



# Global China and the Global Game in Africa

China–Africa Engagement  
through the Lens of Football

Edited by **Jonathan Sullivan,**  
**Tobias Ross,** and **Angela Lewis**

  
**PETER LANG**

The story of China–Africa relations is one of the most important geopolitical and geoeconomic developments of the past two decades. This book uses the interaction between China and African countries in football to critically examine how engagement through football reproduces unequal outcomes but also positive developments on both sides. A multidisciplinary cast of China and Africa scholars demonstrate how political, economic, social and cultural issues play out through football, illuminating the motivations, processes and consequences of the evolving relationship between China and African countries. From nation states, corporations, institutions, clubs, players and fans, this book shows how the global game runs through Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Algeria, Egypt, Beijing, Guangzhou and the Chinese Northeast, with its ramifications for geopolitics, South–South relations, international sports governance, diplomacy, soft power, international media, labor migration and transnational fandoms.

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**Sport in East and Southeast Asian Societies**  
Geopolitical, Political, Cultural and Social Perspectives

J. A. Mangan, *Series Editor*

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

*Global China and the Global Game  
in Africa: China–Africa Engagement  
through the Lens of Football*

“No matter if political sciences, international relations, economics, or global studies, the subject of China–African relations has become an essential subject to properly understand the dynamics that shape our world. But until now, the role of sport in this connection was often merely a footnote. With this book, Jonathan Sullivan, Tobias Ross, and Angela Lewis have put together an excellent collection of case studies that puts the shared enthusiasm for football in the centre of this politically, economically, and culturally loaded relationship. This makes not only for an enticing read, but also for an outstanding and much-needed resource across many disciplines.”

—Dr. Tobias Zuser, Assistant Professor, Chinese University of Hong Kong

“This book provides a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted interactions between China and Africa through football. Edited by Jonathan Sullivan, Tobias Ross and Angela Lewis, the book explores a wide range of topics, including stadium diplomacy, labor migration and sports diplomacy, and shows how football serves as an important conduit for political, economic and cultural exchange. The book offers a nuanced perspective on the intersection of sport, politics and international relations in the bilateral character of this engagement, moving beyond simplistic accounts to highlight the wider geopolitical and economic implications of China’s presence in African football.”

—Dr. Ilker Gündoğan, Researcher, Ruhr University Bochum, Germany



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# China–Africa Relations through Football

Jonathan Sullivan<sup>1</sup>

Two-way exchange between China and Africa is multifaceted and long-standing (Large 2021). Since 2000, diplomatic, economic, cultural, and educational engagements have been consolidated and institutionalized through the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Trade relations are intense, and African countries constitute a significant cohort of partners involved in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Reliable data are scarce, but there are likely several hundred thousand Chinese citizens residing in Africa and around 200,000 Africans living in China. Over the past two decades, China’s presence and purported ambitions in Africa have attracted significant attention, skepticism, and criticism, especially in western nations (Mawdsley 2008). In China’s relations with many African countries there are real inequalities and serious substantive and normative issues to consider. These issues are sometimes captured by the amorphous term “neocolonialism” (Negi 2008), a combination of economic and political influence that leverages China’s power differential to the detriment of African partners. There is, however, no evidence that China is “seeking colonies, using prisoners as cheap labor or any of the other lurid accusations made against

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‘the Chinese’ in Africa” (Taylor 2014, 121), and Hirono and Suzuki (2014) argue that the tenor of related debates “reflect deeply rooted western anxieties that their traditional dominance in Africa is about to be overthrown by a non-western power” (455).

The observation that China–Africa engagement goes beyond the repertoire of stylized “myths” that Hirono and Suzuki (2014) identify is not to dismiss Chinese government support for illiberal regimes, Chinese companies’ pursuit of African natural resources, the lending practices of state financiers or a host of other issues. However, it is a reminder that moving beyond the “myths” there is a multiplicity of exchanges occurring in both sites, with influences traveling in both directions. The chapters in this book show how football is one site where these multi-directional processes play out. Indeed, football is an illuminating case study in China–Africa exchange and a useful vehicle for exploring the complexities of the transcontinental relationship at different levels: from nation-states, corporations, and institutions, to clubs, players and fans. China–Africa and Africa-China exchanges in football are germane to numerous highly salient research areas, including soft power, international media, commercialization, South-South relations, geopolitics, international sports governance, diplomacy, labor migration and transnational fandoms. These issues are explored in the book by a multidisciplinary cast of scholarly experts on China, Africa, and football.

Since 1969–1970, China has constructed, financed or gifted dozens of football stadiums across the African continent (Xue et al. 2019). To date, China has contributed sports infrastructure in 36 different African countries. Known by the (generally) negatively valenced descriptor “stadium diplomacy,” the practice has been viewed with skepticism by western observers (Dubinsky 2021). Put charitably, such interpretations of stadium financing and construction reflect a focus on contrasting motivations and interests, and differential power and exchange relations that are also associated with China’s exploitation of African natural resources, corruption and “debt traps” (Brautigam 2020). Chapters 2 and 12 of this volume explore an alternative perspective on African countries’ continuing willingness to accept Chinese-funded stadiums, but neither denies the negative externalities observed in cases where stadiums go unused or scarce resources have been wasted. More broadly, it is undeniable that some African countries’ engagement with China has produced observably negative outcomes for those societies, including the enrichment and entrenchment of repressive and self-interested regimes and the failure of African resource wealth to benefit local people through re-investment in industrial capacity, healthcare, or education. Local society-led resistance to the presence and practices of Chinese actors has been observed in

several African countries (Leslie 2016). These issues deserve appropriate scrutiny and criticism. Equally, however, the mono-dimensionality and normative basis for some depictions of “China in Africa” require redressing, and African perspectives brought back in (Sautman and Yan 2009). This is arguably the case in football exchange too, where stadium diplomacy is just one among many forms of connection between China and African countries. The desire to contribute a more holistic and balanced understanding of engagement through football underpins the motivation for this book. Moving beyond stadium diplomacy as a manifestation of China’s instrumental use of sport to gain influence and advantage in Africa, the chapters in this book use the diversity of exchanges in football to explore a range of political, economic, social, and cultural issues. The resulting collection provides an original treatment of China–Africa and Africa–China relations that accounts for African agency, speaks to the diversity of practitioners and stakeholders, and leverages perspectives from individual African nations and China.

Engagement in football represents a conceptual and empirical challenge to conventional western “China–Africa” narratives, not least by undermining the implied unidirectionality of influence. In football, “Africa–China” engagement is as salient as “China–Africa.” One need only consider some of the many African players to have contributed to the development of the Chinese Super League (CSL)—Cameroon’s Stéphane Mbia, Ivorian Didier Drogba, the D. R. Congo’s Cédric Bakambu, Ghanaian Asamoah Gyan, Mali’s Frédéric Kanouté, Nigeria’s Yakubu Ayegbeni, and Senegal’s Demba Ba. And let us not forget the contribution of African talent to the Chinese Women’s Super League, including Zambian superstar Barbra Banda (who moved to Orlando Pride in spring 2024 for a near world record transfer fee). Football labor migration is only the tip of the iceberg. China and African countries are relevant to global governance of football, where placing officials in executive roles and securing voting blocs that determine hosting rights in multilateral bodies can be highly consequential economically (Chadwick et al. 2022). Football possesses abundant “soft power” potential (Grix and Houlihan 2014), as well as the perils of “sport washing” (Skey 2023). Chinese investors and sponsors play an important role in the development of football in Africa, exemplified by Chinese involvement in the continent’s crown jewel international competition, the African Cup of Nations (AFCON) (Cockayne et al. 2022).

Bilateral partnerships are manifest in relations between the Chinese Football Association (CFA) and numerous African Football Associations (FA). The deal agreed with the Ghanaian FA in 2012 and formally commencing in 2017 was

typical. China, a global power in women's football, opened its facilities to the Ghanaian women's team and arranged friendly matches in advance of Ghana hosting the women's AFCON. In return, the Ghana FA supported Chinese youth football development, including team visits and training matches. Not coincidentally, the Chinese media firm StarTimes then secured the broadcast rights to the Ghana Premier League, and under the terms of the deal China agreed to fund the construction of 10 artificial pitches in the country. StarTimes has become a significant player in the mediation of African football, with exclusive long-term rights deals in several countries. The company is also effectively a gatekeeper for foreign football in Africa through its broadcast rights to show European football in several African nations. StarTimes' involvement in African football must also be contextualized within the broader expansion of Chinese media operations on the continent (Jedlowski 2021; Lewis 2023).

China's emphasis on youth football development, and Africa's well-known credentials in international youth competition, has led to numerous connections between youth academies, involving tours, shared training resources and friendly matches. The China–Africa Youth Tournament (CAYT) launched in 2019 with four African FA representative teams from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Kenya traveling to Hunan Province to face off against local representatives from Hunan, Guangdong, Shandong and Shanghai. This first iteration was hosted by Hunan Provincial Sports Bureau and linked to the China–Africa Economic and Trade Expo. The second edition scheduled to be held in Nigeria was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic but resumed in summer 2023. It is one of many youth exchanges. In a later chapter, Tobias Ross analyzes the 2001 Lion Cub Project initiated by the Chinese professional club Dalian Shide in Cameroon, the first large-scale player recruitment and naturalization program in Chinese sport. The Lion Cub project was launched at a time when attitudes toward naturalization in China were predominantly negative and it failed to deliver on its goal of developing 24 Cameroonian teenagers into CSL and national representative level players. Other migrations, in both directions, have led to the establishment of transnational communities and enriched cross-cultural fandoms. African communities based in Guangdong and Zhejiang have become fans of local teams, while Chinese fandoms have coalesced around individual African players like the Ivorian Didier Drogba, one of Africa's greatest players and a star for Shanghai Shenhua, and James Chamanga from Zambia, who enjoyed a decade-long career in the CSL. The presence of settled African communities in China's southern provinces has led to cross-national relationships and children of mixed heritage, some of whom are promising young football talents. Two players

of mixed Nigerian and Chinese heritage, Su Yuliang and Huang Shenghao played for Guangzhou City FC youth teams, and the latter for China's under-17 national squad. The Tanzanian-Chinese player Eddy Francis and Gabon-Chinese Alexander N'Doumbou play for Shanghai Shenhua and Zhejiang Professional, respectively. African community establishment in China will thicken connections between China and African countries and, with CSL clubs and the Chinese national team actively scouting mixed heritage players, may lead to further talents emerging.

## **China–Africa Engagement**

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has long considered itself as an actor in solidarity with other developing nations in the struggle against western imperialism. This orientation was entangled in the idiosyncrasies of Maoist Thought and complicated by the conceptual hybridity inherent in “market socialism with Chinese characteristics” that emerged in the Dengist reform era (Taylor 1998). It was further complicated by China's transformation into an economic superpower and integral motor of the globalized economy. However, China has not relinquished the idea that it shares the developing world's struggle against western domination of global systems, structures, and norms that fundamentally disadvantage, and often mistreat, developing nations (Yin 2023). How China manifests its self-image in its engagement with the developing world, including Africa, has changed as the country moved from socialist construction and the export of revolutionary ideas under Mao, to an economic superpower engaged in geopolitical “systemic rivalries” with the West. When China engages with African countries today, there is an inescapable power differential that cannot be masked by invoking legacies of solidarity or rhetorical commitments to “win-win” economic cooperation.

China's omni-lateral approach to diplomacy in the past two decades has produced a multitude of initiatives from FOCAC to the BRI and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Facilitated by diplomatic connections and governmental policies (on both sides), Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) and ostensibly private corporations are active across most economic sectors in Africa. The focus has been on extractive primary industries, for good reason, but Chinese firms are increasingly diversifying into telecommunications, logistics, agriculture, construction, trade, and media industries. Over the past 20 years China has become Africa's biggest trade partner, surpassing African trade with former

colonial powers and the United States. China became Africa's biggest donor, surpassing the World Bank and former colonial powers' foreign aid. As a development partner, China's characteristic *modus operandi* foregrounds what it likes to frame as "win-win" economic cooperation. Chinese involvement in Africa has been welcomed by many African partners, not least when Western partners withdrew or downsized engagements in the early 2000s. Yet, the reality is that Chinese involvement in Africa is not driven by altruism: China pursues its own national interest in its dealings with African countries and often drives hard bargains. It also does not concern itself with promoting democratization, good governance or improving human rights. This is consistent with China's long-standing if selectively employed policy of "non-interference" (Aidoo and Hess 2015) and it has been welcomed by self-interested elites in some African countries. China has directly or indirectly bolstered repression in Zimbabwe, Equatorial Guinea, D. R. Congo, Angola, Sudan and several other African countries (Masunungure 2011). It has enriched and entrenched numerous illiberal regimes across the continent and sometimes refused to use its influence to intervene in the abuses that their partners inflict on African people and societies (Large 2008). On the other hand, China has participated in UN peacekeeping missions in Mali and South Sudan, anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden (Coleman and Job 2021; Lanteigne and Hirono 2013) and contributed to African countries' COVID-19 pandemic response, supplying PPE and vaccines.

China's rapid industrialization has created a substantial appetite for African natural resources. An inexhaustive list might include oil, copper, coal, diamonds, gold, bauxite, iron ore, timber, lithium, and various rare earths. China buys these resources from African firms, where they exist, or negotiates access rights and operating concessions for SOEs specializing in extractive industries. Redolent of European colonial powers of old, China has also invested heavily in the physical infrastructure needed to mine, refine, transport and ship resources back to China, where they will fuel manufacturing and technological development, modernization, and urbanization on a scale mostly unknown in Africa. Across the African continent, Chinese SOEs in the construction and engineering sectors have built ports, roads, airports, railways, bridges, dams, mines, power plants, and refineries. These constructions are instrumental in that they support China's need to extract and deliver natural resources, but the same SOEs have also built hospitals, civic buildings and other facilities from which it doesn't directly benefit. Indirect benefits accruing to such contributions may come in the form of engendering positive views of China and their subsequent conversion into influence or soft power.

SOEs like China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (Sinopec), China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) are extracting substantial quantities of oil from Angola, Nigeria, Libya, and Sudan. China Nonferrous Metal Mining Group extracts copper from Zambia and D. R. Congo. Agribusiness and food conglomerate Beidahuang, the world’s biggest soya producer, has acquired agricultural land in Namibia, Niger, and Zimbabwe for growing crops and cotton. China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) is one of several state-owned construction companies building all kinds of physical infrastructure across Africa, from the African Union in Addis to the Great Mosque in Algiers and hundreds of smaller projects. China Railway Construction Corporation has laid thousands of kilometers of track across Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal. China Merchants Port Holdings Company has built four ports in the Horn of Africa, and linked the mega-port at Doraleh, Djibouti to landlocked Addis via a Chinese-built railway. Many Chinese projects are financially underwritten by state-backed “policy banks” like the Export–Import (Exim) Bank of China (Corkin 2011).

The scale and rapid increase in these projects led to an equation that purportedly explained China–African engagement: resources for infrastructure (Brautigam 2009). But China’s ambitions—and African countries’ ambitions—extend beyond that. African population growth, the youthful slant of its demographic composition and increasing levels of prosperity make the continent’s current and future market attractive. Chinese companies are deeply involved in establishing market position in numerous sectors. In some sectors, like telecoms, vertical integration of hardware and software puts Chinese firms in a strong, and potentially dominant position, with concomitant risks (Gagliardone 2022). For example, China’s national champion telecom firm Huawei, ostensibly private but with close government links, is building telecommunications networks across Africa, bringing broadband connectivity and phone networks on which its own devices and smartphones will operate on. Once connected, African users have shown an appetite for Chinese digital entertainment platforms like TikTok (international cousin of Douyin owned by Beijing-based ByteDance), Chinese fast fashion apps like Shein, wholesale and retail e-commerce platforms like Taobao, and “do everything” communication apps like WeChat. This is good for Chinese firms’ ambition to go global. Setting aside valid concerns about what Chinese companies do with all the personal data it will collect on African users (Gravett 2022), it is also good for those

African consumers who were previously unable to access Wi-Fi and mobile internet, cheap smartphones and connected devices, abundant shopping and entertainment options, or take part in digital citizenship. It is not coincidental that TikTok sponsored a content partnership with the Confederation of African Football (CAF) in 2022 covering the men's and women's AFCON and the CAF Champions League. It is also consistent with the Chinese state's conception of domestic professional football as a driver of economic activity with a distinct social function (Hesketh and Sullivan 2020).

Reflecting its intensifying connections across the continent, Chinese migration has increased substantially in the past two decades (Sun 2014, 28). Many of these people are individual citizens with no connection to the Chinese state who come to Africa to pursue small-scale economic opportunities, often with little prior knowledge, connections or language skills (Sullivan and Cheng 2018). Some put down roots and become embedded in local economies. Others are sojourners, using Africa as a migration stepping-stone to Europe or North America, encouraged or forced by economic or personal circumstances to seek opportunities outside of China (Driessen 2016). Conflicts have arisen in some receiving societies as a result of the preferential hiring practices employed by Chinese SOEs, whereby Chinese workers are brought in to work on Chinese projects (Cardenal and Araujo 2013; Michel and Bevret 2009). The increasing number of Chinese living in Africa has prompted negative reactions in some countries' media and some host populations. Poor working conditions, labor abuses and the distortion of local economies by incoming Chinese actors have led to protests and political opposition in Zambia, action by trade unions in South Africa, and by business organizations in Uganda and Ghana. In some cases, notably Zambia, anti-Chinese sentiment has been instrumentalized by local politicians (Larmer and Fraser 2007; Mohan and Tan Mullins 2009). Chinese companies and migrants have been criticized for "unfair competition, smuggling, inferior quality, illegal immigration, ruining local industries, taking local jobs, and simply invading foreign countries by virtue of sheer numbers" (Nyiri 2011, 149). Chinese economic activity has been criticized for discouraging exchange with African populations in the form of employment opportunities, investment in local projects, assimilation into communities and knowledge exchange (Carmody 2011). The China–Africa engagement is replete with consequential issues, and by comparison football may appear frivolous. The intention of this book is not to sideline or minimize broader issues, but to use the political, economic, and social dimensions of sport as a site to illuminate the complexities of China–Africa and Africa–China engagement.

## **China–Africa Engagement in Sport**

Sport in the Mao period was as politicized and ideological as it was in other Communist nations (Hong and Xiong 2002). Excellence in sporting competition was leveraged as a physical demonstration of the superiority of Communism and ideological supremacy over the capitalist bloc. Football in the early years of the PRC was “a symbol of modernity; a talisman of topicality; a statement of intent” (Dong and Mangan 2001, 79), and the Communist state saw utility in it for nation building internally and alliance building internationally. Irrespective of the fact that China’s capacity in football was limited in every respect during the early Mao period, it provided a means to approach these ends. In 1955, a Chinese team was dispatched to socialist bloc ally Hungary, then one of the strongest teams in the world, to learn “modern football.” Among the delegation was star player and captain Shi Wanchun. Having benefited from training and experience in Hungary, Shi was sent two years later to North Vietnam, another Communist bloc ally, to coach the national team. Further Chinese players sought training in Hungary, and in 1959 a Chinese national team beat a Hungarian team in a friendly match. During the Mao period, including the Cultural Revolution, China invited and hosted delegations of African athletes to expand relations at a time of domestic instability and international isolation. Demonstrations of solidarity were equally valuable on both sides, demonstrating the symbolic power of sporting exchanges under the most difficult political and economic conditions (Shuman 2017).

China’s absence from FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for political reasons (i.e., those institutions’ recognition of the Republic of China (Taiwan) rather than PRC) until the 1970s was a hindrance to making advances on the pitch. The national team could not compete in international competitions, only friendlies and exhibition matches against mainly fellow Communist bloc countries. But that did not prevent the use of sport off the pitch. The idea of using foreign sports aid was conceived in the late 1950s and institutionalized with the founding of the Foreign Sports Aid office of the General Administration of Sport in 1965. This established a crucial mechanism for planning, budgeting, and executing sport-related projects among ideologically aligned or friendly countries in the developing world. By 1966, it had already delivered the first Chinese construction project in sports delivered overseas, in the form of multi-purpose facilities in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where the second iteration of the Games of the New Emerging Forces was held. Later the same decade, funded by Chinese aid, Chinese architects and workers

broke ground on the first football stadium China built overseas. Construction on Amaan Stadium in Zanzibar, part of Tanzania and home by the 1930s to Chinese diasporic communities (Hsu 2007), was completed in the early 1970s. Tanzania and China were closely aligned in the Maoist ideological orientation of their political regimes, and the stadium was one of many physical manifestations of the goodwill that existed between them.

Chinese SOEs possess substantial expertise and capacity in engineering and construction and Chinese governments have consistently shown a preference for aid projects that result in tangible physical infrastructure. However, the extent of China's support for African countries through football goes beyond the supply of infrastructure. One example is the long-standing pursuit of knowledge exchange, resource sharing and mutual support for football development, particularly at the youth level. Starting in the 1970s, China has sent elite players and coaches to numerous African countries to share their expertise and conduct knowledge exchange programs. Yan Dejun, a former national team player, was sent by the Chinese government to share his coaching expertise with the Mauritanian and Burundi men's national squads between 1974 and 1977. Yan was succeeded as Burundi coach by another former Chinese national team player, Gao Fengwen. After gaining valuable practical experience, Gao returned to China and entered the Chinese national team set-up, coaching age-group football in the early 1980s and helping China to qualify for the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Qi Wusheng was another former player to gain coaching experience in Africa before entering the Chinese national team management structure. Qi led the Somali national team from 1978, before returning to China to coach the Chinese national team from 1994 to 1997. Chinese coaches were active in the 1970s and 1980s in Tanzania, Rwanda and several other African nations. A similar story of knowledge and expertise exchange is evident in youth football, with long-standing training programs and competition between China, Cameroon, Mozambique and others (Zhou et al. 2022). These programs include the supply of pitches, equipment, and referee training. Unsurprisingly given these foundations, players from African nations constitute one of the largest cohorts of foreign talent throughout the professional era in Chinese domestic football starting in 1994.

The PRC has a history of using sport in the pursuit of national diplomacy. The most famous example was the "ping-pong diplomacy" that facilitated communications with the US and signaled a willingness to establish bilateral relations at a pivotal moment in the Cold War following the Sino-Soviet split. Table tennis matches helped pave the way for President Nixon's visit to China in 1972, which in turn facilitated the normalization of US-China relations and changed