

# Analysis of China's Sports Diplomacy Path from the Perspective of Soft Power

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**Abstract:** “When a country prospers, sports thrive.” Building a strong sports country is an important connotation of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and building a moderately prosperous society in all respects. Actively engaging in sports diplomacy from the perspective of soft power can expand a country’s international influence, promote friendly cooperation between nations, and enhance the overall image of the country. This article analyzes the concepts of soft power and sports diplomacy and explores the path of China’s sports diplomacy from four aspects: promoting diverse subjects, expanding propaganda channels, optimizing underlying design, and actively participating in competitions.

**Keywords:** Soft power; Sports diplomacy; Implementation path

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## 1. Introduction

Sports diplomacy is one of the most effective diplomatic means. It has the characteristics of participation, popularity, and universality. Compared with other diplomatic means, sports diplomacy has almost no communication barriers and can play a greater role in bilateral or multilateral friendly exchanges, which has a positive effect on enhancing friendship between countries and increasing international economic cooperation.

## 2. Conceptual analysis of soft power and sports diplomacy

### 2.1. Soft power

Hard power mainly refers to strong economic and military strength and is also the main means by which countries achieve development and growth<sup>[1]</sup>. Soft power, on the other hand, is a relatively weaker strength compared to hard power, such as unique national charm including ethnic traditional culture, national values, and political system. In addition, some brands, events, and symbols can also be included in the national soft power, such as Geely Automobile, NBA Games, Chinese Kung Fu, Hollywood movies, Japanese Doraemon, Chinese Spring Festival Federation, etc. Simply put, soft power is a means of promoting and establishing a national image in a way that is easily accepted and in line with public taste. Good soft power can not only attract more

countries to become allies but also serve as an auxiliary means of hard power. Through a combination of soft and hard power, diplomatic activities can be completed more smoothly <sup>[2]</sup>. At present, there is no specific concept of soft power. However, both domestically and internationally, the above views or concepts are still quite recognized. Soft power is a soft and intangible appeal that can greatly enhance the persuasiveness of a country's external dissemination and promotion of its own culture.

## **2.2. Sports diplomacy**

Sports diplomacy is one of the important components of diplomacy for various countries. The answer given by domestic experts and scholars to the definition of sports diplomacy is "the diplomatic behavior of the sports industry or a country using sports as a carrier to promote relations between nations" <sup>[3]</sup>. In its social research projects, the General Administration of Sport of China defines sports diplomacy as "an official, formal bilateral or multilateral activity conducted by a sovereign country with other international sports organizations or sovereign countries, primarily through sports and cultural exchanges, to promote the progress of sports." Therefore, sports diplomacy, in simple terms, is a diplomatic activity aimed at promoting mutual interests and friendly exchanges between two or more countries through sports activities (sports events, sports organizations and institutions, sports culture, etc.).

## **3. The importance of China's sports diplomacy from the perspective of soft power**

### **3.1. Expanding the country's international influence**

Sports diplomacy plays a critical role in most sovereign countries, and at the same time, it has become a major means of diplomacy between nations <sup>[4]</sup>. With the increasingly close foreign exchange activities between countries, sports diplomacy has officially entered the international stage, greatly expanding the content and form of diplomatic activities between countries, and breaking the traditional forms of political, military, economic, and technological diplomacy. The saying goes, "weak countries have no diplomacy." Sovereign countries can only develop their national sports industry after having a strong economic foundation. Therefore, the higher the frequency of sports diplomacy, the stronger the comprehensive national strength of the country, and the greater the country's international influence.

### **3.2. Promoting friendly cooperation between nations**

In recent years, China has been committed to strengthening exchanges and cooperation with the international community through sports diplomacy, and the results have been very significant. With the continuous improvement of China's comprehensive national strength, sports diplomacy has become one of the main means of communication and cooperation between China and third-world countries <sup>[5]</sup>. At present, China is actively promoting traditional Chinese martial arts to the world through the influence of Confucius Institutes. This is a pioneering achievement in the integration of traditional Chinese sports and excellent national culture and provides more space and platforms for international cooperation.

### **3.3. Enhancing the overall image of the country**

The so-called national image refers to the positive appearance and state exhibited by a country on the world stage <sup>[6]</sup>. At the same time, national image is also one of the main factors related to national status. Enhancing national image through sports diplomacy is the most direct and effective way. By continuously participating in sports diplomacy activities, the international community can actively explore, understand, and showcase China, thereby improving China's international status and influence.

## **4. The effective path of China's sports diplomacy from the perspective of soft power**

### **4.1. Promoting diversified subjects and strengthening sports diplomacy**

In terms of subjects, a model can be adopted with the government as the main body and other subjects as guidance, such as non-governmental organizations, social organizations, and individual public outside the government. The joint promotion and development of multiple entities can effectively play the national strategic role of sports diplomacy.

Firstly, the government needs to establish sports diplomacy institutions and academic research institutions and formulate sports diplomacy-related policies and diplomatic plans. At the same time, strengthening the connection and cooperation between departments at all levels, actively implementing, following up, and constantly adjusting, can bring sports culture with Chinese characteristics to the global stage<sup>[7]</sup>.

Secondly, the government should actively leverage the role of non-governmental organizations in sports diplomacy. In dealing with non-governmental sports organizations, government intervention can be appropriately reduced, providing them with greater self-management space, fully leveraging the bridge role of non-governmental organizations and associations in connecting the public and the government, assisting the national sports and diplomatic departments in supporting work, increasing public trust, and establishing a good national image<sup>[8]</sup>.

Lastly, the government should create a high-quality image as a sports diplomatic ambassador. Athletes and government officials have a certain level of popularity and affinity among the public, and their high-quality sports image is more easily accepted by foreign individuals, thereby achieving the goal of sports diplomacy, such as Ming Yao, Xiang Liu, Ping Lang, Dan Lin, etc. During the visit, national leaders can make full use of the obvious public image of sports to introduce China's excellent sports to foreign individuals, so as to gain recognition from foreign individuals, spread Chinese traditional culture, and continuously improve China's sports culture soft power<sup>[9]</sup>.

### **4.2. Expanding publicity channels and improving diplomatic mechanisms**

Firstly, it is necessary to leverage sports events and their platforms. The five major leagues in Europe, boxing matches, the four major leagues in the United States, sumo matches, and other competition platforms are excellent channels for promoting traditional sports. These channels help to create Chinese sports event brands and increase the influence of traditional sports projects. With China's increasing emphasis on sports diplomacy, many policies and documents have been introduced in recent years to encourage the development of sports, clarifying the direction and path of traditional sports development in China<sup>[10]</sup>. For instance, introducing social capital to host sports events, improving the mechanism of professional leagues, highlighting the dominant position of clubs in the market, and accelerating the decoupling of sports associations from government departments. The introduction of this series of policies and regulations has greatly promoted the development speed of traditional sports in China, laying the foundation for enhancing China's soft power in sports diplomacy.

Secondly, it is important to leverage the role of the media. In order to help foreign individuals better understand the culture and values of traditional Chinese sports, the government or civil organizations can use mainstream foreign media to promote traditional Chinese sports, establish trust with the public, increase their recognition, and promote diplomatic behavior between foreign governments and China. For example, using platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter, etc. to promote traditional Chinese sports through visual products and books, and promote cultural product exchanges<sup>[11]</sup>. At the same time, we can also take advantage of the characteristics of the Internet, establish websites related to sports diplomacy, design sports games, etc., to publicize Chinese traditional sports more innovatively and appropriately for young people, enhance the understanding of Chinese traditional sports by foreign people, and further expand the overseas

influence of China's traditional sports.

Lastly, we increase the influence of traditional Chinese sports projects through sports assistance. For example, providing free sports equipment to some developing countries or underdeveloped areas to help them develop physical education courses. Through sports assistance, we can not only deepen the emotions of foreign individuals towards China but also use sports diplomacy to achieve more diplomatic cooperation and achieve friendly and common development between the two sides. However, it should be noted that during sports assistance, it is necessary to combine the actual situation of other countries or regions to provide necessary sports assistance in order to maximize the role of sports diplomacy.

### **4.3. Optimizing the underlying design and laying a solid foundation for diplomacy**

Firstly, we need to improve diplomatic institutions. Without changing the national sports diplomatic institutions, we should actively build local sports diplomatic departments <sup>[12]</sup>. The establishment and improvement of local sports diplomatic departments can facilitate cooperation with provincial and national sports diplomatic departments from top to bottom to accelerate the implementation of sports policies and reduce information congestion and other issues. At the same time, some sports projects may face issues of multi-regional and cross-provincial implementation during the construction process. The construction of local sports diplomatic departments can greatly improve the communication efficiency between local and national sports diplomatic departments, enhance local cross-regional cooperation, and further improve the effectiveness of sports diplomacy.

Secondly, we need to clarify diplomatic responsibilities. The clarification of the responsibilities of sports diplomacy can effectively play the role of centralized management, which is conducive to improving the rigor and standardization of sports diplomacy. In the new situation of sports diplomacy, it is necessary to establish a foreign affairs agency responsible for national and local sports diplomacy, set up more targeted and timely functions, clarify institutional responsibilities, and enhance the standardization and rigor of centralized management functions. At the same time, the transformation of the sports diplomacy model from market profit-oriented to service management-oriented can simplify the approval process of sports diplomacy activities, reduce unnecessary involvement of various departments, strengthen centralized functions, and thus achieve the goal of enhancing the soft power of sports diplomacy.

Thirdly, we need to increase the focus on staffing. The role of sports diplomacy cannot be achieved without the hard work and dedication of the sports diplomacy department and its staff <sup>[13]</sup>. Therefore, in order to ensure the role and value of the sports diplomacy department, it is necessary to strengthen the staffing management of the sports diplomacy department to ensure stability and consistency. This includes avoiding arbitrary changes, preventing multiple staffing stations, addressing staffing shortages, and refraining from creating positions based on temporary circumstances. At the same time, efforts will be made to increase the focus on staffing, ensuring that professional and technical personnel and management personnel systems operate independently to prevent overlapping responsibilities and to further strengthen the personnel circulation and regulation system of the sports diplomacy department. Only when the sports diplomacy department forms a virtuous cycle and development can the sports diplomacy industry thrive.

### **4.4. Actively participating in competitions to enhance sports influence**

In recent years, China has played an increasingly important role on the world sports stage. For example, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, the 2022 Winter Olympics, etc. In addition to participating in and hosting the aforementioned large-scale sports events, China has also attended

intercontinental comprehensive sports events such as the Asian Games, Asian Beach Games, and East Asian Games. In order to enhance the effectiveness of sports diplomacy, sports performance, and national soft power, China is currently actively participating in major international sports events while still striving for various world single sport events, such as the World Athletics Championships, the right to host F1 Shanghai races, World Aquatics Championships, and comprehensive international sports events such as the Olympics, Asian Games, East Asian Games, and Asian Beach Games <sup>[14]</sup>. By vigorously hosting these sports events, not only can we enhance the level of China's sports industry and showcase the culture and spirit of traditional sports, but we can also use hosting large-scale sports events as a channel to promote the content and spirit of traditional sports to more countries and regions, enhance the country's influence and sports soft power. In addition, the hosting of various international sports events in China can accelerate the economic, technological, and transportation development of the competition venue. These have promoted the development and enhancement of the country's soft power to varying degrees <sup>[15]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

In the era of China's peaceful development, enhancing China's soft power and the dissemination of sports diplomacy has become an important strategic measure. However, sports diplomacy is a complex and systematic project that requires both the interpretation and exploration of traditional sports, as well as innovation and integration with modern sports. Therefore, the government's sports department and related departments should actively formulate detailed and reasonable strategic plans to enhance sports diplomacy and actively implement them, in order to create a good domestic and international environment for China's development in a peaceful era.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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