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'This Is Not a Problem but an Issue': Chinese-Born Table Tennis Players Representing Another Country at the Olympics, 1988–2020

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ABSTRACT

Table tennis was first included in the Olympic program at the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul. During the period 1988 to 2020, 811 athletes participated in the Olympic Games. Of these, a staggering 127 China-born table tennis players represented countries other than China at the Olympics. Collectively, these China-born athletes have officially earned these non-Chinese nations eight silver and seven bronze medals. Women have consistently migrated more than men. Did the number of China-born table tennis players who represent another country increase between 1988 and 2020, or was there a decline in numbers following the introduction of stricter eligibility rules in 2008? What are the major destination countries for China-born table tennis players? Through the life and stories of athletes, this study seeks to clarify that most of them obtained their new citizenship via *ius domicilii* and *ius matrimony*, meaning that they were naturalized through marriage or residency in their new countries. In short, we conclude that these athletes left China because of the extraordinary talent pool and their ambition to perform in an international event, such as the Olympics, in combination with existing diasporic migration corridors.

KEYWORDS

China; table tennis; migration; Olympic Games; citizenship

Chinese table tennis player Han Xing was born into a family of ordinary workers in Jingzhou in Hubei Province in 1989. She played at the highest level for the provincial and Shanghai teams until 2006. Nevertheless, at the age of 15 or 16 years old she must have realized that her chances to perform at the highest (Olympic) level for her country were limited despite being one of the top 20 players in her age group. Therefore, she started to work as a table tennis coach in a folk club in Shenzhen in 2008. Later that year she was approached by a Congolese sports official who asked whether she could help improve table tennis players' performance in the Republic of Congo. After half a year of considering the offer, Han Xing accepted the invitation and officially acquired Congolese nationality to represent the Congolese

national team. She stated, ‘The temptation of the “three major tournaments” is too great. A table tennis player has to participate in the “three major tournaments” in his/her life to be considered complete’. The three major tournaments refer to the World Championships, the World Cup, and the Olympics. In the following eight years in the Congo, she helped the Congolese team win the women’s team, women’s doubles, and mixed doubles championships in the African Table Tennis Championships. She won the singles championship twice and dominated in the Africa Cup. After the 2016 Rio Olympics, Han Xing officially retired from table tennis. The Congolese President awarded her the ‘Knight Medal’ in recognition of her contribution to Congolese sports. A year later, Han Xing returned to her hometown of Hubei, reunited with her family, settled in Shiyan, and ended her African career.¹

The case of Han Xing may sound exceptional, but it is not. In fact, it is not at all unusual for athletes to compete in the Olympics for a country that is not theirs by birth.² What is unusual is the scale at which it is happening in one sport: table tennis. In fact, since table tennis was introduced to the summer Olympics in 1988, only 40 Chinese-born table tennis players have represented China, whereas 127 Chinese-born players have competed for other countries and territories. In other words, over 75% of China-born Olympian table tennis players have represented other countries than China itself. To date, these China-born athletes who did not represent China have officially won eight silver and seven bronze medals. Two athletes migrated after winning gold for China but did not win a medal for their new countries (Taiwan and Japan).

Each summer Olympics, journalists and media representatives around the globe highlight the dominance Chinese born table tennis players representing another country, and every four years they tend to challenge the notion of national representation. In 2016, the *New York Times* wrote:

At the Summer Olympics here, Chinese-born table tennis players represented China, of course. But they were also playing for 21 other countries, out of 56 in the tournament. Of the 172 table tennis players at the Games, at least 44 were born in China. Six were representing China.³

The story of table tennis in Canada in 2020 is another example of the importance of migration and national representation. Historically, the sport has been dominated at the highest levels by first-generation Chinese-Canadians in Canada. Only six of Canada’s 20 Olympic table tennis athletes were born in Canada and ten of the 14 immigrant table tennis athletes representing Canada were born in China.⁴ Nevertheless, media representatives do not present a complete picture of foreign-born table tennis players, including the number of players, change over time, destination countries, and gender differences.

Academics, legal scholars, politicians, sport representatives, and the media have all debated the pros and cons and causes of the purported rise of foreign-born representatives at the Olympic games. Generally speaking, there are two underlying assumptions in these debates. The first is that the Olympic games have become more migratory over the years, meaning that the number of foreign-born athletes has increased in absolute and relative terms.⁵ Second, many claim that states increasingly utilize migration by casually offering citizenship to talented sports migrants to increase their global economic competitiveness and win Olympic medals.⁶

Accordingly, the aforementioned assumptions are examined in the case of table tennis players born in China. In addition, the direction of migration will be examined, and then related to certain migration corridors.⁷

This is an interesting case for three major reasons. First, the case of table tennis has not been studied so far in the existing literature. This is remarkable since the number of foreign-born representations in table tennis is extremely high. Second, due to the tournament set-up, table tennis at the Olympics is not dominated by either men or women. In 1988 – the first Olympics with table tennis – teams consisted of two men and two women (for both singles and doubles). This was replaced by a national team event in which a team consists of a maximum of six players (three men and three women) playing two male singles, two female singles, a male double, a female double, and a mixed double. This means that table tennis is a sport in which men and women are equally represented in numbers. This makes it possible to examine gender differences in migration patterns, an aspect that has been overlooked in the literature in this context so far. Overall, twice as many Chinese female table tennis players have represented another country compared to men. Third, the notion of migration corridors has only been studied from the perspective of the Global North in which existing migration patterns have been affected by colonisation and decolonisation, or migration from (poor) sub-Saharan countries to rich European countries.⁸ However, the case of China does not fit within this pattern, and this highlights the importance of neighbouring countries and ethnic (Chinese) identity.

Migration, Citizenship, and Identity in the Sports Arena

Trends in international migration show a clear increase in the absolute number of migrants around the globe. However, the relative numbers – as a percentage of the total global population – have remained stable in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The percentages differ and change over time but, overall, approximately 3–5% of the global population lives in a country in which they are not born.⁹ Nevertheless, the destinations and composition of migrants have changed considerably over the years. Europe used to be the primary source of emigration in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century but transformed into a site of immigration in the last decades of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. Some countries that historically received large numbers of immigrants, such as Argentina and Brazil, are now facing the opposite trend: they have developed into countries of emigration. Overall, Czaika and de Haas conclude that under the unequal conditions of globalization, global migration has become increasingly non-European and less colonial, and increasingly moves towards the Global North. Chinese emigration fits in this global, yet under-researched, pattern.¹⁰ China has always been a typical country of emigration. The four most important destination countries in the twenty-first century are Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and the United States. Overall, more than 80% of the Chinese diaspora reside in Asia.¹¹

Similarly, in the field of sport sociology and history, there is a debate concerning whether athletic migration (as a form of elite migration) has been on the rise

since World War II. On the one hand, authors such as Bale and Maquire argue that migration in itself is nothing new but note that the process is 'speeding up'.¹² Legal scholars and sports sociologists alike tend to argue that athletes increasingly change nationality (and states increasingly accept naturalization of athletes) for instrumental reasons, i.e. performing at the highest level (at the Olympics) and winning medals.¹³ The direction of the migration of sport elites can be predominantly explained by global inequality. In the case of football migration from Africa to Europe, both Paul Darby and Poli argue that the emergence of football academies in West Africa and the export of highly skilled football labour to Europe led to increasing inequality between Africa and Europe when it comes to football skills. The rich (often Western countries) capture the 'best and brightest' and leave the other continents empty-handed.¹⁴ Adjaye makes a similar point when he writes about 50 Nigerian-born athletes who were competing for other countries than Nigeria because of the poor incentives, non-payment, and lack of training facilities in that country.¹⁵ Jansen explicitly aims to balance his sample of Olympic alliance switches between sending and receiving states mainly in the Global North, except for Argentina and Australia.¹⁶

Jansen and Engbersen raise the question of whether there is an increase in the amount of foreign-born representation in elite international sports competitions. They analysed approximately 40,000 athletes from 11 countries who participated in the summer Olympic games between 1948 and 2012. The selected countries have different histories of migration and cover the distinction between 'nations of immigrants' (Australia, Canada, United States), 'countries of immigration' (France, Great Britain, Netherlands, Sweden), 'latecomers to immigration' (Italy, Spain) and what were coined, 'former countries of immigration' (Argentina, Brazil). They conclude that the Olympic games have not become inherently more migratory. Rather, the direction of Olympic migration has changed, and most teams have become more diverse. Overall, they find that Olympic migration is primarily a reflection of global migration patterns rather than discontinuity with the past.¹⁷

What these studies have in common is that they hardly discuss the case of Asia and the Middle East. One of the very few exceptions is the work of Reiche and Tinaz, who highlighted the conditions under which countries naturalize foreign-born athletes. Based on the cases of Qatar and Turkey, they emphasize the importance of low participation rates in certain sports, the desire of countries to gain international prestige through sports, and the interests of individual athletes for economic and sports-related reasons, as in cases when it is easier for athletes to qualify for international competitions when representing weak sport countries.¹⁸ In addition, Oonk and Schulting examined the IAAF dataset of nationality transfers and found that 254 out of 695 (36.5%) transfers of allegiances between 1998 and 2016 were African athletes who transferred to non-African countries.¹⁹ A total of 96 cases (13.8%) involved the countries of Turkey, Qatar, or Bahrain. They offer two inter-related explanations for the dominance of African athletes: (1) more lucrative financial reimbursement schemes and (2) excellent sports facilities, as appealing incentives for African athletes to relocate to the Middle East.

The phenomenon addressed in this paper differs slightly from these movements in the sense that we focus on athletes (table tennis players born in China) who

represent countries other than their own (rather than just ‘working’ in other countries). However, the main argument formulated in this paper is based on a combination of the above arguments, and explanations taken from studies on mainstream and athletic migration.

Aside from the numbers and the global inequality debates, there is also a moral debate. In the field of sport sociology and history, controversy exists over these interrelated questions. Cases like that of Han Xing contest traditional notions of citizenship, nationality, and identity. The supposedly ‘natural connection’ between citizenship and belonging and the country of birth, the background of the parents, and the place where people work and pay taxes is at stake. Elsewhere, Oonk has labelled this as ‘thick citizenship’.²⁰ However, athletes lacking prior relations with the country they represent, before the citizenship transfer in exchange for money, may be labelled ‘thin citizens’. These cases often raise moral, legal, and factual questions. For example, in the field of football, the so-called ‘Africanness’ of football was under scrutiny during the 2018 World Cup in Russia.²¹ Despite the fact that only two French players were born on the African continent – Steve Mandanda (Zaire/Democratic Republic of the Congo) and Samuel Umtiti (Cameroon) – another 12 players had a genuine connection (through descent) with the African continent.²² A similar pattern occurred in the North-African Moroccan team: only 6 out of the 23 selected players were born in Morocco. Eight players who represented Morocco were born in France, five in the Netherlands, two in Spain, and two in Canada and Belgium.²³ Van Campenhout et al. counted the number of foreign-born players for all the World Cups since its inception in 1930. Based on an analysis of 4,761 footballers, of which 301 are foreign-born, they concluded that, apart from some fluctuation, the overall percentage of players who represent a country in which they are not born remained relatively stable over the entire period: between 6 and 12%. Nevertheless, they argue that a more contextual approach in which ancestry and migration corridors are included is preferable because it acknowledges ‘context’ above birthplace. This becomes clear in the case of the Moroccan team, where the number of foreign-born players can easily be explained by the fact that they were children of labour migrants (in the case of Dutch Moroccans) or part of colonial migration (in the case of French Moroccans).²⁴ In short, these debates typically revolve around three interrelated questions:

1. Has there been an increase in the number of athletes that switch their alliances? In other words, are we witnessing a marketization of citizenship, and does this lead to an inflation of the idea of ‘nationality’?²⁵
2. What is the direction of these switches? From poor to rich countries? From high skill countries to low skill countries? Or do they occur within certain migration corridors such as colonial migration or transcontinental labour migration? ²⁶
3. What can we learn from the under-researched case of Chinese table tennis players?

Accordingly, a perspective from the Global South is explored where China is the dominant country and the ‘sending state’.

Table Tennis in China

Mao Zedong's rule of China was a primary contributor to the growth of physical education in China. During his reign from 1949 to 1976, he asserted that physical education was to serve the political purpose of building a class of citizens who were well-disciplined in both mind and body. The Olympic games of 1952 in Helsinki reinforced his ideas of building the nation through sport. After these games, he followed the successful example of the Soviet-Union of how a communist country could defeat Western democratic countries on the international stage. Therefore, he aimed at creating a powerful centralized and hierarchical state organization of elite sports. Nevertheless, between 1952 and 1976 the People's Republic of China did not participate in the Olympics due to the dispute over the political status of the Republic of China (Taiwan).

The International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) happened to be one of the few international sports institutions that allowed China to participate in international tournaments. This was the consequence of its own ambivalent relationship with the IOC. From its inception in 1926, the ITTF had seen the sport as a means of providing cheap entertainment for the working classes, while maintaining an aristocratic vision inspired by the social ideals of family, health, and education. The IOC with its focus on amateurism was viewed as elitist by the ITTF. The ITTF recognised the People's Republic of China in 1953. At that time Hungary and then Japan dominated the sport. But after China won the men's world championship in 1959, Chinese officials were convinced that promoting China internationally through table tennis would be successful. In 1961 the World Table Tennis Championships were held in Beijing. The Chinese men's team won the first team title by defeating Japan in the semi-finals and Hungary in the final. It is fair to say that the recognition of the PRC in international sports eventually enabled basic diplomacy and the opening of US-Chinese relations in 1971.²⁷

Table tennis was introduced at the Olympics in 1988. Since then, China has won 60 medals (32 gold, 20 silver, and 8 bronze). The best all-time performing table tennis player at the Olympic games is Ma Long from China, who earned an astounding five gold medals from 2012 to 2020. The best performing female player is Wang Nan, also from China, with four golds and one silver medal. With 18 medals, South Korea ranks second to China in the overall medal count and is the only other nation to have won a double-digit number of medals. The global success of Chinese table tennis players can be explained by three interrelated causes:

1. Due to historical reasons, China has chosen to focus on the development of table tennis as a sport. Furthermore, table tennis has made important contributions to the development of Chinese society (for example, ping-pong diplomacy), which has given table tennis a special social status in China.
2. China has established an effective three-level training, league, and coach system, and, through long-term training and competitions, the country has developed an effective method of technical and tactical training and preparation for world competitions.
3. With the assistance of scientific research, Chinese table tennis coaches and players have been able to master the basic rules of table tennis, which is one of the important reasons for the success of Chinese table tennis (Zhang et al. 2018).²⁸

One by-product of China's dominance – and the popularity of the sport in the country – has been an extremely large group of talented players who are not quite good enough to play in the national programme. In the Chinese system, perfected over many decades, provincial clubs draw players from city teams before sending their best to the national programme. Only the best 50 men and women reach the top. In short, to get selected for the Chinese Olympic table tennis team, you have to be a world-class medal candidate. However, despite being world-class athletes, Chinese players who are not consistently performing in the top five of their batch are not selected for the Chinese Olympic team.²⁹ Therefore, athletes like Han Xing often choose to represent another country to perform at the Olympics at least once. It is thought that they do this not so much in the hopes of winning a medal but rather from a desire to be part of the event.³⁰

Overall, the eligibility rules to perform at the Olympic Games are straightforward. The underlying principle of national representation is that an athlete can only represent a country of which he or she is a national. This means that Chinese table tennis players who wish to represent another country need to change their nationality. Han Xing, for example, changed her nationality to Congolese and was then permitted to represent Congo. In case athletes have dual or multiple citizenships, they may choose which country they wish to represent. Such a choice is, in principle, binding, yet athletes who have already performed at the Olympic Games for one country and wish to change their nationality are allowed to represent a second country following a three-year non-competition period.³¹ The World Cup and the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) have formulated rather strict rules that state that any player aged 21 or over may not change their country of representation. The ITTF has also introduced a waiting period for younger athletes who wish to change their eligibility. They are excluded from world events for three to seven years, depending on their age at the time of the request for their new sporting nationality.³² The ITTF's new regulation, which is one of the strictest examples in an individual sport, was established to encourage national federations to develop local talent. This most probably has affected the number of eligibility changes after 2008.³³

Data and Methodology: Creating a Dataset of Chinese Table Tennis Players at the Olympics

The data were collected from the Olympedia database, which lists 122,085 individual athletes who participated in over 300,000 events in all summer Olympic games between 1896 and 2022.³⁴ These data provide, among other things, the names of all athletes, the events they participated in, the country they performed for, and what, if any, medals they won. The database is the successor of Sports Reference LLC, which was previously used by Jansen¹⁸ and others. It is the only known secondary source that provides information about the names and countries of birth. It includes the birth countries of 108,252 athletes and another 4,867 were obtained from Wikidata.³⁵ To gather complete information on the table tennis players, the names of another three birth countries were manually obtained from newspaper sources.

A total of 811 table tennis players have been active since the introduction of table tennis at the Olympics in 1988. For 678 out of these 811 players, the place

of birth is known. Following the example of Horowitz and McDaniel, it is assumed that athletes with an unknown birth country represent their country of birth.³⁶ This leads to a conservative result regarding the overall number of foreign-born athletes.

However, the dataset comes with some limitations. States, academics, and migrants themselves have used different criteria to define 'migration.' Nevertheless, the sociological standard of counting migrants is the foreign-born proxy and for migration in general.³⁷ A person's place of birth is fixed, and if there is a disparity between an individual's place of birth and country of residence, that person is defined as an international migrant. In the case of table tennis and China, all the athletes followed were born in China and represented a county other than China. In addition, while using the Olympedia database, it was found that several 'foreign-born' athletes are defined as foreign-born because of changing historical borders. For example, an athlete that represented Yugoslavia could represent Croatia after the 1990s. Nevertheless, these changing borders do not apply to China. In some exceptional cases – especially in the case of Hong Kong – it is unclear whether the athletes who were born in China but represented Hong Kong should therefore be considered migrants. In these and other comparable cases, they are not counted as migrants to make estimates on the number of migrants rather conservative.

Apart from the database, qualitative information has been found on the life stories of individual athletes in newspapers, magazines, through databases like lexus-nexus, and online.

Research Questions

1. Did the number of China-born table tennis players who represent another country increase between 1988 and 2020? And/or was there a decline in numbers following the introduction of more strict eligibility rules in 2008?
2. Is there a difference between the numbers of China-born men and women representing another country in table tennis between 1988 and 2020 and if so, what explains these differences?
3. What are the major destination countries for China-born table tennis players?
4. What are the contextual variables that explain the migration (motivation for migration, language skills, geopolitical considerations, migration corridors)?

Major Statistical Results

In total, 811 table tennis players have been active in the Olympics since table tennis became an Olympic sport in 1988. Out of these 811 representations, 186 athletes were foreign born (22.9%). The majority of these athletes ($127/186 = 68.3\%$) were born in China.³⁸ Overall, 127 China-born table tennis players have represented a country other than China at the Olympics since 1988. There were 41 and 86 male and female players who migrated, respectively. In the year 1988, only three Chinese players represented another country and this number increased to 48 players in 2008. Between 2008 and 2020, the number of Chinese players that represented another

country decreased from 48 players to 24. Overall, except for the year 1988, women consistently migrated more than men. A plausible explanation might be that men were much more likely to find a job in professional table tennis than women in China. Most coaches – both at the club level, as well as for the national team, are almost always men. In addition, men are also hired as sparring partners to train women. Women were rarely used as sparring partners. Moreover, the individual life stories later in this article show that some women who migrated start – albeit accidentally – to coach other women before taking up the opportunity themselves to perform at the highest level. In some cases, the host countries may not have developed a strong women’s talent pool, like in Turkey or in the USA. Therefore, Chinese talent and success at the Olympics would serve as a springboard to attract local talent.

Figure 1 shows – except for 2004 – that there has been a steady increase in the number of foreign-born Chinese table tennis players at the Olympics between 1988 and 2008. However, and somewhat counterintuitively, there is a steady decrease in the numbers after 2008. This may be explained by two interrelated factors: (1) The ITTF passed very strict regulations to prevent young Chinese table tennis talents from switching national alliances to encourage national federations to develop local talent and (2) countries may have become more hesitant to recruit athletes from other countries. Regarding the latter, some observers were concerned that the dominance of Chinese-born players in international events would harm the popularity of the sport, whereas others argued that it would improve the sport level of the adopted countries.³⁹ Others, however, are less enthusiastic about those Chinese players who appear interested only in furthering their personal careers and show little enthusiasm for the culture of their new home country. For Thomas Weikert, the president of the Table Tennis Federation, this is not a ‘problem’ but an ‘issue’.

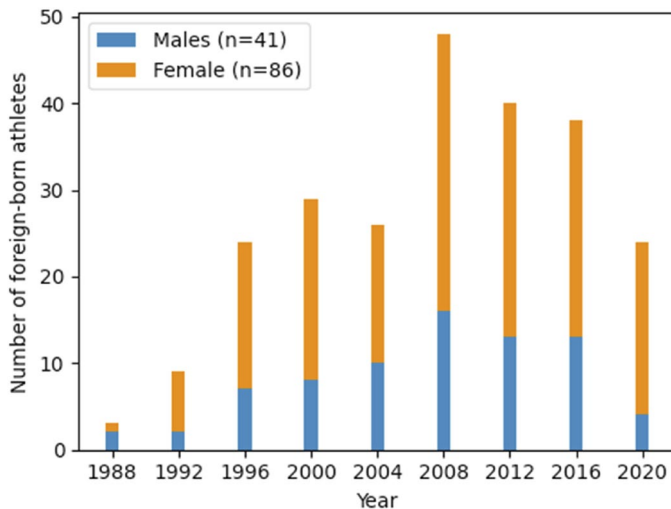


Figure 1. Numbers of China-born table tennis players who performed at the Olympics for another country over time.

*The number of athletes in the legend is the sum of all individual athletes. Athletes that performed at multiple Olympic Games are added for every year they performed at the Olympics.

Although he would like some kind of regulation that makes it mandatory for players to live in a country for a considerable period of time before they can represent it, he feels that this phenomenon ‘is not the fault of the Chinese’ and that ‘the others have to practice hard’ (Table 1).⁴⁰

Destination Areas for Chinese-Born Table Tennis Athletes

A few destination areas for Chinese table tennis players can be distinguished.

1. United States, Canada, and Australia. These countries do not have a tradition of table tennis nor a professional table tennis league.
2. Japan and Singapore have a strong tradition of table tennis. However, they offer different schemes for naturalization. Japan is very strict while Singapore promotes foreign-born players to represent it.
3. Turkey, Germany, and the Netherlands developed a professional league in the 1980s and 1990s that attracted players who were unable to perform at the highest level in China. They found a chance to perform at the Olympics through these countries.
4. Hong Kong and Taiwan are countries⁴¹ in the region that are closely connected to China and have a special status.

Table 1. Destination areas of Chinese-born table tennis players 1988–2020.

Country	Quantity
Hong Kong	17
USA	13
Singapore	13
Australia	10
Canada	10
Germany	7
Austria	6
Japan	5
France	4
Korea (South)	4
Turkey	4
Poland	3
Portugal	3
Spain	3
New Zealand	2
Taiwan	2
Congo	2
Croatia	2
Dominican Republic	2
Great Britain	2
Italy	2
Netherlands	2
Switzerland	1
Slovakia	1
Qatar	1
Ukraine	1
Luxembourg	1
Sweden	1
Brazil	1
Monaco	1
Argentina	1
Total	127

The United States, Canada, and Australia have traditionally been major destinations of the Chinese diaspora. Through diasporic networks and corridors, migrants (including athletes) have found channels to new destinations. This is yet another example of how diasporic networks are also reproduced in sports.⁴² Hong Kong and Taiwan are special cases in this respect because of their political history with China. In addition, from the athletes' life stories it will become clear that most foreign-born Chinese table tennis players obtained their citizenship through *ius domicilii* and *ius matrimony*. Here, the lead of Jansen et al. is followed, arguing that *ius domicilii* and *ius matrimony* were the prime causes of naturalization. At the same time, it must be noted that countries like Singapore are – and remain – extremely open to attracting foreign-born athletes, whereas other countries, e.g. Japan, are not. Finally, being born in China but competing under a different flag, athletes that moved to European countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Turkey (and to a lesser extent the USA and Canada) had to navigate through athletic and cultural challenges to realize their Olympic dreams, whereas those who represented Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore did not being part of a predominantly Chinese ethnic community.

United States of America, Canada, and Australia. The story of table tennis in the USA, Canada, and Australia is strongly linked to immigration. In these countries, table tennis is not at the centre of the nation's sports interests. The USA and Canada have a long tradition in basketball, baseball, and ice-hockey, but not table tennis. Meanwhile, in Australia, cricket, Australian Rules football, football, rugby union, and rugby league are the most popular sports. All of these countries do not have a professional table tennis league. Historically, table tennis has been dominated at the highest levels by first-generation Chinese migrants in these countries. Collectively, they have been represented by a total of 33 Chinese-born athletes (USA = 13, Canada = 10, and Australia = 10) at the Olympics.

Take the example of Eugene Wang and Mo Zhang, both of whom were born in China and learned to play advanced table tennis. Both athletes migrated with their parents to Canada as part of a larger group of Chinese migrants. Notably, between 1995 and 2005, more than 300,000 Chinese citizens arrived in Canada. They brought with them their cultures, traditions, cuisines, and sports. Altogether, second- and third-generation Chinese-Canadians make up approximately 70–90% of the table tennis population in Canada.⁴³ The massive influx of Chinese created a pipeline of talented young players, many of whom now compete in hundreds of clubs across the country. Another example is Feng Yijun, who was born in Nanjing, China. Yijun moved with his parents to the US at age 8 to make Texas his new home. After calling the 'Lone Star State' his home for many years, Yijun moved to Georgia during his sophomore year of high school. He claims in an interview with CBS that while the transition was not easy as far as school and making new friends, it definitely helped his game. He began training at the Atlanta International Table Tennis Academy and eventually represented the USA at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio.⁴⁴

Other Chinese-born athletes have become citizens of Canada, USA, and Australia through educational programmes or marriage. For most of them, the primary aim of migration was not to represent these countries at the Olympics but to pursue

other careers or follow in the footsteps of their parents. In fact, some life stories suggest that they had 'retired from table tennis in China' before migration. The life stories of the individual athletes suggest some patterns that may need further exploration in future research.

A typical example of this is Wei Wang, born in China in 1961, who followed the regular Chinese table tennis career path. At age 23, Wei Wang retired from professional table tennis in China, moved to the United States to attend college and stated that 'she would never compete again.' Nevertheless, she started to coach other players and after a few years decided to return to the game. She came out of retirement in 1988 and at the age of 30 became the USA champion. She eventually represented the USA during the Barcelona Olympics in 1992.⁴⁵

Some, like Jin Fang Lay, who married an Australian, met their partners during international table tennis tournaments. Lay met her husband during a tournament and she migrated to Australia in 1994 with the intent to retire from table tennis. However, her husband Jorg managed to talk her out of retirement, and she eventually represented Australia six times at the Olympics between 2000 and 2020.⁴⁶

Or Gao married an American. Gao grew up in China. When she was 5, her father decided she was a talented table tennis player and took her to a special school for athletes. At the age of 12, Gao was selected for her province's table tennis team. After that, she had little time for academics. At 17, she moved up to the national team in Beijing and began playing in international competitions. Gao came to the United States for ping-pong (table tennis) but stayed for love. While visiting Las Vegas for the Table Tennis Doubles Cup in 1992, her former coach introduced her to Frank Chang, a University of Maryland graduate whose family had emigrated from Taiwan when he was 13. Chang had come to Las Vegas expressly to meet Gao. The couple married in 1993 and this marriage almost marked the end of Gao's career. Frank's parents felt that table tennis was an unseemly occupation for their daughter-in-law. Fortunately, after a few years, the family's resistance softened and Gao began playing again. She won the national championship in 1996 and became a US citizen soon after. The ink was hardly dry on her citizenship papers when USA Table Tennis Federation asked Gao to represent the United States.⁴⁷

In exceptional cases, there is a combination of educational aspirations coupled with a desire to continue to play table tennis. Such an example is Zheng Jiaqi. She moved from China to the USA in 2006 with a dream to earn a college degree, compete internationally, and one day represent the US at the Olympics.⁴⁸

What is clear from these life stories is that the USA, Canada, and Australia did not actively recruit table tennis players from China. The emergence of Chinese-born table tennis players should be seen as an offshoot of the general migration patterns to these countries, that is, through education, work relations, and marriage. There were no direct financial rewards or compensation for changing their alliances. However, as will be seen, the situation can be different for other countries (e.g. Singapore).

Japan and Singapore. Whereas table tennis has historically not been very popular in the USA, Canada, and Australia, it achieved great interest early on in Singapore, South Korea, and Japan. Japan is ranked second after China by the ITTF. Its most

important tournaments include the Japan Open under the ITTF (held since 1989) and the T League or Nojima T League. Started in 2018, the T League was the first professional table tennis league to be established in Japan. Consequently, some of these countries became interesting destinations for Chinese table tennis players to pursue their professional careers abroad, and eventually be able to perform at the Olympics for these countries.

Singapore and Japan developed two different schemes of naturalization. Japan has a restrictive citizenship regime wherein the two primary paths to it are either through long-term residency or marriage. Chinese national team player Wei Qingguang represented China in the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games in the doubles with Chen Longcan. He became a Japanese citizen in 1997, represented the country, and changed his name to Seiko Iseki as part of the formal citizenship requirements. After retiring from table tennis in China, he was sent to Japan to serve as an ambassador for Sino-Japanese table tennis cultural exchanges.⁴⁹ Another case is He Zhili, who met Hideyuki Koyama, a Japanese engineer. The two fell in love and decided to get married. She settled in Japan and was renamed Yama Hideyuki. In the women's table tennis finals of the Hiroshima Asian Games, Yama Zhili once again picked up table tennis to represent the Japanese team and eventually represented Japan at the Olympics.⁵⁰

Table tennis played an instrumental role in the development of the Foreign Sport Talent scheme (FSTS) in Singapore. This scheme is used by Singaporean sport officials to scout and facilitate the migration of non-Singaporeans deemed to possess exceptional sports talents, and to convince them to don the Singapore colours in sporting events. Singaporean member of parliament Choo Wee Khiang introduced and initiated the scheme. One of the major success stories behind the scheme is Feng Tianwei. Feng was born in 1986 in Heilongjiang, People's Republic of China. She is the only daughter of Feng Qingzhi, a granary worker, and his wife Li Chunping, a department store employee. Feng's poor parents lived frugally for years to pay for her table tennis training. Feng topped the qualifying matches a month after commencing play and was called up for the national team in 2003. Feng left China in 2005 to play in the Japanese professional league, where she was spotted by Liu Guodong, the coach of the Singapore Table Tennis Association, in 2006. In March 2007 she was invited to train in Singapore under the FSTS. She became a Singaporean citizen in January 2008 and won two bronze and one silver medal in the next four Olympic Games for Singapore (Feng Tianwei 2012).⁴⁷ Overall, Singapore was represented by 13 foreign-born table tennis players between 1988 and 2022, most of them under the FSTS.⁵¹ Nevertheless, from time to time the scheme has been scrutinized. While it accounts for only 2.5% of the 1,400 carded Singapore national athletes, the FSTS scheme is still proving to be a controversial issue among Singapore's sporting fraternity. In recent years, the call has sounded for an end to the FSTS scheme, particularly after Singapore's successes at regional events in 2008.⁵²

Turkey, The Netherlands, and Germany. Turkey, the Netherlands, and Germany lack such schemes. Instead, they have managed to attract Chinese table tennis players because of their (emerging) professional table tennis league. The four Chinese-born

Turkish table tennis players that performed for Turkey at the Olympic games all started in the professional Turkish Table Tennis Competition and have competed for sports clubs like Fenerbahçe and Besiktas since 2006. Countries like Turkey, the Netherlands, and Germany provided options to escape China's talent pool. This is in line with the argument of Reiche and Tinaz who argue that in the case of Qatar and Turkey: 'Naturalizations can be explained in regard to low participation rates in national sport and the desire of both countries to gain international prestige through sport. Athletes switch nationalities for economic and sports-related reasons.'⁵³

The story of Li Jie in the Netherlands is revealing in this respect. Li Jie was only 16 years old when she turned her back on China in 2001 to build a table tennis future in the Netherlands. She had not managed to reach the national level in her home country and found that she did not have enough talent to even play for the provincial team. In an interview in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, she reveals that a phone call from her coach who knew that a Dutch club was looking for a Chinese player made Jie's heart skip a beat. Although she hardly knew anything about the Netherlands, she did not hesitate for a moment. 'In China, it is very difficult to achieve anything in table tennis. This was my chance to go abroad.'⁵⁴ Six years after her arrival in the Netherlands, she received a Dutch passport, which was a significant milestone for her because she was now able to participate in major events. However, having to surrender her Chinese passport caused mixed feelings. Regarding this bittersweet event, Jie stated, 'That was strange, but the only possibility to play for the Netherlands.'⁵⁵

A similar example is Han Ying. She was born in Liaoning Province to table tennis-loving parents and played until the 1990s on her provincial team. However, after the try-outs for the national programme she realized she did not have what it takes to succeed at the very highest level. She moved to Germany in 2002 in search of better career opportunities and rekindled her career goal of competing at world championships and the Olympic games after being granted German citizenship in 2010. Regarding her decision, Ying stated, 'If I'd stayed in China, I would probably have never had the chance to compete at the Olympics because there are way too many talents in the sport in China.'⁵⁶

Taiwan and Hong Kong. Hong Kong and Taiwan are two separate entities that are recognized by the International Olympic Committee and therefore they have the same status as any other country during the Olympics. Hong Kong first competed at the Olympic games in 1952 as British Hong Kong. Since the sovereignty of Hong Kong was transferred to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, the National Olympic Committee (NOC) for the special administrative region (SAR) has referred to it as *Hong Kong, China*. Hong Kong maintains its own NOC and is represented separately at the Olympics. For any gold medal ceremony, the Hong Kong SAR flag is raised, and the PRC national anthem is played, even in situations where athletes from China win a silver or bronze medal, resulting in the Hong Kong SAR flag flying above that of China. Prior to 1997, the team's name was 'Hong Kong', but this was later changed to 'Hong Kong, China'.

The current legal status of Taiwan is under dispute as a result of World War II, the Chinese Civil War, and the Cold War. Taiwan is de facto a self-governing democratic entity. Nevertheless, the PRC considers it a part of China under the one

country-two systems framework and actively seeks to end Taiwan's sovereign status through a process of reunification. In 1979, the executive committee of the International Olympic Committee passed a resolution that both governments ultimately agreed to follow. Specifically, it admitted the PRC under the name 'Chinese Olympic Committee' and the government of Taiwan as the 'Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee'. This arrangement allowed Beijing to accept Taiwan's inclusion in the Olympic Games by framing the island as a regional branch of its national team, even though their medal counts were separate. Taiwanese athletes would be required to compete under an alternate anthem and flag to that used by Taiwan, so as not to display the Republic of China emblems. A similar formula was later adopted to allow an independent Olympic team from Hong Kong to compete after the British handed its former colony back to China in 1997. Due to the special political status of Taiwan, neither China nor Taiwan recognizes the passports issued by the other and neither considers travel between mainland China and Taiwan as formal international travel. A permit has therefore been issued as the travel document for Taiwanese residents to enter mainland China since 1987, when China decided to lift the mutual travel ban across the Taiwan Strait.

Overall, two Chinese-born table tennis players have represented Taiwan and 17 have represented Hong Kong since 1988. Chen Jing was the only one in this sample that previously represented China at the Olympics before representing her new country (Taiwan). Chen was born in 1968 in Wuhan, Hubei Province in China. At the age of 18, she was selected for the Chinese national team. She received a gold medal in singles and a silver medal in doubles at the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul. In 1991, she defected to Taiwan after failing to make the national team in 1990 in China. Competing for Taiwan, she received a silver medal at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta and a bronze medal at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, there is a lack of information about the Chinese-born players who represented Hong Kong. Their Wiki-pages are almost empty and newspapers and magazines highlight the results of matches but not the context and reasons for their migration. It is fair to assume that competing at the highest possible international event is one of the prime motivations for mainland players to represent Hong Kong. One such example is Lin Ling. She is the highest-ranked table tennis player ever to switch from China to Hong Kong. She made the move in February 2002, stating 'I wanted more opportunities to play at a higher level'.⁵⁸ In 2004, however, the Hong Kong table tennis federation took pride in not selecting mainland-born players and instead sent six Hong Kong-born players to the Olympics. It was the first time that Hong Kong had sent a completely home-grown team since the city first took part in the 1988 Seoul Games when the sport made its Olympic debut. However, such a strategy did not last long, as becomes clear from a Reuters article in 2012 that states that all three Hong Kong players who were born on the Chinese mainland failed to hit the top ranks. In addition, there seems to be a tendency to define their choice for cultural reasons. 'We are definitely loyal to Hong Kong, otherwise, we would be playing for China', said Hong Kong's Chu Yan Leung. His Chinese-born teammate Tang Peng added, 'We are playing for Hong Kong but there is no difference between Hong Kong and China. We are in the same country'.⁵⁹

Numbers and Considerations: Chinese Table Tennis Players Going Global

Some scholars have highlighted the fact that there is an increase in the number of foreign-born athletes that represent the country in which they are not born at the Olympics and other international sports events.⁶⁰ Others have argued that this is, in fact, not the case (Van Campenhout and Jansen). Our study did find a significant increase in the migration of table tennis players at the global level upto 2008. The evidence (see [Figure 1](#)) suggests that there was a decrease in the numbers since 2008. This is most probably the consequence of the stricter nationality regulation of the ITTF. Nevertheless, the numbers are small, and the regulations do not apply to most Chinese-born athletes in the database because they did not perform at an international tournament before they migrated. Therefore, the Chinese case is not conclusive for either position.

Nevertheless, the Chinese case is relevant because it reveals different forms of migration corridors. Jansen (working on the Olympics, but not China) and Van Campenhout (focusing on the FIFA World Cup, in which China never participated) highlight migration corridors in terms of sending and receiving states related to 'countries of immigration' (like the USA) and countries of emigration (like Argentina and Brazil) or colonial corridors in which athletes (or descendants thereof) from former colonies represent the mother country.

On the one hand, China follows similar patterns, as most of the Chinese foreign-born players would follow the Chinese diaspora and represent countries of immigration like the United States, Canada, and Australia. But on the other hand, the case of Chinese athletes is unique because an important part of the foreign-born Chinese represents the neighbouring countries, including Singapore and Japan. The Chinese case is exceptional because it considers neighbouring countries Hong-Kong and Taiwan as part of its country, whereas the International Olympic Committee and the International Table Tennis Federation have given these two entities a special status and allowed them to perform in their tournaments. Finally, some Chinese athletes moved to emerging professional table tennis leagues in Europe (Turkey, the Netherlands and Germany) and eventually qualified for local citizenship and therefore were able to perform for their host counties.

Overall, most Chinese table tennis players left China because the local competition was fierce. Unlike African athletes who would run for Qatar and Bahrain – and would get better payment and training facilities – Chinese table tennis players were not looking for better training facilities and money. Their major aim was to be able to perform at the highest possible level. It is fair to say that the best training facilities and coaches were in China, rather than abroad. But for some of the athletes, that was precisely the reason to migrate, i.e. the overwhelming amount of well-trained talented players and therefore the fierce internal competition. To have higher chances to perform at the highest level, some of those talented players decided to emigrate. One important – but exceptional – case is that of Singapore, where table tennis has played an instrumental role in the development of the FSTS to attract Chinese table tennis players. In short, an understanding of these 'Chinese' corridors could help future research aimed at understanding the changing notions of citizenship in relation to nationality in sports, and perhaps even in a wider societal context.

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