

The Mediating Power of Sport

**Global
Challenges and
Sport Culture
in China**

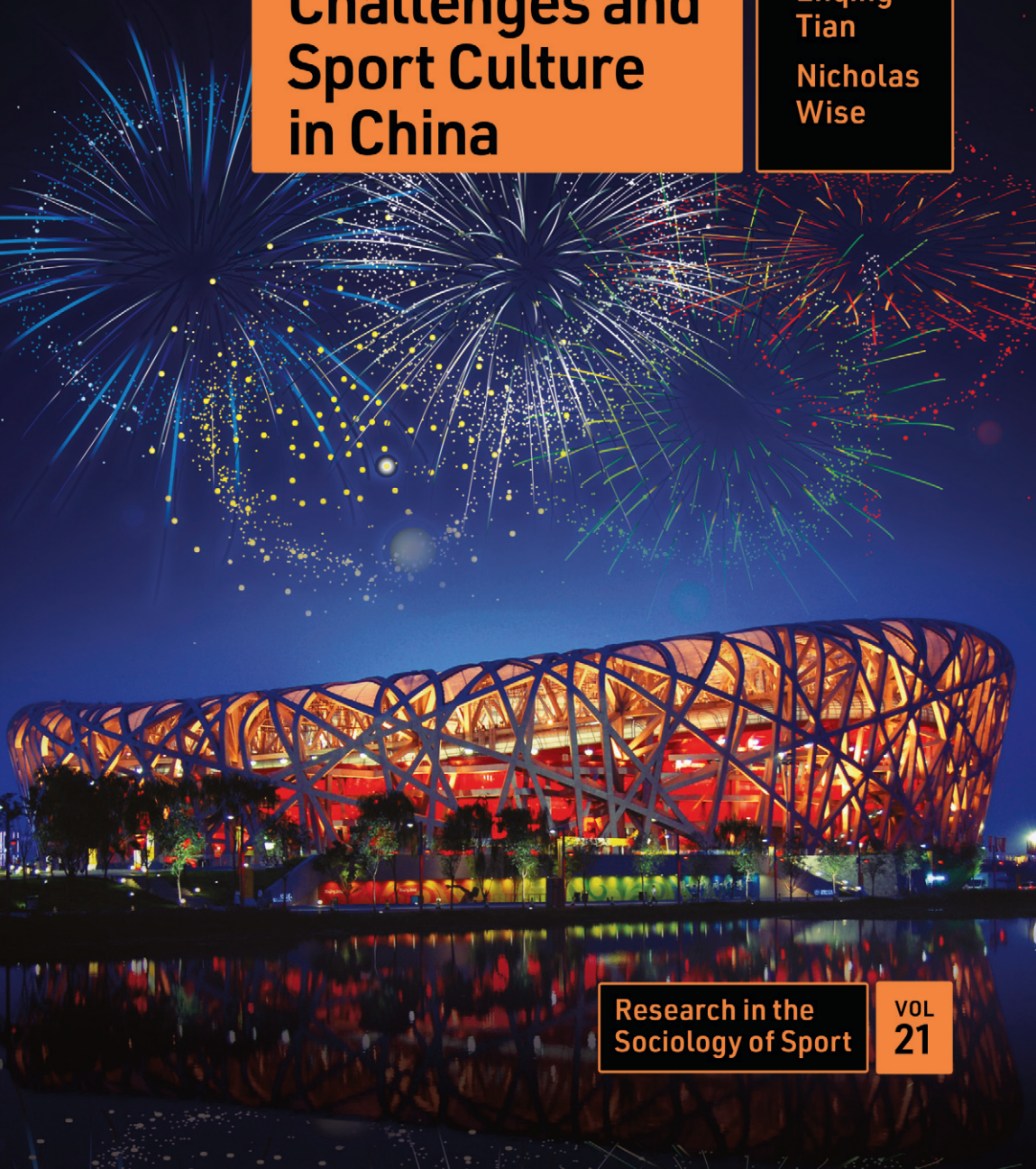
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**Research in the
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THE MEDIATING POWER OF SPORT

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT VOLUME 21

THE MEDIATING POWER OF SPORT: GLOBAL CHALLENGES AND SPORT CULTURE IN CHINA

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INTRODUCTION – THE MEDIATING POWER OF SPORT: GLOBAL CHALLENGES AND SPORT CULTURE IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This first chapter is the introduction to the book. The purpose of this book is to address and better understand why China tightly embraces modern sport in contemporary times. Some view this as an indicator of glocalisation and a result of Western industrial civilization putting pressure on China to showcase their strengths as a nation. Some important considerations to explore are China's mediated ability to play and compete with the west. Sport is also seen as a channel of observing global political and economic challenges, especially those in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the intense tensions between communities, which certainly inspires further academic development. Given China's recently remarkable achievements in sport, it is high time to show the world more inside stories of sport development across the nation. The contributors of this collection bring foundational Chinese context to each chapter as they examine changing sport cultures at different scales.

Keywords: Sociology of sport; China; global sport; sport culture; modern sport; social transformation; nationalism; sports development

China is a rising power in the realm of global sports given their investment in sport and success in international competitions and recent hosting of large-scale events (see [Chu, 2020](#); [Dreyer, 2022](#); [Wise, 2020](#)). Sport is important no matter the context, may it be related to culture, economics or politics, as there are sociological and geographical implications that frame the importance of sport in

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society today (see [Tian & Wise, 2020](#); [Wise, 2015](#); [Wise & Kohe, 2020](#)). For decades, scholars have placed attention on sports sociology research in China to understand attitudes towards sport as China has long had ambitions to succeed in sport globally ([Kong et al., 1990](#)), may this be policy and promotion through hosting mega-events ([Zheng et al., 2019](#)) and establishing a new image ([Chen, 2012](#)) or investing in the development of different sports (e.g. [He & Malcolm, 2021](#); [Li & Liu, 2022](#); [Li et al., 2020](#)).

China has spread the playing field by focussing on different intentions locally and regionally based on encouraging physical activity of people of all abilities ([Sun et al., 2019](#)), healthy well-being ([Xu et al., 2019](#)), fandom patterns ([Gong, 2020](#)) and everyday leisure routines ([Sui & Yang, 2023](#); [Tian & Wise, 2022](#)). Given the global importance of football (or soccer), much work aligns the growth and popularity of the sport with China's role in the globalisation of sport (see [Bond et al., 2018](#); [Newman et al., 2021](#); [Tian, 2017](#)).

Each of these, among others, that frame global and local dimensions of sport come into focus in subsequent chapters in this book. Much work focuses on spotlighting major- or mega-sporting events, but from a development standpoint, it is important that we consider local grassroots dimensions of sport in our research (see [Wise, 2014](#)) so that we can critically explore who is impacted by sport ([Wise & Whittam, 2015](#)). This is especially important that we continue to focus on local impacts as we see countries showcase themselves in the globalised world of hosting large-scale events ([Hall & Wise, 2019](#); [Li, 2021](#); [Roche, 2017](#)).

The purpose of this book is to address and better understand why China tightly embraces modern sport in contemporary times. Some view this as an indicator of glocalisation and a result of Western industrial civilization putting pressure on China to showcase their strengths as a nation ([Lu & Fan, 2013](#)). Some important considerations to explore are China's mediated ability to play and compete with the west. Sport is also seen as a channel of observing global political and economic challenges, especially those in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the intense tensions between communities, which certainly inspires further academic development. Given China's recently remarkable achievements in sport ([Zheng & Chen, 2016](#)), it is high time to show the world more inside stories of sport development across the nation. The contributors of this collection bring foundational Chinese context to each chapter as they examine changing sport cultures at different scales.

Sociology of sport researchers have focused on a wide range of topical areas ([Tian & Wise, 2020](#)), and in recent years, more attention has focused on sociological aspects of sport across China. Cultural and political aspects of sport are integral to the study of sport and sociology, adding critical depth to how we think about the impact of sport on societal actions and measures ([Manzenreiter, 2015](#); [Wise & Harris, 2019](#)). Other important aspects concern the increasing importance of soft power ([Chen et al., 2012](#); [Wise & Ludvigsen, 2023](#)), technology ([Wong & Meng-Lewis, 2023](#)) and big data ([Tian, 2020](#)), as sport is at the centre of these discussions which impact us socially and emotionally. Emotional aspects of sport and events that people participate in showcase the power of sport to connect people ([Gellweiler et al., 2019](#)). Elements of heritage and development are also

important directions when we think about sport and destination development as addressed in chapters in a recent collection by [Wise and Jimura \(2020\)](#).

This book outlines a number of sociological themes that sports scholars interact with. Topical areas chapters delve into focus on the challenge and reform of elite sports, nationalism and sport for development in China. Chapters focus on mega- and major-events and sports such as baseball, soccer and running, and along with the sociological and regional considerations, chapters provide important historical contexts of different sports as well. Mega-events especially are used by nations to leverage future impacts, create a new image or build a new visitor economy ([Wise & Maguire, 2022](#)). Chapters also introduce a range of social theories to address the different conceptual considerations sports scholars consider.

Some thinkers that sports scholars commonly engage with include theoretical foundations and inspirations from Elias, Bourdieu, Foucault and Cornell among others to address the issues of mediating power and sports culture ([Tian & Wise, 2020](#)). These conceptual directions are relevant when discussing sport in China as they help us think about sporting aspirations, fandom, branding, mega-events, competitiveness and gender in sports. Chapters throughout this volume offer critical insight into globalised sporting cultures and political hegemony. In the final section, two contributors offer theoretical underpinning to reflect on current trends in line with traditional Chinese culture of sport and the sub-discipline in China with a philosophical version for researching sociology of sport in China going forward.

By analysing the relationships between sport and social transformation in China, the book will examine how and why the sport plays a key role in China's rise in the 20th and 21st centuries. The book will integrate a number of topical directions addressed above to discuss how and why China embraces modern sport. Important in this is how China embraces the Olympic Movement and also creates new forms of influence in the world through sports to showcase their presence in the international sports arena (see [Wise, 2020](#)).

Featuring major sports and events, original documents and interviews with a wide breadth of insiders, this book, for the first time, provides a sociological guide to understand the relationship between China's social structure and sport. Some previous scholars addressed sport but they are not grounded in sociological perspectives. For instance, [Riordan and Jones \(1999\)](#) edited a collection on sport and physical education in China. This collection provided readers with a history of physical education in China and directions for management. [Fan and Lu \(2015\)](#) examined key issues in sport in China longitudinally from 1949 to 2012.

From a disciplinary standpoint, this book offers sociological insights to what [Fan and Lu \(2015\)](#) address based on their overview of history, politics and society pertinent to sport in China. Chapters in this collection go further and offer contemporary analyses on the social issues in China sport with micro-, meso- and macro-scope perspective but do address historical foundations as well that lend to modern practice. [Chu \(2020\)](#) highlights the inseparable nature between politics and sporting mega-events in China. Events are a global phenomenon ([Wise & Harris, 2019](#)), and [Chu \(2020\)](#) reviews 20 bidding cases to demystify domestic and

international political reasons behind event bids as they pertain to building relationships, social structures and the development of a dominant sporting culture with international influence in China.

To offer a summative overview the book, this collection is organised into this introduction and 11 chapters. The introduction chapter here (this chapter you are reading) frames the importance of sociology of sport research in China today and offers here an overview of each chapter. Chapter 1 positions the tradition and development of sport in China in light of recent mega-events. Chapters 2 and 3 frame directions on nationalism, and then into particular examples of sport in China, where Chapter 4 relates to national identity and football. Chapter 5 continues with football, Chapter 6 into baseball, Chapter 7 on cricket, Chapter 8 offers directions on e-sports and Chapter 9 looks at running culture. Chapters 7 and 8 also provide insights into the Asian Games. Chapters 10 and 11 bring the collection together, with Chapter 10 offering scope on a new development mode and Chapter 11 offering new directions to bring together foundations and conclude this collection. We now provide some details on what each chapter contributes to this edited collection.

Chapter 1 on an *Embodied Turn? Reviewing and Reflecting on the Study of Chinese Traditional Sports Culture* by Zhen Zhang examines the study of traditional Chinese sports and identifies issues within research areas. This chapter introduces new interpretative perspectives and approaches within the framework of bodily sociology. The chapter addresses links between locally-informed sports practices and the formation of socialized individuals and considers three main themes: self-giving, the creation of bodily value and the construction of national identity through sports. The chapter advocates for further bodily sociological studies of Chinese sports culture, which could enhance the understanding of Chinese studies among Western scholars and contribute to a genuine embodied turn in this field of study.

In modern China, sports and nationalism always have close connection, and nationalism is the important reason for the promotion of Chinese sports. Chapter 2, titled *Chinese Sports Heroes and Nationalism at Mega-Sporting Events*, by Gen Li considers relationships between Chinese sports and nationalism in globalised China. They argue this focus has been under-researched by scholars, and more academically focused research can devise more influencing factors when studying relationships between sports and nationalism in China with regards to globalisation. This chapter focuses on the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games and considers stories of three Chinese sports heroes. In many respects, the three athletes focused in this chapter represent the national image of China. Under the influence of the mass media, market economy and sports professionalisation, nationalism still exists in Chinese sports and the concept of ‘winning glory for the nation’. The relationship between Chinese nationalism and sports shows the important implications of rapid Chinese sports development.

Chapter 3, *Debates on Football and Chinese National Identity*, by Kaixiao Jiang and Jinyu Liu critically evaluates whether football can attain recognition as a national sport in China. This chapter addresses policy considerations, especially surrounding Article No. 11, released by the Chinese government in 2015, which

aims to develop a new national strategy centralised on the sport of football. The focus here is to also foster consumption and enhance national soft power using football given the sports global popularity. With football the national sport of many countries around the world, the goal here is to encourage Chinese football fans to support the national football team. This chapter addresses literature comparisons with established Chinese national sports such as Chinese martial arts, badminton and table tennis. The chapter reveals that football currently falls short of meeting the general criteria of nation-wide popularity to be considered a national sport. It also proves that football fails to meet the criterion of politics, hindering its identification as a national sport in China. The chapter rebuts the assumption and advocates for the validity of comparing how fans assess their fandom for local and national football teams.

Chapter 4 continues with a focus on football. *Chinese Football Fandom: Growing with the Changing Chinese Society* by Kaixiao Jiang and Liam O'Callaghan explores how the development of football fandom for the Chinese national team and local football clubs is strongly associated with societal changes and builds on whilst offering different arguments from the previous chapter. Although the performances of Chinese football teams, especially the national team, have failed to impress the world, football remains the most popular because of millions of supporters with loyalty and passion. Most studies related to fans mainly focus on the economic and political implications of spectatorship along with the rise of China. Nevertheless, few articles are available to answer the fundamental questions, such as 'when did these supporters come out?' and 'what were the factors of the development of fandom?' This chapter considers archival records and published documents over the last decades to offer a comprehensive and historical analysis of the development of football fandom in the People's Republic of China. As such, this chapter does not intend to be the most authoritative one but is one of the rare sources to lay down the foundation for research on Chinese football fandom. Furthermore, this chapter also proves that studies on football fandom can be a useful window for observing Chinese society.

The Commercialisation of Chinese Professional Football: Transition and Evolution by Yang Ma is the focus of Chapter 5. This chapter articulates the transition to and evolution of the commercialisation of Chinese professional football, continuing this core theme of football through the middle chapters of the book. The author argues that there are different turning points that we need to direct our attention to, framed around two major findings. First, there exists a distinct 'Chinese way' of commercialising football. However, it does not indicate that Chinese football doggedly avoided the Western governance model. For the club governance, Chinese football authorities set about recommending privately operated enterprises, large and medium-sized state-owned enterprises. Second, the commercialisation transitions of professional football in China were triggered by exogenous policy shifts, rather than endogenous changes in market structures, resulting in higher horizontal financial fragility than is associated with the commercialisation model adopted in more developed Western markets.

Chapter 6 by Xiaoqian Richard Hu focuses on the development of Baseball in China, titled *Jack and the Visiting Giants: The Development of Chinese Baseball*.

Chinese baseball represents a singular case of investigation into how China responds to sport globalisation. Baseball is a relatively peripheral sport in China. Nonetheless, it is important to examine the development of Chinese baseball and its interplay with the global sport giants and international events such as the Olympic Games and the Major League Baseball. Given the influence of sport globalisation, we also identify the consistent dominance of Chinese sport authorities and the spectrum of local stakeholders' reaction towards globalisation. The chapter provides a critical discussion of the relationship between marginal position of Chinese baseball in the local sport system and the rationale of its response to sport globalisation.

Little work to date has focused on Cricket's development in China, and Boyang He, Dominic Malcolm and Chunyang Xu address this in Chapter 7. Their chapter titled *From An Expatriate-only Sport to An Asian Games Sport: the Development of Cricket in China* provides an exhaustive analysis on the development of cricket in China in order to advance existing theories of cricket's development and consider future implications for the international game. This chapter builds on work by [He and Malcolm \(2021\)](#) and He et al. (2023) which are foundations to the assessment of the development of cricket in China. The authors note that there are two key historical eras surrounding the sport: 1. Cricket as an 'expatriate-only' game and 2. Cricket as an 'Asian Games sport'. The first era, Cricket as an 'expatriate-only' game, is constructed according to three key phases: early development; post-war and the 'opening-up' era. The second era, Cricket as an 'Asian Games sport', is constructed according to five periods over the past few decades. These include the budding period (2003–2005), peak period (2006–2010), stable period (2011–2014), trough period (2015–2018) and revival period (2019–present). By providing this more comprehensive analysis of the development of cricket in China, it argues that cricket in contemporary China (mainland) exists within two distinct strands; that is, a grassroots game kept alive by a resourceful expatriate diasporic community, and a state-led game, largely underpinned by the Asian Games that embedded in the educational system.

Chapter 8 by Jianping Hong and Jiandong Yi focuses on a phenomenon that is gaining attention in China and around this world, this being esports. This chapter, *Esportisation: The Inclusion of Esports in the Hangzhou Asian Games* considers the inclusion of esports in a major event. The significance of this event marks that Asia once again takes a lead in the global esportisation, and this chapter investigates a series of events in the inclusion process of esports by looking into the history of making all this possible. This chapter is based on process-sociology and actor network theory to analyse the type characteristics of esports events during the Hangzhou Asian Games. The chapter examines how key stakeholders' interact and balance in the network composed of international sports organisations. The development is different from other sports given its base is emerging esports organisations and esports game companies instead of sporting governing bodies. The chapter also examines the functions of global game industrial economic geography, local cultural politics, esports geopolitics and Olympic values in esports sportization, aiming to reveal the implications of

esports inclusion in the Asian Games on the debate of whether esports meets the criteria to be classified as a 'sport' and its enlightenment of digital strategy to the inclusion esports in the Olympics.

Chapter 9, *Running Culture in China: Conceptualising Notions of Power and Self*, by Zhanbing Ren considers the scale of running events in China which have increased dramatically. In China, running is not only a social phenomenon but also a historical and cultural phenomenon. It is noted that running in China is an organic part of human culture and takes on distinct sociological values. This chapter offers insight into the development of Chinese running culture and how this has emerged from ancient and modern Chinese running cultures. The chapter is conceptually based on Foucault's notions of disciplinary power theory, bio-power and the technologies of the self. This chapter discusses running culture in China for the first time under Foucault's theoretical framework and thus argues that running culture in China constructs the subjectivity of the Chinese runners under the joint action of the technologies of power and the technologies of the self. Findings acknowledge how Chinese Runners present and express themselves by showing a 'sense of presence'. Runners illustrate the implicit or explicit meaning and value of a particular way of life through running. It is also found that China's running policy under the technologies of power meets the needs of runners whereby power is not oppressive but productive.

Dehao Ma and Liu Ji focus on different elite sports in China in Chapter 10. *Challenges and Reforms of Chinese Elite Sports: Towards a New Development Mode* address the national government's expectation of transformation, administrative system reform, economic transition, social demand structure's upgrading and population change impacting sport across China. Against these considerations, in order to make this reform better adapted to China's reality and future development, the chapter suggests that Chinese traditional elite sports development mode should shift its driving forces of development from single to multiple and thus change its administrative system from government-oriented to society-oriented. The authors also speak to the importance of developing training concepts from instrumentalism to humanism. They argue that this will improve its construction of development from unbalanced to balanced and alter its effectiveness of development from extensive to intensive so to better achieve sustainable development.

The final chapter in this collection, Chapter 11, *From 'Imported' to 'Local': Framing Foundations on the Sociology of Sport in China*, by Qiang Gao and Le Zhou reflects on the development of sport sociology in China. They address sports sociology, and this notion as a transition from an 'imported' Western concept to a 'localised' Chinese discipline. In doing this, they also focus on the role of the Body in this process. This chapter offers some descriptive insight into the development of sport sociology in China to frame directions going forward. For instance, new characteristics of the study of sport have emerged in China; therefore, it is important to recognise some of the differences and similarities between Eastern and Western ideologies, especially regarding the concept of the 'Body' in research. In doing so, this chapter provides a unique perspective on the development of sport sociology in China, highlighting the role of the Body and

the process of localization and this development of sports sociology in contemporary Chinese scholarship.

This book was inspired by the need to offer a collection useful for students, scholars and policymakers focussing on sport and sociological considerations in China. Over the past 40 years, sport programmes and courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level have been introduced in several universities across China, particularly in the areas of sport sociology, sport management and sport politics. However, the emergence of these programmes/courses has not seen a commensurate growth in research or publications to meet the needs of its students and teachers. This volume would make a significant contribution to filling this gap.

This book is the first English collation of chapters united in a single volume that offer both theoretical and empirical directions on sporting cultures and sports development in China. The contents and contributions offered in this book are organised for academic researchers, sport practitioners and as noted students who are expressing interest in the study of sport. The content will cater to readers in China to examine topical directions for different sports while also capturing attention of readers in various international settings to think about the sociology of sport from their own cultural context. This volume will provide various standpoints from sociology perspectives pertinent to how we understand sport policy, development and management. We now direct your attention to the following 11 chapters.

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