute to forge closer ties between Brazil and China.

**Keywords:** China, Brazil, Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, Football, Belt and Road Initiative

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# CHINESE SOFT POWER AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: FOOTBALL AS A TOOL TO PROMOTE CHINA-BRAZIL RELATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

Between October 24 and 26, 2019, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro paid his first state visit to China. On October 25, Bolsonaro met his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Xi thanked Bolsonaro for his warm congratulatory message on the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC and also pointed out, “China and Brazil are the most representative emerging market countries and largest developing countries of the east and west hemispheres” (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2019). During the visit, the two countries also issued a joint statement between the People's Republic of China and the Federative Republic of Brazil. In this joint statement, the two Heads of State underlined the role of China-Brazil High-level Coordination and Cooperation Committee (COSBAN) to boost relations between the two countries. But for the analysis of this paper, we draw attention to points 6 and 8 of this 12-point document. The 6<sup>th</sup> in which both Presidents expressed their determination to cooperate with development and investment policies, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative. And especially point 8, which highlights “the role of cooperation in the cultural, educational and **sports fields** to increase mutual knowledge and understanding, in particular on **football-related issues...**” (our emphasis).

In recent years, regarding the sports field, football has taken on a special focus as a link to strengthen the exchange between the two countries. And it is not the result of chance. This is because the growth of the Chinese sports industry is one of the goals of the current government. In October 2014, the Chinese State Council issued a document to boost China's sports industry: “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption” (国务院关于加快开展体育产业促进体育消费的若干意见). This strategy is commonly deemed as the milestone marking the take-off of the Chinese sports industry (LIU, 2017). To meet that challenge, the Chinese government sees the development of football as the driving force behind this growth process. For this reason, “The Overall Reform Plan to Boost the Development of Football in China” (中国足球改革实施方案) was issued in 2015,

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a kind of preamble to the main document, from April 2016: “China’s medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)”- (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050 年), thereafter “the Plan”.

In addition to serving as a driving force for the development of China's sports industry, the Plan highlights, as we will show later, the recognition of the relevance of football to Chinese diplomatic and trade relations. Elite sports have long been used as a political tool, at the service of geopolitical and ideological strategies and, as Gupta puts it, also as a tool for exposing your country to the world (GUPTA, 2009, p. 182). After all, sport is a good way to promote the country's image internationally, seeking acceptance and legitimation (ALLISON; MONNINGTON, 2002). So it is no novelty to affirm that the economic, political and social roles of sports are focus of a great deal of attention in the politics and policymaking realm (KORNEEVA; OGURTSOV, 2016). Since the proclamation of the People's Republic of China the political use of sport has been recurrent. The 1950s were also marked by the first steps taken towards the setting up of an elite sports system in China (HONG, 2008). As we will see later, the politicisation of sport has continued over the decades and remains a reality to this day. Elite sport, thus, can serve as a resource for public diplomacy (BRANNAGAN; GIULIANOTTI, 2018; DUBINSKY, 2019), namely the so-called sports diplomacy (ABDI et al., 2018; JARVIE; MURRAY; MACDONALD, 2017; NYGÅRD; GATES, 2013), that can help a country achieve its desired international relations by exercising the power of attraction, or as Joseph Nye, a soft power tool (NYE, 2012).

In this context, China can be deemed as a good case study. This paper aims, through the analysis of the policy document, to understand the Plan by assessing its power to introduce change and novelty as an important part of sports diplomacy (CHINA’S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM COMMISSION, 2016, p. 2) and in promoting the "strengthen the international cooperation and exchanges of talent in the football industry” (CNDRC, 2016, p. 10), trying to understand, through the observation of some cases, how football contribute to the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). And taking insights from the theory of innovation, namely on the conceptualization of the innovation criterion provided by Drucker (2011, p. 148): “Innovation is not a technical term. It is an economic and social term. Its criterion is not science or technology, but a change in the economic or social environment”, this paper

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intends to answer the following question: is there an innovative role in establishing different forms of relations, cooperation and exchanges between Brazil and China, noting the merit of the link between sport, in this particular case football, diplomacy and soft power?

**FROM EMPIRES TO REPUBLICS**

The exchanges between Brazil and China dates to 1810, with the Chinese migrating to Brazil to plant tea and teach their skills to Brazilians. In 1880 the first diplomatic agreement would be signed, in Tientsin (currently Tianjin), between the Empire of Brazil and the Qing Dynasty: the Sino-Brazilian Treaty of Friendship, Trade and Navigation (SIMAS, 2011). In 1911, Sun Yat-sen proclaimed the Republic of China, which was recognized by Brazil in 1913, with Brazilians installing diplomatic representation in China in 1914 (FUJITA, 2003, p. 59 e 60). In 1949, Brazil did not recognize the People's Republic of China (FUJITA, 2003; SIMAS, 2011), however, in the early 1960s an attempt was made to approach the PRC, including the visit of the Vice-President João Goulart to China, the first so far, in 1961 (BECARD, 2011, p. 31 e 32). The military coup in 1964, however, marked a retreat in relations, with the dictatorship's option to align itself with the Western powers - USA (BECARD, 2011, p. 32).

It was not until 1974 that Brazil recognized the PRC. For Fujita, since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1974, "Brazil and the People's Republic of China have been building a solid and consistent bilateral relationship based on an intrinsic logic of mutual benefit" (FUJITA, 2003, p. 59), Becard, however, argues that "despite the desire to Brazil and China in promoting bilateral cooperation, relations developed slowly in the early years" (BECARD, 2011, p. 32).

In 1993, Brazil and China established a "Strategic Partnership" - the first of its kind celebrated by China (GONÇALVES; BAUAB BRITO, 2010) - and in 2004 the China-Brazil High-level Coordination and Cooperation Committee (COSBAN) was created. In 2009, China became the largest destination for Brazilian exports, absorbing 15,2% of the total exported by Brazil (IPEA, 2011). In 2012, the relations were elevated to "comprehensive strategic partnership" status and the Global Strategic Dialogue between Ministers of Foreign Affairs was established along with the Ten-Year

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Cooperation Plan (2012-2021). In 2012, China also became the main supplier of products imported by Brazil. In 2018, Brazilian exports to China totalled US\$ 64.2 billion (26,7% share on Brazilian exports) and the imports represented US\$ 34.7 billion, meaning that the flow of trade between the two countries reached the historical mark of US\$ 98.9 billion: US\$ 29.5 billion of commercial surplus. From January to October 2019, bilateral trade totalled US\$ 81.6 billion, with a favorable Brazil surplus of US \$ 21.5 billion. Despite all this, the Brazilian-Chinese relationship seemed to be at risk after the election of Bolsonaro, a far-right politician, who has cultivated an anti-China and anti-communist rhetoric, and following the president's decision to move closer to countries governed by leaders with whom he agrees with ideologically, such as the United States. However, as Bolsonaro's visit to China in October 2019 has shown, the Brazilian government came to realize that it is not smart to distance itself from its largest trading partner. And as mentioned above, the two countries issued a joint statement in which, among others, they express their determination to cooperate with development and investment policies, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative, and emphasize the importance of the “role of cooperation in the sports fields”, aimed at increasing mutual knowledge and understanding, expressly mentioning “football-related issues”.

**ON THE COURSE OF COOPERATION AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE**

In September 2013, Xi Jinping evoked the history of the Silk Road. Recalling Zhang Qian's travels to Central Asia “on missions of peace and friendship” (XI, 2014, p. 315), Xi emphasized how those journeys helped to open “door to friendly contacts between China and Central Asian countries” (p. 315). Further on Xi extols the ancient Silk Road as the “exchanges and mutual learning” provided by the interactions among the Eastern and Western civilizations along the route contributed to “the progress of human civilization” (p. 315). Therefore, Xi calls on the countries of the Eurasian region to have “an innovative approach and jointly build an economic belt along the Silk Road” (p. 317), thereby laying the foundations of what would initially be called “One Belt One Road”, now the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). The Chinese leader's political discourse, based on promoting the strengthening of “trust, friendship and cooperation, and promoting common development and prosperity” (p. 316), follows the



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Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence<sup>4</sup>. This is evident when Xi affirms China's commitment not to interfere in either the internal affairs or the foreign policies of the countries (p. 316). That is why Liu & Dunford (2016) claim that China is not only intending to reestablish the old trade route, but to use the cultural message of the Silk Road as a basis for international cooperation. The Silk Road, according to the same authors, would be a metaphor for peace and cooperation, openness and inclusion, mutual learning and mutual benefit.

The BRI aims to establish an open platform that enables mutual benefits to those involved through cooperation in economic, political and cultural exchanges. The cultural dimension component is mainly represented through the promotion of '*people-to-people ties*'. The Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative ( 推□“一□一路”建□工作□□小□□公室)<sup>5</sup> reckons people-to-people bonds as "*the cultural foundation for building the Belt and Road*", as well an ingredient needed to materialise "*the common dream of all peoples to enjoy a peaceful and prosperous life*" (CHINA'S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM COMMISSION, 2019). In May 2017, Presidents Mauricio Macri (Argentina) and Michelle Bachelet (Chile) attended the 1st BRI Forum, in Beijing. At the occasion, Xi "told Macri that the LAC region was a 'natural extension' of the Maritime Silk Road, showcasing that the possibility of its inclusion in the BRI has become more salient" (IISS, 2018). Panama was the first to sign such an agreement with China, in November 2017. In May 2019, at the time of the 2nd BRI Forum, a total of 15 countries from the LAC region have signed BRI-related MOUs with China, among them the Southern Americans Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Venezuela and Uruguay.

Giulianotti & Robertson (2004) argue that sport, in particular football, is one of the most dynamic and sociologically enlightening domains of globalization. As 'the global game', it helps us theoretically and empirically explore the multidimensional and long-term processes of globalization. Giulianotti also says that football is one of the great cultural institutions (GIULIANOTTI, 2010, p. 42), reflecting the social, political and economic context in which it finds itself. It seems pertinent, then, to observe how the Plan can help to understand the political and geopolitical aspirations of the country, serving as an instrument of public diplomacy and soft power.



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## THE PLAN

Throughout the 20th Century, despite some attempts, China was unable to succeed in this football (LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2018). The professionalisation of football in China has occurred only during the 1990s. The first professional championship was launched in 1994, and, for a brief period, it gained popularity (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2013). Despite being the first professional sport in China, Chinese football continues to lack competitiveness. After a few attempts of the Chinese authorities to fight football fraud, 2011 is commonly seen as the beginning of a new phase of professional football development in the country (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2013).

Issued in April 2016, the "China's medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)" - (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050年) is the latest Chinese effort to try to improve and develop football in the country. The Plan represents a public policy strategy formulated and implemented by the Chinese Government, under the competence of the State Council's Office of the Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference on Football Reform and Development (足改部际联席会议办公室). This body brings together, among others, 11 Ministries, 4 State Council Commissions, 5 government agencies, as well as the Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Department and a range of bureaus, agencies and commissions at the provincial and local government levels.

Currently, the Chinese men's team is only 69th in the FIFA World Men's Rankings<sup>6</sup>. There is, therefore, a long way to go, as acknowledged in the plan. Accordingly, to transform China into a future global football power, the original plan proposed three development stages, each one establishing goals to be fulfilled in 2020, 2030 and 2050, respectively (CHINA'S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM COMMISSION, 2016): **by 2020:** 20,000 specialized football schools, 70,000 football fields, 30 to 50 million primary and secondary school students practicing the sport; **by 2030:** 50,000 specialized football schools<sup>7</sup>, the Chinese Men team being one of the best in Asia, and the Women team established as "world-class"; **until 2050:** the Men team in the top-20 of the FIFA ranking, established as a global football power. It is worth to mention that the overarching goal to establish China as a "world-class football power" by 2050 aligns with broader national objectives culminating with the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 2049.

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The scope of the Plan is broad, aiming at points such as the educational system (CNDRC, 2016, 6), increasing the physical education's academic load, with emphasis on football, and encouraging the practice of football as a public health issue (aiming at the well-being physical and mental development of young people, as well as strengthening the physical conditioning of the masses). Here we see the importance of implementing public policies that integrate such an ambitious plan with the promotion of education as a springboard of for emerging talents by promoting new cultural habits, such as the practice of football. The football development plan is aware of this. For this reason, it aims to promote the strengthening of grassroots football and community football, talent training, increasing the scale of youth participation in football, developing football schools to promote interest and cultivating fans (CNDRC, 2016, pp. 3, 4, 5).

The Plan, however, also covers points such as the promotion of cultural and diplomatic exchange with other nations (as we will address later in this chapter). As well as aspire making football the driving force behind the development of the entire sports industry in the country, so that this will become a relevant sector in the national economy, helping the country to continue to grow and thrive, as mentioned before.

The far-reaching nature of the Chinese plan is well illustrated by figures such as the stated aim to ensure that the national sports industry will generate US\$ 460 billion by 2020 (CNDRC, 2016) and US\$ 813 billion by 2025 (Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption). For comparative reference, it is estimated that the global sports industry traded around US\$ 1.3 trillion in 2017, US\$ 519.9 billion of which in the United States alone (PLUNKETT RESEARCH, 2018). Accordingly, the Chinese plan makes explicit the ambition to foster its national sports industry in ways that will allow China, in a five-year period, to draw near the current size of the United States market.

### **SPORT, PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER**

Diplomacy is “the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of relations between the governments of independent state” (SATOW, 1957, p. 1). Dubinsky says “the term public diplomacy was applied during the Cold War referring to the process of international organizations trying to achieve foreign policy goals by engaging with

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foreign publics” (DUBINSKY, 2019, p. 1). The author adds that “new public diplomacy refers also to non-state actors” (p. 1) and explains that public diplomacy comprehends communications and interactions by governments, policymakers, organizations, and individuals to influence foreign publics to achieve a more favorable image of the nation and ultimately achieve foreign policy goals (DUBINSKY, 2019). Essentially, public diplomacy seeks to exercise influence by building positive and resilient affiliations, which other parties consider to be attractive and valuable (BRANNAGAN; GIULIANOTTI, 2018). Finally, sport diplomacy happens when international sport is consciously employed by governments as an instrument of diplomacy (ABDI et al., 2018).

Since the proclamation of the PRC sports have been used as a political and diplomatic tool. From the so called "sovietisation of sport" in the 1950s, fundamental in the establishment of contacts with the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012a); the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF) - through GANEF China aimed at strengthening its leadership in the Third World as an alternative to the powers of the United States and Soviet Union (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012b) and also promoted sport as a revolutionary diplomacy (QINGMIN, 2013); the "ping-pong diplomacy", which allowed Chinese rapprochement with the United States during a period of tension in Sino-Soviet relations (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012c); the Olympic strategy which was implemented from the 1980s (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012d) and deepened after the bad results in the Seoul Games (1988) with the implementation of the elite sport system, 'juguo tizhi' (□国体制), which in English, literally, means 'the whole country support for the elite sport system', a political strategy that can be summarized as the quest for glory at the Olympic Games (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012e, 2012f). That glory was achieved in 2008, when Beijing hosted the Summer Olympic Games. Hosting the Games was an important part of the whole Olympic strategy: “Beijing’s success was regarded as a milestone on the road of national revival” (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012g, p. 153). China believes that through the 2008 Beijing Games it was able to show the world its development and that it has managed to position itself as a world power: economic and sports. "The image of a highly modern nation, efficient and increasingly prosperous" (GIULIANOTTI, 2015, p. 290) was what the country tried to sell to the world, seeking not only the establishment

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of diplomatic and commercial relations, but also the development of tourism. According to Giulianotti (2015), mega-events such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup, “can be considered one of the most powerful contemporary manifestations of globalization.”

And that brings us to a key concept to understand the Plan and how this public policy is connected to the BRI, as a diplomatic tool. We are talking about what Joseph Nye calls soft power (Nye, 2012). Following the author, "power is the ability to influence others to achieve the results they want, which can be done through coercion, payment or attraction" (Nye, 2012, p. 151). In contrast to hard power, which would be characterized by coercion (e.g., military force) or pay (e.g., economic force), there would be soft power. As Nye (2004, p.5) explains: "A country can obtain the results it desires in international politics because other countries - admiring its values, emulating its example and aspiring to its level of prosperity - will want to follow it". Cultural achievements and sports success are ways to win the admiration of others. That is why sports can be a very useful tool in the exercise of soft power (BRANNAGAN; GIULIANOTTI, 2015, 2018; CHARI, 2015; CHEN; COLAPINTO; LUO, 2012; DELGADO, 2016; KRZYZANIAK, 2016; LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2017; SAMUEL-AZRAN et al., 2016).

The concept of 'soft power' was introduced in China in 1992 and has since generated a number of discussions and became a central concept in the political formulation in the Chinese Communist Party (XU; WANG; SONG, 2018), having been adopted in the official language of the CCP in 2007, in the then President Hu Jintao's speech at the party's 17th National Congress. Cultural legacies and achievements, besides sports success are ways to win the admiration of others. After all, culture is an important source of power and promoting a compelling culture is one of the main means to build an external national image (NYE, 2008, p. 95). In a speech at the 12th group study session of the Political Bureau of the 18th Central Committee, Xi Jinping stated that the strengthening of “cultural soft power is decisive for China to reach the Two Centenary Goals and realize the Chinese Dream of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (XI, 2014, p. 178).

As far as public diplomacy is concerned, the Plan explicitly demonstrates its perception of football as an instrument of sport diplomacy. For example, the policy

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paper discusses the growth of the international exchanges, seeing the rise of football activities as "an important part of sports diplomacy" (CNDRC, 2016, p. 2). It goes further and draws attention to the need to strengthen the "international cooperation and exchanges of talent in the football industry" (CNDRC, 2016, p. 10), adding that the foreign exchange channels of football must be expanded, encouraging all bodies to host various forms of international football exchange activities and all kind of football experts to go abroad for study and training, and, finally, supporting the more outstanding experts to work in international organizations (CNDRC, 2016, p. 16). The Plan also refers to the importance of increasing "the level of domestic and foreign opening up and develop win-win cooperation" (CNDRC, 2016, p. 5). As we can observe, "cooperation" and "exchanges" are two keywords both in the Plan and in the Xi's speech from 2013, showing how both initiatives play a fundamental role in the Chinese geopolitics and are consistent with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, that are "the most important diplomatic name card of China in the contemporary world stage" (Zhengqing & Xiaoqin, 2015, p. 67). To what extent has sport, in particular football, contributed to China's BRI? This is what we will discuss in the next section of this chapter.

### **THE PLAN UNDER THE LIGHT OF THE THEORY OF INNOVATION**

Can innovation theory inform the discussion of the Plan implications on China's relations with the world and more precisely with Brazil? Yes, if you consider innovation not as a technical term, but as an economic and social term (Drucker, 2011, p. 148). If you look at innovation as a means to foster change in the social and economic environment, inducing new patterns of behaviour and creating new habits (DRUCKER, 1985, 2011), and, at the same time, understanding that "the measure of innovation is the impact on the environment" (DRUCKER, 2011, p. 150). The Plan presents the overall goal of shifting the habits of sporting practice and consumption, fostering change in the social and economic environment. But also promoting the establishment of diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges. Joseph Schumpeter argues that "it is [...] the producer who as a rule initiates economic change, and consumers are educated by him; they are, as it were, taught to want new things, or things that differ in some respect or other from those which they have been in the habit of using" (SCHUMPETER, 1982, p. 65).

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Schumpeter's reference to the need for educating consumers to change their consumption habits finds some parallel in the Plan. In the sense that this policy document seeks to promote the popularization of football - the practice of sport and the consumption of its products - as a way of developing the country's sports industry. By establishing innovation as a change in the wealth-producing potential of existing resources (DRUCKER, 1985), we see the innovative nature of the Plan.

The Plan states that Chinese state will lead the "reform and innovative development" and will be the responsible for fully displaying that "football has a leading role for China's sports development and reform". The document clearly prescribes a distribution of tasks which seems to be regarded to ensure the conditions for an innovative public action (as, for example, sport administration departments and educational administration departments). The Plan also highlights the role of non-governmental partners. Indeed, it foresees an "extensive" participation of civil society in its implementation. Investments in football also provide the possibility of establishing innovative trade and diplomatic relations. Since the Plan, large Chinese corporations made significant investments in both domestic and overseas football markets.

### **CONNECTED BY FOOTBALL...**

According to the spirit of this novel strategy, the government limits its action to the guiding and supporting the development of the industry while fostering a structure that allows for setting forth a competitive market structure (ZHAN, 2013). As soon as the Plan was published, large Chinese corporations made significant investments in both domestic and overseas football and sports markets. In that sense, it is important to remember that investments in football can provide the possibility of establishing trade and diplomatic relations. We must also consider that investing in sports at an international level brings the possibility of creating a state brand, helping to establish a national brand name (GUPTA, 2009b, p. 1786). There is also the influence exerted by what Mills called the Power Elite. He argues that "the power elite are not solitary rulers. Advisers and consultants, spokesmen and opinion-makers are often the captains of their higher thought and decision" (MILLS, 1956, p. 4). According to Mills these include professional politicians, administrators, and celebrities. Football business can be that political and economic tool, as a means through which to accumulate and exert power,

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to acquire legitimacy and credibility, and to exert influence over the governance of sport. That's what happens, for example, in the Italian power elite, according to Doidge, between business, politics, and football extends into football governance (DOIDGE, 2018, p. 118).

One of the most notable examples is the relationship with the United Arab Emirates. In 2014, China signed a major oil and gas deal with Abu Dhabi, the capital city of the United Arab Emirates and also capital of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. The UAE is a strategic partner to China, since the country is close to both overland and maritime Belt and Road routes. In October 2015, Xi Jinping visited the United Kingdom. The Chinese president has been to Manchester with the then British Prime Minister, David Cameron. During his stay in Manchester, Xi went to the Etihad Campus, the training centre of Manchester City, a club owned by City Football Group, which belongs to Abu Dhabi United Group. Two months later, in December 2015, a group of Chinese investors, headed by China Media Capital, acquired a 13% stake in the company that owns Manchester City for \$400 million. In the same month, during the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Shaikh Mohammad Bin Zayed, state visit to China, it was launched a US\$10 billion UAE-China joint strategic investment fund. In February 2019, City Football Group bought Sichuan Jiuniu Football Club a football club based in Chengdu, Sichuan, China.

### ...BRAZIL-CHINA

Since the profound change introduced by Deng Xiaoping leadership and the development of the so-called '*socialism with Chinese characteristics*' and the inherent 'socialist market economy, Chinese authorities have been prolific in issuing a number of reforming policies, fully acknowledging that sports, of high cultural and economic relevance, could not be apart from the changing dynamics (HU; HENRY, 2017). Yu et al. refer to "a new socialist/centralist approach", using football to promote both political and cultural nationalisms (YU et al., 2017, p. 20). Keeping the ideal of the reform and opening up, which is a fundamental characteristic of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', the Plan establishes the need to promote "the opening up of football", emphasizing that it is necessary that "high-level football talent comes to work in China" (NDRC, 2016, p. 16). As soon as the Plan was launched the CSL has drawn



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considerable attention, mainly due to the hiring of foreign players, involving highly inflated transfer prices and salaries. Overnight, the Chinese Super League was under the spotlight. Some of these foreign players were Brazilian. Not that it is a novelty the migratory flow of Brazilian footballers. The talent of the Brazilian player has become an appetizing target in globalized football dominated by business. It is not surprising that currently there are 23 Brazilian players in the Chinese Super League. The innovation in this market has to do with the level of some of these players. Brazilian National Team athletes such as Oscar, Hulk, Paulinho, Ramires, Renato Augusto and Alexandre Pato are playing or have recently played in the CSL. In the specific case of Oscar, Hulk, Paulinho and Ramires, it was even more surprising because they left the European continent and headed for China, going against the current of the migratory flow of football, which is markedly Eurocentric.

In the field of the international cooperation and exchange of talent in the football industry (NDRC, 2016, p. 10), one of the goals of the Plan is to have 50,000 specialized football schools in China by 2025. For that, the Plan is emphatic in the need to support "the construction of a number of schools that are specialized in campus football" (NDRC, 2016, p. 9). The former Brazilian player Ronaldo (three times FIFA World Player of the Year and twice France Football's Ballon d'Or winner) has football schools in China. The so-called Ronaldo Academy are located in seven different cities and has eight schools. In the pursuit of knowledge exchange, Shandong Luneng, a CSL club, acquired Desportivo Brasil, a corporate-club from Porto Feliz in the state of São Paulo. The Grupo Traffic with the objective of training and preparing young talents to be negotiated to professional clubs created Desportivo Brasil. Shandong Luneng bought the club and every year they take 30 Chinese young players to spend a season training in Desportivo facilities. In the same way, in 2017 the CSL club Shanghai SIPG opened a training facility in Londrina, in Paraná. This endeavour is a partnership of the Chinese club with the Brazilian club Londrina EC and with two other private partners – SM Sports and Grupo Figer. The place has a built area of 1,100m<sup>2</sup>. The complex is for the exclusive use of young Chinese and the first Shanghai SIPG delegation to arrive in Paraná was the U18 team, with 25 athletes, including some from the China Youth National Team. It was even speculated that the Chinese club considered to take over Londrina EC, having negotiated with the club administrators its acquisition. More



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recently, the media reported alleged interests of Chinese investors in clubs such as CSA, from Alagoas, and América, from Minas Gerais. So far, however, it has been mere speculation. But we recall that Brazilian legislators are currently discussing bills aimed at transforming football clubs into companies, which could facilitate this type of investments in the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

In recent years, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has urged the “Chinese Dream” (中國夢) (PETERS, 2017, p. 1301) as part of the so-called "rejuvenation" pursuit, something that has to do with modernisation of the country and economic success (PETERS, 2017, p. 1302), which is part of the “Two Centenary Goals”: to “realize the Chinese Dream of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (XI, 2014, p. 178). This idea of “rejuvenation” also involves China's rise as a protagonist and global leader. And the BRI is undoubtedly the grandiose and ambitious Chinese project. A challenge in which China seeks to deepen its process of opening up to the world. Building on its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, China stands as a promoter of globalisation, proposing to the countries along the route - maritime and overland - an economic, political and cultural model of cooperation and exchange. Sport has not been left out of plans for economic development and expansion of Chinese influence. The Plan, analysed in this article, is compelling when it says that great efforts are needed to make real “the dream of the rise of football, the dream of a powerful sports nation and the dream of the nation's rejuvenation” (NDRC). 2016, p.3). In addition to the “China Football Dream” (中國足球夢), the search for global leadership in sport is highlighted in the Plan, which mentions the importance of “strengthening international cooperation” (NDRC, 2016, p. 10). “Expand football's foreign relations channels” (NDRC, 2016, p. 16) and for this the Chinese state counts on the participation of the private sector. Which, as we have shown in this article, has made massive investments in football both domestically and internationally. As Scutti and Wendt (2016) put it, football, alongside demography, technological development, economic and military might, is a criterion for evaluating international power. Thus, the authors argue, “geopolitics and football have become inseparable universes” (SCUTTI; WENDT, 2016, p. 105).

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The geopolitics of world football is changing. Emerging countries, such as the BRICS, have perceived in sport, and more specifically in football, a soft power instrument capable of repositioning them in the international context. China has been one of the driving forces of this change. Brazil is on the road of this transformation. As we saw in this article, football is already being used as a connecting element, creating new forms of relations between Brazil and China. We believe there is room for further deepening of these relationships. As the Plan itself dictates, the Chinese are willing to seek knowledge in football to develop the practice in their country, they long for knowledge exchange. Brazil, the five-time World Champion, is a talent barn that can help China find its way to the development of football. There is also a huge Chinese market to be explored. As Ronaldo has already identified through his Ronaldo Academy, spread across seven Chinese cities. But the Plan is not limited to encouraging the opening of football schools. There is a whole incentive to the development of the sports industry that can be exploited by Brazilian companies specialized in that field. On the other hand, Brazil can benefit from Chinese direct investments in the Brazilian market. Since the acquisition of companies and manufacturers in the sports industry, even the control of Brazilian clubs. The recent case of Bragantino, acquired by Austrian Red Bull, is a sign that foreigners companies opened their eyes to Brazilian football market. Chinese companies and entrepreneurs have been investing in clubs around the world, especially in the rich European market, but they have already reached South America. Brazil may be a new route on this journey.

Finally, we understand that the contribution of this work lies in the theoretical approach adopted in the analysis of the Chinese Football Plan. Introducing the discussion of how this Chinese public policy document serves as a tool of China's geopolitical strategy, demonstrating, for example, how football enters the path of the BRI. This is a different perspective, in which sport, particularly football, is considered as a connecting factor. Bearing in mind that we have not exhausted the subject, because we are talking about a strategy that has the ultimate goal of 2050, we understand that we were able to demonstrate, from the presented cases of relationships between Brazil and China, and through football, that sport can open doors and serve as a diplomatic instrument, such as a soft power tool.

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## Notas



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<sup>4</sup> The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence first appeared as an international agreement, that is, the Agreement between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India, concluded between China and India in Beijing in April, 1954 (Zhengqing & Xiaoqin, 2015, p. 70). It was Premier Zhou Enlai who first connected the idea of "peaceful coexistence" with the Chinese diplomacy. In a statement in support of the recommendation for peace submitted to the United Nations General Assembly by Soviet Union, he pointed out the principles of equality, mutual benefit, mutual respect for territorial sovereignty (p. 72). The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are: Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; Mutual non-aggression; Mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; Equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; Peaceful co-existence. The Five Principles are considered "the most important diplomatic name card of China in the contemporary world stage, the five principles play a significant role in promoting the peaceful development of China and shaping its image as a responsible power" (p. 67).

<sup>5</sup> The Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative operates under the National Development and Reform Commission and aims at providing BRI with guidance and coordination.

<sup>6</sup> FIFA World Rankings as of 24 October 2019.

<sup>7</sup> In 2017, the People's Daily (人民日报) reported that China's sporting authorities had altered the original goals of the football development plan. Instead of waiting until 2030 for 50,000 specialized football schools, the goal became to reach the mark by 2025 (PEOPLE'S DAILY, 2017).