

# The Evolution of China's Sporting Diplomacy since 1949: The History, Experience and Promotion Strategies

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## ABSTRACT

*The sporting diplomacy in China, as an integral part of China's overall diplomacy, unswervingly upholds the fundamental foreign policy goal of preserving world peace and promoting common development since New China was founded. After adopting the policy of reform and opening, the sporting diplomacy in China has made historical achievements through intensive participation in international sporting competitions, extensive involvement in international sporting organizations, active hosting of mega sports events, and frequent engagement in cultural sporting exchanges with other countries. In the last decade, with a constant increase in China's economy, cultural soft power and international influence of sports, China makes an all-round effort in the pursuit of major countrywide sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. Currently, despite the severe challenges outside China, Beijing is making smooth preparations for the 2022 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, which embraces another milestone in the diplomacy of sport in China. This paper analyzes decision environments, goals, actions and defining features of China's sporting diplomacy in different periods and follows on to summarize practical experiences in the development of the sporting diplomacy in China. The paper shows that the resounding success of China's sporting diplomacy can be attributed to its commitment to serving the country's diplomatic strategy and core interests, its commitment to following the Chinese path of sporting diplomacy, and its commitment to the traditional Chinese value of peaceful development. Finally, emerging issues and promotion strategies are presented.*

**Key words:** China, sports diplomacy, history, development, strategies, Chinese characteristics

## Introduction

Sporting diplomacy, as an important manifestation of a country's soft power<sup>1</sup>, it plays a unique role in maintaining world peace, ensures security of international order, promotes win-win cooperation and carries forward physical culture, and hence makes irreplaceable contributions to the implementation of the national diplomatic strategy. According to the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), sporting diplomacy uses the universal passion for sports to transcend linguistic and sociocultural differences and bring people together<sup>2</sup>. From the ping-pong diplomacy to people-to-people and cultural exchanges among countries along the "Belt and Road"; from the shame of the "Sick Man of East Asia" to the glory of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games; from the ideology of "gold medal first" to "Fitness-for-All" programs, it is undeniable

that China's sporting diplomacy has enriched its historical details and gradually formed concepts, modes and values with Chinese characteristics in the course of long diplomatic practice. However, due to the lack of systematic and in-depth research on the history of China's sporting diplomacy, the lack of refining evolutionary logic and practical features, and the lack of consciousness in the building of a theoretical system of sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, neither the value nor the potential of China's sporting diplomacy has been fully fulfilled.

The world today is in the midst of profound and complex changes. Namely the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic prompting a sluggish global economic recovery, as well as the growing tension between the United States and China, frequent outbreaks of regional conflicts and dis-

turbances, China's sporting diplomacy continues to hold high the banner of peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit. However, under new circumstances, China must address the acute problem related to the type of sporting diplomacy, with Chinese characteristics, that is required in order for it to develop further. In answering this question, General Secretary Xi Jinping clearly pointed out in the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China that large-scale and country-wide diplomacy with Chinese characteristics aims to foster a new type of international relation and build a community with a shared future for mankind<sup>3</sup>. The timely proposition of "building a community with a shared future for mankind" provides a new foothold for forging sporting diplomacy with distinctive Chinese characteristics, for a new era, which is to build an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity. But China must be soberly aware that there are still many prominent inadequacies and problems within sporting diplomacy that require a large amount of attention to be resolved.

From a historical perspective, this paper aims to analyze defining features of sporting diplomacy in different periods, revealing the practical value of sporting diplomacy, summarizing the development experience and unearthed problems of sporting diplomacy and finally exploring a new pathway to comprehensively and successfully promote a sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. The value of this paper resides in (1) the comprehensive review of decision environments, aims, characters and achievements of China's sports diplomacy from 1949 to 2021, this being something that is not introduced in existing studies; (2) the critical analysis of deep-rooted problems in the development of China's sporting diplomacy; and (3) the strategic thinking of strengthening the administrative system, discourse power and the theoretical system of sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.

## Literature Review

Given the fact that sporting diplomacy is one of the strongest and most direct instruments of diplomacy with "low-cost" and "low-risk" characteristics<sup>4</sup>, numerous studies have focused on the historical changes, application values and strategic constructions of sporting diplomacy in recent decades. Wang summarizes the history of China's sporting diplomacy during the Cold War and points out that the ideology of "friendship first" is politically motivated by China's great-power aspiration, but China failed to conduct friendship consistently in sport because of its conflict with another mission of theirs which was to "win honor for the country"<sup>5</sup>. Based on the historical review of foreign sporting diplomacy from the founding of People's Republic of China in the 1990s, Xiong and Zhang argue that China's foreign sports policy transfers from "eliminating first, affiliating later" to the "Olympic Mode" with the evolution process of opening<sup>6</sup>. Kobierecki's study explores the diplomacy in ping-pong between the United

States and China as a diplomatic tool and then proposes a hypothesis on a subsequent legacy of the ping-pong diplomacy in American foreign policy<sup>7</sup>. Yu and his colleagues examine the characteristics of Chinese sporting diplomacy in the 1980s and they point out that the diplomacy at that time met the overall needs of peace and development and contributed greatly to serving politics<sup>8</sup>. Their research provides a general understanding of China's sporting diplomacy in different periods, but fails to fully explore the connotation, characteristics, and value of the diplomacy.

After the Beijing Games, more research has burgeoned to further analyze China's sports as a public diplomacy tool, but scholars at home and abroad have not reached a consensus thus far. Chinese scholars tend to hold a more positive attitude towards the role that sporting diplomacy plays in strengthening China's soft power. Zhong and his colleagues examine the position and role of China's sporting diplomacy over the past two decades and note that frequent sports cultural exchanges and sports events have had a profound impact on the image of the country, enhancing ties with other nations and giving China more discourse power in international organizations<sup>9</sup>. By drawing on the decades of experience in this diplomacy, Song and Xing propose that Olympic diplomacy does enhance China's soft power and international image and is more likely to embrace success again in 2022<sup>10</sup>. Liu and her colleagues conducted advanced research on sporting diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics since China's reform and opening. In their work, China's sporting diplomacy has experienced four historical periods, namely the "Olympic Diplomacy" period; the "home game" three-dimensional diplomacy period; the "public diplomacy period" and the "all-round lead" period<sup>11</sup>. Different from previous studies, their study provides a comprehensive analysis of the overall situation of China's sporting diplomacy, with theoretical reflections on how to develop this diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. Foreign scholars, on the contrary, take a critical look at sports as a diplomacy tool. Manzenreiter applies an empirical analysis to demonstrate the weak impact of the Beijing Games on improving the international image as a means of soft power. However, his work neglects the impact of staging sports events on the spread of national culture and the promotion of national diplomacy, the other two important dimensions of soft power<sup>12</sup>. Likewise, Kobierecki conducts a case study to examine the effectiveness of enhancing the international image of China through hosting mega sports events and achieving sporting victories<sup>13</sup>. The study result aimed to show whether sports performance can be utilized to improve China's international perception or if it remains tested.

Admittedly, these studies shed light on the future research about the development of sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, however due to the limitations of the times, the existing literature lacks a comprehensive review of the history in relation to China's sporting diplomacy from the founding of New China until now, thus the development logic cannot be fully explored and systematically presented. Besides, the existing literature either

emphasizes the role of sporting diplomacy as a political tool in enhancing national soft power or criticizes China's sports as a whole, but little research covers both the gains and losses throughout the course of the diplomacy, and there is minimal research that integrates historical experience with a development strategy in the new era. This paper aims to fill this research gap through literature research and comprehensive analysis.

## The Origins and Evolutions of China's Sporting Diplomacy

Historical institutionalism argues that the evolution of policy systems includes not only a relatively long historical process, but also changes brought in by certain historical nodes in a short period of time, namely critical junctures<sup>14</sup>. According to Harding, the periodization of China's sporting diplomacy since the founding of New China is based on the degree of China's involvement in world affairs, the status of alliances between China and the two superpowers, and China's goals in international affairs<sup>15</sup>. Combining historical institutionalism with Harding's theory, the history of New China's diplomacy in sport can be divided into 6 stages.

### *Drawing on the experience of the Soviet Union (1949–1957)*

In the first few years of the establishment of the PRC, the new government had several formidable rebuilding tasks; at the same time, the confrontation between capitalism led by the United States, and socialism led by the Soviet Union, made the international situation extremely complicated. In order to consolidate the new regime and foster a strong international environment, Chairman Mao put forward the “leaning to one side” diplomatic strategy for the purpose of enhancing friendship with the socialism camp and the Third World Countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America<sup>16</sup>.

Guided by the “leaning to one side” strategy, the primary goal of China's diplomacy in sport was to comprehensively inspect and learn from the Soviet Union. In August 1950, the Preparatory Committee of the All-China Sports Federation appointed Xu Yingchao as its leader and organized the first 13-member sporting delegation to the Soviet Union. After the poor performance of the Chinese delegation at the 15th Olympic Games held in Helsinki, Xu's team visited the Soviet Union again and not only conducted a more in-depth inspection of the Soviet sports facilities, but also its level of competitive sports and sporting administration. Inspired by the Soviet model, the National Sports Commission in 1954 promulgated the Sports System for Preparatory Work and National Defense (referred to as Lao wei zhi), which marked the construction of a top-down sports management system in New China.

Another distinctive feature of China's sporting diplomacy in this stage was using competitive sports as a bridge to promote exchanges with socialist countries. Despite the

failure of no medals in the Helsinki Olympic Games, China actively participated in various international sporting events for the expansion of their presence in the international space. In August 1953, the Chinese sporting delegation participated in the 4th International Youth Friendship Games in Bucharest and won the first gold medal in swimming. In the 12th World University Games in 1954, the Chinese sporting delegation achieved outstanding results; In the Sino-Soviet weightlifting friendly match in 1956, Chinese athlete Chen Jingkai broke the world record, triggering the first climax of China's competitive sports. In addition, to resume the lawful seat in the United Nations and participate in more international sporting events and international sporting affairs, China joined 15 international sporting organizations (Table 1), paving the way for wider international sports exchanges.

**TABLE 1**

CHINA'S PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL SPORTING ORGANIZATIONS (1949–1957)

Entry Year	International Sporting Organization
1952	Fédération Internationale de Natation (FINA), Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA), Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), Asian Table Tennis Union (ATTU), Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB)
1953	International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), International Tennis Federation (ITF), International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles (FILA)
1954	FIVB, Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), FILA, International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF), International Shooting Union (UIT)
1955	International Weightlifting Federation (IWF)
1956	Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG)

### *Breaking the international sports blockade (1958–1965)*

From 1958 to 1965, China's diplomacy in sport went through unprecedented difficulties and nearly collapsed due a great deal of turbulence that occurred both in China and entally to China. Domestically, the ‘political upheavals’, also known as ‘the Great Leap Forward’, resulted in the unrealistic pursuit of sporting development<sup>17</sup>. When it comes to the international situation, the suspension of economic assistance from the Soviet Union and the deterioration in Sino-US relations brought about tremendous pressure on China's diplomacy in sport. Consequently, China broke off its ties with the International Olympic Committee (ICO) and eight other international individual sporting organizations in 1958. Given the situation, the Party Central Committee made a decisive readjustment, putting forward “anti-imperialist and anti-revisionism” as China's diplomatic strategy during this period<sup>18</sup>.

The strategic goal of China's sporting diplomacy in this stage was to strengthen the international sporting struggle and improve China's international standing. In pursu-

ing this goal, the Party Central Committee proposed a “adjust, consolidate, enrich, and improve” policy (referred to as the eight-character policy) to readjust the scale of sports development<sup>19</sup>. Despite China’s withdrawal of many international sporting organizations, they made a great effort to reconsolidate sporting diplomacy through table tennis. At the 26th World Table Tennis Championships held in April 1961, the Chinese team won 3 world championships, largely improved China’s international status and successfully broke the international sports blockade. Since 1961, the whole country upheld the spirit of the “eight-character policy” and gradually formed a competition system suitable for the basic dimension of Chinese context. In January 1964, the Central Committee approved the State Sports Commission’s request to hold the 2nd National Games. During these games, Chinese performance on track and field, shooting, archery, and weightlifting improved significantly, which marked a milestone for both Chinese sports and Chinese sporting diplomacy to return to the world stage.

Strengthening sporting exchanges with the first and second intermediate zone countries while reducing sporting exchanges with the Soviet Union were two implementation paths of China’s diplomacy at this stage. In January 1964, Chairman Mao clearly instructed the strengthening of contacts with the first intermediate zone, namely Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and the second intermediate zone, namely Europe, North America, Canada, and Oceania. Undoubtedly, sporting diplomacy must be in line with China’s diplomatic strategy. Since 1960, China had conducted extensive exchanges of sporting delegations with India, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Pakistan, Cambodia, Japan, the United Kingdom and France (Figure 1). By contrast, affected by the “anti-imperialist and anti-revision” strategy, the number of sporting exchanges between China and the Soviet Union significantly decreased. It is worth mentioning that China, excluded from the Olympic Games and Asian Games owing to a Taiwan issue, enthusiastically helped Indonesia host the first games of the New Emerging Forces in 1963 as an effective means to break political isolation and demonstrate their Olympic Spirit to the world.

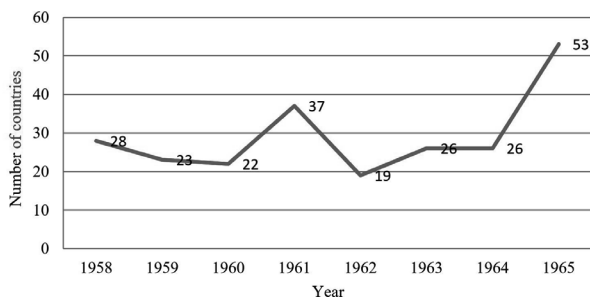


Fig. 1. The number of countries and regions that conducted sporting exchanges with China (1958-1965). Designed by Y. An after Wu<sup>20</sup>.

### The Ping-pong diplomacy (1966–1977)

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), as described by Lu (2016), was one of the most tumultuous political movements to have taken place in modern Chinese history. In the first phase of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1972), the entire sports industry in China reached rock bottom and so did their sporting diplomacy. The formal sporting diplomacy between China and socialist-friendly countries was interrupted within the first two years. There were only small-scale sporting exchanges carried out with a handful of countries such as Vietnam, Congo and Albania<sup>21</sup>. Only when the success of the ping-pong diplomacy emerged in 1971, the sports diplomacy in China was able to be revitalized and experience development.

The fundamental goal of the ping-pong diplomacy was to quickly improve Sino-US relations as well as promote the normalization of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations. The context of China’s foreign relations had greatly changed due to the Zhenbao Island incident that occurred between China and the Soviet Union in 1969. Since then, the tension both between Sino-US and Sino-Japanese relations has, to some extent, eased. Under these circumstances, the Party Central Committee decisively ceased international sporting competitions and sent a Chinese team to participate in the 31st World Table Tennis Championships held in Japan in March 1971. As the competition was carried out entirely for the needs of international political struggle, Chairman Mao formulated the policy of “friendship first, competition second”, as a clear manifestation of political character in sporting diplomacy. On the last day of the competition, China invited the US table tennis delegation to visit China, breaking a decades-long rift between the two countries. The success of the ping-pong diplomacy was a turning point in the course of China’s sporting diplomacy through which China normalized its relations with the United States. In fact, with the normalization of Sino-US relations and the restoration of legal seats in the United Nations, other countries, such as Australia, Canada, Japan, Singapore, began to establish diplomatic relations with China. Subsequently, the number of international sporting exchanges China became involved with increased significantly (Figure 2). Besides,

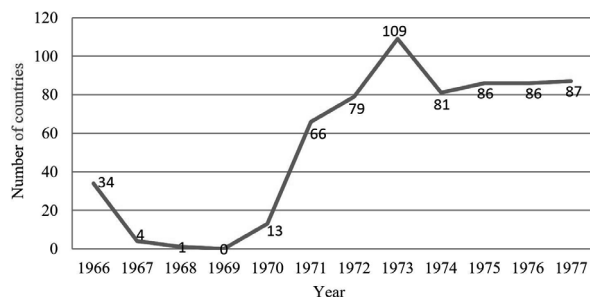


Fig. 2. The number of countries and regions that conducted sporting exchanges with China (1966-1977). Designed by Y. An after Wu<sup>20</sup>.

China successfully held a series of international friendly invitational tournaments, some of these being the Asian Table Tennis Championships in 1972, the International Swimming and Diving Invitational Tournament in 1975 and the Beijing International Football Invitational Tournament in 1977, through which China improved its international sporting status and made truly remarkable progress in their sporting diplomacy.

Sports foreign aid to third world countries was the main implementation path of China's sporting diplomacy during this period. It served as a form of foreign aid in light of China's "one line, one large area" diplomatic strategy, which was to unite all the forces that could be united in third world countries during the 1970s. China, as a benefactor, sent numerous sporting delegations and coaches to Asian, African and Latin American countries and regions in successive years to help train local athletes, providing free sporting facilities in spite of their own economic difficulties and helping countries such as Syria, Ethiopia, Mexico and Cyprus with sporting aid. Historical experience shows that foreign sporting aid has played an indispensable role in sports diplomacy. Through tireless efforts, 92 countries and regions established diplomatic sporting relations with China by the end of 1970s<sup>22</sup>. The diplomatic nature of China's foreign sporting aid lies in the fact that many Chinese athletes and coaches sent to third world countries eventually went to developed countries like the United States, thus failed to maintain commitment to helping these third world countries.

#### *The Olympic model diplomacy (1978–1989)*

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, as the confrontation between the two major camps of the United States and the Soviet Union mitigated, the international political situation became more diversified. In December 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee held in Beijing marked the beginning of China's reform and opening. The meeting developed a series of major decisions regarding socialist modernization. Sporting diplomacy, in accordance with the Party's requirements for modernization in the new era, ushered in a period of strategic opportunities, forming a new pattern of opening.

Full participation in international sporting organizations by establishing an "Olympic Model" was the foremost strategic objective of China's diplomacy of sport in this period. Since the founding of the PRC, the issue of "One China" triggered great trouble in China's involvement in international sporting competitions and sporting organizations. Guided by the policy of "One Country, Two Systems", the National Sports Commission pioneered the "Olympic Model", which meant athletes from Chinese mainland and Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan had opportunities to participate in the Olympic Games. On November 26, 1979, the IOC headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland officially announced the approval of the Chinese Olympic Committee and to this day the Taiwan region of China retains the Olympic Committee membership under the name of "Chinese Taipei" with the changing of the flag,

emblem, and song. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, China placed fourth in the gold medal table and gained international prestige and approval. While emerging in the Olympics, China actively joined international sporting organizations such as the International Association of Athletics Federation, the International Football Federation, and the International Swimming Federation so that China's international status and influence could be further improved. By 1989, China was a legitimate member of 74 international sporting organizations and 38 Asian sporting organizations<sup>23</sup>. In brief, the success of the "Olympic Model", another major breakthrough in China's sporting diplomacy after the ping-pong diplomacy, not only highlighted the characteristics of sports as a "pioneer" of the national diplomacy, but also a milestone transition in sporting diplomatic strategic thinking from "revolutionary diplomacy" to "pragmatic diplomacy".

Enhancing exchanges with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and other European countries was a concrete implementation path of China's sporting diplomacy strategy at this stage. After the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, China abandoned its previous "one line, a large area" diplomatic policy and turned to an "independent, non-aligned" foreign policy, so that it carried out the most frequent sporting exchanges with western developed countries and regions since the founding of the PRC. Some examples of the sporting exchanges China had with other countries were the Chinese sports delegation visiting Germany in 1982; the Chinese women's basketball team visiting the Netherlands in 1983; the Chinese women's football team going abroad for the first time in 1986 to visit the Italian women's football team; and the Chinese sports delegation signing a sports exchange and cooperation agreement with the Spanish sports delegation in 1987. Under the strategic framework of "peace and development" and "North-South cooperation", China's sporting exchanges with foreign countries have made significant breakthroughs. Evidently, these exchanges, as an essential ingredient of the country's foreign affair activities, are highly political and must adhere to the Party's foreign policies and the national diplomatic strategy.

#### *The multifaceted home games diplomacy (1990–2011)*

In the 1990s, the drastic changes that took place in Eastern Europe, together with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, signaled a major adjustment in the world political pattern. As the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union came to an end, the United States became very powerful, facing a new ideological confrontation with an increasingly powerful China. On the other hand, with the growing impact of economic globalization, China adhered to the fundamental national policy of opening and pursued development with its doors wide open. During this stage, China's sporting diplomacy had undergone fundamental changes, one of which was actively hosting international sporting events to promote international exchanges.

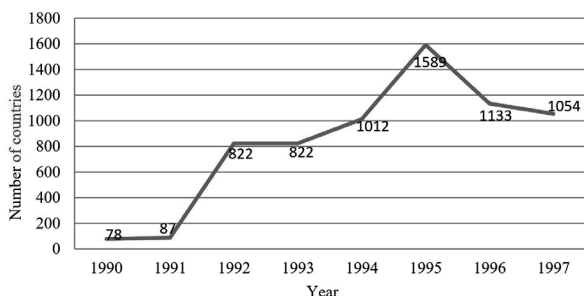


Fig. 3. The number of countries and regions that conducted sports exchanges with China (1990-1997). Designed by Y. An after Wu<sup>20</sup>.

In 1990, China became the host of the 11th Asian Games and achieved outstanding results by winning 183 gold medals. The significance of the Beijing Asian Games lies in three aspects, firstly, it effectively eliminated the negative impact of Chinese political turmoil and enriched China's international image. Through the platform of the Beijing Asian Games, China was able to resume its diplomatic relations with Indonesia and Vietnam, established diplomatic relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Singapore, as well as many other countries. The number of countries and regions that conducted sporting exchanges with China also reached a peak (Figure 3). Secondly, the Beijing Asian Games not only demonstrated China's sporting power to the world, but it also showed China's prominent achievements in terms of politics, economy, science, and technology since its reform and opening, meaning China's international image and prestige rose further. Since then, China's sporting diplomacy officially entered into a new stage known as the "multifaceted home games model". Lastly, the Beijing Asian Games paved the way for the successful bidding of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Based on the precious experience gained from holding the Beijing Asian Games, the National Sports Commission promulgated *the Outline of the Olympic Glory Program* in 1995, which proposed that China should undertake sporting missions related to hosting international sporting events and increasing the exchange of international sporting talents, making China's competitive sport embrace modernization and the world<sup>24</sup>. To accomplish this mission, China actively hosted the 2001 World University Games, the 2007 Asian Winter Games and the world-famous 2008 Olympic Games. (Figure 3)

After Beijing's successful bid for the 29th Summer Olympic Games on July 13, 2001, sport in China as well as internationally became closely connected, thus the international sporting diplomacy in China expanded unprecedentedly. If the Beijing Asian Games is a classic model of the "multifaceted home games" sporting diplomacy, the Beijing Olympic Games is definitely an upgraded version. This being shown through there being more than 140 foreign heads of state and 204 National Olympic Committees that attended the Games, making Olympic history<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, the Beijing Olympics became regarded as an important practice activity of the national diplomatic

strategy and a platform for world civilization exchanges as well as accurately grasping internal and international imperatives from the government to the people. This being in terms of both economics and politics, from sports performance to national image and thoroughly demonstrated China's Olympic spirit of "mutual understanding, friendship, peace and fair competition" to the world. Since the Beijing Olympics, China plays a more active role in increasing its representation and strengthened its voice in international sporting affairs by sending 2,547 Chinese coaches in the field of table tennis, gymnastics, diving, badminton, and martial arts to 123 countries and regions around the world<sup>26</sup>. The Games also exert a far-reaching effect on the sports industry in that China's sporting products and services became more diversified with the formation of sports-related interest in communities including international organizations, enterprises, societies, and media. In line with this trend, China's sporting diplomacy attaches more emphasis on "cooperation and win-win" to pursue a mutually beneficial strategy of opening based on peaceful development in the new era. Thereafter, the function of sporting diplomacy at a political level gradually weakened while its function through culture and national soft power significantly strengthened.

*Panoramic heads of state sporting diplomacy (2012–present)*

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party in China in 2012, China has made sweeping efforts in the pursuit of major countrywide diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, thus advancing China's diplomatic agenda in a comprehensive, multilevel, and multifaceted approach and therefore created a favorable external environment for China's development of sporting diplomacy. The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party in China in 2017 officially announced that socialism with Chinese characteristics has crossed the threshold into a new era, which is a new historic juncture in China's sporting diplomacy. The report delivered on the 19th National Congress makes it clear that major countrywide diplomacy with Chinese characteristics aims to foster a new type of international relations and build a community with a shared future for mankind, to build an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity. Sporting diplomacy, as an essential component of national diplomacy and an important manifestation of national soft power, must deepen its reform on concepts and forms drawn on the historical experience and traditional Chinese culture, making a sustained effort to tackle tough issues head-on.

One of the most distinctive features of major countrywide sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics is the creation of the "Panoramic Heads of State" sporting diplomacy. In February 2014, Chinese President Xi took the opportunity for China to participate in the Sochi Winter Olympics in Russia to deepen the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Russia. At the same time, he met more than 40 heads of state from the Czech

Republic, Greece, and Afghanistan as well as heads of international sporting organizations. It was the first time that China combined attending international sporting events with foreign heads of state and their diplomacy, creating a precedent of panoramic heads of state within sporting diplomacy. Since then, sporting activities have regularly appeared in the arrangement of diplomatic activities, no matter whether it was with developed or developing countries. In October 2015, President Xi visited the Manchester City Football Academy with the former British Prime Minister David Cameron during his visit to the UK and said that China should actively learn from the training experience and methods of British football. In July 2017, President Xi and German Chancellor Merkel watched the Sino-German youth football friendly match; in June 2018, President Xi and Russian President Putin watched the Sino-Russian youth ice hockey friendly match; and in August 2019, President Xi and the President of the Philippines Duterte attended the opening ceremony of FIBA Basketball. By carrying out a series of head of state sporting attendances, China presents a peaceful, friendly, open, and confident image to the world, and enhances its diplomatic soft power.

Besides the model of panoramic heads of state, a new form of international sports industry cooperation was forged. As discussed above, China's sporting diplomacy in the post-Olympics era, featuring win-win cooperation, gives a higher priority to expanding the field of sporting exchanges and cooperation ranging from sporting competition, the sports industry, sporting culture, to scientific research in sport and sporting education, and working jointly for common prosperity and development. Taking the opportunity of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and Paralympics, China has signed winter sports cooperation agreements with Finland, Norway, and Switzerland to address its shortage of snow facilities and coaches, helping them access Chinese ice and snow sports markets in return<sup>27</sup>. In 2018, sports became a key cooperative project of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the BRICS countries (namely Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the Forum on the China-Africa Cooperation. On the "17+1" cooperation platform, China initiated a beneficiary in the form of cooperation in ice and snow resources with Slovenia and ice and snow coach training with the Czech Republic. In brief, China's sporting diplomacy in the new era is full of vitality and creativity in promoting sporting cooperation with other countries so that it can join in endeavors to build a sports industry community.

Lastly, a new platform of sporting cultural exchange was built under the "Belt and Road" Initiative. Culture is a crucial component of national soft power as it helps to assimilate the ideas and ways of thinking of other cultures<sup>28</sup>. In the new era, sporting diplomacy acts as a bridge linking China with countries along the "Belt and Road" and strengthens sporting exchanges and beneficiary cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran. The Beijing Summit of the Forum on the China-Africa Cooperation held in 2018 clearly pointed out that the development of

sports exchanges and cooperation with African countries will further remove the cultural barriers between the Chinese and African people and hence create a China-Africa community with a shared future for cultural prosperity. In April 2019, sports and cultural exchanges officially became an important field of the "17+1" strategic cooperation between China, Central Europe, and Eastern European countries. In doing so, China's capacity for engaging in international sporting communication and telling Chinese stories will be largely improved and enhance its cultural soft power. Without a doubt, strengthening the people-to-people and cultural sporting exchanges with other countries through the "Belt and Road" Initiative is of great significance to China's sporting diplomacy in the future.

### The Historical Experience of China's Sporting Diplomacy

In retrospect, China's sporting diplomacy had achieved fruitful results in expressing political positions, establishing international image, promoting intergovernmental cooperation, disseminating traditional culture, and enhancing friendship with the people of other countries over the past 70 years. The development course of China's sporting diplomacy encapsulates the practical experience and collective wisdom of the party and the people. It is necessary, therefore, to summarize the valuable experience accumulated from diplomatic practice.

#### *Committed to the country's diplomatic strategy and national interests*

In alignment with the central party's diplomacy and resolutely serving national interests is the most outstanding feature of China's sporting diplomacy. National interests, described by Coulombis and Wolfe<sup>29</sup>, stem from the fundamental principle of a nation's sovereignty. For any sovereign country, it must ensure its sovereignty, homeland security and developmental interests when formulating diplomatic strategy. As for China, the core interests are changing with the times, thus the strategic goals and implementation path of sporting diplomacy are also differing in accordance with the change of national core interests. In the stage of "drawing on the experience of the Soviet Union", as consolidating the new regime was a top priority of the Party, Chinese sports adopted a diplomatic strategy that completely leaned towards the socialist camp, increasing sporting exchanges with socialist countries. In the stage of "breaking the international sports blockade", China's core interest was to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Closely followed the party's leadership, sporting diplomacy reduced exchanges with the Soviet Union while strengthening relationships with the first and second intermediate zone countries. However, the mistaken judgment of national interest during the Cultural Revolution led to the serious deviation in the development of sporting diplomacy, which can be seen as a counterexample of the organic unity of the party's political leader-

ship. After that, with the smooth progress in implementing the “ping-pong diplomacy”, China’s sporting diplomacy was back on the right track, increasing investment in foreign sporting aid and actively participating in mega sporting events in line with the national core interests of both development and security. After adopting the policy of reform and opening, the party laid out the strategic goal for achieving socialist modernization in China. In line with the principle of “one country, two systems,” China’s sporting diplomacy made fresh progress in the “Olympic Model” and focused on hosting the multifaceted home games for the purpose of economic construction and socialist modernization. At present, with an entirely new posture in the East, China champions the development of a community with a shared future for mankind as major countrywide diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. Sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, as a response, engages in carrying out extensive Fitness-for-All programs, promoting a new form of international cooperation in the sporting industry, strengthening people-to-people and cultural sporting exchanges with other countries, making smooth preparations for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and Paralympics, and speeding up efforts to build China into a country which is strong in sport.

#### *Committed to the Chinese path of sporting diplomacy*

In the early days of the founding of New China, the value of sporting diplomacy was not fully displayed owing to the lack of its own characteristics as well as the poor Chinese context on all fronts. Even so, sporting diplomacy had the courage to break new ground by helping host the first games of the New Emerging Forces, devoting tireless endeavors to serve the national interests at that time. Since the reform and opening began, the party made a clarion call to take a path of their own and build socialism with Chinese characteristics. Sporting diplomacy, from the “ping-pong” diplomacy to the “Olympic model” diplomacy, and from the “multifaceted home games” diplomacy to the “panoramic heads of state” diplomacy, worked hard to explore a new path with distinctive Chinese characteristics. China’s sporting diplomacy at each stage cannot be simply replicated in that it is the logical outcome of the evolution of history, theory, and practice. In other words, sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics is a diplomacy that cannot be mechanically copied or judged without regard for its history, its social and political context, and its cultural traditions. Since the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, confronted with severe changes both internal and external to China, responded to the demands of overall diplomacy, sporting diplomacy, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China has leaped ahead to catch up with the times and creates distinctive Chinese characteristics in the promotion of building a community with a shared future for mankind, offering Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to addressing the problems facing mankind. From this perspective, only if China keeps to the Chinese path of building major countrywide diplomacy with Chinese

characteristics, can their sporting diplomacy make further progress in its international influence ability to inspire and power to shape.

#### *Committed to the core values of the Chinese nation*

It is well-known that peace and security are two prerequisites for the development of human society. The development of the Chinese nation, which since modern times began, had been through the darkness of domestic turmoil and foreign aggression as well as the desperation of war and poverty. Through years of arduous and painful struggles, the Chinese people, once ravaged by three mountains of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism, has realized their liberation, independence, and stability under the unified leadership of the Communist Party of China. Due to this, when it was founded, China’s sporting diplomacy remained firm in its commitment to upholding and pursuing an independent foreign policy of peace. In the 1970s, guided by the principle of the “ping-pong” diplomacy, Chinese sports began to go global. The sports ideology of “friendship first, competition second” is a crystallization of the core values of the Chinese spirit<sup>30</sup>. Since their reform and opening, China’s sporting diplomacy has integrated its development with international sports and continued to break new ground in politics, economy, and culture in the context of peace and development. From the creation of the “Olympic Model” to the boycott of the 1980 Moscow games, China’s sporting diplomacy upholds its fundamental foreign policy goal of preserving world peace and promoting common development. Through years of tireless work, the process of using sports as a way of maintaining peace has evolved to an ideological movement of “sport for development and peace” in the 21st century<sup>31</sup>. As China is moving closer to the center stage and making steady progress toward the brilliant prospects of rejuvenation, sporting diplomacy in the new era puts more emphasis on “cooperation and mutual benefits” with other countries based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, forging a new form of international sporting relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation. By launching the panoramic heads of state diplomatic sporting activities, carrying out sports’ cultural exchanges along the “Belt and Road”, and deepening sports strategic cooperation with countries strong in winter sports, China has made all-round efforts in the pursuit of major countrywide diplomacy with Chinese characteristics and has made great contributions to global peace and development. All in all, no matter how complicated the international environment is, “peace and development” remain as core values of the Chinese nation and the call of our times. Major countrywide sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics can be realized only by staying on the path of peaceful development.

#### **Emerging Issues and Discussions on China’s Sporting Diplomacy**

Notwithstanding the criticism of the communist system, the high efficiency of unified leadership and a prob-



lem-oriented approach had built China into country that had a major impact through their sporting achievements. However, standing at the new historic juncture of building a country strong in sport, there are some acute problems that have not been addressed. Therefore, it is imperative to pinpoint these problems, face them head on to finally get to the root of the problem.

*Weakness in the ability to inspire and power to shape*

China's international sporting influence has risen to a new level since the successful hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games, but as a major sporting country, China's abilities to inspire and power to shape are not where they should be. Outside of China, due to the deep-rooted prejudice over China's political system, China's sporting diplomacy is often misunderstood and even distorted by some western coverage on purpose. For example, the successful bid for the 2020 Beijing Winter Olympics and Paralympics is misjudged as an exposure of "Chinese hegemony"; Chinese athletes, who have performed superbly at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, are distorted by The New York Times as "the Chinese sports machine"<sup>32</sup>. When encountering stereotypes and double standards judging Chinese athletes and Chinese sports, the Chinese media's capacity for remaining in the right tone in international sporting communication is generally weak. After all, compared to western media like ESPN, Bleacher Report and Yahoo Sports, China's Games media is "immature" in terms of its internationalization, specialization, and individualization, which leaves them in a passive position still when facing groundless accusations. Apparently, the media coverage's ability to tell China's stories well needs to be stronger.

At home, in contrast to China's great achievements in competitive sports over the past 20 years, the number of individuals working as Chinese diplomatic personnel is far from enough. According to statistics (Table 2), among the 276 Chinese individuals holding positions in international sporting organizations, there are only 8 Chinese officials occupying important positions higher than an IOC Member or Vice-Presidency of the International Sports Association. Moreover, a recent survey indicates that the composition of Chinese sporting diplomats in the light of age, educational level and professional background is not satisfactory (Figures 4–5), let alone there also being only a few international referees from China. The inadequacy of diplomatic sporting personnel is mainly because China neither establishes any special institutions nor an effective mechanism for cultivating diplomatic sporting talents proficient in foreign languages as well as those familiar with the rules of international sporting organizations. As a result, Chinese athletes are often subjected to unfair treatment in mega sporting events, and China's endeavor to uphold international sporting fairness and justice is undermined. Responding to the demands of the day for major countrywide sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, there is an urgent requirement for China to strengthen the system for training world-class diplomatic sporting personnel.

**TABLE 2**  
CHINESE OFFICIALS IN HIGH-LEVEL POSITIONS IN THE IOC AND INTERNATIONAL SPORTING ORGANIZATIONS

Entry Year	Gender	Name	Position
2000	M	Zaiqing YU	IOC Vice-President (2014-)
2012	F	Lingwei LI	IOC Member
2018	F	Hong ZHANG	IOC Member
2012	M	Zhihao SHI	ITTF Executive Vice President
2014	M	Yifu WANG	ISSF Vice President (2018-)
2019	F	Yang YANG	WADA Vice president
2020	M	Quanhai LI	ISF President
2021	F	Jihong ZHOU	FINA Vice President

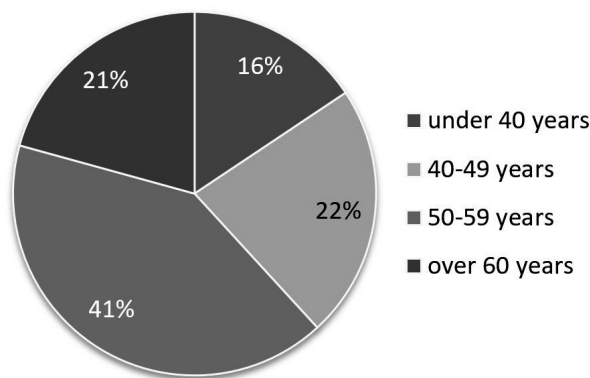


Fig. 4. Age distribution of the Chinese incumbents of international sporting organizations. Designed by Y. An. after Zhong, et al<sup>33</sup>.

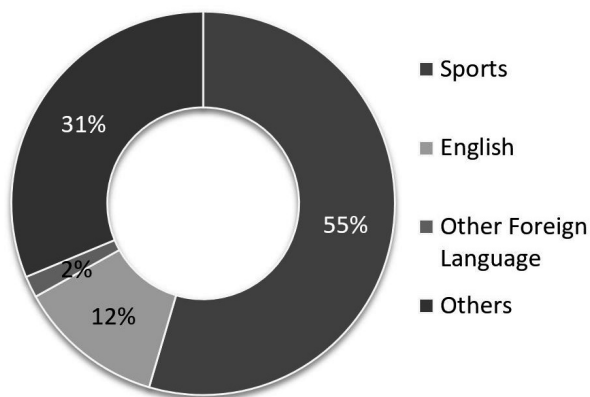


Fig. 5. Major distribution of the Chinese incumbents of international sporting organizations. Designed by Y. An. after Zhong, et al<sup>33</sup>.

To enhance Chinese sporting ability and to inspire, empower and shape sport in China, it is imperative to strengthen Chinese Sports media's capacity for engaging in international communication to present the world a true and panoramic view of China and enhance its cultural soft power. With the expeditious development of the

internet and big data, online Chinese sports media should actively seek for cooperation with western mainstream sports media, introducing foreign sports while improving means of external communication. Recently, Tencent and ESPN have carried out strategic cooperation to jointly create a more professional sports media platform. Moreover, Chinese foreign affair universities, institutes of physical education and scientific research institutions should spare no efforts to cultivate a large number of compound sporting diplomats who possess outstanding professional quality, excellent foreign language skills and profound knowledge about rules of international sporting organizations. To this end, a long-term mechanism for the cultivation of world-class sporting diplomatic talents needs to be established to increase the number of Chinese officials in high-level positions both in the IOC and international sporting organizations to make China a country strong in sporting talent that can keep contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to global sporting governance.

*Weakness in the governments administrative capacity to coordinate and organize*

China's sporting diplomacy, as noted above, is subordinate to the implementation of the overall diplomatic strategy at the national level, at the heart of which is the Party Central Committee. As China's only governing party, the party's centralized and unified leadership ensures China's strong capacity for overall planning in terms of the consideration of internal and international imperatives, the allocation of domestic diplomatic sporting resources and the power structure of international sports when formulating a diplomatic sporting strategy and policy, but the coordination between government institutions in China's sporting diplomacy is inadequate and the mechanisms for implementing s sporting diplomacy are imperfect.

At present, there are four state organs that assume responsibilities for national sports international exchanges (Figure 6). The main function of the Department of Foreign Affairs Management under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is to draft laws and regulations concerning the management of foreign affairs and review the major foreign affair regulations of local governments. The Department of International Liaison, an executive branch of the General Administration of Sport in China (GAS), accounts for coordinating and managing foreign-related issues in sporting systems and in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan; and organizing international sporting exchanges and cooperation with international sporting organizations and countries. The Bureau of International Exchange and Cooperation, established by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, takes the responsibility of conducting cultural exchanges and cooperation with other governments, as well as non-governmental and international organizations. The Department of Physical, Health and Arts Education under the Ministry of Education takes responsibility of coordinating international sporting competitions and art exchange programs for students in primary, secondary, and higher education institutions. Although they work hard to closely follow the unified leadership of the Central Committee on the implementation of sporting diplomacy, there are still difficulties in the exercising of power that guarantees sound decision-making and resolute execution. The lack of coordination among national institutions of sporting diplomacy is likely caused by the unclear functions and duties defined both for the institutions themselves and for their internal bodies. It is noticeable that the same problem occurs at the local governmental level as well. The Municipal and Provincial Bureau of Sports, affiliated by GAS, perform their own tasks in planning and organizing sporting exchanges, but lack coordination either with other departments or with



Fig. 6. The administrative structure of China's sporting diplomacy. Designed by L. An.

internal bodies. Hence, it can hardly form a powerful synergy for conducting national sporting diplomacy strategy and policy.

From the perspective of the governance theory, governance is an political administrative process in which the government's administrative power is distributed, organized and operated<sup>34</sup>. There are four models of governance: hierarchy, networks, competition, and negotiation. This is combined into ten governance patterns, namely multilevel Hierarchy, Hierarchy-Networks, Hierarchy-Competition, Hierarchy-Negotiation, multilevel Networks, Networks-Competition, Networks-Negotiation, Competition-Competition, Competition-Negotiation, and Negotiation-Negotiation<sup>35</sup>. In China's case, a Networks-Negotiation sporting diplomatic system of administration shall be developed at the central governmental level to strengthen the coordination for state institutions. One possible solution is to establish a government sports agency that is responsible for organizing and coordinating the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Administration of Sport in China, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Ministry of Education Agency when implementing the Central Committee's policies, decisions and plans related to sporting diplomacy. A more comprehensive approach shall be adopted to ensure that both functions and duties are defined clearly for the four state institutions themselves and their internal bodies as well. Meanwhile, a Hierarchy-Networks sporting diplomacy system of administration shall be developed for achieving extensive cooperation and negotiation between the Central Government and local governments. To this end, the Central Government shall deepen its governance on the transformation of its functions, further streamline administration and delegate powers of foreign sporting affairs and develop new ways of regulation and supervision. At a provincial level, a Competition-Negotiation system of administration shall be formed to encourage local governments to take the initiative in conducting sporting diplomacy under the leadership of the Central Committee and build a cooperative relationship with the Central Government. In doing so, it is more likely to form a powerful synergy for implementing sporting diplomacy.

#### *Weakness in the theoretical research with Chinese characteristics*

China's sporting diplomacy has been focusing on the dialectical approach of unifying the party's theory and practice since its birth. Guided by Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Theory of Three Represents, and the Scientific Outlook on Development, sporting diplomacy and has worked hard to advance its theoretical explorations, and indeed has achieved some major theoretical innovations. Since the 18th National Congress, confronted with profound changes both internal and external to China, the Party Central Committee gives higher priority to strengthening theoretical explorations based on practice. However, compared with the historic achievements in the practice of China's sport-

ing diplomacy, its capability of theoretical research is relatively weak. First, there are no specialized academic institutions or think tanks on sporting diplomacy in China thus far, and few national sporting diplomacy academic conferences have been held in recent years, which leaves the construction of sporting diplomacy theory with Chinese characteristics behind. Second, the phenomenon of copying from western sporting theoretical paradigms still exists, making it difficult for China offer its wisdom and solve the problems related to developing a global sporting governance system and safeguarding the international sports order. Consequently, the penetration, guidance, influence, and credibility of China's sporting diplomacy in international academic activities such as international sporting conferences, academic sporting exchanges and international journal publishing remain weak.

In tackling these questions, theoretical analysis and policy guidance of China's sporting diplomacy should be deepened to fit China's practice of building a country strong in sports. Firstly, it must make clear that the theoretical innovation of sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics is built on the basis of long-term practice and experience accumulated in the course of the development of sporting diplomacy. Therefore, it is necessary to apply a dialectical and historical approach to explore the objective laws in the development of this diplomacy<sup>36</sup>. In addition, there is an urgent need to develop new types of think tanks related to sporting diplomacy and get actively involved in international academic sporting activities as this will enable China to strengthen the academic exchanges and cooperation with other countries. Lastly, the theoretical innovation of sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics should be critical and forward-thinking. On one hand, we must increase our awareness of criticism when drawing on the theoretical achievements of other countries and promote the creative evolution of sporting theories with Chinese characteristics. On the other hand, we should carefully consider the new requirements proposed by promoting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind and conduct in-depth research on international sporting issues, such as the construction of global sports partnership networks and the innovation of international sports organization cooperation mechanisms. In summary, a major countrywide sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics can be realized only when these problems are resolved.

#### **Conclusion**

In just 72 years, China's sporting diplomacy has made historic achievements in breaking international isolation, providing foreign sporting aid, realizing Olympic Dreams, upholding justice whilst pursuing shared interests, and promoting people-to-people cultural sporting exchanges along the "Belt and Road". Drawing on the experience and achievements of China's sporting diplomacy, it can be found that the most distinctive characteristics the diplomacy was, is and will be the unity of the party's leader-

ship. Currently, China's sporting diplomacy is in a critical moment of strategic development as China is preparing for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and Paralympics, striving to build a country which has a strong presence in sport, fostering new types of international relations and building a community with a shared future for mankind. However, there are still many inadequacies and challenges that sporting diplomacy faces. Chinese sports media's capacity for international communication awaits further improvement; the mechanism for the cultivation of world-class sporting diplomats falls short; the system of sports diplomatic administration is incomplete; and the theoret-

ical research on sporting diplomacy is falling behind. In short, China has a long way to go in building a major countrywide sporting diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. In the new era, China's sporting diplomacy should rise to the challenges, enhance its ability to inspire, enhance its power to shape, deepen reform in the system of the government administration, and advance theoretical research with distinctive Chinese characteristics. With these efforts, China's sporting diplomacy will hopefully become a more important participant, contributor, and torchbearer in the endeavor for world peace, global development, and international order.

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## **RAZVOJ SPORTSKE DIPLOMACIJE U KINI OD 1949. GODINE: POVIJESNI RAZVOJ, ISKUSTVA I PROMOCIJSKE STRATEGIJE**

### **SAŽETAK**

Sportska diplomacija u Kini, kao sastavni dio ukupne kineske diplomacije, podržava temeljni vanjsko-politički cilj očuvanja mira u svijetu i promicanja zajedničkog razvoja od osnivanja Nove Kine. Nakon usvajanja politike reformi i otvaranja, sportska diplomacija u Kini ostvarila je povijesna postignuća kroz intenzivno sudjelovanje u međunarodnim sportskim natjecanjima, ekstenzivno sudjelovanje u međunarodnim sportskim organizacijama, aktivno gostovanje mega sportskih događaja i čest angažman u kulturnim sportskim razmjenama s drugim zemljama. U posljednjem desetljeću, sa stalnim porastom kineske ekonomije, kulturnom mekom moći i međunarodnim utjecajem sporta, Kina čini sveobuhvatne napore u potrazi za ostvarenjem učinkovite sportske diplomacije. Trenutačno, unatoč teškim svjetskim izazovima, Peking se izrazito uspješno priprema za Zimske olimpijske i paraolimpijske igre koje će se održati 2022. godine, a koje ukazuju još jednu važnu prekretnicu u diplomaciji sporta u Kini. U ovom radu analiziraju se okruženja odlučivanja, ciljevi, radnje i definirajuća obilježja kineske sportske diplomacije u različitim razdobljima te se nastavlja sažimanje praktičnih iskustava u razvoju sportske diplomacije u Kini. Rezultati pokazuju da se veliki uspjeh kineske sportske diplomacije pripisuje njezinoj predanosti služenju diplomatskoj strategiji i temeljnim interesima zemlje, njezinoj predanosti da slijedi kineski put sportske diplomacije i predanosti tradicionalnoj kineskoj vrijednosti mirnog razvoja. Na kraju rada su predstavljena nova pitanja i strategije promocije u budućnosti.

