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Effects of local and global orientation on popular support for policy strategies to create a stronger Chinese Men's football team

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to explore and describe the support of Chinese football fans for policy strategies to create a stronger men's national football team based on their local and global orientation. Drawing upon social theory of globalisation, we distinguish between football fans with local and global orientations. Using survey questionnaires, we investigated Chinese football fans ($n = 546$) support for five strategies to improve the men's football team: controlling the number of international players, controlling costs with international players, supporting young national players, promoting academy system, and promoting naturalisation. Results show that globally engaged fans offer higher support for strategies to create a stronger national football in China when compared to all other groups. Fans support promoting young national players more than either controlling for international players or naturalising foreign players. Fans with a rooted cosmopolitan orientation are the ones who offer higher support for non-traditional strategies, such as naturalisation. Findings can have direct impact on how the Chinese government and sport authorities propose strategies to create a stronger national team.

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Introduction

China has explored two interconnected pathways to become a protagonist in the international football scene. The first one has focused on the commercialisation of the Chinese Super League (CSL), the country's top league, which has become one of the most attractive leagues in the world, in economic terms (Delgado and Villar 2018). After the Chinese economic reform, marketisation has been a natural path to make football more popular and create a stronger men's national team (Peng *et al.* 2019). This pathway has been effective to increase domestic interest for football, mainly through the development of the CSL. However, this has not been effective to create a stronger and competitive men's team – the 'Chinese Football Dream' (Sullivan *et al.* 2019). The second pathway has focused on government-led football reform plans. The current policy plan, the Overall Plan for Chinese Football Reform and Development, was proposed in 2015. This policy plan is the third in a sequence of three, after the first (1993–2002) and the second (2003–2012) Ten-Year Plan for Chinese Football Development (Peng *et al.* 2019).

The Chinese Communist Party and the president of China Xi Jinping have led the top-down approach for football development in the country (Sullivan *et al.* 2019). Scholars have attributed the succession of reform plans to the frequent poor performance of the men's national team (Tan and Bairner 2010). For instance, failing to qualify for the 1990 FIFA Men's World Cup¹ triggered the first Ten-Year Plan, which focused on sending young players abroad to get better training and

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contracting foreign coaches to work in the CSL (Sullivan *et al.* 2019). This first plan has received some appreciation because of the successful classification of the Chinese men's team to the 2002 Japan/Korea FIFA Men's World Cup. Nevertheless, that was the last time that China participated in a men's World Cup. They lost their three matches in the group stage, suffering nine goals and scoring zero. Some argue that that participation triggered the second Ten-Year Plan (Sullivan *et al.* 2019). The second plan did not produce tangible success for the men's national team. Therefore, China launched the 2015 Overall Plan. This new policy plan has the clear aim of improving the quality of the men's national team. While the discussion of gender bias in Chinese football is beyond the scope of this study, we should mention that all three plans and other government-led strategies have clearly focused on developing the men's national team, relegating (unfortunately) women's team to a secondary importance (Zhao *et al.* 2012).

Carefully investigating the government-led plans, we see two broad strategies to develop the men's national team. The first one focuses on developing young national players, for example, by promoting opportunities for young players to effectively be part of professional clubs and by promoting a stronger national academy system (Zheng *et al.* 2018). China has historically shown strong appreciation for the academy system because of its similarity with the Soviet model of sports schools (Hong and Zhouxiang 2015). The second strategy focuses on controlling for international players in the national leagues, mainly in the wealthy CSL (Lee and Brownlee 2017). This strategy has been proposed to control either the number of or the costs with international players. This seems to be a response to frequent criticisms the CSL faces for paying too much to international star players. Apparently, a stronger league full of star players has not promoted a stronger national team, the dream of all Chinese fans. As a response, the government and the national football governing body – the Chinese Football Association (CFA) – have defined some limits for international players' participation in the CSL (Yang and Bairner 2019). Although not contemplated in the previous policy plans, China has started to apply a third contemporary strategy: naturalisation of players (Liu *et al.* 2019). The Nationality Law of China authorises naturalisation of people whose near relatives are nationals. Despite legal support, naturalisation is still a controversial theme in China. In football, after some resistance, the government and the CFA now accept naturalisation as a possibility to improve the quality of the Chinese national team (Zuser 2019). In this study, we investigate the popular support for all these strategies as means to create a stronger men's national team.

The literature has proposed that investigating popular support for such strategies in China should be of utmost importance (Peng *et al.* 2019). The authoritarian regime may suggest that the government does not need popular support to launch new policies (Shirk 2018). However, sport leaders and politicians know that the football revolution in China will need public support because the country has experienced an impressive increase in collective resistance against the government in recent years (Cai 2008, Chen and Zhang 2019). Although suppression may still be a common way to contain resistance, concession has gained some (still timid) space (Cai 2008). In football, an alignment between government policy and popular opinion can avoid resistance and lend legitimacy to government policy in internal grounds (Sun *et al.* 2017, Connell 2018). Popular support is important not only to get better results internally, but also externally (Grix and Lee 2013, Connell 2018). The country has a strong interest in becoming a major actor in the international football scene to improve its international soft power (Manzenreiter 2010, Grix and Lee 2013). To create soft power through football, an alignment between government policy and popular support is of fundamental importance (Manzenreiter and Horne 2004, Grix and Lee 2013). Additionally, globalisation has increased the importance to fans' support in the process of football management in East Asian countries (Close and Askew 2004). In China, football has been the pioneer of the reform in sport (Hong and Zhouxiang 2013). One of the most important changes has been the increased participation of fans in the politics of football (Hong and Zhouxiang 2013, Lee 2021). In this sense, this research is timely and innovative as it proposes to investigate popular support for key strategies recently proposed to promote football in China.

We draw upon Merton's (1968) social theory of globalisation that distinguishes between people with local and global orientations, to investigate popular support for government-led strategies. People with a local orientation have a more inward-looking, local perspective of life, while those with a global orientation have a higher interest in and awareness of distant events (Zürn 2016, Kuhn *et al.* 2018). In a country where people are not encouraged to disagree with the government and governmental policy, we should not assume that everybody is local oriented (Bell 2016). This is an old stereotype, which certainly does not apply to modern China (Nyíri *et al.* 2010). Local and global orientations of football fans are equally important to understand their support for the government-led strategies. Knowing how their personal perspective on life correlates with support for government-led strategies can shed some light on why people may support different strategies.. For example, policy strategies supporting local young players may have more support among people with local orientation, while strategies supporting naturalisation may get more support among people with a global orientation. Results will inform football authorities and government in China not only about which strategies receive more support, but also whether this support varies depending on local/global orientation of fans. Therefore, in this study, we aim to explore and describe the support of Chinese football fans for policy strategies to create a stronger men's national football team based on their local and global orientation.

Literature review

Supporting young national players in Chinese football

Government-led policies to develop football in the country have included strategies to promote young talents. For example, in 2017, the government supported the CFA to pass a rule that requires professional clubs to establish youth academy teams (Gündoğan and Sonntag 2018). According to that rule, all CSL clubs must have at least three-tier academy teams – under-19, under-17 and under-15 teams – and a minimum of 15% of their budgets must be invested into these teams (CFA 2017). Following this rule is mandatory for a club to keep its eligibility to play in the CSL or for a club in lower leagues to be eligible to access upper leagues. Despite the positive first-impression this rule may cause, Prentice (2019) reports that youth academies are still a luxury in the country, available only to a middle-class urban elite. The elitist characteristic of this strategy may create doubts about its effectiveness. Football fans may see this as something highly effective, based on the history of sport schools in the country. But they can also see the academy system as something with little effectiveness to improve the quality of the national team.

The government and the CFA have tested other strategies to support the development of young talents. These strategies are mainly related to inclusion of under-23-year-old (u-23) players in rosters of professional teams, due to space competition between foreign players and young national players (Thomassen 2019). Conversations exist to expand the rule to other leagues (beyond the CSL) and to younger players (e.g. u-21) (Thomassen 2019, Yang and Bairner 2019). In 2017, the CFA defined that CSL teams must field at least one u-23 national player and have an additional u-23 player in their squads (Church 2017). In 2018, they ruled that the number of Chinese u-23 players in each match must be equal to the number of foreign players fielded (Jourdan 2017). Four foreign players could be registered and three could be fielded per match. Then, we should expect at least three u-23 national players in the roster per match. However, in 2019, the CFA changed this rule again and said that CSL teams were no longer required to have at least three u-23 domestic players in every match, probably due to pressures from clubs looking for immediate commercial profits (Wenao 2019). As the diversity of strategies to support development of young talents has shown, this is a very complex policy to be adopted. Commercial appeal of professional clubs and space for development of young players seem to be competing values (Hong and Zhouxiang 2015; S. Lee and Brownlee 2017).

The reactions of fans towards policies supporting young national players in professional clubs on the quality of the national team are also far from being clear (Yang and Bairner 2019). Yang and Bairner (2019) affirm that the reactions of Chinese football fans to rules related to u-23 and younger players in professional squads range from support to frustration. Some fans support it, as they see it as a possibility to develop local talents; others get frustrated because the rule can undermine the performance of their clubs (Yang and Bairner 2019). Fans who follow and cheer for their clubs in the Asian Champions League have expressed frustration over those rules because clubs from other Asian countries do not need to have u-23 players in their rosters. They believe it has created a competitive disadvantage for Chinese clubs in international competitions (Yang and Bairner 2019).

International players

Some scholars see support for young national players and investment in international players to strengthen the national leagues as antagonists (Prentice 2019, Sullivan *et al.* 2019). Prentice (2019, p. 199) proposes that, 'Before adding noughts to the contracts of footballing superstars from foreign leagues, China would be better off adopting a "bottom-up" approach: pumping money into its academies and making football a sport truly accessible for the masses to partake in'. Because the CSL has invested in international players for many years and the quality of the national team has not improved, there is an assumption that this policy is not the best for the country (Lee 2021; S. Lee and Brownlee 2017). At least, not to accomplish the dream of being an international football powerhouse (Sullivan *et al.* 2019). The most straightforward advice has been for the government and the CFA to create limitations on how clubs invest in foreign players, while increasing their investments in local young players. We argue that this view may be over-simplistic. These two strategies are not necessarily antagonists. The international success of other countries have been associated with strong national leagues (Sahakyan *et al.* 2012). Having strong international players in the local leagues can promote the growth of national talents (Kuper and Szymanski 2014). In this research, we do not assume these strategies as antagonists, and we give a chance for Chinese football fans to show their support for either or for both.

Football has become a big business in China, mainly due to the development of the CSL. This development has happened based on transfers of international players to the clubs in the league. The transfer expenditure of CSL clubs grew 785% in the last 4 years (2016–2019), making the expenditures comparable to those of traditional leagues in Europe, such as the Spanish 'La Liga' and the Italian 'Serie A' (Han 2019). The 2017 season established the record on transfer expenditures, when the CSL clubs spent an aggregated amount of \$451 million to bring star players such as Oscar, Carlos Tevez and Pelle to the country (Pifer 2019). Despite the increased marketing appeal of the CSL, the Chinese government has not been happy with the lack of spill-over effects on international results of the Chinese team. The government has been interested in using football to create soft power (Manzenreiter 2010, Grix and Lee 2013) and they believe this should be constructed based on a stronger national team, not on a stronger national league (Sullivan *et al.* 2019). The 'socialist democratic' regime of the country may explain this preference for the state. The fact is that 'the dream' is about being competitive internationally, against other countries.

Controlling investments in international players has an additional political motivation. State companies own some CSL clubs. For example, Shanghai SIPG Football Club belongs to the state-owned Shanghai International Port Company. Shanghai SIPG has been criticised for having invested the unimaginable sum of \$130 million to sign Brazilians Oscar and Hulk (Thomassen 2019). Criticisms have reached the government. The astonishing sums paid to international players have turned into social discontentment, becoming an even more complicated issue when conspicuous spending and corruption are associated with football in China (Sullivan 2019). For all these reasons, controlling for international player spending has become a major concern for the government and the CFA.

Some rules exemplify the strategy of controlling for international players. In 2017, the CFA reduced the number of international players who could play in each match from four to three, by dropping the rule that allowed an additional slot for a player from Asian Football Confederation countries (Wenao 2019). In 2018, the Chinese government supported the CFA to establish a 100% transfer tax for international players, proposing to use this money to develop young players (Din 2018). In January 2020, the CFA imposed a salary cap on foreign signings, setting the yearly cap at \$3.3 million per player and \$95 million per club (Price 2020). The message behind these rules is very clear: China is not closing the league to international players, but a better balance between commercial appeal and investment in local (mainly young) players is necessary to achieve ‘the dream’.

We still do not know how such rules sound to football fans. The strategy of strengthening the top national league has not worked to make the men’s national team great, at least not until now. Therefore, some fans may agree that controlling for international players can make the national team better, mainly if carried out in association with support for young local players (Yang and Bairner 2019). On the other hand, the growth of the CSL has created a mass of identified fans, who have enjoyed watching and cheering for local teams full of international stars. The control rules have already created negative commercial impacts for the league, reducing the number of international star players and bringing some loss to broadcasting rights and sponsorship deals (Yang and Bairner 2019). Football fans may see this as detrimental for the sport in the country, as they see countries with strong leagues getting success in international competitions (Sahakyan *et al.* 2012).

Naturalisation of players

The frustration of not qualifying for the 2018 Men’s FIFA World Cup has brought new (and barely imagined) strategies to improve the quality of the national team in the short term. Xi Jinping and Chen Xuyuan, president of the CFA, have admitted that the next goal of the Chinese national team is to qualify for Qatar 2022 (Yee 2019). To attain this goal, naturalisation of players has become the new pilot policy of Chinese authorities (Xiaochen 2019). In 2019, the CFA published the Interim Rules for the Management of Naturalised Players (CFA 2019). This is the earliest Chinese government-led strategy about naturalisation of players. In 2019, the Norwegian-born from a Chinese mother, John Hou Sæter became the first naturalised Chinese football player (Zuser 2019). By the end of the same year, nine other foreign players were naturalised (Yinglun 2019). The Nationality Law of China authorises naturalisation of people whose near relatives are nationals. Nevertheless, in less than a year, the naturalisation of football players has gone a step further. The Brazilian-born forward Elkeson Cardoso (Ai Kesen) became the first naturalised player without Chinese ancestry to wear the national team jersey (Yinglun 2019). According to the CFA, there are other seven international players without Chinese descent waiting to be naturalised (The_Economist 2019).

Criticisms against naturalisation are many in the country. Some fans have not been supportive at all to naturalisation, using the media to express their criticisms, including racist comments (The_Economist 2019). To face these criticisms, sport authorities in China have made very clear that the Chinese national team should not fully depend on naturalised players, but only get some help from them in some key positions to improve chances of qualifying for the next big events (Xiaochen 2019). As initial facts have shown, naturalisation of players is more than just a legal process. Zuser (2019) summarises the current stage by saying, ‘It is yet to be seen whether the Chinese leadership, or indeed the media and soccer [football] fans, are ready for unfamiliar faces to be representing their country’ (p. 3). From a purely sporting perspective, the CFA should have no reasonable objection to utilising naturalised players; the discomfort clearly comes from somewhere else (Zuser 2019). This research investigates whether fans support the idea of naturalisation as a means to improve the quality of the national men’s team.

Local and global orientation of football fans

We draw upon Merton's (1968) social theory of globalisation to propose that local and global orientation of football fans should affect their support for government-led strategies to promote football. Merton differentiates between local- and global-oriented people based on how they see facts and events of life (Kuhn *et al.* 2018). Local-oriented people have a more inward perspective of life, looking for local solutions to solve problems, while the global-oriented ones have a more outward, cosmopolitan perspective, generally looking for global solutions. Some scholars see local and global orientations as extremes of the same continuum (Kuhn *et al.* 2018). In this study, we propose that the two orientations are not mutually exclusive, but rather they can co-exist. We see local and global orientations as individual continuums, where people can have similar levels of each orientation at the same time. High-level concerns about local issues do not deny the existence of high-level concerns about global issues. The same is true for low-level concerns about local and global issues.

Callahan (2003) proposes that to understand local and global values in China, one must see how Chinese people see the outsiders. Callahan sees local and global values as somehow linked to feelings of nationalism and cosmopolitanism, respectively. Since the 1990s, China has seen the re-emergence of the discourse of the National Humiliation² (*Guochi*) – a feeling caused by imperial forces – where the foreign 'other' has been appointed as the origin of the problems of the country. This discourse has proposed that Chinese people need a strong State, to protect them from imperialistic forces (Callahan 2003). The danger of the foreign other and the need for a strong state have strengthened feelings of nationalism. The rise of nationalism is one element in the narrative of an assertive China that now challenges the Western-dominated international liberal order (Johnston 2017). This context is important in this investigation, where current strategies to develop the Chinese men's football team have focused on controlling for foreign 'others' – international players – while supporting young Chinese talents. However, the assumption that Chinese are nationalists only, with no cosmopolitan attitudes, is over-simplistic. So is over-simplistic the idea that Chinese football fans would have only local orientation, with no global perception of the world, and would support local talents while rejecting international players.

Some research has shown that nationalism has actually declined in China since 2009 (Johnston 2017). Additionally, the image of Chinese people as local-oriented only, with no traces of cosmopolitanism seems to be more a caricature painted by the Western media than the reality (Nyíri *et al.* 2010). Mainly younger generations of Chinese see themselves as cosmopolitans, showing high-level concerns with global issues, but not necessarily denying their feelings for the nation (Nyíri *et al.* 2010). This supports our approach of considering both local and global orientations to analyse support for government-led strategies to develop China men's football team.

Method

Procedure and participants

This research was approved by the GUEP ethics committee, at the university where both authors were affiliated on 29 March 2019. All participants were provided appropriate informed consent, with which they agreed before answering the questionnaire. We collected data using a web-based questionnaire hosted in Tencent Surveys. The questionnaire link was posted on two popular Chinese football fan forums: Baidu Forums and Dongqiudi Quanzi, from 19th June to 5 July 2019. The use of a purposive sample for this research is justifiable based on the aim of the research, which targets a specific population of interest: Chinese football fans who have knowledge about current trends of football in the country (Teddle and Yu 2007, Suri 2011). We managed to reach such population using football fan forums, which allowed us to collect data from a large base of fans who are engaged with Chinese football on a regular basis. Overall, the survey collected data from fans living in 31 provincial-level administrative divisions of mainland China. Five hundred and seventy-

four participants completed the questionnaire, and ten questionnaires were eliminated from the sample for incomplete data, producing a final sample of 564 fans. Most respondents were male (69.9%), single (54.7%), young adults ($M = 27.3$ years old, $SD = 8.56$) and formally educated (72.2% had at least a bachelor's degree).

Instruments

From the literature, the research team came up with five strategies used by the Chinese government in association with the CFA to create a stronger men's national football team: controlling the number of international players in the CSL, controlling costs with international players in the CSL, supporting young national players in professional clubs, promoting a strong academy system and promoting naturalisation of players. We created four/three items to represent each of those five strategies. All items in this section of the questionnaire were rated based on the following question: *'Please, express your level of agreement with the following statements as strategies to create a stronger Chinese Men's Football Team. The more you agree with a statement, the more you support it'*. Items were jumbled and answered based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

In the second section of the questionnaire, we tested the local and global orientation of the respondents. We used Kuhn *et al.*'s (2018) cosmopolitanism scale, constructed based on responses to four variations of the same question. The question reads, *'To what extent do you care about the living conditions of people in ... ?'* (a) *your city*, (b) *China*, (c) *Asia* and (d) *the world*. The questions were answered on an anchored scale, varying from 1 (*I do not care at all*) to 5 (*I totally care*). We measure both local orientation (a + b) and global orientation (c + d). The values for local and global orientations vary from 2 to 10. The third section of the questionnaire had demographic questions.

Data analysis

We started testing the psychometric properties of the scale we created to measure strategies for a stronger national football team in China. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis. Three indices were used to assess the model fit: root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index and Tucker-Lewis index (CFI and TLI)(Hu and Bentler 1998)(Hu and Bentler 1998)(Hu and Bentler 1998)(Hu and Bentler 1998)(Hu and Bentler 1998)(Hu and Bentler 1998)(Hu and Bentler 1998). The factors' reliability was indicated by Cronbach's alpha (α) and composite reliabilities (ρ). Values above .70 are considered adequate for scales used in social studies (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994). Convergent validity was informed by average variance extracted (AVE) – a value of at least .50 indicates that the variance due to measurement error was smaller than the variance explained by the factor's indicators (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Discriminant validity was measured by checking if the AVE of each factor was greater than its squared correlation (shared variance) with any other factor (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

We use the median of the values of local and global orientations to segment fans according to their orientations. We create a clear gap between fans who are high and low in each type of orientation. Those subjects who have a score exactly on the median were eliminated from further analysis. The median for local orientation was nine. Those with values below nine (44.2%) were labelled as *low in local orientation*, while those with values above nine (55.8%) were labelled as *high in local orientation*. The median for global orientation was seven. Those with values below seven (51.6%) were labelled as *low in global orientation*, while those with values above seven (48.4%) were labelled as *high in global orientation*. Then, we created a 2×2 cross-tabulation table to define our four groups of football fans: globally engaged, global, local, and locally disengaged (Table 1).

To compare the groups in their support for different strategies, we run ANOVA with Tukey *HSD* post-hoc tests. We use the local/global orientation group (at four levels) as the independent variable in ANOVA. We calculate the average of all items representing each factor to compute an aggregated indicator of that factor. To do so, we first checked the internal consistency, composite reliability, and

Table 1. Four groups of football fans in China, based on their local and global orientation.

		Local Orientation		Total	Total %
		High	Low		
Global Orientation	High	Globally engaged 156	Global 40	196	48.4%
	Low	Local 70	Locally disengaged 139		
Total		226	179	405	100%
Total %		55.8%	44.2%	100%	

convergent validity of the factors. We had no problems with such measures, which granted us support to aggregate the items (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998). We use the aggregated indicators as the dependent variables in ANOVA. To control for familywise inflation (or inflation of alpha error), we applied the Bonferroni correction and adopted an alpha error equal to .01 for pairs of comparisons (Keppel and Wickens 2004).

Results

Results of the confirmatory factor analysis show good psychometric properties for the created scale. The model fits the data reasonably well (CFI = .950; TLI = .940; RMSEA [90% CI] = .059 [.053; .064]). Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and psychometric measures are presented in Table 2. Alpha and rho show good internal consistency and reliability of the items (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994). The AVEs of all factors indicate large factor loadings, implying convergent validity. The AVE of each factor is greater than its squared correlation with any other factor, indicating discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981). These results lend support for the use of the average value of all items as an aggregated indicator of each factor (strategy). Strategies that propose controlling the number of ($M = 3.65$; $SD = 1.04$) and costs with ($M = 3.62$; $SD = 1.17$) international players do not receive as much support as those that propose promoting an academy system ($M = 4.35$; $SD = 0.85$) and supporting national players in professional clubs ($M = 3.81$; $SD = 0.98$). Frequency tables show that less than half of the respondents agree that controlling the number of (46.8%) or the costs with (47.9%) international players will improve the quality of the national team (values equal to or higher than 4). Higher percentages of respondents agree with supporting young national players (51.8%) or promoting an academy system (77%). Although still slightly above the midpoint of the scale, naturalisation was the strategy with the least support ($M = 3.59$; $SD = 0.97$); the lowest percentage of respondents (43.6%) agree that naturalisation is an effective strategy.

Descriptively, football fans who took part in this study show a higher local orientation ($M = 8.71$; $SD = 1.68$) than a global orientation ($M = 7.01$; $SD = 2.11$). Descriptive statistics show that globally engaged fans have the highest means, while locally disengaged fans have the lowest means in support for all five strategies (Table 3).

Results of ANOVA show significant differences between groups in all five strategies: controlling the number of international players ($F(3,401) = 12.63$; $p < .001$), controlling costs with international players ($F(3,401) = 10.39$; $p < .001$), supporting young national players ($F(3,401) = 33.84$; $p < .001$), promoting academy system ($F(3,401) = 25.21$; $p < .001$) and naturalisation ($F(3,401) = 19.72$; $p < .001$). Tukey *HSD* post-hoc comparisons indicate that, in general, globally engaged fans offer higher support for strategies to create a stronger national football in China when compared to all other groups. Globally engaged fans provide statistically higher support for three strategies (supporting young national players, promoting academy system and naturalisation) when compared to global-oriented fans (Table 4, first row) and for one strategy (naturalisation) when compared to local-oriented fans (Table 4, second row). Globally engaged fans provide significantly higher support for all five strategies when compared to locally disengaged ones (Table 4, third row). Local-oriented fans support more the promotion of academy system than global-oriented fans. There are no significant

Table 2. Item wordings, factor loadings (λ), average variance explained (AVE), Cronbach's alphas and descriptive statistics (M and SD).

Dimensions and items	M	SD	α	ρ	λ	AVE
<i>Controlling the number of international players in the CSL</i>	3.65	1.04	0.834	0.834		0.56
A maximum number of international players per team should be enforced in the CSL	4.30	0.92			0.736	
A maximum number of international players on the pitch at the same time should be enforced in the CSL	4.41	0.92			0.795	
It is important to limit the number of players from other Asian countries in the CSL	3.56	1.08			0.740	
It is important to limit the number of players from Europe in the CSL	3.44	1.18			0.718	
<i>Controlling costs with international players in the CSL</i>	3.62	1.17	0.835	0.836		0.63
It is important to limit the values of international transfers to CSL teams	3.65	1.34			0.848	
A salary cap for international players in the CSL teams should be enforced	3.65	1.30			0.828	
CSL teams should stop spending too much money on international players	3.55	1.39			0.707	
<i>Supporting young national players in professional clubs</i>	3.81	0.98	0.888	0.889		0.67
Professional clubs should have at least two under-23 players in their roster	3.97	1.09			0.806	
Professional clubs should have at least one under-23 player in the starting team	3.81	1.17			0.829	
Professional clubs should have at least two under-21 players in their roster	3.84	1.07			0.840	
Professional clubs should have at least one under-21 player in the starting team	3.63	1.20			0.794	
<i>Promoting academy system</i>	4.35	0.85	0.889	0.890		0.68
All professional clubs should have academy teams (e.g. under-19 team)	4.32	0.97			0.848	
Professional clubs should have a sound academy system	4.45	0.92			0.883	
Professional clubs should have a high-level director for their academy teams	4.41	0.95			0.861	
Professional clubs should have a compulsory minimum investment limit on their academy system	4.20	1.07			0.702	
<i>Naturalisation</i>	3.59	0.97	0.779	0.781		0.51
China should naturalise international players who have a Chinese descent	3.64	1.19			0.623	
China should naturalise high-level international players who are willing to play for China national team	3.77	1.18			0.846	
High-level international players should be supported if they want to become Chinese citizens	3.93	1.14			0.832	
China should allow high-level international players to have dual citizenship	3.02	1.48			0.502	
LOCAL/GLOBAL ORIENTATION						
To what extent do you care about the living conditions of people in ...						
(a) ... your city	4.30	0.92				
(b) ... China	4.41	0.92				
(c) ... Asia	3.56	1.08				
(d) ... the world	3.44	1.18				
Local Orientation = (a + b) (it can range from 2 to 10)	8.71	1.68				
Global orientation = (c + d) (it can range from 2 to 10)	7.01	2.11				

CSL – Chinese Super League

differences between global-oriented and locally disengaged fans. Local-oriented fans offer higher support for four out of five strategies (the exception is naturalisation) when compared to locally disengaged ones.

Discussion

The aim of study was to explore and describe the support of Chinese football fans for policy strategies to create a stronger men's national football team based on their local and global orientation. Descriptive results show that Chinese fans give more support for strategies that focus on development of young national players than for strategies that propose controlling numbers of and costs with international players in the top league of the country. Some authors suggest that these two groups of strategies are interdependent (Prentice 2019, Sullivan *et al.* 2019); that is, in order to support young players, government and sport authorities must control for international players in the country. Others propose that supporting young national talents does not necessarily depend on controlling for international players (Sahakyan *et al.* 2012, Kuper and Szymanski 2014). They believe

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of five strategies to create a stronger China national football team per group.

Groups	N	Controlling the number of international players				Controlling costs with international players				Supporting young national players				Promoting academy system				Naturalisation								
		M	SD	SE	95% CI	M	SD	SE	95% CI	M	SD	SE	95% CI	M	SD	SE	95% CI	M	SD	SE	95% CI					
Globally engaged	156	3.95	1.01	0.08	3.79	4.11	3.91	1.14	0.09	3.73	4.09	4.31	0.81	0.06	4.18	4.44	4.67	0.60	0.05	4.58	4.77	4.04	1.00	0.08	3.88	4.20
Global	40	3.49	1.09	0.17	3.15	3.84	3.47	1.18	0.19	3.09	3.85	3.62	0.84	0.13	3.35	3.89	3.97	0.82	0.13	3.71	4.23	3.28	0.90	0.14	2.99	3.56
Local	70	3.79	1.12	0.13	3.52	4.05	3.69	1.28	0.15	3.38	4.00	3.91	1.05	0.13	3.66	4.16	4.56	0.77	0.09	4.38	4.74	3.39	1.11	0.13	3.13	3.66
Locally disengaged	139	3.22	1.05	0.09	3.05	3.40	3.15	1.20	0.10	2.95	3.35	3.23	1.00	0.08	3.07	3.40	3.92	1.02	0.09	3.75	4.09	3.23	0.87	0.07	3.08	3.38



Table 4. Tukey HSD post-hoc results for mean difference (ΔM), standard error (SE) and descriptive value (p).

Groups	Controlling the number of international players			Controlling costs with international players			Supporting young national players			Promoting academy system			Naturalisation		
	ΔM	SE	p	ΔM	SE	p	ΔM	SE	p	ΔM	SE	p	ΔM	SE	p
Globally engaged	Global	0.46	0.19	0.068	0.44	0.21	0.154	0.69	0.16	0.70	0.14	<.001*	0.76	0.17	<.001*
	Local	0.17	0.15	0.690	0.22	0.17	0.574	0.40	0.13	0.11	0.12	0.782	0.65	0.14	<.001*
Global	Locally disengaged	0.73	0.12	<.001*	0.76	0.14	<.001*	1.08	0.11	0.75	0.10	<.001*	0.81	0.11	<.001*
	Local	-0.29	0.21	0.499	-0.22	0.24	0.779	-0.29	0.18	-0.59	0.16	0.002*	-0.12	0.19	0.928
Local	Locally disengaged	0.27	0.19	0.472	0.32	0.21	0.445	0.38	0.17	0.05	0.15	0.988	0.04	0.17	0.994
	Locally disengaged	0.56	0.15	0.002*	0.54	0.17	0.010*	0.68	0.14	0.64	0.12	<.001*	0.16	0.14	0.664

* Significant p-values, adopting an alpha error of .01.

that national clubs' investments in international players and support for young local players can coexist and even, with some appropriate planning, produce a stronger national team. Football fans in the current study seem to agree with this second group of authors, as they do not see controlling for international players as something with strong potential to improve the quality of the national team – at least not as strong as developing young national players, which they support more.

These initial findings show something beyond expected results. We might expect football fans to support the development of young players in the country. However, based on current policies, we could also expect them to be supportive of strategies that control the number of and costs with international players. They express some but certainly not strong support for these strategies. We see two possible explanations for this result. First, despite the lack of short-term positive results of the Chinese men's team, football fans may understand that a stronger national league (which depends on the presence of excellent international players) can help China to achieve 'the dream'. Fans are usually well informed about international leagues, and they are aware about other countries with strong leagues that have been successful in top international competitions (Sahakyan *et al.* 2012). Therefore, they do not consider the presence and costs of international players in the country as a barrier for the national team to attain positive results. Second, they may not strongly agree about controlling for international players because they enjoy watching them playing for their favourite teams. Maybe Chinese football fans are becoming more like fans in other countries with strong national leagues, such as England, Germany and Spain. While they strongly support the national team, they are also committed fans of local clubs. The allegiance to clubs and national teams has no conflicting attitudes (Hart 2017). Thus, they do strongly support the development of young national players, but they do not strongly support the control for international players, which might diminish the quality of their favourite teams and their spectatorship experience.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study investigating support for naturalising football players in China. The government and the CFA have recently supported the naturalisation of some international players, who are now eligible to play for the Chinese men's team. While naturalisation of athletes has been a common practice in small countries, with a shortage of sport talents, such as Qatar, Bahrain and United Arab Emirates (Grix 2015, Reiche and Tinaz 2019), this is something new for China. The most populated country in the world has not had problems to find talented nationals to represent it in different sports. However, in football, the story has been different. Results have not come as fast as the government, sport authorities, and even fans would like. This has justified the strategy of naturalising football players in China. As a country of emigration rather than immigration, China is not used to naturalisation of foreigners (Low 2016, Mignot 2019). Therefore, it is not surprising that Chinese fans do not render strong support for naturalisation of players. This is a new process and fans are not used to it. Qualifying for the next World Cup with the help of some naturalised players may change perceptions of Chinese fans.

Local and global orientation of football fans

An important innovation of the current research is the segmentation of Chinese football fans according to their local and global orientation. Using Merton's (1968) social theory of globalisation, results show that the local and global orientations of fans have some impact on their support for different strategies to promote the national team. Pairwise comparisons show important differences in support for different strategies. First, the two groups with fans high in local orientation (globally engaged and local) offer more support for strategies to control the number of and costs with international players when compared to one group low in local orientation (locally disengaged). In this sense, local orientation seems to play an important role in attitudes towards international players in the country. However, we do not see this as a simple example of ethnocentric behaviour because the combination of local and global orientation (in globally engaged fans) also produced higher support for controlling for international players. Ethnocentrism is seen as a strong sense of in-group self-importance and self-centeredness (Bizumic and Duckitt 2012). Local-oriented fans may

defend the option of reducing numbers and costs with international players not because they do not like them, but because they see this strategy as something effective to bring a greater good – a stronger national team. These results need to be analysed together with those of other strategies because local orientation has also positive effects on supporting the development of national talents.

Second, similar results are found when comparing groups in their support for the two strategies involving young talents – supporting young national players in professional clubs and promoting academy system. The two groups high in local orientation (globally engaged and local) offer more support for such strategies when compared to the other two groups low in local orientation (global and local disengaged). As it happens with controlling for international players, local orientation plays a key role to inform support for strategies related to young talents. However, unlike support for controlling for international players, the difference between fans with only local and fans with only global orientation is something that deserves our attention. They do not differ in their support for young players in professional teams, but they do in their support for academy system. Therefore, local orientation may not be determinant to define support for opportunities for young players in professional clubs, as most groups of fans (except for locally disengaged fans) see this as an important factor to increase chances of success of the national team. The strategy of supporting young players in professional clubs is consistent with the literature and current practices adopted by sport authorities in China, as they propose a minimum number of young players (u-23 or u-21) in the rosters of professional clubs (CFA 2017, Gündoğan and Sonntag 2018, Thomassen 2019). This should increase the pool of young talents with a chance to develop further and reach the national team (Madichie 2009). However, local orientation seems to be determinant to support the academy system. Local orientation can relate to traditional ways of promoting sport in the country. The Soviet model has informed the Chinese sport school model, which has inspired the creation of sport academies (Mangan and Hong 2013, Hong and Zhouxiang 2015). Therefore, considering the high local orientation of Chinese fans, it is not surprising that fans with higher local orientation support this strategy.

Third, contrary to the other strategies, support for naturalisation of international players seems to depend on a combination between high global and high local orientation of fans. Unlike the other four strategies, which can be categorised as traditional ones, naturalisation is a strategy that has not been traditionally applied to develop sport in China. Comparisons show that globally engaged fans render more support for this strategy when compared to all other three groups, which do not differ among them. Globally engaged fans have high levels of cosmopolitanism. Here, we use the term cosmopolitanism in the sense of rooted cosmopolitanism, where concerns with global issues do not cancel out concerns with local problems (Appiah 1997). This means that individuals can have high concerns with both global and local issues. However, our findings do not back the argument of elite cosmopolitanism (where people with global orientation do not care for local issues – Calhoun 2002), as something important to inform support for non-traditional strategies to improve the quality of a national football team. Chinese football fans with a rooted cosmopolitan orientation are the ones who offer higher support for the only non-traditional strategy tested in the current study. To conclude, if we want to know how localism and cosmopolitanism can inform popular support for government-led strategies, we will need to move beyond the dichotomy of local and global orientation (Thomson and Taylor 2005, Piwoni 2019). These results have important practical implications.

Practical implications

Results of the current study provide fundamental information for sport authorities on how to get more public support for both traditional and non-traditional strategies. While there are no guarantees that those strategies supported by people will produce the realisation of ‘the dream’, an alignment between government-led strategies and public support may be beneficial to promote

the sport in a more democratic way in the country (Manzenreiter and Horne 2004, Grix and Lee 2013). This is particularly important to China, a country that still lives under an authoritarian regime, but whose people increasingly call for more democratic decisions (Chen and Zhang 2019). While Chen and Zhang's (2019) study illustrates the increased number of popular protests in China in non-sport contexts, a more democratic participation of fans and supporters is still to be required in the sport sphere.

A challenge to increase the alignment between government-led strategies and public support is the authoritarian regime, where the government usually does not seek for popular support to implement new policy. An additional challenge is the fact that a policy can give sport leaders power and legitimacy if it produces better international results on the field, even when the policy is not aligned with people's will. This seems to partially explain why Chinese sport authorities have invested more in traditional strategies to push the men's national team to the next level in international competitions.

The lack of positive international results on the field has led them to recently start investing in non-traditional strategies, such as naturalisation of players. Support for different strategies is linked to local and/or global orientation of fans. Considering that is not easy to change the local and/or global orientation of people (Merton 1968, Kuhn *et al.* 2018), sport authorities need to manage the fact that a large part of football fans in the country have local orientation. Local-oriented fans support traditional strategies (e.g. young national players in professional teams and academy system) more than global-oriented fans. Therefore, authorities should have no problems to garner support for these strategies. The problem with traditional strategies is that they have been used for decades with little positive effects (at least in terms of international success of the men's national team).

If sport authorities and government keep innovating in their strategies to improve the quality of the national team, as they did when they started naturalising players, they will need to deal with lower levels of support from the population. Support for innovative strategies seems to be related to a combination of high global and local orientations of the population. The good news from the current study is that about half of the participants in the survey indicate high levels of global orientation (either in isolation or, and mainly, in combination with local orientation). Fans who are high in both global and local orientation produced the most support for naturalisation. This is promising. Improving feelings of global concerns and rooted cosmopolitanism can have important effects on Chinese football, and sport in general. We are aware that to change is difficult and takes time to become widespread in a country. However, recent social and political changes in the country have shown some improvement in global awareness (Shi *et al.* 2017). Football authorities can benefit from this not only to support naturalisation of international players but also and mainly to get support to other innovative strategies to develop the sport in the country.

Still from the practical point of view, controlling for international players also fits in the box of traditional strategies and seems to have little effect, according to our sample of fans, to improve the quality of the national team. If the problem was the lack of resources, used either in hiring international players for CSL teams or in developing young national players, we would understand the current pressures to control for foreign players in the country. This has not been the case. Football fans seem to be aware of this. The CFA has enough resources to invest in developing young players. The new transfer tax for international players (Din 2018) has generated additional resources to develop young players. Therefore, our suggestion is for sport authorities in the country not to see international players in the CSL and development of young talents as conflicting goals because they are not and, more importantly, fans do not see them like conflicting goals. Sport authorities can apply a more cosmopolitan approach and use the international players to help the process of developing young national players. A stronger league has the potential to create opportunities for young players' development by playing at the highest possible level, and, ultimately, to produce a stronger national team (Sahakyan *et al.* 2012).

Considering the current level of dissatisfaction with the performance of the men's national team and the ineffectiveness of traditional strategies, we suggest that the Chinese authorities should think about other innovative strategies. Naturalisation is the first non-traditional strategy adopted and may have short-term impacts on the national team. However, to become a football powerhouse, they will need additional strategies. Democratisation of football practice can be considered an unorthodox strategy in a country that is used to follow the Soviet model of sport schools (Mangan and Hong 2013, Hong and Zhouxiang 2015). Democratisation of practice in the country is a key strategy to develop the sport in the long run. We are aware that democratisation of practice is somehow contemplated in the 2015 Overall plan under the label of 'popularization'. The mistake in using this term is that football is already very popular in China (Delgado and Villar 2018, Peng *et al.* 2019). Thus, Chinese authorities do not need strategies to make football popular, rather they need innovative ways to promote democratisation of practice, that is, they need to provide opportunities to every child to play football if they wish. More importantly, these opportunities do not necessarily need to be in a formal or institutionalised way. Informal practices should be very welcomed. The traditional sport school model sponsored by the state has not worked, at least not for football. Constructing new football pitches (as proposed in all three government plans) by itself is unlikely to significantly increase the number of youths participating in football. An innovative way to promote democratisation of football practice in China should consider a reduced influence of the State and give space for regional and local initiatives and, more importantly, for informal practice. Support for this less-centralised approach may start in regions where people have both local and global orientations, which seems to facilitate the acceptance of non-traditional strategies to develop football.

Limitations and future studies

We have focused on local and global orientation of football fans to explain support for specific strategies. Other characteristics of fans may affect their support. While we have no theoretical support to use demographics as group variables, other variables such as team identification (Wann 2006) and allegiance to the national team (Gleaves and Llewellyn 2014) may have the potential to affect support for some strategies. We have not controlled for identification of fans for specific Chinese teams. This may explain why they do not strongly support, for example, the control of international players. Highly identified fans with local teams might be more prone to not support strategies related to controlling for international players because it might decrease the quality of their teams. Allegiance to the national team is another variable with the potential to affect decisions about support. Fans with high allegiance to the national team might offer more support for all strategies they perceive as positive to improve the performance of the team. Interactions between team identification and allegiance to the national team also have the potential to affect support for strategies to develop the team. In addition to local and global orientation, future studies may consider team identification and allegiance to the national team as factors affecting supporting for specific strategies. Although we have managed to collect data from a suitable convenience sample of football fans living in 31 provincial-level administrative divisions (out of 34 total), findings of the current study cannot be extrapolated to the whole population of football fans in China. The most recent Nielsen Global Media's survey in China's urban population indicates that the country has around 187 million football fans (Nielsen 2018). Recent data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicate that 17% of China population aged 25–64 have tertiary education (OECD 2019). Therefore, our sample may be biased towards more educated people in China. Budget permitting, future studies should consider the use of a random representative sample of football fans in the country. A random representative sample should be advantageous mainly for studies aiming to investigate, for example, the influence of specific demographic variables on support for specific strategies, which was not the case in the current study. The use of only two forum websites (Baidu Forums and Dongqiudi Quanzi) may represent a limitation of this study.

Despite being very popular forums to discuss football in China, fans who interact in other forums might have different perceptions about the topics investigated in this study. We acknowledge the methodological limitations of the study and indicate that this is only the first step to understand policy strategies to create a stronger national men's football team in China. Future studies can build upon the knowledge here produced enriching the findings present in this article.

Notes

1. We use FIFA Men's World Cup here to draw a distinction between this event and the FIFA Women's World Cup, to apply gendered labels equally across the two tournaments.
2. The first appearance of National Humiliation dates from 1910s, when China was facing the challenge to deal with the conflicting forces of imperialism and modernity. *Guochi* referred to the problems related to the National Humiliation, caused by imperialism, while *Guoxue* referred to the problems brought by modernity (Callahan 2003).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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