


## NATURALIZATION IN CHINESE FOOTBALL: LEGAL ISSUES, NATIONALISM, AND IDENTITY

*NATURALIZAÇÃO NO FUTEBOL CHINÊS: QUESTÕES JURÍDICAS,  
NACIONALISMO E IDENTIDADE* 

*NATURALIZACIÓN EN EL FÚTBOL CHINO: ASUNTOS JURÍDICOS,  
NACIONALISMO E IDENTIDAD* 

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**Abstract:** The nationality conversion of athletes is no longer a novelty in international sports, however, the case of footballers' naturalization in China has received little academic attention. The introduction of overseas talents was endorsed by national policy, with the purpose of strengthening the Chinese national team aiming to reach the World Cup. This article examines some legal concepts in Chinese footballers' naturalization and discusses this phenomenon from a sociological perspective. The purpose is to employ the football athletes' nationality swapping as a case to discuss the status quo of this sport in China, and meanwhile, to discuss nationalism and social identity under the interaction of sports and society.

**Keywords:** Footballers' Naturalization. Chinese Football. Nationalism. Social Identity.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In June 2019, Li Ke made his debut for the Chinese men's football team, becoming the first naturalized player to represent China. Three months later, in a World Cup Qualifier game against the Maldives, Ai Kesen became the first naturalized player without any Chinese ancestry to play and score a goal for China. In May and June 2021, in the four victories over Guam (0-7), Philippines (2-0), Maldives (5-0) and Syria (3-1) for the World Cup qualifiers, China had five naturalized players on the squad. Although in international sports nationality swapping is nothing new, for Chinese football it is a day worth remembering.

Naturalization refers to the legal act by which a non-citizen individual may acquire a certain country's citizenship according to relevant laws and regulations (CHIU, 2021). So, it can be understood as the process of making somebody become a citizen of a specific country (ZHANG *et al.*, 2020). The discussion of "naturalization" in the field of modern sports mainly refers to the issue of athletes' nationality conversion. Athletes' naturalization is usually carried through to add dynamics to the development of specific sports in the country. As for athletes, they tend to switch nationalities for some sports-related reasons as well as economic benefits and individual welfare. For example, it would be easier for athletes to qualify for sports mega-events representing weaker nations or sporting federations, and they are promised high bonuses and better living/training conditions (MARQUES; MARCHI JÚNIOR, 2021; REICHE; TINAZ, 2019).

Many academics have examined this phenomenon from the angle of labor migration, taking into account the "center-periphery model" for a one-way shift to developed nations (CHOI, 2020). Numerous studies have explored the sport migration from global south countries to Western countries (e.g. West Europe, England, or the United States), and it was attributed to the fact that elite sport has its historical evolution closely linked to globalization processes (GIULIANOTTI; ROBERTSON, 2004, 2009; MARKOVITS; RENSMANN, 2010). As Giulianotti and Robertson state, "sport, in particular football, constitutes one of the most dynamic and sociologically enlightening domains of globalization" and that being "the global game", football helps us to theoretically and empirically explore multidimensional and long-term processes of globalization (GIULIANOTTI; ROBERTSON, 2004, p. 546). And this allows us to understand why traditionally football-strong countries like Germany, France, and Italy whose men's national teams have all benefited from their central position in the world-system. As a result of a long and dialectical process of exploitation and capital accumulation which make these countries are attractive destinations for migratory flows from former colonies and also peoples from other countries on the periphery of the system. This migratory flow from the semi-periphery and periphery of the system is also reflected in the football market (LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2019). It is worth mentioning that Italy, Germany, and France are the three of the last four World champions that had naturalized players. Moreover, in addition to the impact of the political and economic landscape brought about by globalization, the power of emerging capital cannot be ignored. For example, it is worth paying attention to

the fact that some athletes swapped passports to the Gulf States like Qatar, UAE, and Bahrain competing in Olympics or World Cup qualifiers. Although these countries are not commonly considered among center countries, the powerful oil economy and capital driving force behind sports are promoting the flow of elite athletes towards them. Back to Asian football, countries with naturalized players have also achieved notable progress. For example, Qatar, won its first Asian Cup in 2019. Countries like the Philippines and Lebanon also displayed impressive levels in their World Cup qualifiers games.

In most cases, sports naturalization brings talents for a certain country's national team and it is adopted as a positive strategy to improve the team's strength. However, this phenomenon has faced a great deal of criticism. According to Grix (2016), athlete naturalization has generated controversies as it allows someone from a foreign country to compete for another nation with which they have no cultural, historical, or linguistic connection. The increasing transnational mobility of athletes has brought more cultural plight and ethical confusion: who would be eligible for representing the country in international competitions? (CHIU, 2021; JANSEN *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, as Oonk (2020b) points out, the emergence of the legal status of citizenship is at the same time a complex process concerning a sense of belonging, while it also allows us to try to understand the process of "nation-building". Numerous theoretical and methodological approaches have been used in adequate research examining issues around national identity and sport. For example, media and digital source analysis (VINCENT; HILL, 2011; JIANG, 2013; VINCENT; HARRIS, 2014; FALCOUS, 2015; SKEY, 2015; GIBBONS, 2015; LIČEN; BILLINGS, 2013; ZENQUIS; MWANIKI, 2019), perspectives of the international sports mega-events (JANSEN, 2019; JANSEN *et al.*, 2018; VAN CAMPENHOUT *et al.*, 2018; OONK, 2020a; OONK, 2020b), and elite athletes (HIRAMOTO, 2019; RAZACK; JOSEPH, 2021; VAN CAMPENHOUT; VAN HOUTUM, 2021; ZENQUIS; MWANIKI, 2019). In addition, we also note that many recent studies analyze this issue specifically using different countries/regions as case studies, ranging from South Korea (CHOI, 2020; SHIN *et al.*, 2022; CHANG *et al.*, 2019), Hong Kong (HO; CHIU, 2016; YUNG; CHAN; PHILLIPS, 2021; CHIU, 2021), Qatar and Turkey (REICHE; TINAZ, 2019).

China intends to have one of the biggest sports industries on the planet and counts on football to improve this development, with the "China's Medium and Long-term Football Development Plan (2016-2050)" as its main policy (LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2017). Ensuring the success of the national team is a method to fuel passion and consumption. Moreover, in this case, football has assumed the function of a political instrument both internally and externally, combined with the Chinese dream of rejuvenation. In the current literature, there is a paucity of studies on the athlete's naturalization in Chinese football. In effect, Chinese naturalized footballers are not just a simple competitive issue; it serves as a lens through which to showcase the relationship between sports and politics, diplomacy, the shaping of nationalism, etc.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

This work is methodologically based on the analysis of the mainstream press release of the athlete's naturalization in Chinese football between 2015 and 2022, the official documents of the Chinese Football Association (CFA) and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), as well as a literature review in Chinese and English, to examine the case of Chinese football within the context of globalization, migration, citizenship, and national identity. It explores footballers' naturalization phenomenon as China is paying full engagement in developing football. The paper is divided into three main parts: (a) an overview of legal concepts related to athletes' naturalization - China's immigration policies and FIFA's regulations; (b) a brief overview of the transforming nationalism of China and the significance of football in nationalism's construction; (c) a brief analysis of how Chinese media constructed both naturalized football players and their national identity.

## 3 ATHLETES' NATURALIZATION: LEGAL CONCEPTS

### 3.1 NATIONALITY AND NATIONALITY LAW IN CHINA

Nationality and citizenship are not the same in lexical terms. In the Oxford English Dictionary, nationality means "the status of belonging to a particular nation", while citizenship is defined as "the position or status of being a citizen of a particular country" (HORNBY; LEA; BRADBERRY, 2020). In Chinese nationality law, the acquisition of citizenship is only related to nationality (WAN, 2020). For instance, once a person acquires Chinese nationality, he/she is a "Chinese citizen". Therefore, in this paper, we can equate possession of Chinese nationality with Chinese citizenship.

Generally, on the world scale, there are three interrelated ways to obtain citizenship: "jus sanguinis", acquiring citizenship through descent; "jus soli", citizenship will be granted to anyone born in the territory of the country and; "jus nexi", also named as "stakeholder principle" (OONK, 2020a), which is often applied to migrants residing in a country for years or those who can claim a notable contribution to the country, politically or economically. China's nationality law mostly supports "jus sanguinis" and "jus soli" (WAN, 2020), nevertheless, it still leaves possibilities for "jus nexi".

The naturalization of foreign athletes is a significant subject of analysis not only because China is one of the few countries in the world that explicitly does not recognize dual citizenship but also for the complicated citizenship acquisition process. According to China's Nationality Law, there are only two ways to acquire nationality: the original acquisition by birth and the inherited acquisition by naturalization. The original acquisition means through descent and birthplace. In contrast, for inherited acquisitions, China accepts naturalization applications from qualified foreigners who have obtained a naturalization certificate signed by the Ministry of Public Security. To get this certificate, a candidate must complete one of the following requisites: (1) Close relatives of Chinese citizens; (2) Settlers in China; (3) Other legitimate reasons.

It is quite simple for applicants with Chinese ancestry to have this certificate if they give up their former nationality. However, for non-ethnic individuals, two reasonable paths ought to be either married Chinese citizens or nominated by the government for special reasons, considering that the threshold to be legislatively recognized as a “settler” in China is relatively high.

There are two main ways for naturalized footballers to obtain Chinese citizenship. First, ethnic individuals within three generations renounce their original nationality to apply for Chinese nationality. Second, non-ethnic players, with the support of national policies, obtain Chinese citizenship through the clause of “other legitimate reasons”.

### 3.2 SPORTS NATIONALITY AND FIFA’S REGULATIONS

The nationality obtained does not mean the qualification for representing a country but it is often the “sport nationality” that determines whether an athlete can compete. In international competitions, sport nationality means a qualification to hold the nationality of a country and to represent that country in international sporting events (HUANG, 2013). Nationality is a concept in public law determining citizenship, whereas sports nationality is a private law issue that ascertains the qualification in sports events (ZHANG, 2019). That is to say, nationality is a necessary but not sufficient requirement for sports nationality.

In the “FIFA Statutes”, the closest explanation to “sports nationality” is the “eligibility to play for representative teams’ described in the “Identity Applicable Management Rules”. Although the eligibility to play for representative teams was considered a priority under FIFA’s system (OONK, 2020a), since 1930, foreign-born athletes’ participation in FIFA’s competitions has been a long-standing phenomenon (VAN CAMPENHOUT; VAN STERKENBURG; OONK, 2018). Not only that, in the early stage of international football, athletes, especially Latin Americans of European descent, such as Alfredo di Stefano, freely represented different countries, causing chaos in terms of competitions’ organization and ethics. This triggered the formulation of the first provision of FIFA’s regulation regarding nationality swapping. In 1962, at the 33rd FIFA Congress in Santiago, Chile, to regulate it ‘Article 18’ stated:

1. Any player who is a naturalized citizen of a country in virtue of that country’s laws shall be eligible to play for a national or representative team of that country.
2. If a player has been included in a national or representative team of a country for which he is eligible to play pursuant to 1, he shall not be permitted to take part in an international match for another country. Accordingly, any player who is qualified to play for more than one national association (i.e., who has dual nationality) will be deemed to have committed himself to one association only when he plays his first international match in an official competition (at any level) for that association.
3. The only players exempt from this provision are those whose nationality has been changed not voluntarily but as the result of an international decree either granting independence to a region or ceding part of one country to another (ENGLAND FOOTBALL ONLINE, 2011).

This first edition confirmed two principles that have been passed down to the present. First, FIFA's eligibility rules respect the nationality laws applicable to each member association. In other words, the question of naturalization is left to the laws of each country, and the eligibility for national teams is left up to each country's naturalization laws. Second, FIFA affirms the exclusivity of athletes' qualifications. Once a player has participated in a competitive match defined as an "official competition" representing one member association, he or she cannot play for another. In addition, it also claimed some exceptional cases which were still considered nowadays. For instance, the mentioned rules were not applicable in the dissolving States cases as the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, etc.

These rules were revised at the end of 2003 and were applied until 18th September 2020, the 70th FIFA Congress approved the amendments presented by the Proposal for amendments to the Regulations Governing the Application of the Statutes (FIFA, 2020). This latest version brought more detailed regulations on the change of membership. First of all, "granny rules" (blood relationship within three generations) and residency are listed as essential indicators for judging eligibility for a specific country as well as the place of birth. Second, the amendments stipulated that membership change was obliged to abide by the following rules in the case that the applicant (player) had represented the original association. 1. The applicant has participated in the competition on behalf of the original association (except for International A-level), and at that time already had the nationality status that he wishes to change to; 2. The applicant has participated in the competition on behalf of the original association (except for International A-level), but he or she had not attained the age of 21 years old in the last match; 3. The applicant has participated in no more than three international A-level events (excluding World Cup and Intercontinental Cup finals) on behalf of the original association, and he or she was under 21 years old in the last game. Plus, the match date must have passed three years prior to the application date. In effect, the new FIFA ruling gave more flexibility in switching international allegiance. Benefiting from these modifications, for example, Jiang Guangtai was successfully naturalized by China through Part 3 with his third generation of Chinese blood. In contrast, Ai Kesen, who does not have Chinese ancestry, though he did not represent Brazil in any official matches, wear the red jersey until completing his 5 years of continuous residence in China. Overall, in China's case, naturalized footballers first need to obtain nationality and, subsequently, after FIFA's approval, they can compete to represent the Chinese team. Till June, 2022, China has 11 naturalized football players (table 1) and 6 of them have been selected for the national team. Among them, Li Ke, Ai Kesen, Luo Guofu, A Lan, and Jiang Guangtai have played on the stage, whereas Fei Nanduo has not made his debut.



Table 1 – China's Naturalized Footballers

Primitive Name	Chinese Name	Eligibility	Nationality of Origin	Chinese Ancestry
Nico Yennaris	Li Ke	Yes	England	Yes
Elkeson de Oliveira C.	Ai Kesen	Yes	Brazil	No
Aloísio Gonçalves	Luo Guofu	Yes	Brazil	No
Alan Carvalho	A Lan	Yes	Brazil	No
Pedro Delgado	De'erjiaduo	Yes	Portugal	No
Alexander N'Doumbou	Qian Jiegei	No	Gabon	Yes
Roberto Siucho	Xiao Taotao	Yes	Peru	Yes
John Hou Sæter	Hou Yongyong	Yes	Norway	Yes
Tyias Browning	Jiang Guangtai	Yes	England	Yes
Fernandinho	Fei Nanduo	Yes	Brazil	No
Ricardo Goulart	Gao Late	No	Brazil	Yes

Sources: elaborated by authors from information on the CFA and the CSL website.

## 4 SPORT AND NATIONALISM IN CHINA

### 4.1 TRANSFORMING NATIONALISM IN CHINA

Nationalism is not an ancient phenomenon but arose in response to historical trends during the transition from pre-modern to modern history, as “a fairly recent human invention” (HOBSBAWM, 1992). Nationalism was first used by the German philosopher J.G. Herder and French priest A. A. de Barruel at the end of the 18th century. It appeared in English as a theological term in the early 19th century and gradually obtained its social and political meaning. In recent decades, several well-known scholars have emerged in this research field in the Europe and USA, such as Ernest Gellner, Elie Kedourie, Benedict Anderson, Anthony Smith, Gil Delannoi, Liah Greenfeld, and Eric Hobsbawm. Different scholars have different emphases in their study of ethnicity and nationalism.

Kedourie sees nationalism as an “ideology” and believes that “nationalism is a doctrine that originated in Europe in the early 19th century. Hobsbawm draws the nation largely as a set of “invented traditions” comprising national symbols, mythology, and tailored history; while according to Anderson (2006)’s theory, the nation is seen as an ‘imagined community’, one that is imagined as both finite and sovereign. Gellner draws a link between the advent of industrial society and the emergence of nationalism, and Smith (2013) focuses on cultural factors and historical memory in ethnic identity. In the “Warwick Debates”<sup>1</sup>, one of the topics between Gellner and Smith is about “memory”: how history and memory are used to build nations. Gellner asserts that the real history of a nation starts when it became a state. Therefore, he argues that the pre-state period is pre-historical. Conversely, Smith stresses the importance of myths and symbols for the unification of a population.

<sup>1</sup> Warwick University provided the venue for a series of debates on nations and nationalism, which brought together Ernest Gellner and Anthony Smith.

Samuel Huntington regarded China as a civilization. He believed that China is a civilization that has an extensive history, which is conceptually different from what we call China as a country today (HUNTINGTON, 1996). History is in constant development and change, and nationalism changes with it, rather than having a permanent objective definition. As one of the core concepts for understanding modern China, although the “Chinese nation” is a recent product in a strictly academic sense, it is connected to the history of China in terms of the origin of civilization and cultural heritage (QING, 2022). From a practical perspective, the “Chinese nation” not only constitutes the population base of China’s modern state, but also serves as a key link to confirm the two-way correspondence between “state” and “nation”, which is consistent with Gellner’s point. Hobsbawm once emphasized that attention should be paid to the complexity of the evolution of nationalism in historical changes and its ups and downs in shaping the nation and nation-state. In this regard, Fei Xiaotong (1989) pointed out that the “Chinese nation” as a conscious national entity emerged in the confrontation between China and Western powers in the past century. In fact, China’s modern nationalism, on the one hand, comes from the “self”-consciousness formed under the strong impact of the invasion of Western culture; on the other hand, it is an identity that Chinese people pursued together conforming to the historical trend of the worldwide nationalism (HWANG; JARVIE, 2001; LU, 2011; WANG; WANG, 2016).

From the “Qin” to the “Qing”, China existed in the form of a dynasty, and history and culture served as a link to connect people. Therefore, ancient China did not create the national community that the West refers to by the concept of “nation”. The traditional Chinese culture advocates the construct of the ‘Huaxia Centre’ (CHENG, 2017, p. 48). It upholds the ‘Han people’ while devaluing ethnic minorities, from which derives “ethnic group” identity. “Ethnic group” identity was based on the Confucian civilization and patriarchal system. It helped to maintain the order of the monarchy and emphasized ethical principles. However, this concept did not pay enough attention to national interests. It lacked modern sovereignty and territorial awareness, which are appreciated by the modern and contemporary vision of the nation. After Liang Qichao introduced the Western concept of “nation” into China, this concept promoted and contributed to the construction of many ethnic groups in China in the direction of the nation, or in Benedict Anderson’s words, an “imagined community” was steadily constructed. Since 1848, the Opium Wars, China began a century-long struggle against colonialism and aggression, by which, gradually, the concept of modern nationalism in China was becoming clear. The reason is that the migration of people caused by the century-old war broke the original geographical isolation and the anti-fascist war made most Chinese people have a common historical destiny and collective memory. After the founding of the new China, although following the ethnic theory of the Soviet Union, the government identified and divided the ethnic groups within its borders (ZHU; CHEN, 2013, p. 506-511), the concept of “Chinese nation” has been used as a proxy for the community composed of 56 ethnic groups in China. In fact, after continuous extension and development, this concept has gone far beyond its literal meaning and has become a synonym for the whole closely linked to China’s country, nation, territory, and history, and it is the cohesion of national spirit and national emotion.



## 4.2 FOOTBALL AND THE “THE CHINESE DREAM”

Sports have proved “uniquely effective” in defining national identity and the sense of belonging (XU, 2008, p. 1). Drawing from Anderson’s expression, Hobsbawm wrote that “the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven people with a name” (HOBSBAWM, 1992). Amara claims that “the values of national identities are perceived to be the core values of modern sport” (AMARA, 2012, p. 10). And he adds, explaining that “in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the sport has become the vehicle par excellence for national sentiment, because the sport involves a competition that is based on the very system of the nation-state” (AMARA, 2012, p. 10). As a matter of fact, the importance of football in the formation of modern national identity is also seen in the Brazilian case. When comparing Brazil with European countries and the United States, the anthropologist Roberto Da Matta noted that these had as sources of social identity consolidated institutions such as the constitution, the political system, the financial order, and the university system, while Brazil, in the absence of political and social structures, formed its identity from secondary sources such as carnival, samba, football and religion (as quoted in LOVISOLO; SOARES, 2011). The view that sports have been employed in the development of a nation’s identity is supported by several authors, including Cha. The author cites the example of the Olympic team of the unified Germanies, which competed in events under the same flag in the 1956, 1960, and 1964 Games despite all of their differences and the atmosphere of the Cold War (CHA, 2016).

China is not an exception. Mao Zedong, about 30 years prior to his 1949 triumph, wrote an essay entitled “A Study of Physical Culture”. He praised physical education as necessary to counteract the weak physical condition of the population (MAO, 1917). Under the maxim “Keep fit, study well, work well” sports and physical education would receive a lot of attention in the years after the revolution. Physical culture was seen by the government as one of the most acceptable and efficient tools for enacting new social policies since it represented rationality, progress, and a commitment to healthy living (JARVIE; HWANG; BRENNAN, 2008, p. 64). For that reason, a broader view was used to reintegrate sports into “body culture,” which virtually encompassed all activities relating to the body (BROWNELL, 1995). Thus, sports have become the core means of shaping a particular national temperament and a cultural process of values. It became an essential part of strategies that Chinese politicians and educationalists took to achieve national salvation and revival (LIU, 2013; LU, 2011). Since Mao’s era, sports have become a modern socialist citizen discipline tool. Accordingly, “sports nationalism”, emerging as a powerful ideology in Chinese politics, was manifested as a unique form of overcoming subordination, literally or figuratively, showing China’s response to the blockade of the Western world (XU, 2008). The 1950s were also marked by the first steps taken toward the setting up of an elite sports system in China (HONG, 2008). Elite athletes’ performance was linked with the Communist Party of China (CPC)’s political outlook on nationalism (SHEN, 2020), which was very common among socialist countries at that time. Athletes have become the spiritual support of nationalism; this has also explained why ‘People’s Sports’ has placed a heavy burden on star athletes (LU; FAN, 2019). Since the new

century, mega-events like the 2008 Olympic Games have affected the evocation of nationalism (LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2017), building solid spiritual bonds and emotional belonging for Chinese people.

Let us remember that since the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the political use of sports has been recurrent (LEITE JUNIOR, 2022). As the so-called "Sovietisation of Chinese sport" (FAN; LU, 2012b; ZHENG *et al.*, 2018); the "revolutionary diplomacy" (QINGMIN, 2013) and the Games of the New Emerging Forces (FAN; LU, 2012b; QINGMIN, 2013); or the Ping Pong Diplomacy (ABDI *et al.*, 2018; CHEN, 2001). Another example is the PRC's comeback to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which coincided with Deng Xiaoping's rise to the country's leadership, marking the beginning of the period of economic reforms and the deepening of the process initiated by Mao of returning to the international community. Sport played a fundamental role in China's quest to achieve national modernization and to catch up with Western capitalist countries. China's Olympic trajectory was successful in catching up with the sporting powers. Since returning to the Olympic community, several public policies have been presented (ZHENG *et al.*, 2018), with a central axis: the '*juguo tizhi* (举国体制)<sup>2</sup> (FAN, 2008). Olympic Glory was achieved in Beijing 2008 (ZHENG *et al.*, 2018): "Beijing's success was regarded as a milestone on the road of national revival" (FAN; LU, 2012a, p. 153).

National revival is intertwined with the dream of rejuvenating the nation. Continuing the sport's tradition as a strong element of the PRC's political, economic, social, and even geopolitical strategies, football was identified as the sport to be developed (LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2017). On the one hand, because after the Olympic success and having become an Olympic power capable of facing the USA on an equal footing, the men's national football team weakness is seen as a source of frustration and humiliation (LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2017). On the other hand, there is an economic aspect. The development of the football industry was identified as the driving force behind the development of China's sports industry<sup>3</sup>. The Chinese Football Dream represents the "Chinese Dream" of "rejuvenation of the nation", being part of the Chinese planned ascendancy on the global stage (LEITE JUNIOR, 2022).

From 2014 to 2016 the State Council issued a number of policies in order to boost China's sports industry, with a special highlight on "Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption" (国务院关于加快发展体育产业促进体育消费的若干意见), from 2014, "The Overall Reform Plan to Boost the Development of Football in China" (中国足球改革发展总体方案), from 2015, and, finally, in 2016 was published "China's medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)" - (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050年), henceforth Football Plan. Football was placed as a priority with the need to develop a medium-and long-term development plan (STATE COUNCIL OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2014). The Football Plan placed football development as part

<sup>2</sup> "the whole country support for the elite sport system".

<sup>3</sup> The Chinese government wants its sports industry to become the largest market in the world. The aim is to reach 5 trillion Yuan by 2025 (about US\$ 813 billion) and by 2035 the sector will represent 5% of Chinese GDP.

of China's national strategy (STATE COUNCIL OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2016). As Yu *et al.* wrote, the new policy represents the update of substantial central planning and sizeable resource allocations (YU *et al.*, 2017, p. 3). Furthermore, the Football Plan also connects the revitalization and development of football with the construction of a powerful sports nation, the promotion of social development and the realization of the Chinese Dream. As in its "Guiding Ideology" football development represents a new sector of economic growth, in addition to representing the Chinese Core Socialist Values<sup>4</sup> (STATE COUNCIL OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2016). That is why that policy serves as a tool for the fulfillment of two of the most important national strategies: Common Prosperity and the Chinese Dream.

President Xi Jinping brought the "Chinese Dream" into the CPC discourse. Xi spoke on the topic for the first time in 2012, expressing that the rejuvenation of the nation<sup>5</sup> would be the greatest dream of the Chinese people (XI, 2014, p. 38). Very briefly, the realization of the "Chinese Dream" implies modernization and economic success and the consummation of the rise of China as a protagonist on the global scene, that is, a reinvigorated China. In other words, China completes the transition from the periphery of the system, subjugated by imperialism and colonialism, and reaches its core. This Chinese development will only be effectively achieved if China achieves "social security, fairness and justice, and resolves the imbalances and inadequacies in development and the most pressing difficulties and problems that are of great concern to the people" (XI, 2021): the fulfillment of Common Prosperity. As we can see, the Chinese Football Dream is also part of the country's developmental and geopolitical strategies, after all, the Football Plan is one of the ongoing national projects whose success will be decisive in contributing to the realization of China's economic and social development, that is, the realization of the Chinese Dream.

However, the development of the Chinese football industry also depends on the success of its national men's team. Good performance is important for the development of football culture in the country and, consequently, for the strengthening of the entire consumption chain related to this industry. And it is in this sense - the search for strengthening the national team - that the issue of naturalization of players came into the equation. It is noteworthy that women's football is not outside the Football Plan. The document stipulates that by 2030 the Chinese women's national team is established as "World-Class". The focus of this public policy for the development of football is greater on men's football because the Chinese men's national team is still unable to compete at a high level even on the Asian continent, while Chinese women's football is much more competitive at the international level. In the 1990s, the Chinese women's national team had excellent results, being fourth in the 1995 World Cup and world runners-up in 1999, as well as runner-up in 1996. Between 1986 and 1999, Chinese women completely dominated the Asian continent, winning all seven editions of the AFC Women's Asian Cup played at that time. In the 2000s, however,

4 The Core Socialist Values are prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equity, justice, rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship.

5 In short, the rejuvenation of the nation means transforming China into a modern socialist society, a prosperous and strong country, achieving the revitalization of the Chinese nation and increasing the quality of life of the Chinese people by 2049 (at the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China).

the performance decreased in global competitions (World Cup and Olympic Games), while at AFC Women's Asian Cup, the title only came once, in 2006. For this reason, the Football plan also looked at women's football, but put the bar higher and on a much shorter goal than for men's football (to be among the best in the world in 2030). The results seem to begin to appear, with the conquest of the latest AFC Women's Asian Cup in 2022.

## 5 NATURALIZED ATHLETES IN THE TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

As we have already argued, the case of naturalization in China is quite peculiar, especially considering the rigidity of Chinese legislation. However, there has recently been flexibility in exceptional cases of high-performance athletes, such as footballers. This brings us to Smith (1995), who argued that the development of nationalism is one of the most challenging processes to grasp, and with globalization progresses it became improper to state a clear separation in practice between "civic" and "ethnic" nationalism<sup>6</sup> (BAIRNER, 2001, p. 4). Smith asserts that "modern nations are simultaneously and necessarily civic and ethnic" (SMITH, 1995, p. 99).

In February 2019, the former Norwegian midfielder, Hou Yongyong, became the first athlete under the naturalization policy. In July, Li Ke played in a friendly match against the Philippines, which made him become the first naturalized player to represent the Chinese national team. After that, many non-ethnic athletes such as Ai Kesen, De'erjiaduo, Luo Guofu, Alan, etc., have successively obtained Chinese nationality. Until the last round of Qatar 2022 World Cup qualifiers, five naturalized players have competed in the competition representing China.

There is increasing public scrutiny of naturalized athletes' motives and intentions, especially for those non-ethnic names. The CFA has given naturalized players huge economic returns through direct or indirect means. On the other hand, participating in the World Cup, even the qualifiers, is also many professional athletes' dream. For ethnic players, in addition to financial rewards, the media would like to emphasize their emotional connection with China. For example, Jiang Guangtai told the press while participating in the national team camp: "My mother and family are proud of me being selected for the Chinese national team" (WANG; ZHANG, 2020). However, former Brazilians like Ai Kesen, Alan and Luo Guofu, may have different experiences. Since the first year of the Chinese Super League (CSL), Brazilian foreign players have always been the preference for Chinese clubs. In addition, they had strong adaptability and low salary requirements, which are also highly valued by Chinese clubs. After the CSL increased its capital investment in 2011, many international talents who were on the rise in their careers also came to China to play.

<sup>6</sup> In short, Bairner explains that ethnic nationalism is very close to assumptions about the primordial and, therefore, natural origins of the nation. Additionally, it is usually related to language and in some cases has connections to race. So, one either fits in or one doesn't (BAIRNER, 2001, p. 3). That is why Smith considers that ethnic nationalism brings with it a sense of "exclusiveness" (SMITH, 1995, p. 100). On the contrary, as Bairner argues, civic nationalism "celebrates citizenship within particular political entities as opposed to membership in supposedly natural human associations" (BAIRNER, 1995, p. 3). It is connected to the emergence of the artificial creation of nations and nation-states. So, its mean is related to the ideal of sovereignty of the people who constitute the citizens of the national state (SMITH, 1995, p. 99). In that sense, Bairner considers civic nationalism "inclusive" (BAIRNER, 1995, p. 3).

Among them, are regulars of the Brazilian national team such as Oscar and Hulk. The truth is that in the four transfer windows between 2016 and 2017, Chinese Super League clubs, by investing large sums of money, shook the global market, threatening the Eurocentric supremacy of the richest European clubs. In 2016 alone, Chinese clubs spent €416.1 million on signings, four times more than all other Asian clubs combined (LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2019). In the case of Brazilian players, in 2020 they account for more than 40% of the nationality distribution of the CSL foreign players (PP SPORTS, 2020). Before coming to the CSL, Ai Kesen was once selected for the Brazilian national team. After his joining Guangzhou Evergrande in 2013, he helped the team to win 2 Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Champions League and 4 Chinese Championships as their main striker. In Alan's case, he was a UEFA Europa League Golden Boot Award player in the 2014/15 season, and he also maintained a good scoring ratio after coming to China. Good competition level and consistent experience of playing in China are vital conditions for them to receive a naturalization invitation, as they are more familiar with Chinese football.

## **6 NATURALIZED PLAYERS: “DREAM MAKERS” OR “OUTSIDERS IN RED JERSEY”?**

The meaning of identity initially comes from the study of “the process by which the duality of mind and body forms a unified subject” (CHAI; GUAN, 2018). Lexically, identity is defined as “the characteristics, feelings or beliefs that make people different from others” (HORNBY; LEA; BRADBURY, 2020). In 1979, Tajfel proposed the concept of “social identity” based on his research on social psychology. He put forward that “Social identity” is an individual's self-recognition of one or more social groups, and the subordination brought about value and emotional meaning. In addition, Tajfel (2010) argued that affiliation with groups like social class, family, or a football team was essential for fostering pride in oneself and a sense of social identity. This is also supported by BAIRNER (2001) and MESSNER (1992). For example, Group identity sports are considered an important way to build various social identities and many countries used sports to build national image and cohesion.

In less than a hundred years of New China, collective sports such as Chinese women's volleyball, women's football, and men's basketball teams have all contributed to the creation of a sense of national honor and collective identity. In the context of the close connection between the “football dream” and the “rejuvenation of the nation”, China is eager to achieve a breakthrough in the field of male football. However, Chinese football lacks talent and young people participating in this sport are relatively low. Statistics for 2017 show that China's registered youth football population is just over 90,000, while in the same period, Japan's was nearly 700,000 (HAI; LIANG; CHEN, 2021). It is necessary to strengthen the team. In 2013, Guangzhou Evergrande became the first Chinese club to win the AFC Champions League (which was repeated in 2015), and its successful model - “elite local players + top foreign talents” - has inspired Chinese football. The CFA hoped to replicate this model by naturalizing overseas talents and creating a strong national team. As a result, they “poached” Marcello Lippi from Evergrande and consulted with him to develop a plan



to naturalize players for China. In this context, the naturalized player has become the expected “savior” of the Chinese men’s football team to enter the World Cup.

Sports became the vehicle for national sentiment with competitions based on the nation-state system (AMARA, 2012) and, it develops national identity as means of self-categorization, by which we distinguish “us” and “them” (SEIPPEL, 2017). This allows athletes, spectators, and fans to express their national emotions. To build this emotion, media and the press has played an important role in the identity construction of naturalized players. In the early days of naturalization, the media used descriptions such as “returning to the ancestry”(YEKONG SPORTS, 2019a; 2019b) for the naturalization of ethnic athletes, emphasizing their Chinese blood, to create an image of “overseas youth returning to China to reimburse the motherland”. Correspondingly, non-naturalized players, such as Ai Kesen, are called “minority compatriots” (TENCENT SPORTS, 2020a) because their skin color and appearance are very similar to those of ethnic minorities in Western China. The media highlighted non-blood players’ love for Chinese culture and promoted their plans to stay in China for a long time.

**Figure 1** – Naturalized Footballers with Chinese flag



Source: Xinhua.com, 10th, October 2019. Photographer: Cao Can (Image: Li Ke and Ai Kesen).

Nevertheless, the integration of naturalized players has never been easy. As Norbert Elias and John Scotson (1995) described, the “old families” have “developed a common way of life and a canon of norms which will be unconsciously disturbed by the “newcomers” for they do not know the local behavior patterns. The naturalized athletes bring combat capability to the Chinese team as well as uncertainty. Although fought in the name of China, they never seemed to really integrate into the society. As Gordon (1964) proposed in his migration assimilation theory, cultural integration and adaptation are regarded as indispensable elements in the process of minority ethnic groups integrating into mainstream society. For China, it might be challenging to integrate the culture of naturalized players due to various reasons such as language, gastronomy, and ideology.



After the “sweet period” at the initial stage, the Chinese media began to be harsh on naturalized players. The suspicions about overseas talents were rising, driven by emotional and institutional resistance towards a group described as “mercenaries” by the public (JANSEN; OONK; ENGBERSEN, 2018). In 2021, the media also continuously disclosed the issue of national team locker room conflicts related to naturalized players (SPORTS SUDU, 2021; TITANBAKE, 2021). In fact, the Chinese language proficiency of the naturalized players selected for the national team is very limited. Players, including Li Ke and Jiang Guangtai, do not have sufficient levels to take interviews in Chinese. In addition, some media criticized them for not paying efforts into social integration out of pitch. For example, naturalized athletes not used Chinese on their social media, they always go abroad on vacation, which made it seem that they don’t make their home in China, instead, they are in China just for work (TENCENT SPORTS, 2020b).

In sports, winning seems to overshadow everything. However, conversely, when the national team is losing, non-ethnic players are often to be stigmatized as the culprits. Some people, e.g., attribute the poor performance of the France team in the 2010 World Cup to the squad’s ethnic diversity (OONK, 2020a). Non-Germanic descent represented by Mesut Özil faced the dilemma like “I am German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose” (VAN CAMPENHOUT; VAN HOUTUM, 2021). In the 2022 World Cup qualifiers, the Chinese team lost in the Asian region’s top 12 stages and did not achieve the expected goal. This declared the de facto failure of the Chinese football naturalization although those policy makers may not publicly admit that. With an average annual expenditure of more than 800 million yuan changing for nothing, many considered athletes’ naturalization a waste of money, and the CFA was blamed for its chaotic management. To summarize, in the short-term perspective, the naturalized players failed to become the savior of Chinese football.

## 7 CONCLUSION

This study set out to critically explore Chinese football naturalization within the context of legal issues, nationalism, and identity. Legal concepts surrounding the footballers’ nationality-swapping were examined while we tried to unpack the process of construction of Chinese nationalism and athletes’ identity through this special case.

Sports naturalization has gradually increased in China in recent years. Many naturalized athletes have gradually appeared in sports such as athletics and winter sports. The footballers’ naturalization in China is a product of state policy in a specific period. Naturalized athletes must complete two tasks before participating in world events on behalf of the new country: the conversion of nationality and sports nationality.

Naturalized footballers can be regarded as sports talent immigrants supported by specific policies instead of a result of natural migration. The sport was considered a cultural scene through which a strong sense of nationalism is collectively imagined. Due to China’s unique historical and cultural background, naturalized footballers have faced difficulties in integrating into the team and gaining social recognition. They were

confronted with more criticisms when the performance of the national team did not improve.

The current world system reflects the process of colonization and imperialism, which has a direct impact on football's global market. Many South American and African countries have talents in football, e.g., but they cannot compete with the European market for many years. Similarly, the development of Chinese football needs to cultivate talents, though also facing Eurocentric football (LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2019). It will be found that the whole country is trying to shape the football-related culture in the review of the history of Chinese football naturalization. The country expects high-level overseas talents to drive the football market and eventually form a virtuous circle of football ecology. However, society is a whole, and any change to any part of it is like dropping a stone in a calm lake. Therefore, the formulation of football policy should not be an isolated link but should explore its long-term significance and impact from a broader perspective. In the context of sports, the construction of an "imagined community" requires both good storytelling and firm performance. This takes a long-term process.

Chinese football's naturalization reflects the country's determination to develop this sport, although in China it was designed primarily to serve the nation's political or economic goals rather than a result of "cultural enthusiasm" (PENG; SKINNER; HOULIHAN, 2018, p. 15). This article briefly discussed the strategy of naturalization of Chinese football from a historical and sociological perspective. However, when it comes to the future development of Chinese football and the integration of football and society, more elements need to be detected and discussed.

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**Resumo:** A conversão da nacionalidade de atletas não é mais uma novidade no esporte internacional; no entanto, o caso da naturalização de jogadores de futebol na China tem recebido pouca atenção acadêmica. A introdução de talentos estrangeiros foi endossada pela política nacional para fortalecer a seleção chinesa e permitir sua participação na Copa do Mundo. Este artigo examina alguns conceitos jurídicos no contexto da naturalização de futebolistas chineses e discute esse fenômeno a partir de perspectivas sociológicas. O objetivo é utilizar a troca de nacionalidade dos atletas de futebol como um estudo de caso para debater o status quo desse esporte na China e, ao mesmo tempo, discutir o nacionalismo e a identidade social no contexto da interação entre esporte e sociedade.

**Palavras-chave:** Naturalização de futebolistas. Futebol Chinês. Nacionalismo. Identidade Social.

**Resumen:** La conversión de nacionalidad de los deportistas ya no es una novedad en los deportes internacionales, sin embargo, el caso de la naturalización de los futbolistas en China ha recibido poca atención académica. La introducción de talentos extranjeros fue respaldada por la política nacional, con el propósito de mejorar la selección nacional china y participar en la Copa del Mundo. Este artículo examina algunos conceptos legales en el contexto de la naturalización de los futbolistas chinos y analiza este fenómeno desde perspectivas sociológicas. El propósito es utilizar el intercambio de nacionalidad de los atletas de fútbol como un caso para discutir el estado actual de este deporte en China y, al mismo tiempo, analizar el nacionalismo y la identidad social bajo la interacción del deporte y la sociedad.

**Palabras clave:** Naturalización de Futbolistas. Fútbol Chino. Nacionalismo. Identidad Social.

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### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

**Dongye Lyu:** Conceptualization; Investigation; Writing – original draft.

**Emanuel Leite Júnior:** Investigation; Writing – review & editing.

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### **EDITORIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

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