

# CROSS-CULTURAL FACTORS, KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER AND FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA: INSIGHTS FROM A MIXED METHODS APPROACH

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## ABSTRACT

China has launched a long-term plan for football (soccer) development. One of its strategic initiatives consists of recruiting foreign coaches to obtain advanced skills and knowledge. The aim of this article is to analyse the reasons why the competitiveness of Chinese football has not yet reached the level of other countries, as well as to investigate the role played by the knowledge transferred by coaches from a leading football country such as Spain. Based on a mixed methods research design, the results suggest three reasons for the lower level of development of football in China: the prioritisation of academic success by young Chinese football players, traditional learning via repetition and automatisms, and the lack of success of China's national football team. The study contributes to the literature on the influence of cultural factors on national athletic success. Moreover, it offers practical implications for improving China's national strategy for football development.

## KEY WORDS

China, football (soccer), knowledge transfer, national competitiveness, cultural factors.

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## Introduction

For many years, China has been a benchmark for sporting success. Its greatest showcase has been the results obtained at recent editions of the Olympic Games, even surpassing the USA at the 2008 Olympic Games held in Beijing. However, much of this success can be attributed to individual sports with a greater tradition in China, such as table tennis, badminton, and athletics (Bougon and Leplâtre, 2016). In team sports, albeit with some exceptions such as basketball and volleyball, China does not have a significant record of success in international competitions. In

the case of football (soccer), the results of China's national team are even somewhat disappointing. This is striking in a country that, according to the World Bank (2021), already has 1.398 billion inhabitants, of which it is estimated that around a third (about 466 million) do some type of physical activity, and where there is an ever-increasing passion for football. With these ingredients, it is notable that it has not yet been possible to form a team of quality footballers to make up a more competitive national team.

This fact has not been ignored by the current Chinese President Xi Jinping who, since his accession to power, has introduced football into the official agenda of his government, promoting a national strategy based on a series of reform programmes whose objective is to make football part of Chinese civic culture (Junior and Rodrigues, 2017). Leaders of emerging economies use sport as a tool for reaching social, economic, cultural, and political objectives (Tinaz and Knott, 2021). In the case of China, the initiative is based on several pillars. First, football is viewed by China's government as an opportunity to promote the growth of the entire national sports industry, and in so doing, contribute to economic development (Junior and Rodrigues, 2019). Second, this is also seen as a way to promote China's soft power, namely positioning China as a benchmark country in football, and take advantage of the influence and international image derived therefrom (Lemus and Valderrey, 2020). Finally, another fundamental pillar is President Xi Jinping himself, a renowned football fan (Gündođan and Sonntag, 2018).

Until recently, the only news about Chinese football in other countries referred to the large amounts of money invested in hiring foreign footballers to raise the level of the Chinese Super League (the main domestic competition) and the acquisition of stakes in major European football clubs (Lee and No, 2021). However, the Chinese government's strategy has changed in recent years. Since 2017, expenditure on the transfers of foreign football players has been substantially reduced as a result of a series of restrictive measures, such as forcing unprofitable clubs which hire a foreign player to invest the same amount of money in a fund intended to promote youth football. At the same time, the Chinese government issued a new regulation to rationalise outward foreign direct investments made

by Chinese companies. This new regulation includes investments in sports clubs within the category of "restricted transactions", given the possibility that they do not contribute to the general interest of China, or involve excessive risk-taking (Latham and Watkins, 2017). For this reason, some Chinese companies have decided to put their shares in European football teams up for sale.

In short, this new strategy is much more oriented to the long term, seeking to develop comprehensive projects for the development of football, where training schools for young footballers are playing a greater role (Junior and Rodrigues, 2019). By boosting youth football academies, China is following what established elite football clubs in Europe have done (Thoene and Kneubuehler, 2017). The implementation of this strategy requires the recruitment of foreign experts and high-profile coaches, who may contribute to an improvement in the performance of China's national football system at various levels (Yu et al., 2019).

To this end, a series of short, medium, and long-term objectives have been established, collected in various official documents, among which the "Medium and Long-Term Development Plan of Chinese Football (2016-2050)" stands out (National Development and Reform Commission, 2016). It details measures such as: the integration of football in the Chinese government's economic and social development plan, the construction of new football fields and facilities, and the introduction of football as a subject in the study programmes of Chinese schools. Hence, it is a comprehensive development plan that involves a root-and-branch reform of Chinese football, including professional clubs, competitions, the national team, and youth academies (Liu et al., 2017). The ultimate goal is to realise what the plan itself calls

“China’s football dream”, which includes becoming a football global power by 2050. It involves, among other objectives, qualifying for, hosting, and ultimately winning the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) World Cup (Zhang, 2020).

The aim of our study is to investigate the reasons why the competitiveness of football in China has not yet reached the level of other countries with greater international achievements in the sport. To do this, we will examine the role played by factors related to national culture. More precisely, we seek to answer these two research questions: Why is Chinese football still not competitive internationally? How do cultural factors affect the determinants of China’s competitiveness in football?

This study makes several contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on international management, analysing the role played by cross-cultural differences in national athletic success. Second, it provides new empirical evidence on international management in the field of sport, a topic that has not been analysed so far, in particular with regard to football and cultural factors (Peeters et al., 2021; Szymanski et al., 2019, 2021; van Bakel and Salzbrenner, 2019). Finally, it offers practical implications about the transfer of knowledge and skills from leading football countries to China, which is seeking to improve its global football positioning.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the literature review. Then, the methodology used in the empirical study is explained and the main results are reported. After the discussion, we suggest potential avenues for future research.

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. Cultural factors and sports success

Several variables influence a country’s performance in international sporting competitions. In the case of football, it is noteworthy that, despite being a universal sport, international success strongly differs among world regions. This may be illustrated by performance in the 21 FIFA World Cup tournaments held between 1930 and 2018. Only eight national teams have won the tournament: Brazil (five times), Germany and Italy (four times each), Argentina, France, and Uruguay (twice each), and England and Spain (once each). This shows a clear regional bias, since winners have only come from Europe and South America to date. Moreover, no team from outside those continents has been runner-up, and only two have even reached the semi-finals: the USA (in 1930) and South Korea (2002).

A large population seems not to be a determinant of success. China and India, the world’s two most populous countries, have not enjoyed any success in the FIFA World Cup, with the only exception being China’s qualification for the 2002 tournament, albeit with disappointing results in the three games played: three losses, no goals scored, and nine goals conceded. While a large population can produce a greater pool of talented football players, this may be capitalised upon only if individuals play football instead of other sports; this, in turn, depends on the country’s cultural predisposition toward football (Hoffmann et al., 2002). This suggests that cultural factors matter when explaining international sporting success.

National culture affects the assessment of physical and aesthetic factors of a given sport, its popularity among citizens, and the reasons for playing, including not only

incomes but also non-pecuniary motivations (Hoffmann et al., 2002, 2004). Past studies have investigated the impact of certain cultural factors on the success of football teams. One such factor is collectivism, namely the importance attached by a society to collective accomplishments instead of individual achievements (Hofstede, 1980). In team sports such as football, this variable showing a dichotomy between the “I” and the “we”, or group identity, may play a key role. Accordingly, Maderer et al. (2014) find that European football clubs with players from more collectivist cultures are more successful, as they tend to subordinate their individual goals to those of the team. Furthermore, Hoffmann et al. (2002) report that certain underlying cultural roots inherent in Latin societies contribute to the popularity of football, this being a determinant of national team performance in those countries with a larger population.

As for football in China, prior research has also addressed the influence of culture-related variables. Hence, Lemus and Valderrey (2020) suggest that football could contribute to raising China’s sense of national pride if a winning football team could be put together. Yu et al. (2019) posit that Chinese football nowadays represents an idiosyncratic collection of players, coaches, fans, firms, and state actors that create cultural interdependencies, where China’s government seeks to promote football as part of everyday cultural life. Wang and Hu (2017) highlight that, in team sports, the usual mentoring relationship between coach and athletes, starting when the latter are young, is influenced by *guanxi*, a distinctive feature of China’s culture that refers to the importance of interpersonal connections and social networks as drivers of many aspects of Chinese society. Finally, Liu et al. (2017) point out that cultural differences may hinder the applicability of Western best practices and professional

experiences in sports activities to China.

The above reasoning suggests that culture really matters, not only when explaining the sporting performance of a given country, but also the validity of the transfer of sporting knowledge and methods from one country to another. Next, we outline the theoretical framework used in this study.

## 1.2. Hofstede’s Model

Regarding the analysis of cultural differences between countries, one of the most relevant conceptual frameworks is Hofstede’s model. Initially developed by Hofstede (1980) and later expanded by Hofstede et al. (2010), this model revolves around the concept of cultural distance, referring to the differences existing in relation to the way individuals from different countries observe certain behaviours. This, in turn, influences the validity of the transfer of work practices and methods from one country to another. This model has also had a significant academic impact and has been widely used in numerous research studies (Andrijauskiene and Dumciuviene, 2018; Quer et al., 2017; Rigtering et al., 2017; Wu, 2006). Hofstede’s model considers that the values that distinguish one country from another can be grouped around six dimensions of national culture, which we summarise below, following Hofstede et al. (2010).

The first of these is “power distance”, or the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept that inequalities exist in a social hierarchy. The second dimension is “individualism versus collectivism”, or the degree to which individualistic or collective behaviours are valued. The third is the so-called “masculinity versus femininity” and refers to the relative importance of values traditionally associated with men (achievement, material rewards for success, etc.) and women (quality of life, solidarity, personal relationships, etc.).

The fourth dimension is “uncertainty avoidance”, or the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The fifth one is “long-term versus short-term orientation,” that is, the preference for quick results over perseverance for future rewards. The last dimension is “indulgence versus restraint”, associated with the social tendency towards the free gratification of the desires to enjoy life and have fun or towards the establishment of social norms that restrict those behaviours in some way.

Hofstede's model will be used in our study to justify the influence that Chinese culture exerts on the structural determinants of competitiveness of Chinese football. Before doing so, we will explain how we have conducted our empirical research.

## 2. Methodology

We have adopted a mixed or hybrid methods approach, which is increasingly used in business and management research. Mixed methods research is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches with the goal of broader and deeper understanding and corroboration (Johnson et al., 2007). There are several types of mixed methodology. In this study, we use a QUAL → QUAN sequential design, which allocates the same degree of importance to both the qualitative (QUAL) and the quantitative (QUAN) parts. We initially proposed an exploratory design, whereby the first qualitative part allowed us to explore the phenomenon which is the topic of this study. In addition, the main purpose was development, since the qualitative part facilitated the better subsequent execution of the quantitative part (Molina, 2012; Sánchez, 2019).

We considered that a mixed methods approach was the most appropriate option in our empirical research because the

QUAL design in a novel study helps to discern the variables to be measured (Molina, 2013). Thus, the first qualitative part helped us to propose hypotheses, to improve the quantitative instrument for collecting information, and to know more about the context for the selection of the sample and the use of specific variables and measures (Creswell, 2015). Later, in terms of the QUAN design, we used a survey to collect quantitative data and test the hypotheses. The survey items were based on the first qualitative part of the study, which allowed the variables to be more specific and appropriate.

### 2.1. Qualitative research design

The qualitative research was based on evidence derived from the experience and opinions of the individuals who were interviewed (Sánchez, 2019). Hence, we first carried out an exploratory study to examine a phenomenon for which there is no well-defined theoretical framework, with the aim of developing hypotheses (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014). Exploratory studies are suitable in situations in which there is no consolidated knowledge about the area under study (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2000), as is the case in our research. Additionally, it was a comparative or multiple study, in which the same questions were asked to compare the answers obtained and draw conclusions therefrom. In order to collect information, we conducted in-depth interviews with professionals linked to football in China. As Johnson (2001) points out, in-depth interviews are useful when knowledge is often taken for granted and not easily articulated and where different individuals may have multiple perspectives on the phenomenon to be analysed.

The interviewees had different profiles and backgrounds, including not only foreigners but also a Chinese national. This allowed us to obtain primary information

from different perspectives, which was very useful and enriched the first part of our empirical research. In terms of the foreign participants, we focused on Spaniards, as Spain is considered one of the world's leading football countries. To implement the abovementioned national strategy for football development, China needs to absorb knowledge from other countries that are already a world benchmark in football, one of them being Spain. Accordingly, China has established cooperation agreements with Spanish organisations such as the Professional Football League (LaLiga) and the Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF), as well as with various renowned Spanish football clubs such as Real Madrid, Atlético de Madrid, and Villarreal. One of the central axes of these cooperation agreements is youth football. As a result,

an increasing number of Spanish coaches have landed in China, not only to join Chinese professional football teams, but also to integrate the technical staff of the football schools that are being implemented throughout the country.

All the interviews were conducted in person, in some cases complemented with digital tools. Although we used a semi-structured interview script, it included only open questions to give the interviewees more freedom when expressing their opinions (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). These questions focused on the following general topics: the professional experience of the interviewee, facilities and existing infrastructure in China, training methods, organisation of competitions, and cultural factors. Table 1 offers a descriptive analysis of the individuals interviewed.

**Table 1. Interviewee profile (qualitative study)**

Name	Nationality	Activity developed in China	Interview date
Alexandra Fernández	Spanish	Youth football coach	November 2019
Sergio Pou	Spanish	Youth football coach	March 2020
Jaime Pérez	Spanish	Youth football coach	April 2020
Luis García Plaza	Spanish	Professional football coach	March 2020
Harrison Lu	Chinese	University professor / Amateur footballer	April 2020

Source: Own elaboration.

## 2.2. Quantitative research design

We used a survey instrument administered online through the "Microsoft Forms" application. During the first stage, a questionnaire was sent out to the individuals interviewed during the qualitative study to carry out a pre-test in order to analyse the attributes of the questionnaire, before preparing the final version. In the second phase, the questionnaire was sent out to the target population using various online channels such as email, WhatsApp, and WeChat (the latter being the most popular social media application in China). The target population was made up of professionals linked to football in China. Respondents were reached using snowball sampling,

which consists of asking respondents to share the online questionnaire with their acquaintances who have or have had a relationship with Chinese football. Snowball sampling is a solution in hidden populations, as in our case, namely when the population of interest is not fully known, not well defined and fully listed, and creating a sampling framework is difficult or impossible (Voicu and Babonea, 2007). Besides, this method has the advantages of avoiding experimenter selection bias and facilitating the collection of experimental data (Jackson et al., 1996). Initially, we based data collection on the personal connections of the interviewees in the qualitative study as well as on those of one of the au-

thors of this article, who has been an elite football player. Finally, a total of 115 useful responses were received.

### 3. Research results

#### 3.1. Qualitative research

Based on the information obtained from the interviews carried out in the qualitative study, we proposed various hypotheses related to the theoretical framework of our study: Hofstede's model of cultural differences between countries.

A first noteworthy result extracted from the interviews was the importance given to academic studies in China. Alexandra Fernández highlighted the everyday life of Chinese schoolchildren: "They have classes at school from Monday to Saturday. The schedule is very demanding, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., so that later the children do not have time for other activities. They finish classes, do their homework and at 9 p.m. they are in bed, to start over again the next day. Also, at age 14, many children go to boarding schools and can no longer be in a football team outside school. From 15 to 19 years old, there are boarding schools where teenagers dedicate themselves exclusively to football, but many parents do not want that future for their children".

Apart from the importance placed on academic studies, China's culture is characterised by a large degree of "power distance", according to Hofstede's model. In China there is great respect for hierarchy, particularly within the family itself. Thus, many parents make decisions about the path their children should follow. Harrison Lu pointed out that "most Chinese parents attach importance to academic studies; improving in football is not important compared to academic studies; most parents will not allow their children to spend too much time and money on football training".

Alexandra Fernández also perceived that in China "the family is very important, and parents are highly respected. Parents want their children to study and build a future; this may cut off their development for team sports". The one-child policy (in force between 1979 and 2015) might have played a role as well. It might have created a more individualistic generation against the Chinese tradition of "collectivism" (according to Hofstede's model). This could have made it easier for them to excel in individual sports rather than in team sports. The search for academic success refers to another dimension of Hofstede's model: "masculinity versus femininity". Likewise, the dimension of "indulgence versus restraint" can also be considered since, by prioritising academic success, sport can be perceived as a waste of time that prevents students focusing on what is truly important: their studies. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** The lower number of young football players who become professionals in China is caused by the prioritisation of academic success, the consideration of football only as a leisure activity that takes time away from studying, and the fulfilment of parents' wishes (which leads many young football players to focus on their academic training).

To promote the competitiveness of a country in a given sport, there must be people with the appropriate qualifications, and with specific skills for the requirements of the activity. Regarding this, it should be noted that the habit of "following the leader" in China may limit improvisation. Luis García Plaza referred to this when asked about his perception the first time he came into contact with Chinese football: "The Chinese are very disciplined, but the training they use in football academies is very analytical, they lack talent and inventiveness on the field".

It is remarkable that, when asked about training methods, all the interviewees agree that the most commonly used system in Chinese football is that of repetition to create automatisms. Sergio Pou highlighted this point: "Their methods, both training and learning, are based heavily on the repetition and automatism of technical skills. They are capable of investing many long training sessions during a week, repeating and repeating what they want to learn at that moment". As for Chinese football coaches, Jaime Pérez added that: "It is difficult for them to accept some kind of freedom in decision-making for the football player, and this makes them more prone to using direct command methods which are simpler".

Alexandra Fernández explained her own experience in the face of the problem she encountered when she arrived in China: "When I arrived in China, I wanted to train in an integrated way; at first, it was difficult for the Chinese trainers to understand the exercises and I had to end up replacing the integrated training with individual technique sessions and repetition training". Harrison Lu's Chinese vision confirmed the above comments from the Spanish interviewees: "I have seen some training sessions where the coach instructs the technique (such as shooting or passing with different parts of the feet), then the players imitate the technique; they repeat them several times and then move on to the next task". This context can be explained because, as previously mentioned, in China there is a high level of "power distance" according to Hofstede's model, which, in turn, promotes the above-mentioned habit of "following the leader". Furthermore, even though China has a low score in the "uncertainty avoidance" dimension, there are many norms and rules of behaviour in Chinese society. On the contrary, in Spanish football training, an integrated methodology is used,

decision-making is encouraged, and the combination of several simultaneous technical actions is promoted. This was emphasised by Luis García Plaza: "Spanish coaches try to use more training methods. The Chinese coaches used very analytical and simple methods". Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2.** In China there are many rules and norms of behaviour leading to learning based on repetition and automatisms which, together with the habit of following the leader, may be beneficial for individual sports, but not for team sports such as football.

When it comes to cultural affinity toward football, drawing on his experience as a professional football coach in China, Luis García Plaza stated that "they like football, but not so much. There are many people who dedicate themselves to other things and, although they watch football, there is a larger tradition in other sports, especially individual sports". This idea is perceived in the same way by the Chinese themselves, as Harrison Lu confirmed: "We don't have a strong cultural environment around football. I mean we have a lot of fans of this sport, but the actual number of fans is very limited". Finally, Alexandra Fernández also commented on her perception of whether or not there is a real cultural environment in China around football: "There are still Chinese people who don't know what football is. Children who know football, it is because of the new approach of the Chinese president, because they are compelled to practice it in schools".

The latter is something that does not happen in a country like Spain, because the media continuously report football-related news. Moreover, as Harrison Lu pointed out: "The atmosphere of football in China is not always positive; Chinese football is sometimes mocked by the Chinese themselves, especially when it comes to the



men's national football team". This statement regarding the lack of success of China's national football team is also shared by Luis García Plaza: "At the national team level they are unable to succeed". This prevents the Chinese population from being proud of their national football team and, thereby, cannot motivate further development and interest in football, taking advantage of the high collectivist nature of Chinese society suggested by Hofstede's model. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3.** The lack of success of China's national football team prevents football from contributing to the development of national pride based on the collectivism of Chinese culture, which is a contributing factor to the lack of football tradition in that country.

### 3.2. Quantitative research

As stated above, we used a survey instrument in our quantitative research. The respondents were asked to rate several items on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree" (Dawes, 2008). To prepare the questionnaire, we relied on previous studies that analysed the competitiveness of industries in specific locations (Adarmes, 2016; Akçagün, 2013; Horta et al., 2016). Regarding the questions related to Hofstede's model, we based these on the Values Survey Module (VSM) questionnaire developed by Hofstede and Minkov (2013). However, in both cases, the questions were adapted to the specific needs and objectives of our empirical research, according to the previous qualitative research. Table 2 summarises the questions, variables and measures related to each hypothesis.

**Table 2. Variables, measurements, and their corresponding hypotheses (quantitative study)**

Question No.	Variable	Hypothesis
1	In China there are few young football players who become professional footballers.	H1
	The main reason for the above statement is that:	
	– The Chinese prioritise success in their academic training over success in professional football.	
2	– The Chinese consider football to be just a leisure activity that takes time away from other more productive activities. – Many young Chinese fulfil the wishes of their parents and focus on their academic training, finally dissociating themselves from football.	H1
3	Traditional training methods in China can be beneficial for individual sports, but not for team sports such as football.	H2
	The main reason for the above statement is that:	
4	– In China there are many rules and norms of behaviour that promote learning based on repetition (that is, repeating the same action many times until it is automated). – The Chinese have the habit of "following the leader", which makes them very disciplined, but restricts improvisation when making decisions.	H2
5	The limited tradition of football in China is due in part to the lack of success of its national football team, which has prevented the development of a sense of national pride related to football.	H3
Measurement of all variables: 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree)		

Source: Own elaboration.

Next, we report the main findings from our quantitative empirical research, which we analysed using SPSS Statistics Version 26 software.

#### 3.2.1. Test of Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1, which refers to the low number of young football players who become professionals, was tested by analysing crosstabs and the Chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ -test) from questions 1 and 2. If the  $\chi^2$

– test turns out to be statistically significant, we can conclude that there is an association between the categorical variables. Furthermore, we will obtain the adjusted residuals (ARs) to analyse the relationship between categories, so that if the AR is large (in absolute values), the correspond-

ing categories will be related. ARs that are greater than 1.96 in absolute value will be statistically significant at the 0.05 level, and those that are greater than 2.58 in absolute value will be significant at the 0.01 level (Rodríguez and Mora, 2001). Tables 3, 4 and 5 show the results obtained.

**Table 3.  $\chi^2$ -test for “prioritisation of academic success” and “limited number of young football players who become professional footballers” (Hypothesis 1)**

		Limited number of young football players who become professional footballers						
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total	
Prioritisation of academic success	Strongly disagree	Count	2	5	1	4	4	16
		AR	1.2	1.7	-1.0	-.4	-.8	
	Disagree	Count	1	3	1	4	3	12
		AR	.3	.8	-.7	.4	-.7	
	Neutral	Count	1	5	4	4	2	16
		AR	.0	1.7	1.2	-.4	-1.9	
	Agree	Count	2	2	8	12	12	36
		AR	-.2	-2.1	1.5	.7	-.1	
	Strongly agree	Count	1	4	3	9	18	35
		AR	-1.0	-1.0	-1.2	-.5	2.6	
Total	Count	7	19	17	33	39	115	
$\chi^2$ -test: 20.818 (Sig. 0.186)								

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 4.  $\chi^2$ -test for “football is just a leisure activity” and “limited number of young football players who become professional footballers” (Hypothesis 1)**

		Limited number of young football players who become professional footballers						
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total	
Football is just a leisure activity	Strongly disagree	Count	1	4	1	3	2	11
		AR	.4	1.9	-.6	-.1	-1.2	
	Disagree	Count	1	4	4	6	4	19
		AR	-.2	.6	.8	.3	-1.3	
	Neutral	Count	4	4	4	5	1	18
		AR	3.1	.7	1.0	-.1	-2.8	
	Agree	Count	1	4	6	14	13	38
		AR	-1.1	-1.2	.2	1.4	.0	
	Strongly agree	Count	0	3	2	5	19	29
		AR	-1.6	-1.0	-1.4	-1.6	4.2	
Total	Count	7	19	17	33	39	115	
$\chi^2$ -test: 34.580 (Sig. 0.005)								

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 5.  $\chi^2$ -test for "fulfilling parents' wishes" and "limited number of young football players who become professional footballers" (Hypothesis 1)**

		Limited number of young football players who become professional footballers						
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total	
Fulfilling parents' wishes	Strongly disagree	Count	0	3	0	0	0	3
		AR	-.4	3.9	-.7	-1.1	-1.3	
	Disagree	Count	1	4	2	2	3	12
		AR	.3	1.7	.2	-1.0	-.7	
	Neutral	Count	4	5	2	8	3	22
		AR	2.6	.9	-.8	.9	-2.2	
	Agree	Count	2	5	13	19	17	56
		AR	-1.1	-2.1	2.5	1.2	-.8	
	Strongly agree	Count	0	2	0	4	16	22
		AR	-1.3	-1.0	-2.2	-1.2	4.3	
	Total	Count	7	19	17	33	39	115

$\chi^2$ -test: 49.545 (Sig. 0.000)

Source: Own elaboration.

As shown in Table 3, the  $\chi^2$ -test is not statistically significant (Sig. 0.186). Therefore, we cannot conclude that there is an association between the variables "prioritisation of academic success" and "limited number of young football players who become professional footballers". Conversely, Table 4 reports a  $\chi^2$ -test that is statistically significant (Sig. 0.005). Hence, there is an association between the variables "football is just a leisure activity" and "limited number of young football players who become professional footballers". Analysing crosstabs, we find an AR of 4.2 between the "strongly agree" categories of both variables, being greater than 2.58, and consequently statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Similarly, as shown in Table 5, the  $\chi^2$ -test is also statistically significant (Sig. 0.000). Accordingly, there is an association between the variables "fulfilling parents' wishes" and "limited number of young football players who become professional footballers". In this case, crosstabs show an AR of 4.3 between the "strongly agree" categories of both variables, thereby being statistically significant at the 0.01 level as well.

As a result, our findings suggest that the consideration of football only as a leisure activity that takes time away from other more productive activities, and the fulfilment of parents' wishes (which leads many young football players to focus on their academic training) are the two main reasons for the limited number of young football players who become professionals in China. The prioritisation of academic success turns out not to be a direct determining factor in itself, suggesting that it is parents who force young Chinese people to focus on their academic careers, leading them to distance themselves from football. Thus, our findings provide partial support for Hypothesis 1.

### 3.2.2. Test of Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2, related to rules and behavioural norms that promote learning based on repetition, was tested in a similar way, namely using crosstabs and the  $\chi^2$ -test, in this case based on questions 3 and 4. Tables 6 and 7 show the results.

**Table 6.  $\chi^2$ -test for “many rules and norms of behaviour” and “traditional training methods beneficial for individual sports” (Hypothesis 2)**

		Traditional training methods beneficial for individual sports						
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total	
Many rules and norms of behaviour	Strongly disagree	Count	1	0	0	0	2	3
		AR	4.2	-.3	-.3	-1.1	.1	
	Disagree	Count	0	2	0	3	0	5
		AR	-.3	5.4	-.4	1.6	-3.0	
	Neutral	Count	0	0	0	1	0	1
		AR	-.1	-.2	-.2	1.6	-1.3	
	Agree	Count	0	1	3	17	9	30
		AR	-.8	.3	2.3	3.9	-4.4	
	Strongly agree	Count	1	0	1	12	62	76
		AR	-.5	-2.5	-1.8	-4.3	5.6	
	Total	Count	2	3	4	33	73	115
	$\chi^2$ -test: 81.835 (Sig. 0.000)							

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 7.  $\chi^2$ -test for “following the leader” and “traditional training methods beneficial for individual sports” (Hypothesis 2)**

		Traditional training methods beneficial for individual sports						
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total	
Following the leader	Strongly disagree	Count	1	1	0	0	0	2
		AR	5.3	4.2	-.3	-.9	-1.9	
	Disagree	Count	0	0	0	4	5	9
		AR	-.4	-.5	-.6	1.1	-.5	
	Neutral	Count	0	1	1	4	5	11
		AR	-.5	1.4	1.1	.6	-1.3	
	Agree	Count	1	1	3	11	19	35
		AR	.6	.1	2.0	.4	-1.4	
	Strongly agree	Count	0	0	0	14	44	58
		AR	-1.4	-1.8	-2.1	-1.1	2.8	
	Total	Count	2	3	4	33	73	115
	$\chi^2$ -test: 61.023 (Sig. 0.000)							

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 6 reports the statistical significance of the  $\chi^2$ -test (Sig. 0.000) and the AR (5.6) between the “strongly agree” categories of the variables “many rules and norms of behaviour” and “traditional training methods beneficial for individual sports”. Likewise, Table 7 shows both a statistically significant  $\chi^2$ -test (Sig. 0.000) and AR (2.8) between the “strongly agree” categories of the variables “following the leader” and “traditional training methods beneficial for individual sports”. This provides strong support to Hypothesis 2, as both rules and behavioural norms leading to learning

based on repetition and the tradition of following the leader seem to be determinants of traditional training methods in China that can be beneficial for individual sports, but not for team sports such as football.

### 3.2.3. Test of Hypothesis 3

To test Hypothesis 3, dealing with the lack of football tradition in China, we analysed frequencies and descriptive statistics of the responses to question 5. Table 8 shows the results.

**Table 8. Frequencies and descriptive statistics for “limited tradition of football in China due to the lack of success of its national football team” (Hypothesis 3)**

Limited tradition of football in China due to the lack of success of its national football team			
	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Strongly disagree	3	2.6	2.6
Disagree	16	13.9	16.5
Neutral	29	25.2	41.7
Agree	50	43.5	85.2
Strongly agree	17	14.8	100.0
Total	115	100.0	
Mean: 3.54; Standard deviation: .994			

**Source: Own elaboration.**

We obtained a mean of only 3.54, which suggests that the lack of success of China's national football team is not a decisive factor in the limited tradition of this sport in China. However, we could consider that it does have some influence, since 67 respondents, or 58.3%, “agree” or “strongly agree” with that categorisation. In actual fact, a successful achievement such as Spain experienced with the victories of its national football team in the 2008 and 2012 European Championships and the 2010 World Cup would have generated a feeling of national pride in China and would have awakened the interest of many young Chinese in this sport. In any case, the results obtained lead us to consider Hypothesis 3 as only partially supported.

## 4. Discussion

Our study has investigated the cultural factors that have not yet allowed China to catch up to other countries with a longer football tradition, such as Spain. From a social and educational viewpoint, our results suggest that high pressure on the part of the parents and the very structure of the Chinese educational system, which leads students to be very competitive when it comes to access to higher education, makes it difficult for young Chinese to practice and continue their sporting careers (Li, 2020). An outstanding example of this is the so-called “gaokao”, the highly

demanding national examination for entrance to universities in China.

The use of repetitive learning methods to imitate behaviours, another factor deeply rooted in Chinese culture, also plays a role here. These traditional methods prevent improvisation and creativity among football players, which may have a direct influence on performance in team sports. Integrated training methods, that is, using real game situations in which technical, tactical, and physical aspects are present, are used to a much greater extent in Spain (Gallardo et al., 2020; Pacheco, 2007). Conversely, China continues to use analytical and repetition methods for the acquisition of technical skills, which hinders the motivation and performance of players (León et al., 2020). Furthermore, a sense of national pride is another distinctive characteristic of Chinese culture, albeit football is not included. The lack of international success of China's national football team seems to undermine the development of a sense of national pride around football to some extent, which hinders the promotion of football among younger generations.

As stated above, one of the key elements of China's long-term plan for football development relies on foreign coaches being hired in China to introduce new coaching methods, practices, and tactics. The results of this strategy probably still need more time to materialise in terms of

performance in international football competitions, thereby reducing the gap between China and high-performing football countries. Drawbacks arising from cultural distance must be overcome. As reported by Peeters et al. (2021), a greater cultural distance between a foreign coach's home country and the destination country reduces the effectiveness of learning-by-hiring, yet migrant coaches with extensive international experience can mitigate that negative effect. Although coaches with prior intercultural experience are more likely to communicate better with players from a different cultural background, this does not always lead to superior team performance. Past studies addressing this issue in elite football teams did not reach conclusive findings. Thus, whereas Maderer et al. (2014) fail to confirm that the intercultural experience of the coach positively moderates the relationship between cultural distance to team members and team success, Szymanski et al. (2019) report that national teams with multicultural coaches perform better only when the competitive environment is highly global, namely at the FIFA World Cup instead of regional tournaments such as the European Championship and Copa America.

#### 4.1. Contributions

Our study makes several contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on international management by analysing the influence that cultural idiosyncrasy has on the structural determinants of national competitiveness in a particular sector. In doing so, we draw on Hofstede's model of cultural differences between countries. Second, we have provided new empirical evidence on international management in the field of sport, a research topic that has received scant academic attention so far, especially in the case of the influence of cultural factors on football development (Peeters et al., 2021; Szymanski et

al., 2019, 2021; van Bakel and Salzbrenner, 2019). Third, we also presented certain practical implications about the transfer of football knowledge and skills from leading countries such as Spain to others, such as China, which are trying to upgrade their international competitiveness.

Finally, our study may constitute a first step to progress in the three areas proposed by Szymanski et al. (2021) as avenues for future research on sport and international management: national competitiveness (analysing cultural and institutional characteristics of some countries that have led them to be leaders in some sports); global innovation, learning, and diffusion of organisational practices (addressing knowledge transfer from one country to another); and international human resources (focusing on global human resource mobility, recruitment of talent from other countries, etc.).

#### 4.2. Limitations and future research

Despite these contributions, our study is not without limitations. The first of these may be the possible bias of the results obtained, since we have relied on subjective evaluations of the interviewees and the survey respondents that may be influenced by their own personal experience: the duration of their professional stay in China, the specific place where they have worked, possible problems of cultural adaptation in the case of foreigners, etc. Future research controlling for these factors could help us to overcome this limitation.

Secondly, we have focused on Spain as a world-leading football country transferring football skills and knowledge to China. This may have conditioned some of our results. Future studies considering other leading football countries could allow us to discern whether the findings reported here are generalisable to other contexts.

## Conclusions

China is pursuing the strategic objective of becoming a world football power by 2050, as the ultimate goal of its so-called "football dream". After several years in which its initiatives focused on heavy financial outlays to attract foreign football stars to its domestic football league and acquire European elite football clubs, China is reorienting its strategy. It is now adopting a mindset more in line with one of the distinctive features of its national culture: long-term orientation. To do this, it is investing a great deal of resources in football education, hiring foreign coaches from countries much better positioned to impart advanced football knowledge. The main conclusion that can be drawn from this research study is that the success of this strategy requires a suitable fit between the structural determinants of competitiveness and cultural factors – in short, trying to modulate the pillars that can provide a long-term competitive advantage in the world of football with the idiosyncrasies of China's own national culture.

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