

The Image Game

An Explanatory Case Study on Soft Power as a Strategic Ulterior
Motive in Chinese Football

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Abstract

In the 21st century more states are realizing the benefits with hosting “Sports Mega-Events” such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup. These events create an opportunity for a country to spread a carefully selected image and to gain influence and attraction in the international arena, or in other words, to exercise soft power. This thesis investigates how the Chinese government, through massive economical and outspoken support to Chinese football, is trying to exert soft power. Serving as a theory-using case study, the aim is to explore how the substantial efforts that the Chinese government has taken to push the Chinese national team and the Chinese Super League internationally and nationally, can be understood and explained through a soft power perspective. By using theories from Nye (2004) and Lee (2009) on empirical material such as news articles and academic literature the purpose is to disentangle the underlying reasons and analyze how professional sports leagues and national teams can serve as a strategic political tool. The conclusion is that there are multiple indications that point towards that Chinese Football is strategically utilized by China to pursue soft power.

Key words: Soft Power, China, Chinese Football, Hard and Soft Resources, Sports.

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Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Thesis Question and Purpose	3
1.2 Motivation of Case Selection	3
1.3 Delimitations	4
1.4 Method and Material	5
2 Previous Research.....	6
3 Theories and Concepts	8
3.1 Soft Power	8
3.2 Hard and Soft Resources	9
3.3 Critical Reflection on the Theories	11
3.4 Operationalization	12
3.5 Summary	13
4 China, Football and Soft Power	14
4.1 Background on China and Chinese Sports	14
4.2 China, Sports and Soft Power	15
4.3 Soft Power and Chinese Football	17
4.4 Summary	19
5 Analysis	20
5.1 Indications of a Soft Power Effort.....	21
5.2 Reflection on Alternative Explanations	23
5.3 Summary	23
6 Concluding Thoughts	24
7 References.....	26

1. Introduction

This thesis explores the relationship between politics and sports in China, specifically the underlying reasons for the mainly state-led and funded recent support for Chinese football. Sports and politics are often viewed as two fields separated from each other, and many would say that they should not and cannot be related. However, sporting events are sometimes utilized by states and actors as a way of taking political stands. Boycotting, protests, isolation from sporting events, and soft power illustrations are ways of doing so. In other words, politics can be expressed through sports, and sports can influence politics. It thus becomes interesting when the politics behind the sports surfaces, and ulterior motives are revealed. In recent years, an increasing number of countries have been willing to bid to host sports mega-events, for example the FIFA World Cup or The Olympic Games (Grix - Lee, 2013). Viewed by billions, these mega-events are undoubtedly a great platform to promote a state's vision, international image and to gain influence (ibid). The same prestige can be found in having a strong national team or renowned sporting leagues. This strategy for a state to, through cultural factors, attract, influence and persuade other countries without force or coercion is called soft power (Nye 2004). In international relations, politics and sports are gaining importance since more countries are reportedly taking serious efforts in implementing soft power and creating soft resources through sports.

Since the early 2010s, China has taken enormous political and economic actions to support Chinese football from the grassroots to the professional level. This includes building a football field for every 10,000 citizen, setting extremely high achievement goals for their national football team, pushing investors to pour money into the Chinese Super League (henceforth the CSL), and perpetually spending enormous amounts on international transfers to a league with modest prestige (Buckley 2017, Duerden 2017, Nielsen Sports Report 2016). China is used to being a strong country both economically and militarily (i.e. how a country illustrates hard power), but seems to have a shortage of soft power (Shambaugh 2015). In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that China's soft power should increase in addition to declaring the goal of China becoming a "socialist cultural superpower" (ibid, p. 99), and a "world football superpower" by 2050 (BBC 2016). Since 2010, China has taken

great efforts and is financially outspending football leagues in for example Holland and Portugal (Duerden 2017).

This thesis aims at viewing these efforts primarily through a soft power perspective, but alternative explanations, mainly economical, will additionally be lightly discussed. There are several factors with the process of supporting the Chinese football sector that cannot be explained by economy, demand or interest, hinting towards a strategic underlying reason. It is puzzling that, in recent years, China has set ambitious goals for their male national football team (wanting to climb from 81st in the world to best in the world), purchasing international football players for very large amounts to a league with a bad reputation, and for the state to provide substantial economic support to an industry that is not a guaranteed moneymaker. How can these efforts be explained for the, in other aspects, so economically smart China? In addition, China is suffering from a poor image and diminishing respect (Shambaugh 2015), thus creating a football empire would be a motive to increase their soft power and ultimately spread a good narrative for the country. Is it thus possible that China can have a more strategic and political motive behind their football actions, that is best explained by a strategic scheme for China to gain soft power? This thesis aims at exploring this relationship between politics and football in China, and if a soft power-strategy can be seen through China's massive effort in Chinese football. The Chinese state has previously used sports for political purposes to project a strategically chosen strategy and purposely selected image of China (Delgado 2016, Guilianotti 2015), and this thesis points to that football is a part of a similar scheme. By using theories of soft power by Nye (2004) and Lee (2009), that best explains these efforts, the underlying reasons for these peculiar occurrences will be dissolved. In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that there are several aspects that points to that China is using Chinese football as a soft power tool to exert attractiveness, legitimacy and credibility.

To conclude this introductory section follows a disposition of the forthcoming paper. Subsequently in the first chapter, the research question and a statement of purpose for the thesis will be presented, followed by a motivation of the specific case chosen. Next a short declaration on the deliberate delimitations of the thesis will follow, and the first chapter will conclude with a brief display of the method and material used. In the second chapter carefully selected previous research in the field of sports, politics and power will be presented. The third chapter thoroughly introduces the soft power theories by Nye and Lee, followed by a critical reflection and operationalization. In the fourth chapter the empirical evidence on China regarding sports, politics, soft power and Chinese football is presented. The previous information coincides in the analysis where the empirical material is discussed and evaluated

through a soft power perspective. The thesis terminates with concluding thoughts, where the conclusion of the paper is presented, along with suggestions for future research.

1.1 Thesis Question and Purpose

This thesis aims at finding an explanation to China's recent efforts in football and if these could be for soft power purposes. Sporting events provides an opportunity for countries to promote their most prominent side and to spread favorable perceptions, images and identities. Such events allow spectators to take part in positive qualities of a nation and to gain understanding for a nation's history and culture (Delgado 2016, p. 608). Since an attractive national identity provides a powerful tool to pursue soft power, one can understand why sports becomes an important arena for such purposes. Creating cohesion and national heroes is also one goal with creating soft resources through sports (Lee 2009). China has always been a powerful and interesting actor on the international arena, and it is therefore interesting to disentangle if, and how, they are utilizing soft power in sports. This thesis aims at investigating how one can see that China has taken serious efforts in promoting football nationally and internationally, and subsequently explain how this is a conscious strategy for China to improve their image through scholar Joseph S. Nye Jr. and Guen Lee theories on soft power. Through this paper, it becomes more obvious how states are using new types of strategies and powers to gain influence in the 21st century.

The thesis question is as follows: *How can China's recent substantial efforts in Chinese football be explained and understood through a Soft Power-perspective?*

1.2 Motivation of Case Selection

China, continuously wanting to illustrate their political and economic greatness as much as possible, is a country that is always interesting to analyze within political science. How China, being the superpower it is, expresses power is of great importance and interest for the rest of the world. Although China's effort in football does not fall under the category of "sports mega-events", where most previous studies in this field are categorized, one can argue

that the soft power-theory can be seen and analyzed through this case as well. This case illustrates the importance of awareness of new types of soft power implementations that goes beyond sports mega-events. This subject and case additionally matches the criteria of societal relevance which refers to that the subject should be relevant for the rest of the world (Teorell - Svensson 2007, p. 18). The thesis is useful since it provides insights in methods of how states can apply soft power schemes and imply power. One can thereby gain a higher understanding on the new forms and variables of this type of power, and how non-coercive power can be utilized. The thesis additionally has scientific relevance since it is building on the literature on sports and politics, as well as contributing to future research (see Teorell - Svensson 2007, p. 18). My research contributes to another piece to the puzzle of the strategic plan that is China's soft power scheme, by explaining how efforts in Football could be a part of that as well. It serves as *a case of* when states consciously use soft power in sports, and gains its generalization through the soft power theory.

1.3 Delimitations

In this section I will shortly introduce some decisions made in the thesis, regarding what I have chosen *not* to investigate or apply. These delimitations were consciously made in order to achieve more focus and depth. Firstly, when referring to Chinese football I mean both the CSL and in some extent their national team, although the focus in this thesis will primarily be on the former. The thesis will put emphasis on actions taken beginning in the 21st century, more specifically since 2010 until today. Moreover, previous research almost exclusively investigates "super mega-events", something that I will not do since I have instead chosen to investigate Chinese football, and not a *specific* mega sporting event. Another delimitation is that this thesis will not evaluate the possible success of the soft power strategy in Chinese football, but rather investigate how the recent actions taken within the sport is a conscious move of China in soft power gaining purposes. This is due to that the actions are part of an ongoing event, which makes it difficult to evaluate the success. The thesis will investigate actions taken or supported by the Chinese government, although other actors (for example private actors or investors) will be lightly covered but the focus will be on the government. Also, theories provided by Solomon (2014) on affective investment and Guilianotti (2015) on

soft disempowerment will not be utilized in this thesis and can be motivated by that the theories analyze the result of a soft power effort, which this paper will not take in account.

1.4 Method and Material

This paper will serve as a case study, where China and its' soft power efforts in Chinese football will be investigated. A case study is when one researches about one specific case or topic thoroughly, with an aim that from one case to understand the whole (Dumez 2015, p. 55). This paper will thus serve as an intensive, theory-using single case study that will aim at explaining one specific phenomena. A case study provides more depth to a specific topic, which is important since the thesis relies on a theory that is hard to measure and prove. Thus, when attempting to pinpoint cause and effect the four criteria of counterfactual difference, order in time, isolation and mechanism could more clearly disentangle the empirical evidence and connect it to the theories (see Teorell - Svensson 2007, p. 64). Since researching sports and soft power is relatively unexplored, looking at one single case instead of multiple provides a better understanding, depth and intensity. The thesis finds its comparable dimension through the soft power theory instead of through comparing multiple cases.

The empirical material used in this paper comes mostly from secondary sources such as academic literature, books and news rapports. Regarding primary sources, such as interviews or focus groups with Chinese officials or football players, the conclusion is that these types of methodology or material would not be relevant (and in addition very difficult to gather) for this thesis and subject. The combination of the different sources complemented each other well and provided a great variation. One limitation in this thesis is the shortage of Chinese material, that for multiple reasons (one being that the Chinese government contains strong control of the internet and media) cannot be reached or considered objective. In addition, perhaps due to China being an authoritarian regime resulted in a difficulty reaching exact numbers and quantities other than estimations.

2 Previous Research

Sport has generally been a heavily understudied aspect regarding international relations and political science. However, in recent years more studies have been written on the relationship between sports and politics. This section will explore some prominent scholars that have done research on politics and sports, mainly in relationship to the concepts soft power and sports mega-events, sports diplomacy, and public diplomacy. Beginning with Joseph S. Nye Jr and his theory on soft power, this section will explore a few studies that stemmed from his theory and subsequently ending the chapter with a review of selected literature on sports diplomacy and public diplomacy.

To begin with, the main literature and previous research for this paper is Joseph S. Nye Jr.'s book "*Soft Power. The means to success in world politics*" (2004) from which many of the following research derives from. Soft power was introduced by Nye in the late 1980s and, in comparison to hard power (which is using inducements and threats), refers to using resources such as institutions, values, policies and culture to seduce others, and in the long run, to use that attraction to get power without coercion (2004, p. 8). (For a more elaborate explanation on the soft power theory see chapter 3.1.) By introducing these concepts Nye elaborated the way of thinking regarding power-theories, along with establishing the foundation that later scholars would build from in sports and politics.

The concept of soft power has been a theoretical framework for scholars investigating how states are increasingly seeing and searching for to use soft power by hosting for example sports mega-events. Research includes, among others, Grix & Houlihan (2014) and Grix & Kramareva (2017), that have conducted research on soft power and its' relation to sports mega-events. In Grix and Houlihan's (2014) study they compared Germany hosting the 2006 FIFA World Cup with Great Britain hosting the 2012 Olympic Games. The results showed that a state with poor image can improve their international image, and a state with good international image can maintain that image, if successfully hosting such an event (ibid, p. 590). Grix and Kramareva (2017) investigate the Sochi Winter Olympics and the soft power strategy of Russia, stating that the event was a part of an even bigger soft power strategy for international status.

Others, such as Delgado (2016) and Guilianotti (2015) has done research specifically on how China in utilizing soft power in sports and sporting events. Delgado analyzes the relationship between the opening ceremonies of international sports events and the building of a positive image of China to deploy soft power (2016). Guilianotti focuses on China hosting the 2008 summer Olympic Games in Beijing, where the results showed that the soft power implemented to the event was effective both during and after the event (2015, p. 291). The scholar also introduced the concept of “soft disempowerment”, which is the possible negative soft power-outcome for a country when hosting an international mega-event (Guilianotti 2015, pp. 286-287).

Additional research connected to sporting events and soft power are the concepts of sport diplomacy and public diplomacy. Scholar Stuart Murray defines sports diplomacy in two ways. Firstly, as a tool for governments to achieve foreign policy objectives, where sport is consciously used by governments as an instrument for diplomacy (2013, p. 193). Secondly, there is a non-traditional type of sport diplomacy, where a vast web of actors (governments, non-state actors, organizations, teams, national sports associations etc.) practice a unique form of negotiation, representation and communication (ibid). Sport diplomacy serves as a type of public diplomacy, where public diplomacy simply refers to a form of diplomatic engagement as well as being a part of a much broader collaboration with other actors (Deos 2014, p. 1172).

3 Theories and Concepts

This section will present the theories and concepts used in this paper. The chapter begins with an introduction and careful explanation of the most central theory soft power. This is followed by a theory deriving from soft power, namely the theories on hard and soft resources. Thereafter follows a critical reflection on the theories, a section stating the operationalization of the chosen concepts, and the chapter will conclude with a short summary.

3.1 Soft Power

Soft power refers to the act of getting others to want the outcomes that you want, through cooption, attraction and influence rather than coercion and hard power (Nye 2004, p. 5). The concept was first introduced by political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr. in the late 1980s, and has now become a widely known and accepted concept within international relations. Nye claims that there are more ways of viewing power than the most general definition of the ability to get the outcomes one wants or the possession of resources that can influence the outcomes (2004, pp. 1-3). The less abstract concept - hard power - refers to in contrast how states use “carrots” (inducements) or “sticks” (threats) through military or economical actions, to get what they want (ibid, p.5). The new aspect on international relations and power that follows with soft power highlights the ability to shape preferences of others without using tangible threats or payoffs (ibid, p.5). It can instead allure others to strive for the same goals *without* being motivated by money or force, since the goal shares the same values and justness, and thus an intangible attraction persuades us to accept and accompany others’ purposes without being exposed to threats or any monetary exchange taking place (ibid, p. 7). Soft power refers to using resources such as institutions, values, policies and culture to seduce others, and in the long run to use that attraction to get power without coercion (ibid, p. 8). The positive outcomes for using soft power are many, when countries make their power legitimate in the eyes of others, they encounter less resistance to their goals. If being able to shape the international rules and to make them in line with their own interest, a country is less likely to

need costly carrots and sticks, and other countries are more likely to accept and understand their interests (ibid, pp. 10-11).

The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values and its foreign policies (Nye 2004, p. 11). Culture is the set of values and practices that create meaning for a society, distinguished through high culture such as literature and art, and popular culture through mass entertainment (ibid, p. 11). Nye points out that many soft-power resources are separated from governmental control and that governments are often only partly responsible to its purposes, and that this is often a reason why skeptics object to using the term in international politics (ibid, pp. 15,17). Moreover, popular culture is more likely to attract people and produce soft power in the sense of preferred outcomes where cultures are somewhat similar rather than extensively dissimilar (ibid, pp. 15-16). Soft power is thus more depending on the existence of willing interpreters and receivers in comparison to hard power.

Hard and soft power can both reinforce and work against each other. When a state flexes their military strength through an invasion for instance, that hard power illustration can have an effect on soft power (Nye 2004, p. 25). Nye claims that in this perpetually altering world, military, economic and soft powers remain important, and along with social trends of the 'information era' continuing, soft power will become an ever more important factor (2004, p. 30). The ability to share information and to be believed, along with competing for attractiveness, legitimacy and credibility becomes an important source of attraction and power in this age of information (ibid, p. 31).

3.2 Hard and Soft Resources

In 2009, Geun Lee presented an alteration to Nye's theory, which subsequently will be important for this study as well. Lee presented a modification to the soft power theory, suggesting a new definition by making a distinction between hard and soft resources, and explaining the connection between soft resources and how it could lead to soft power (2009). The purpose of the supplement to the concept was to provide a better understanding of the logical relationship between soft resources, soft power, and the political goals with soft power (Lee 2009, p. 207). Lee claims that there is a connection between soft resources and soft power that is important to disentangle, categorize and define (ibid, p. 209). Some soft power

resources could for example be attractive culture, symbols, international celebrities, ideology or international institutions (ibid, p. 209). Lee wishes to refine Nye's definition of soft power, which in its' original definition implies that any power that is cooptive, attractive and non-violent regardless of the power resource is considered soft (ibid, p. 209). Claiming that hard power can be utilized to create attraction, and soft power in addition can be used as a weapon to coerce others to change their actions or attitudes, Lee enriches the earlier concept (ibid, p. 209). Lee ultimately redefines soft power as "[...] based specifically upon the power resources employed to exert influence upon others, by the nature of power, cooptive or coercive" (2009, p. 210). Moreover, when non-material symbolic "soft resources" are used to exert influence the outcome is soft power, and when material "hard resources" are used the outcome is hard power (ibid, p. 210). Thus, soft power can, as well as hard power, be both cooptive and forceful, and the difference is in the power resource used (ibid, p. 210).

It is important to acknowledge that presence of soft resources does not automatically exert soft power. Another important factor that Lee points out is that "[b]eing soft is not soft power!", meaning that soft power is not exerted unless soft resources is derived into actual influence so that manipulation moves others in a specific direction (2009, p. 210). To illustrate how soft resources changes into soft power, three stages are necessary: (1) application of soft sources; (2) the recipients processes and understands the application, providing a short-term or long-term change in behavior; (3) soft power construction (ibid, 210). The first and the last stages are fairly self-explanatory, but the changes in behavior needs further explanation. Here, the application of soft resources causes the recipients to change their short-term way of thinking, with an ultimate goal of changing it long-term and making it into a habit (ibid, p. 211).

In addition to the new definitions, Lee also categorizes five different types of soft power (Lee 2009, p. 207). Firstly, soft power can be used to improve the external security environment through presenting a peaceful image. Secondly, soft power can be a mean for a country to gather support for their foreign policy and security issues from other countries. Thirdly, a state can use soft power to alter or manipulate other countries' way of thinking and their preferences. Fourthly, one can use soft power to maintain the unity of a community. The fifth and final category refers to using soft power to increase the approval for a country's leader or domestic support for a government (Lee 2009, pp. 207-208). Creating national heroes, appealing to patriotism through international sports competitions, or glorifying a leader's performance at an international summit are all examples of the fifth category (ibid, p. 209). Lee emphasizes that the fifth category mainly focuses on domestic rather than

international audiences, but without an international aspect, the fifth category cannot exist (ibid, p. 209).

Moreover, since the soft power goal for a country cannot simply be to gain respect or attractiveness, Lee adds five different types of soft power strategies related to the categories above that explains how soft power strategies ought to be “goal-specific”. The first is creation of self-images to improve security environment, the second is regarding manipulation of others’ images to mobilize support for collective actions, and the third is named the network effect strategy (Lee 2009, p. 212). Moreover, the fourth is called accelerating situational change, and lastly the fifth strategy is creating heroes and celebrities. The fifth category can be used in two ways. One is to exert soft power by being role models for certain universal values, which can set an international agenda to achieve certain national or international goal. The other way is to spread a sense of pride within their own country, which provokes nationalistic unification or support for the government. In the fifth category, the heroes and celebrities can act independently or in cooperation with their government (ibid, p. 213).

3.3 Critical Reflection on the Theories

It is of great importance to reflect on the theories used in this study since they are central for the results. The theories (soft power and hard and soft resources) give the study generalization, but they also have some less good aspects that are crucial to broach and reflect upon. Beginning with some positive aspects, the soft power theory provides a nuanced way of thinking and analyzing power. Both theories strive at explaining the abstract, and many times subconscious, things that might be difficult to grasp yet *do have* effect in world politics. Power balances are perpetually changing, and the world politics is in constant movement. It thus becomes important to not only view power in terms of military or economic strength, because other aspects are important as well, which soft power illustrates.

On the other hand, there is also a discussion on how soft power can be measured and how one can prove the agenda in sports events is soft power. Soft power, being an abstract theory, can ultimately be hard to measure and prove. Academics Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Fuija Lu provide some thinkable aspects to the concept of soft power (2012). The scholars bring up problems with conceptualization, operationalization and the need for clearer variables for identifying targets (2012, p. 566). Although stating that soft power is a near

universally accepted concept, Blanchard and Lu suggest that a framework for operationalizing soft power is preferable (2012, p. 567, p. 582). This is moreover handled in section 3.4 where a proper operationalization is presented for this study to avoid this problem. Others additionally argue that when researching on soft power, one should think about soft power in context related to a target, and systematically consider intervening variables (Blanchard - Lu 2012, pp. 571, 582). In other words, when investigating soft power one should acknowledge that both intermediate variables and the target should be taken in consideration. To conclude, soft power, and the extended theory on hard and soft resources, are theories that can be seen as both easily motivated and hard to prove, which makes operationalization along with conveying a strategic motive important.

3.4 Operationalization

In regard to the previous section 3.3, a clear operationalization on how soft power will be found and interpreted is in order. Since soft power is a highly abstract theory and concept, there might be difficulties with operationalization (providing a measurable definition to a concept) and decoding Chinese actions into soft power strategies. Scholars have previously discussed the lack of clear measurable variables when conducting research on soft power. By clearly defining soft power, along with providing distinguished nominal definitions on which qualifications that should be accomplished to establish the usage of soft power, this operationalization problem could be avoided (see Teorell – Svensson 2007, p. 38). Nye encounters the criticism and explains in an article from 2006 some of the common misunderstandings about soft power, one being that it cannot be measured. He claims that soft power can be measured and quantified through cultural, communications, and diplomatic resources that might produce soft power for a country (Nye 2006). By looking at governmental spending on for example broadcasting or exchange programs, one can more easily see where promotion has been put for soft power-efforts (ibid). Additionally, by using Lee's definition hard and soft resources, and his categories and strategies of soft power (see section 3.2), one can evaluate if China is in fact using football as a soft power resource to exert soft power and decipher actions into soft power strategies. Along with using the theoretical frameworks, by categorizing the actions by domestic and international soft power efforts in the analysis, one could more effectively evaluate how certain efforts are made for a

specific purpose. The concepts and the theoretical strategies from both Lee and Nye will be used when categorizing what actions are for soft power purposes. In addition, a great value will be put on contextual evidence, namely putting information in perspective and analyzing the facts in relation to its surroundings.

3.5 Summary

In this chapter, Nye's theory on soft power and Lee's theory on hard and soft resources was introduced. Soft power refers to getting others to want the outcomes that you want, through cooption, attraction and influence rather than coercion and hard power. A state can spread soft power through culture, where sports is one aspect. Lee's theory stems from Nye's, but adds a distinction between hard and soft resources claiming that hard power can create attraction, and soft power can be used as a weapon in changing people's actions. Lee defines the hard and soft resources, and additionally specifies five different categories of soft power, where the fifth refers to using soft power to gather domestic support for a government by for example appealing to patriotism through international sport competitions. Connected to the categories, Lee suggests five soft power strategies, the fifth being using heroes and celebrities to exert soft power domestically or internationally. Thereafter some critical aspects of soft power theory were briefly discussed, stating that it easy motivated but harder to prove. The concluding operationalization section explained that soft power can be measured through governmental spending on culture and communication and by motivating efforts made by linking them to a strategic goal and considering contextual evidence.

4 China, Football and Soft Power

In the following chapter the central empirical material for this thesis will be presented. The chapter begins with a general background on China, where additionally some of the current most popular sports will be introduced. Subsequently a broad description on how China has previously used soft power in sports event and in culture will be presented. Then follows a more specific section describing the soft power usage in Chinese football. The chapter ends with a short summary of the information given.

4.1 Background on China and Chinese Sports

The culturally rich China has experienced a troubled history including invasions, war, revolutions, uprisings and famines. China has been under communist rule since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and the authorities remains suppressive and hinders any attempts of opposition or outspoken dissent towards the government (BBC 2017). Both domestic and international political actions, for example China's continuous violations of human rights or territorial disputes in the South China Sea, have tarnished the Chinese reputation. China is aware of that being viewed negatively could counter the goals that the country wants to achieve, and has thus taken actions to improve their image (Townshend 2015). Beginning in the late 20th century, China started their journey towards becoming a more modern economic and political superpower. With a population now reaching 1.37 billion, China is currently the second largest economy in the world and thus has large influence in the global economy (Worldbank 2017). The president of China, Xi Jinping, came to power in 2012 and has since been focusing on Chinese economic boosts, anti-corruption campaigns, promoting a more modern approach of China as well as being known for rejecting free speech and constitutional democracy (ibid). Regarding media, China has the largest media market in the world and the largest online population, which both operates under tight control of the government (ibid).

Regarding sports in China, the Chinese interest in football has been growing steadily over the last 3 years, with approximately 31 percent of the population having an interest for the sport (Nielsen Sports Report 2016, p.6), and is the most watched sport in China (EIU 2009, p.18). The highest football league in China is the state-run CSL with 16 different teams, where Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao are the reigning champions. Even though football is popular, the domestic football is experiencing difficulties related to the national team's dismal performances disturbing an expansion of a fan base, the dwindling fan base making attracting sponsorship and television audiences more difficult, and the lack of interest for the sport makes parents not wanting their children to be sent to football academies (EIU 2009, p. 18). Even though football accounts for three out of five currently most popular sporting events in China, basketball is also a popular sport to exercise with 40 percent interest among the inhabitants in 2016 (Nielsen Sports Report 2016, p. 6). Although popular, the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) cannot generate free-market income and are heavily dependent on sponsorship deals generated by the government (Zwerling 2013). Other popular sports in China are traditional table tennis (37% are interested) and badminton (36%), although cycling (26%), mixed martial arts (14%) and motorsports (21%) have also increased in popularity (Nielsen Sports Report 2016, p. 6). Football is moreover undoubtedly the most popular sport in the world, constituting 43 percent of the global sports market in comparison to basketball's modest six percent according to numbers from 2009 (Martin 2014).

4.2 China, Sports and Soft Power

China has a particularly strong cultural foundation with an ancient history reaching as far back as 5,000 years (Delgado 2016, p. 610). Even sports have a long history in China, for example *cuju*, a game similar to football as it consists of sending a ball through a goal though without any clarified rules (Boucher 2008, p. 51). The flourishing and established culture of the old civilization can be seen through philosophy, music, arts, and language throughout large parts of Eastern and South Asia (Delgado 2016, p. 610).

During the 20th century and in the early 21st century, sports has been used by countries to strengthen national images and identities, as well as for promoting governments and state regimes (Delgado 2016, p. 608). In East Asia, sport is continuously used as a tool to promote nationalism and national identities between rival countries (ibid). The Chinese state has

reportedly used sports in political purposes to project a purposely selected image of China (ibid, p. 608). China has also implemented a media strategy where sports, diplomacy and politics go hand in hand in purpose to promote China internationally (ibid, p. 607). The success of Chinese athletes in international games along with hosting the 2008 Summer Olympics, has pushed the idea of China as a strong and powerful country, and provided the opportunity for China to promote a modern, prestigious and economically dominant image of the country (ibid). Another example of previous successful Chinese soft power resources is the former NBA star Yao Ming, who is functioning as an unofficial ambassador for the sport of basketball as well for China (Mordecai 2016). The huge interest and the noticeable effort put on Beijing Summer Olympics uncovered the link between international politics and sport in China.

In recent years, China has given more attention to their soft power implementations. In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that China's soft power should increase in addition to declaring the goal of China becoming a socialist cultural superpower and promoting a good narrative of the country (Shambaugh 2015, p. 99). Additionally, the Chinese government has previously elaborated and utilized carefully designed soft power strategies, with the aim of gaining international recognition and respect, where the cultural aspect is an important element (Delgado 2016, p. 610). Although being a master of hard power, China seems to be experiencing a shrinking soft power and a declining influence and respect (Shambaugh 2015, p. 99). One could even say that China is experiencing a "soft power-crisis"; a BBC-poll from 2014 reveals that since 2005 China has experienced a declining influence of 14 percentage points, and that 49 percent of respondents viewed the country negatively (ibid, p. 107). In international politics image matter, and although China's economic power is impressive, other aspects such as the repressive political system creates a negative vibe (ibid, p. 99). These efforts are taking place not only in media and sports, but also through diplomatic schemes. The scale of the Chinese investments is unprecedented and is not even comparable with the amounts spent by the United States or Russia during the Cold War (ibid, p. 100). China is annually spending 10 billion dollars on "external propaganda", compared to the United States spending 666 million dollars on public diplomacy (ibid, p. 100). A large part of China's outspoken soft power strategy entails subsidizing the media presence overseas by providing their largest state television channel CCTV globally and in English, and to break the western media monopoly (ibid, p. 102-103).

4.3 Soft Power and Chinese Football

Sports, being a multimillion-dollar entertainment industry, plays a prominent role in international relations and business. China has recently spent millions of dollars on Chinese football clubs and purchasing some of the world's best football players to play in their leagues (Toktomushev 2016). Being a huge football-fan himself, Xi Jinping announced in 2015 his goal of China becoming a football superpower by 2050, and making the Chinese male and female football teams the best in the world along with wishing to host the FIFA World Cup (Roddy 2017). A plan was published in 2016 by the Chinese Football Association which set out short, medium and long-term targets, including among others to build a football pitch for every 10,000 inhabitant in addition to climbing from the 81st world ranking and ultimately winning the World Cup in 15 years (BBC 2016). Football is even a part of the school system in China, which building of the grassroots initiative of a 50-pitch football academy initiated by Guangzhou Evergrande illustrates (Nielsen Sports Report 2016, p. 13).

Spending on the CSL has also soared, reaching up to 450 million dollars in transfer fees in 2016, exceeding the amount spent within the English Premier League (Roddy 2017) and outspending large football leagues in Holland and Portugal (Duerden 2017). One can compare the spending with Chinese basketball, where the highest paid players in the Chinese Basketball Association get less than the absolute minimum in the American National Basketball Association (Bedard 2015). The CSL is simultaneously vilified in Europe for their transfer spending and the players denounced greedy for agreeing to play for the league (Zhicheng 2017). Transfer rules have been implemented which hinders too many foreign players in each team and few Chinese football players' pursuit careers abroad (EIU 2009, p. 19). Moreover, 31 football academies have been established across the country to advance domestic players along with recruiting successful international coaches (Roddy 2017, Smith 2016). Due to being accused of corruption, and revelations of fixed football matches leading to 33 players and officials banned in 2013, China has made efforts to clean up the sport and its reputation (BBC 2016). The development of China's professional football system is driven by government strategies and investment plans. Chinese companies and rich individuals are perpetually encouraged to invest heavily in events, teams, facilities, sponsorships and agencies, both internationally and domestically (Nielsen Sports Report 2016, p. 13). This is for example illustrated by that between 2014 and 2015 the spending of international transfers rose by 60,5 %, paying the foreign players huge amounts for moving to China (ibid, p. 15).

Additionally, Chinese firms and individuals have increasingly bought themselves into European clubs such as AC Milan, Atletico Madrid and Internazionale during the years 2014 to 2016 (ibid, p. 20). Here, the Chinese investors seems to have prioritized ownership rather than aligning with a club through sponsorship (ibid).

Some scholars see these efforts in Chinese Football as a way for China to use international diplomacy and getting leverage for international interests. Simon Chadwick, Professor at the University of Salford and expert in soft power and geo-politics of Sport in Asia, says that China “[...] is not just playing football for football’s sake” and believes in an ulterior motive for the actions taken (Roddy 2017). Chadwick says that spending big creates massive expectations, and spending large amounts on players is also a way of creating heroes and icons (Buckley 2017). Others points out the uncertain economic return in putting large sums of money into the sport industry that is not a guaranteed moneymaker (Mordecai 2016). A majority of the investments put in the sport is state-funded (ibid). On the contrary, others claim that these efforts can simply be viewed as a Chinese attempt at building a sustainable and sizeable industry that will generate jobs, export earnings and income. The inward investment may be football-focused, but the goal is to in ten years create a domestic sports economy, similar to the one China has done in computers and smartphones (Nielsen Sports Report 2016, p. 17).

China has also realized the benefits of uniting the world’s biggest population with the world’s most popular and loved sport, in other words making a domestic effort. The CSL has risen in prominence with their intriguing transfers from more established domestic leagues (Nielsen Sports Report 2016, p. 2). The Chinese government has also realized the potential with engaging the 1.37 billion people living and China, and the potential revenues that could be found within China (ibid, p. 5). Reportedly, around 106 million people tuned in on CCTV to watch the Chinese national team losing to South Korea in a 2018 World Cup qualifier game, and the ratings for the CSL are increasing year by year (Zhicheng 2017). One important aspect here is technology, which makes it possible for the 1.305 billion active mobile-users in China to view football instantly through their phone (Nielsen Sports Report 2016, p. 6). Digital broadcasters have recently been investing in domestic and international sports rights to drive subscriptions and help showcase their other services. Chinese media groups have between 2015 and 2016 obtained broadcasting right to for example UEFA Champion’s League. In March 2016 LeEco signed a deal that acquired them the rights to the CSL, along with launching a service for buying official merchandise while streaming the games. By making these large investments in international and national broadcasts rights, the

hope is that this will ultimately provide an increasing interest for other services, raising their own profile and attracting new viewers and fans in the country (ibid, pp. 10-11). And for the first time ever in 2016, the United Kingdom-based sport channel operator Sky Sport has agreed to live broadcast CSL matches (ibid, p. 15).

4.4 Summary

The second biggest economy in the world, China, has a rich ancient culture reaching back several thousand years. The hard power oriented China is, due to bad reputation, suffering from a “soft power crisis” which threatens their image. The Chinese state has reportedly utilized sports in political purposes to project nationalism and provide a carefully selected image of China to the rest of the world, for example during the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. China has additionally implemented a substantial media strategy to promote the country in the international arena, this includes broadcasting deals and spending billions on external propaganda. As a part of China’s goal of creating a greater narrative of the country, as president Xi Jinping has outspokenly said, they wish to become a socialist cultural superpower. At the same time, serious efforts and investments have been made in on the football national team as well as the CSL, promoting the sport both domestically and internationally. Also, great actions have been taken from the grassroots to the professional level to support Chinese football, simultaneously as multiple voices are questioning China’s ulterior motive behind the effort.

5 Analysis

To begin with there are some general reasons of why China would use football as a part of a wider soft power strategy. As previously stated, one could say that China is experiencing a “soft power crisis” with a declining influence and respect through Asia and the rest of the world. China knows that achieving bad in ‘the image game’ is not a preferable situation, and that previous political behavior has had effect on its’ world image. Since image matters it is thus plausible that China would take actions to improve their soft power. A prerequisite for China to create soft power is to have soft resources, where a powerful national team or a prestigious football league could be a useful resource. Thus, that the CSL or the Chinese national football team can be used as soft resources has a clear possibility. Nye points out that popular culture is more likely to create attraction where the culture is similar. Football could thus be a way for China to illustrate their similarity to the rest of the world, instead of trying to promote sports or other cultural aspects that are significant for only China. Additionally, it has been proven that China has previously used sports in political purposes to project a purposely selected image of China, for example through the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, which makes the possibility of football being part of a similar scheme more likely. Since Nye claims that the positive outcomes for attempting soft power is to gain influence, support and prestige, one can see why China would find this strategy tempting.

With some general reasons explained, setting the background of why a soft power strategy would be beneficial for China and plausible for them to utilize, the forthcoming analysis will further evaluate the empirical material through a soft power perspective. The analysis has been separated from the earlier empirical and theoretical material to create a sharper structure and greater emphasis on my own reflections. The section begins with evidence indicating towards a soft power effort where national and international strategies will be highlighted, then follows a brief discussion on alternative explanations. The chapter ends with a summary.

5.1 Indications of a Soft Power Effort

In addition to the general reasons for why China could benefit from increasing their soft power, this thesis has pointed to some indications that a soft power effort has in fact taken place through Chinese football. Among the resources that Nye claims that a state can utilize the cultural aspect becomes most apparent in this case. Outspoken evidence is one of the most prominent indications that points to that China has taken a cultural soft power effort through Chinese football. This is fortified by outspoken support from Chinese president Xi Jinping, where he expresses his wishes for China to become a football superpower. This is also connected to a more general goal stated by Jinping where he wishes to increase China's soft power and ultimately promote a good narrative of the country. In contrast to what Nye stated, that many soft power resources are separated from governmental control and thus the theory is not as applicable to international politics, in this case the Chinese government is highly involved with the different aspects that would lead to a soft power effort through football. The Chinese government has a strict control over the media and internet, runs the CSL, and has reportedly provided substantial amounts of money, encouraged both individuals and rich companies to invest in Chinese football. The statements made by political leaders show that soft power through football is important for China and considered a political tool both abroad and domestically. Since the Chinese government has such a prominent role and has influence in all aspects, it would be difficult to rule out their interference in a soft power effort.

Furthermore, that the CSL is investing large amounts on international players and coaches, in contrast of making the equivalent effort for the domestic players, points towards a soft power strategy aimed internationally. Here, Lee's theory on soft power strategies demonstrates the aim and purpose of the high-profile transfers. The most probable strategy for China to use in this case agrees with Lee's fifth soft power strategy; creating heroes and celebrities to exert soft power. Again, there are two ways this strategy can be implemented. The first is by creating role models for universal values, which sets an international agenda to achieve certain national or international goals. China is doing this by constantly trying to purchase big names from European leagues to the CSL, creating massive attention and perhaps fan bases will follow and subsequently discover that China shares the same sport values as the western world. The unequal economic effort put on international transfers rather than on training and supporting domestic players, makes an international soft power scheme more likely. Linking back to what scholar Simon Chadwick stated - spending big creates

massive expectations along with spending large sum of money on players creates heroes and icons - it thus looks like these astronomical amounts could be an indicator of an effort in Chinese football for other purposes than just for football's' sake.

The other aspect of the strategy of creating heroes and celebrities is to instill a sense of pride within the nation, which creates nationalistic cohesion. There are benefits with having Chinese football players becoming international superstars. By creating international sports talents, such as basketball player Yao Ming, international eyes will look towards China and China will receive an opportunity to exude attraction, legitimacy and power. This is done by boosting the possibilities for future domestic football talents, building football academies and trying to engage the inhabitants to the sport. These actions are also linked to the fifth soft power category that Lee presents, using soft power to increase the approval rating of a leader or domestic support for a government. Invoking patriotism through international sport competition is one example that Lee states is used in this category, and China has seemingly tried to invoke massive attention and participation to football. This is subsequently mirrored to what we can see that the Chinese government is perpetually doing today, where domestic efforts to support the CSL and engaging the inhabitants are made. Due to increasing nationalism in Asia a strong patriotic cohesion could be a unifying goal for the Chinese, thus a prestigious national football team equals a powerful government. It becomes clear that patriotism and nationalism is an important tool and a possible wanted outcome domestically.

One can also notice how the media is connected to a football soft power effort since China has announced its ambition to break the western media and promote CCTV and the CSL outside China. By subsidizing their media presence overseas and providing their media services China is creating an opportunity to spread cultural influences. Linking back to Nye's thoughts on the information era, China has realized the potential spreading cultural soft power through media and promoting the CSL through several media outlets points toward an international ambition. The inconsistency though with broadcasting the CSL abroad is the bad reputation following the league, making an international demand for the league puzzling. An additional aspect worthy of consideration is the paradox of not seeing the same effort put in the equally popular sport (in China) basketball. Basketball entails a similar domestic Chinese market but the massive attention towards football point towards an international awareness of the breadth of football. China has massive potential to create a soft power empire through Football, with a huge domestic market and large potential overseas, but vilifications and dismal performances in the CSL and national team creates a fracture. If corrected, the vision of a football empire might lead to China becoming the soft power giant it is striving for.

5.2 Reflection on Alternative Explanations

In contrast to the previous section, alternative explanations other than soft power is additionally important to take in consideration, where the most prominent one is the economic factor. Football is the most popular sport in the world and has a substantial amount of the market value, which would provide an explanation towards economical explanations of why broadcasting deals are made outside China to show the CSL. Investments from other actors, though pushed by the government, points towards an economic motive. The large investments by private actors are explained by them viewing football as another industry for them to make money, to build a sustainable industry and to create job opportunities. Combining the world's most popular sport with the world's biggest population could contribute with potential economic opportunities domestically. It would also be difficult to motivate private actors to make investments to create soft power for the country.

5.3 Summary

In sum, the outspoken evidence, investments by the Chinese government, purchasing high profile players instead of balancing the same effort domestically, and making international broadcast deals for the CSL where the demand is lacking, all point towards an international soft power attempt. Domestic efforts include building football academies, football fields, and engaging the inhabitants in the sport to create domestic support for the government. There are some paradoxical aspects with broadcasting the CSL overseas and not putting the same effort in the equally popular sport basketball that points towards soft power being a motive. Football entails a larger market abroad than basketball, but the current prestige of the CSL is not equivalent the level of the European leagues. Through theoretical lenses, one can notice there are efforts that points towards both national and international soft power efforts by creating role models for universal values and promoting a nationalistic cohesion. Finally, it becomes clear that there are several indications that point towards soft power, but it is possible that they coincide with economic incentives which stems from the massive potential in seizing what Chinese market entails.

6 Concluding Thoughts

In sum, this study has illustrated the connection between sports and politics generally and football and China specifically. The clear cut between sport and politics is slowly becoming vaguer as more states see the opportunities that follow with hosting prestigious sports mega-events and how sports can be used as a resource to spread a better image, narrative and positive associations. Those associations can in turn be useful in diplomatic relations and can in a greater extent make other states agree with one's political aims. Through this thesis, it becomes clearer how states are using new types of strategies and powers to gain influence in the 21st century. This chapter will state a conclusion, present a concluding discussion and thoughts, along with suggesting future research.

In conclusion, when connecting to my research question if China's recent substantial efforts in Chinese football be explained and understood through a soft power-perspective, one can establish that there are multiple indicators that points to that a soft power effort is an ulterior motive in Chinese football. It is possible to see the positive effects for China building a strong national football team and aiming at a prestigious football league. The CSL serves as a way for China to bypass the major events such as the Olympic Games or FIFA World Cup, creating their own sporting platform where their soft power can preferably be exerted at any time. However, it is hard to prove precisely that all empirical evidence is due to power efforts and since soft power is an abstract concept and power can take different expressions. The abstract character of soft power creates a difficulty establishing mechanisms and isolation, although counterfactual difference and order in time have been illustrated. The result thus becomes an argumentation of indications, where my conclusion rests on an implication that the soft power explanation is the most probable. Nevertheless, there are important factors, including prominent connections between the CSL and the Chinese state, that points to that Chinese football is a part of a larger soft power push initiated and driven by the Chinese government. China is in contrary to other countries taking their own path for boosting their image and building their own sport industry and using that as a platform for spreading a preferable image, and possibly we will see the same types of investments for other countries as well in the future.

Finally, this thesis has contributed with an illustration on how a state can use a sport, professional league or a national team, for strategic political purposes. Research conducted forthcoming can explore further how other sports, not only super mega-events, can serve as a political power-tool. Also, future research can explore if the Chinese efforts in football were successful or not, or in other words, to evaluate whether this soft power strategy helped or harmed Chinese soft power. Currently China is only in the initial phase of a soft power effort, and since being soft is not soft power, future studies can thus establish if the application of soft resources resulted in changes in behavior and a soft power construction.

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