

## Maradona and China: Perceptions and representations of a sports myth

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*“When the ball turns, the world turns”.*  
Eduardo Galeano (1998). *Soccer in Sun and Shadow*.

### Abstract

This article highlights specific aspects of the relationship between Maradona and the People's Republic of China (PRC) to trace the development of the “one-athlete brand” in global sport and the construction of the “foreign” sports myth in China. These aspects include the aligned development of football in China and Maradona as an icon, manifested in the gap in the domestic space for Western athletic icons in China and Maradona's rise during the 1986 World Cup; the political identity and interpretation of Maradona as a supporter of communist and socialist regimes amidst China's opening and international integration; and the modern development of the Chinese sports machine and Maradona's corresponding stardom first as a player and then a coach. We assert that Maradona's extensive story not only included China, but even reflects the strong sociological and cultural implications seen in the profound changes in Chinese society beginning in the mid-1980s.

**Keywords:** Maradona; China; sociology; sport; football.

## 1. Introduction

Diego Armando Maradona represents a sports myth (Mitra & Naha, 2017; Massarelli & Terret, 2011) in the eyes of the Western world, full of nuances and contradictions that have made the man a legend. Maradona perhaps represented the first truly global phenomenon in the world of football and sport in general, reflected in the circulation of Maradona's name in even the remotest corners of the globe after winning the 1986 World Cup (Bavassi et al., 2019; Bifulco & Tirino, 2018; Bifulco & Dini, 2014; Hughson & Moore, 2012). As Bridle accurately described in *The soccer book*:

You could almost say that soccer is the universal language. If you found yourself in the middle of a strange country with no knowledge of the local tongue, you would still be able to strike up a conversation by using a few hand gestures accompanied by the names of some prominent players. Place one hand at chest level while saying "Pelé" then raise it with the word "Maradona", and you'll quickly start making friends (Bridle et al., 2018, p. 10).

But how was Maradona perceived in the Far East, in the People's Republic of China (PRC), which began to open up in the 1980s during the presidency of Deng Xiaoping? What was Maradona's relationship with China and the Chinese, and how did Maradona represent the emergence of China in international football? Finally, what were the reactions to the death of Argentina's world champion last November, and what does this social phenomenon tell us about modern Chinese perceptions of international football and its icons? In order to answer these research questions, an analysis of documentary and historical sources was carried out.

## 2. The historical context: sport, society and the development of the "one-athlete brand"

Prior to the 1980s, football was from the beginning a sui generis world where political instrumentalization was always present and very strong. In Europe, Benito Mussolini's fascist propaganda drew heavily on Vittorio Pozzo's Italy as successive world champions in 1934 and 1938, and Spanish dictator Francisco Franco instrumentally used football and especially the images of Alfredo Di Stéfano and Ferenc Puskás' Real Madrid in the post-war period. On this point we can speak of a "before" and an "after" that distinguishes two moments that characterize the history of "Western sport": a first one in which politics was the protagonist, and a second one in which sponsors became protagonists. While pre-1980s sports development

featured public support and funds, the next era showcased a shift to privatization and commercialisation. This is the case in China, which joined this phenomenon with its reopening in the 1980s. The following takes place in two main phases: from 1984/1986 to 2001, when globalization had not yet pervasively connected the world; and 2001-2019, when global commercialisation took root in sport (Billings et al., 2017; Coakley & Pike, 2009; Cashmore, 2006; 2000; Horne, 2005;).

We identify the first phase from the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1984 and the World Cup in Mexico in 1986 (and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) to September 11, 2001. Following the instrumentalisation of sport by fascism and Nazism (amongst others) during the two World Wars, armed conflict effectively shifted to the sports arena, constructing strong post-war Olympic rhetoric and transforming athletics into an important weapon of the Cold War. The Olympic Games and Olympic medal count determined the dominance and cultural hegemony of one block over the other and served as manifestations of the ideological militancy and nationalism between “red” and “blue” allegiances. The Cold War era, symbolized by the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall and the Soviet bloc, also signaled a destruction and rebuilding of the narrative around sport.

Despite the prevalence of sport in Cold War politics, becoming a global social phenomenon nonetheless proved extremely difficult amidst the political implications of a world divided into the two opposing ideological blocs. Nonetheless, a few athletes managed to rise to international prominence, creating the basis for the “one-athlete brand” (Smart, 2005). The term “one-athlete brand” signifies the athletes that became global sports phenomena through a combination of individual characteristics and the external factors of good timing and media exposure. While one-athlete brands enjoy international notoriety and have or had access to the homes of a large part of the world’s population, they do not always draw universal adoration; much depends on the attitude of the character, the athlete and the showman.

1984 and 1986 are the watershed years of our timeline considering the development of strong brand recognition in the 1980s, marked by sporting mega-events and in the commodification of athletic stardom. In 1984, the Los Angeles Summer Olympic Games took place in the United States, representing the first truly “branded” Olympic Games after the much more sober edition of the Moscow Games in 1980 in the USSR. 1984 is also the year in which Michael Jordan signed his first commercial contract with Nike, creating the “Air Jordan” brand, and Apple bought TV rights to the commercial breaks to Super Bowl XVIII to launch the first Mac. Two years later, the 1986 World Cup in Mexico became the first sporting event to be broadcast on TV channels of many nations that had never been reached before, including China. In line with these mega-events, sport transformed into a more global enterprise, featuring big sponsors, big-budget advertising campaigns and new narratives around great athletes. These included Nike with Jordan and Carl Lewis (the American hero of the Los Angeles Olympics)

and Maradona's "Puma King Maradona Super 1986" football boots, becoming the most coveted sports objects among children and young people all over the world.

1986 is also the year of Maradona, who became one of the most famous and admired sports icons in the world. Lacerda and Mumford argue "the genius is one who is able to break out from the existing chains of convention" (Lacerda & Mumford, 2010, p. 192). Maradona meets this criterion, "demonstrate[ing] a vision and awareness in football that was unsurpassed. He was able to negotiate his way, seemingly effortlessly, past opposition players while continuing to keep control of the ball" (Ryall, 2018, p. 41). Compared to other equally popular sports such as cycling or tennis, football is a team sport in which, on the one hand, the individuality of the "star player" stands out and, on the other, distinct styles of play have been identified over time with particular national identities (Kittleston, 2014). These identities even combine with those "national characters" in Immanuel Kant's memory (Kant, 2006; Martinelli, 2020) that have often been summed up by journalists, intellectuals and commentators in the concept of the "national spirit" introduced by da Johann Gottfried Herder (1871). Zanoni explains these phenomena through the term "Maradollar". According to Zanoni (2007), Maradona represents one of Argentina's most lucrative companies, whose extraordinary revenues are comparable to those of the biggest names in global business. This company has no logo, which means that it is not recognisable as a simple symbol but as a series of visual representations: the Argentine and Boca Juniors colours, and the jersey with the number 10. Maradona's ubiquity is not based on the industrial repetition of a singular appearance. His star quality depends on diversifying and adapting to changes in the markets where his symbolic capital is exchanged (Zanoni, 2007, p. 16; Salazar-Sutil, 2008, p. 443). This more abstract commodification was nonetheless accompanied by specific sponsors such as Puma, who in 1996 signed a \$7.2 million dollar deal with "the injury-ravaged Diego Maradona [...] to use their footwear for two years" (Giulianotti, 1999, p. 117). This solidified the growing trend of the commercialisation of athletes and the development of "one-athlete brands" as a standard of the sports industry<sup>1</sup>.

Maradona's media influence was thus a social phenomenon with global impact, affecting the social body of populations that had previously been excluded from this kind of experience. Maradona as a global icon serves as an early embodiment of this political and commercial representation of athletes. Both can be seen clearly through his relationship with China, where Maradona was hailed for his sporting talent along with his communist ideological leanings. Italian footballer Roberto Baggio followed in Maradona's footsteps in this way, gaining followers in East Asia not only with his skills on the pitch but with his conversion to

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<sup>1</sup> The multi-million-dollar sponsorship deal between Puma and Maradona marked a turning point in the commercialisation of the sports figure: "Before the First World War, top footballers were supplementing their wages by endorsing products and having press articles ghost written. As the UK's post-war austerity came to an end with the consumer culture of the 1960s, so the players sign value (in sterling and status) multiplied constantly. In 1951 Stanley Matthew received around £1,000 per year in boot sponsorship" (Walvin, 1994, p. 177).

Buddhism. Outside of football, basketball superstar Michael Jordan began to proliferate across China, setting the stage for Yao Ming's future superstardom. Maradona's rise to international fame and brand image as a single athlete, however, is a far cry from the modern evolution of popular one-athlete brands. The likes of Maradona and Baggio embodied the ideal type of Argentine footballer known as "*el pibe*" (the boy), "who possesses a small body, high skills levels, a character filled with cunning, creativity and vulnerability, and a disorderly, risk-taking, carnivalesque lifestyle" (Archetti, 1998, pp. 182-184; Giulianotti, 2015b). In fact, "despite their far-from ideal bodies the partially lame Brazilian Garrincha and the stocky Argentinean Maradona dazzled soccer fans around the globe with their artistry" (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 14). As a result, Maradona and Baggio's short and stocky physical appearances were very much secondary to their style of play and ideological beliefs (Hughson & Moore, 2012). This contrasts starkly with "the violent, aggressive forms of hegemonic masculinity that are highlighted by Connell and others, particularly in the context of Australian and American sport" (Archetti, 1998, pp. 182-184; Giulianotti, 2015b).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century thus saw a further evolution of the "one-athlete brand". This development occurs in the second phase of our two-part history, beginning with the fall of the Twin Towers and ending with the advent of Covid-19. This period is characterized by nationalisms in sport, supported and financed by the two opposing blocs (Red and Blue), which were then replaced by multinational investments that took advantage of the globalization of sport. This further opened sport to huge markets – like China – to make huge speculations and profits. Especially in major sporting events, up to the last edition of the World Cup, the monopolization of the sponsorship market by Western interests and corporations has shifted. This is particularly evident in the winning of sponsorship tenders by large Chinese corporations.

Nowadays, the charisma and ideas that sponsors and sports clubs insert into athletes' contracts tie the athlete more and more to the construction of their image in the mass media (Carlson & Donavan, 2013) and on social media (Su et al., 2020). Several modern athletes have gained truly global notoriety due to the globalization of sports communication. Through billion-dollar sponsorship deals, the world's most famous and established male athletes have turned into real brands, like those of Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi in football, Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal in tennis, Usain Bolt in athletics and the evolution of Michael Jordan from basketball star to the iconic shoe brand<sup>2</sup>. In societies firmly rooted in tradition and male physical strength, major brands have found fertile ground for global advertising campaigns based on concepts of

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<sup>2</sup> This article does not venture into the rhetoric of gender equality in sport that is particularly prevalent in the US and other Anglo-Saxon countries (Scraton & Flintoff, 2001). While female athletes like Serena Williams have graced the covers of *Sport Illustrated* several times and been strong voices in the fight for gender equality and against racial discrimination in sports, this has remained more or less confined to the American and Anglo-Saxon context. This is nonetheless changing thanks to athletes like Naomi Osaka - a female athlete of Japanese and Haitian descent who has had resonance globally, and notably in Asia, for her thoughts.

machismo, gender supremacy and the deification of the male body, especially in its sexual representation as a “bull”. Cristiano Ronaldo and David Beckham showcase how athletes have become global icons thanks to advertising campaigns that brand and promote their masculinity (Chadwick & Burton, 2008). We see this manifest on the eve of the 2008 Olympic Games in China with the highly anticipated figure of Rafael Nadal. Upon his arrival in Beijing, Nadal, who was then ranked first in the ATP world rankings<sup>3</sup>, became the focus of media attention as the iconographic symbol of the sexual power of the bull; the national representative of Spain as the land of strong passions; and the divergence from his competition in his physical and athletic prowess<sup>4</sup>. In this way, the host crowd of the 2008 Olympics rallied around Nadal as an athlete who embodied the role of “macho” in sport through both Nike’s sponsored brand creation and his athletic career.

In the same way the fall of the Soviet Union marked the end of the political economy characteristic of the Cold War era, Covid-19 serves as a similar breaking point in the established world order. The destabilization caused by Covid-19 distinctly impacted the world of sports, creating a stark division before and after 2019. However, one consistent measure remains the escalation of episodes concerning the commercial and political nature of the figure of the athlete. Commercially, athletes have found themselves at odds with global brands. Cristiano Ronaldo made a controversial gesture when he sat down at the beginning of a press conference and moved two bottles of Coca-Cola – the official sponsor of the sporting event – asking people to drink water instead of the famous soft drink. Other players imitated this gesture with various brands in the following days, leading to a media earthquake and a reported 4-billion-dollar plunge in the stock market of Coca-Cola<sup>5</sup>. Politically, we have seen most of the stars of the NBA, NFL and American sports take to the field in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, which has gained support in sports and countries around the world. Naomi Osaka, who became the highest-paid female athlete in the world in 2020, refused to play in the Western & Southern Open semifinals in New York City in August 2020 to send a strong message to the world governing body of sport that she stands against discrimination. To show his support for the LGBTQ+ community, the German captain Manuel Neuer wore a rainbow-coloured captain’s armband during the 2020 European Football Championship, giving rise to public discussion regarding the political nature of the rainbow as a symbol. Although these instances lie outside the 2001-2019 timeframe, they nonetheless gave rise to political

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<sup>3</sup> “ATP” stands for Association of Tennis Professionals, the governing body of the men's professional tennis circuits.

<sup>4</sup> Nadal’s image affirmed a different set of values in direct contrast to other tennis players, including Roger Federer, Pete Sampras and Bjorn Borg, who represented elegance and serenity.

<sup>5</sup> This figure was first reported by news agencies such as the Australian Associated Press and published by major newspapers such as The Guardian, but then immediately denied, claiming that the stock market crash was the result of earlier market fluctuations.

speculation and controversy as to what would have been the best behavior on the pitch and the role of athletes in “political” issues.

While these historical events vary greatly in their impact, the result remains a societal reckoning that extends into the world of sport. Maradona’s passing in November 2020 gives us a new reason to return to his legacy as a way to understand the modern evolution of athletes who follow in his footsteps, including the political and commercial nature of Maradona.

### **3. Maradona and China**

Scholars have written on Maradona as a preeminent sports figure that represents spectacle and heroism (Andrews & Jackson, 2002), transgression of sports norms (Lamothe & Barbie, 2020), and performance politics (Salazar-Sutil, 2008). Beyond the person himself, Maradona as a public figure has come to be associated with collective memory of adolescence (Janssen et al., 2012) and the FIFA World Cup (Bavassi et al., 2020). Maradona has also evolved into representations of not only Argentine nationalism and nationalism in sport (Alabarces & Rodríguez, 1999), but of materiality and commodification (Moore, 2012). Few analyses have placed Maradona in “fringe” geographic contexts, where football is not seen as the predominant sport of public consumption and passion. One such work by Mitra and Naha places Pelé and Maradona in colonial India to better explore the construction and demonstration of global fandom (Sarbjit & Naha, 2016). Like India, China had been largely considered a fringe country to the international football order.

The attempt of this essay is to shed light on the relationship between Maradona and the PRC, showcasing how Maradona’s life reflects strong sociological and cultural implications that can be captured in the beginning of a profound change in Chinese society since the mid-1980s. Sport proves to be a unique lens for China’s political history as the state is at the forefront of Chinese sport, placing it at the center of its soft power and geopolitical approach (Mangan, 2013). In line with our previously designated timeframe, we will plot Maradona’s interactions with the Chinese state and its people along the timeline of 20th century China before and during Mao Zedong’s reign and then in the ‘new era’ of China’s sports development, marked by its reopening and development in the 1980s and 1990s and recent state-led football development in the 2000s.

#### **4. Maradona's introduction in China**

Maradona's position as an early icon of football success in China is not surprising given China's modern sporting history. We must first consider the factors from 19th century and early 20th century China that precede the 'new era' of Chinese sports development. These factors suggest that Maradona's rise to fame in China was not accidental, but rather had been carved out by a distinct lack of Chinese athletes to occupy the domestic space for athletic icons. This gap was created by China's self-proclaimed history of physical weakness and the disruption of its sporting apparatus under Mao Zedong's rule.

##### **4.1 The modern development of Chinese sport**

Modern football was played in China as early as the 1870s. Some of the first teams in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing were expansions of early athletic clubs established by British and other European prospectors and functionaries. In 1886, Hong Kong FC was established and a year later Shanghai FC began as an extension of an existing athletic club. Up until the first decade of the twentieth century, the Chinese generally viewed elements of Western culture, football included, with skepticism as the populace remained committed to traditional ways centered on Confucianism and Taoism. However, Western sports gained some acceptance as tools to achieve modernisation, which Chinese officials felt was necessary in defense against impending hostilities in the region (Murray, 1996, p. 19; Lu, 2012). Chinese beliefs about the connection between national and physical weakness can be first traced to 1894 when Yan Fu, a 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar and writer for a popular magazine. Yan coined the term "the sick man of Asia" in reference to China's national strength and its manifestation in the fragility of Chinese physical strength (Xu, 2009, p. 18). The concept of the Chinese "sick man" not only led to political and cultural efforts to cultivate strong bodies and a "warlike spirit" to strengthen the military, but also influenced Mao Zedong, the future leader of the Chinese Communist Party. In 1917, Mao Zedong published an article on sports, using Yan's term the "sick man of Asia" and attributed China's poor sports performance to a lack of national order.

But it was not only domestic opinion that shaped Chinese beliefs about its physical lack of prowess. By the 1930s, others began to take note that China was easily and heavily influenced by international figures. Avery Brundage, the IOC President from 1952 to 1972, explained his understanding of how others took advantage of China through sports:

In this most ancient and veritable civilization – the Chinese – physical fitness and its national organization have been neglected. The highly intellectual



citizens of China have allowed themselves to be plundered by their own bandits for generations. Nations which have developed physical fitness through the hardships of their environment and constant conflict, with the discipline thereby built up have done as they pleased with China for generations (Bairner, 2008; Xu, 2009, p. 21).

The creation of YMCA affiliates and a variety of athletic associations before the outbreak of World War I allowed for marginal levels of development. However, unlike in Japan, football was not integrated into Chinese schools<sup>6</sup>. China's weak sports and physical education system was further exacerbated by the disruption of Chinese society under Mao Zedong's leadership. Mao himself was a sports lover, and when the PRC was founded on October 1, 1949, the Shengyan Football Team was invited to Beijing to play – “in celebration of the establishment of the new communist regime. Football was seen as a symbol of modernity; a talisman of topicality; a statement of intent. The intention was clear: modern sport would characterize modern China” (Jinxia & Mangan, 2001, p. 85). Despite this early signaling of the importance of sport to the construction of Mao's China, international sporting success was far from a priority amidst the domestic turmoil of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). As Dong describes, the Cultural Revolution in particular actively oppressed sport:

Elite sport suffered harshly during the years between 1966 and 1969. Numerous elite athletes, coaches and administrators were purified, persecuted and tortured. Some were even killed. Sports training was disrupted and sports schools were shut down. International sports contacts virtually ended and sport facilities were largely ruined (Jinxia, 2012, p. 158).

In addition to the domestic dismantling of the national sports apparatus, the PRC also withdrew from major international sports organizations, including the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in 1958. This dismantling of the domestic sports apparatus hindered the development of sport and set China behind other countries in terms of its competitive edge, leaving a large chasm between the PRC and the rest of the world.

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<sup>6</sup> This severely restricted its growth and continues to be a barrier today as the Chinese government implements plans to develop its football industry in the twenty-first century. For more information, see Jones (2004, pp. 59-60) and Parrish et al. (2020, p. 23).

## 4.2 Reopening and internationalization of Chinese sport

When China sought to rejoin the global community, it also looked to sport to reestablish its position under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. Deng, the de facto leader of the PRC from 1978-1989 and a football fanatic, even used football as a political pulpit when he re-emerged from exile in 1977 with a speech at Beijing Workers' Stadium at a match between Hong Kong and a Chinese youth team (Bartram, 2012). In 1979, China finally regained control of its sports machine: China rejoined international sports bodies including the IOC and FIFA, and the NSC released an "Olympic Model," which "instructed each province to aim its sports programs at the collective goal of winning at the Olympic Games" (Xu, 2009, p. 127). The reopening of China and its subsequent re-development of the Chinese sports landscape aligned with notable international sporting events: the 1982 FIFA World Cup, the 1984 Olympic Games, and the 1986 FIFA World Cup.

The 1982 FIFA World Cup in Spain created a series of opportunities for China's reopening and its re-emergence in international football. First, Deng entered the Chinese men's side into the 1982 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers, albeit the team failed to qualify (Bartram, 2012). The 1982 World Cup was also broadcast by Chinese national provider CCTV by signal, making it the first World Cup to be broadcast although it remained largely inaccessible to the majority of Chinese viewers.

The 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, however, served as a coming-out party for Chinese athletics: China not only participated in the Games for the first time since its debut in 1952 but also put up big numbers: 363 Chinese athletes competed, China won its first gold medal (and the first of the Games) in addition to another 14 golds to top it off. Following the 1984 games, entities outside of the sports industry began to invest in sports teams and clubs, and "the Baiyunshan Pharmaceutical Factory became the first industrial and commercial enterprise to sponsor the Guangzhou soccer team" in October 1984 (Jinxia & Mangan, 2001, p. 85).

The events leading to the 1986 FIFA World Cup also created a greater gap for Maradona. In 1984, the men's side placed second in the Asia Cup and even defeated Argentina in the India Cup (Maradona did not play). As a result, Chinese fans and news outlets were confident that the PRC side could defeat Hong Kong in a 1985 World Cup qualifier that could have led to its participation in the 1986 World Cup. When Hong Kong upset the Chinese side in a 2-1 victory, Chinese fans erupted in the first serious riots in PRC history<sup>7</sup> (Wood, 2017). Considering the disappointing domestic performance, Chinese fans watching the 1986 World Cup were ready for heroics, even if from a Western athlete. Openness to Western athletic prowess was further

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<sup>7</sup> These riots have proven to not be a one-off reaction from Chinese fans, with Chinese fans rioting after losses in the 2004 Asia Cup against Japan.

supported by the Chinese belief that “embracing Western sports demonstrates their status and desire to keep abreast of world culture” (Xu, 2009, p. 207). Maradona’s stardom therefore did not threaten China’s own desires to promote its new global status or promote nationalism domestically, making an appreciation for Western sport “politically safe”.

When the World Cup kicked off in May 1986, it was the first international sporting event to be broadcast publicly by Chinese CCTV. The 1986 World Cup was also the first time a Chinese reporting team was sent to an international sports event to report locally. Professor Tim Wright, Emeritus Professor of the University of Sheffield and historian of modern and contemporary China, remembers that during his time as a visiting professor that Tianjin University students even protested to postpone exams so they could watch the World Cup in the early morning hours and witness the exploits of Maradona, who had become a fast favorite<sup>8</sup>. These factors – the emerging popularity of global sports competitions amongst Chinese and the accessibility of the events – set the stage for the Argentine men’s national team to win over the Chinese populus with its victory, crowning the Argentine captain Diego Maradona its undisputed star.

Maradona’s communist ideology further entrenched his celebrity status in the PRC. Maradona routinely attributed the foundation and shaping of his ideas and values to meeting Fidel Castro, the four years he spent in Cuba for his rehabilitation and reading Ernesto Che Guevara’s work. These experiences served as a turning point in Maradona’s life, where he became more aware of the world around him and convinced that he could use the weight of his image to help the socialist and communist cause, particularly through Castroism in Latin America<sup>9</sup>. In his documentary dedicated to Maradona’s life, *Maradona by Kusturica*, filmmaker and close friend of Maradona Emir Kusturica pays special attention to the political commitment and struggles of the *pibe de oro* (Maradona’s nickname, meaning “golden boy”) alongside the social and even religious phenomena that have generated the popularity and charisma of the figure of Maradona over the years. In one of the film’s countless dialogues, Kusturica asks the Argentine champion, “Where does this sense of justice come from?” Maradona answers, “From traveling around the world, having read a lot about Che Guevara and studied a lot, including in Cuba.”

Maradona strongly self-identified with the political left, stating in an interview: “I am left, all left: with my feet, with my faith, with my brain.” (Pastonesi & Terruzzi, 1997, p. 26). On the day

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<sup>8</sup> Given the 13-hour time difference between Mexico and China, the World Cup matches were broadcast in the late evenings or early mornings in China. Our interview with Tim Wright, Emeritus professor of Chinese Studies, University of Sheffield, UK on April 25, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> One such example includes a very young Maradona dedicating the 1978 Youth World Cup victory to Jorge Rafael Videla, the man responsible for horrific human rights abuses and thousands of disappearances between 1976 and 1983. Videla became an outspoken supporter of right-wing and neo-Peronist politician Carlos Saúl Menem in the 1990s (Salazar-Sutil, 2008, pp. 449-450).

after Maradona's death, November 26, 2020, the Italian version of Rolling Stones published an article titled “The left starts again with Diego Armando Maradona, seriously.” The article states,

Maradona’s fascination with the far left is well known. It’s not just Fidel Castro, on the contrary, the footballer could well be considered an icon of 21st century socialism. Maradona was a friend of Castro, he was a friend of the Venezuelan socialist president Hugo Chavez and his successor Nicolas Maduro, as well as the former socialist president of Bolivia Evo Morales. He liked Cuba, had visited the Soviet Union and China, and had tattooed not only Castro but also Che Guevara. A famous photo shows him in 2005 next to Evo Morales wearing a T-shirt with the inscription ‘Stop Bush’, on which the ‘s’ in the name of the then US president is a swastika (Salvia, 2020).

The essence of the political thinking of an athlete like Maradona can be summed up in these words from Fidel Castro:

Imperialism has tried to humiliate Latin America countries, has tried to instill an inferiority complex in them; part of the imperialists’ ideology is to present themselves as superior. And they have used sport for that purpose (Gems, 2006, pp. 97-98; Byarkman, 2019).

In China, as in many other Asian, African and Latin American countries, Maradona has embodied the representation of the Global South (Gramsci, 2005), resisting the excessive power of capitalist imperialism, symbolically identified with Margaret Thatcher’s United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan’s United States. This image was further supported by fiery words he reserved for Americans and the United States<sup>10</sup>, and Argentina’s victory over England in the 1986 World Cup with the infamous “Hand of God”. Maradona perfectly embodies not the anti-hero of Western literature, but the cunning underdog in a David-and-Goliath-esque conflict. After his victory in the 1986 World Cup, the English-language press portrayed Maradona as a petty thug who had sullied the beauty of sport with an outrageous violation of “sportsmanship”, which to some degree continues today in the works of some British and American scholars who maintain an ethnocentric and colonialist view of Maradona and this episode in particular (Loland, 2005). In direct contrast, the press of many developing countries saw Maradona’s action as a stroke of genius, a gesture of rebellion against the arrogance of the white man, and the hand of God that helped Maradona disrupt the narrative of the

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<sup>10</sup> During an appearance on Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez’s weekly television show 19, August 2007 said: “I hate everything that comes from the United States. I hate it with all my strength” (Reuters, 2007).

unchallenged dominance of the Western capitalist model (Levinsky, 2014; 1996). More recent analyses have further acknowledged the “greatness” of the gesture and the vastness of its echo, stating “[Maradona’s] patriotism expressed by this goal reflected his national status but undermined his stature as a broader hero” (Maguire, 2017, p. 109).

This revolutionary gesture built upon a developing narrative in China focussed on defying Anglo-American propaganda and promoting the underdog of the socialist model that sought to provide an alternative future to the ongoing “humiliation” of the Global South at the hands of Western capitalist powers (Scott, 2008). The great impression that Maradona’s deeds made on the Chinese public during that edition of the Mexican World Cup was not lost in the historical memory of the Chinese people, but became part of the collective imagination of a mega-state that – at that moment in history – viewed the rest of the world with astonishment and perplexity. Maradona’s perception of China also endeared him to the Chinese state. In one scene Kusturica tells Maradona, “Gabriel García Márquez told me, ‘If there had been no Castro in the history of Latin America, the Yankees would have arrived in Patagonia already and you would all be speaking English’”. Maradona replies: “Yes! I think we are part of the United States.” Kusturica then asks, “So, do you think that the whole world will be an American colony?”. Maradona promptly says, “Of course!”. Kusturica probes, “What about China?”. Without hesitation and with a wag of his index finger, Maradona exclaims, “No, not China!” (Kusturica, 2008).

The powerful influence of Maradona’s image and beliefs on Chinese public opinion did not go unnoticed in the upper echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Deng, reportedly a fan of Maradona, even invited him to come play two exhibition matches in Beijing and Shanghai following the 1986 trophy (Zheng & Zhang, 2020). The former Italian Prime Minister, Romano Prodi, was instrumental in negotiating Deng’s requests as the then-president of an Italian holding company who frequently met with the highest officials of the Chinese Communist Party<sup>11</sup>. Prodi details that a Chinese counterpart to a commercial deal expressed his wish for Maradona to come and play in China “on behalf of Deng Xiaoping<sup>12</sup>”. Deng planned to visit the stadium and broadcast the match to 600 million people, further offering that China would pay all in-country expenses if Napoli Football Club would fund Maradona’s overseas travel. When Maradona offered to accept at the modern equivalent of \$230k USD (Lau, 2014),

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<sup>11</sup> The Institute for Industrial Reconstruction was an Italian public holding company established in 1933 by the Fascist regime to rescue, restructure and finance banks and private companies that went bankrupt during the Great Depression. After the Second World War, the IRI played a pivotal role in the Italian economic miracle of the 1950s and 1960s. It was dissolved in 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Romano Prodi, broadcast on the 16/04/2015 episode of *Aria che tira*, a talk show on the Italian TV channel L47. Translation by authors.

<https://www.la7.it/laria-che-tira/video/prodi-sono-ancora-arrabbiatissimo-con-maradona-16-04-2015-152425>

Prodi had to “communicate to the Chinese Presidency that nothing could be done,” adding, “what does [Maradona] want? A public company?”<sup>13</sup>

Maradona’s request reflects the economic and social transformation of Chinese sports into a “more commercial, competitive consumer culture” that accompanied the 1992 economic reforms under Jiang Zemin (1989-2002) (Jinxia & Mangan, 2001, p. 84). The reforms led to increased private investment in sport, manifested in the increased annual expenditure of the Chinese Football Association from three million yuan in 1991 to 10 million yuan by the mid-1990s. The growing industry and the systems developing around it led to the registration of players, which increased from 2,000 players in 1992 to 6,700 by 1995.

The 1990s also saw the prioritization of the game at the national level in China. In June 1992, China’s National Football Conference outlined a new plan for football, detailing goals for both the men’s and women’s national teams. This plan also called for the employment of German Klaus Schnappler as the head coach of the Chinese men’s side, kickstarting a new focus on international football figures not just as foreign talent, but as potential keys to unlocking Chinese football success. Following Maradona’s professional retirement, his appeal as a player aligned with China’s growing efforts to bring Western coaches to the PRC in the 1980s. The *China Sports Journal* called the increased hiring of foreign coaches and sports experts the “new foreign affairs moment” (Xu, 2008, p. 214), manifesting in the presence of seven foreign coaches in the Chinese delegation to the 2004 Olympic Games. In August 2012, Maradona publicly stated his desire to coach in China “to contribute to the development of China’s soccer youth” (White, 2020).

Maradona’s quick yet sustained stardom in China was thus not accidental, but a culmination of China’s sporting history and good timing. Beyond his footballing prominence, Maradona as a public persona actively embraced communist rhetoric, making him a suitable poster child of the transition of communist China from isolationism to a tempered embrace of globalization. But like much of China’s reopening, China’s newly desired sports predominance in the international arena was mitigated by conflict and negotiation. Maradona’s relationship with China follows a similar trajectory, marred by allegations of doping and drug abuse (Zheng, 2004), along with legal battles over Maradona’s image rights in China. These conflicts, however, have not prevailed in the Chinese perception of Maradona, and his positive legacy remains upheld into the new era of football in China.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*. After all, in 1996, at the end of Maradona’s career with Boca Juniors, Maradona did play a two-match series in China (AP Archive, 1996).

## 5. The myth of Maradona in a new era of football in China

China is no longer just an observer of international football but an active participant. In 2008, one hundred years after the cited 1908 declaration of the Olympic Dream, China fulfilled its self-imposed destiny: it first took part in the 1932 Olympic Games, it won 15 gold medals at the 1984 Olympics, and Beijing hosted the Olympics in the summer of 2008. In celebration, Chinese recognised the manifestation of humiliation through sports, and its rise above it: “[this is] just the beginning for we Chinese who have suffered so much to prove ourselves to the world<sup>14</sup>”.

President Xi Jinping has latched onto this possibility of football greatness even more than his predecessors. Already at an early stage, Xi utilized sport to illustrate political concepts and had already appreciated and studied Maradona’s abilities and charisma. In a September 1988 speech entitled *Economic Chorus*, Xi refers to Maradona at the 1982 World Cup, in which Argentina were the reigning world champions (Jinping, 2016, pp. 25-28). Xi cites Argentina’s round of 16 match against Brazil, where a young Maradona was sent off with a red card, leaving the Argentine side with only ten players on the pitch and ultimately resulting in Argentina being eliminated from the competition. Xi’s message is simple: the whole is more important than its parts – even if one of those parts is Maradona – and a leader should make himself available to the team in difficult times, even if it overshadows his own stardom. Even today, over forty years later, the memory of sporting events and the figure of Maradona is still alive in the mind of the leader of the Communist Party and in the collective imagination of China. In 2020, an excerpt from the 1988 speech was reprinted alongside a brief editorial commentary in a collection of speeches by the *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the CCP (People’s Daily, 2020, pp. 156-157). The republication of the excerpt is no coincidence, but rather a direct nod to ongoing state-led football development in China.

Xi’s approach to sport closely aligns with diplomatic and foreign policy aims. As noted by Ruvalcaba and Zhang (2018),

football diplomacy aspires to narrow the distance between the Chinese people and the people of the world. Football diplomacy highlights China’s open and inclusive diplomatic attitude towards integrating into the world, reflects China’s tentative ‘ball’ diplomatic means to show China’s humble and proactive big country style as well as China’s reform goals of comprehensive development and flourishing (pp. 41-42).

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<sup>14</sup> Our interview with Xu Guoqi, Kerry Group Professor in Globalization history, University of Hong Kong, HK on December 12, 2015.

Xi has been active in pursuing and broadcasting this vision. In 2011, Xi told a South Korean delegation his new version of the Olympic Dream. It came in three parts: first, for China to qualify for a World Cup; second, for China to host a World Cup; and lastly, for China to win a World Cup (Shi, 2015). While visiting the United Kingdom in 2012, Xi visited Dublin's Croke Park and kicked a ball, and the resulting photo was circulated internationally and within China and sparked conversation around China's involvement in football (Leng, 2015). Following his inauguration in 2013, President Xi became the leader of a reinvigorated effort to jumpstart Chinese football. In 2013 alone, several advances occurred: David Beckham was brought to China on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chinese professional football to become the poster child of the sport (McGowan, 2013). Beckham grew to become an ambassador of Chinese football abroad (Sliwowski, 2017, p. 35), a role that was unofficially passed to Pavel Nedved and then Maradona<sup>15</sup> (Das, 2017; SCMP Staff Reporter, 2016; Gibson, 2013). In June 2013, the CFA created another "new" ten-year programme that pledged that the "men's national team will work hard to qualify for the FIFA World Cup finals in 2018 and 2022" (Pumin, 2013). In July, the CFA announced the "China School Soccer Program," which called for the creation of thousands of football schools across 90 different Chinese cities with the help of the State General Administration of Sport (SGAS) and the Ministry of Education. Shortly following Xi's widespread 2015 corruption campaign, Xi reasserted his interest in sport and broadcast China's football intentions. On February 27, 2015, Xi held a meeting with a Central reform-leading group and told it to direct its attention to football (Meyer, 2015). On March 8, the State Council released its 50-point plan addressing "The overall program of reform and development of Chinese football<sup>16</sup>". Later in 2015, Xi revisited England and listed football as one of his top ten topics to negotiate. In the same visit, Xi visited Manchester City grounds with Prime Minister David Cameron, and took a famed selfie with Man City's Argentinian footballer Sergio Agüero, Maradona's son in law<sup>17</sup> (Phillips, 2015).

As an extension of these efforts, Xi has developed a very strong diplomatic relationship with "football world power" Argentina, continuing to build upon Maradona's legacy as an Argentine hero (Ruvalcaba & Zhang, 2018)<sup>18</sup>. In 2016, during the G-20 Hangzhou Summit, "President Xi unexpectedly sent a request to the President Macri, hoping that China would have its own Messi or Maradona in 20 years, which would need the response of Argentina (Weihua, 2017). Macri immediately responded that he was very glad to help. Then they also discussed on the issue like Argentine football coach teaching in China, Chinese players going to the Argentine club, etc." (Ruvalcaba & Zhang, 2018, p. 41). Maradona's influence on Chinese football thus can

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<sup>15</sup> These ambassadors use their fame to support China's position in the world of football, as Zinedine Zidane did for Qatar for the 2022 FIFA World Cup bid.

<sup>16</sup> People's Republic of China State Council, SCS [2015] No. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Despite Xi being a Manchester United fan.

<sup>18</sup> For a review of the Sino-Argentine relationships developed by Xi Jinping as of 2014, see Ruvalcaba & Zhang (2018).



be seen through direct means, centered in his figure as a footballer himself, to indirect means as an ambassador of Argentina and the crux of growing international relations.

## 6. Conclusions

According to John Fiske (1986), the polysemic nature of the narrative produced by and about Maradona is not only the product of his talent on the football field, but the ability to transform these footballing skills into “symbols that can be invested outside the sphere of football, beyond a single and closed interpretation” (Salazar-Sutil, 2008, p. 442). This has also happened in China, where Maradona has taken on all the forms of myth in its most classical meaning and has entered the collective imagination of the Chinese. As a result, Chinese fans and admirers joined the rest of the world in the many spontaneous expressions of condolence and mourning following Maradona’s death (Leung, 2020). On the other hand, our conclusion about the lack of partnership between Maradona and China is that Maradona did not ignore China; on the contrary, he knew of its existence and its strategic importance for the future of world football, but he considered China too far away: far away not only physically from his beloved Argentina and Latin America<sup>19</sup>, but also culturally. Maradona’s respect for China may have been routinely expressed, but the cultural distance and language barrier probably always challenged Maradona to realize a long-term professional project in China. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that after the end of his adventure in European football with Sevilla and his return to Argentina, Maradona lived permanently outside Latin America and Central America, only in the United Arab Emirates, where he held a sport ambassador position<sup>20</sup> after his coaching career (Jose, 2020). This would have been unthinkable in the People’s Republic of China, where he would certainly have been showered with gold but would never have been able to assume institutional responsibilities at that level<sup>21</sup>, nor would he have had the freedom to assume a political leadership role, as he did in Latin America alongside many heads of state. On the contrary, the Chinese Communist Party would have used Maradona’s image and voice to feed the national and international propaganda machine, a direct affront to Maradona’s desired to be free of ties and shackles and avoid conditions in his public and private decisions. This had been the case during most of his football career, first in Argentina under Videla’s dictatorship and Menem’s Peronism and then in Spain with Barcelona and in Italy with Napoli. Although Maradona’s

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<sup>19</sup> Maradona lived in Mexico in 2018 and 2019 where he was the coach of Mexico’s second division club Dorados de Sinaloa in Culiacán. From this experience in 2019, *Netflix* produced a documentary web television series, *Maradona in Mexico* directed by Angus Macqueen and starring Diego Armando Maradona, Gilli Messer and Jarrod Pistilli.

<sup>20</sup> Maradona was appointed Dubai’s Honorary Ambassador of Sports by the Dubai Sports Council in September 2012.

<sup>21</sup> In 2017, Maradona signed a contract to be the Ambassador of Chinese Super League, but his engagement was more about promotional and commercial purposes.

words express a certain admiration for China – the only entity truly capable of opposing American imperialism – Maradona’s character, history and ideological closeness to another socialist model, the Cuban and that of Latin American, meant that he never took the step that would have led him to the Far East. Maradona explained many times his ideological point of view and his role in society:

“I am the voice of the voiceless, the representative of the people. I am one of them, no different. It’s just that I get microphones shoved in my face and I get the chance to speak for them. No one’s given those people a chance in their whole fucking lives. Let’s see if we can get this point across once and for all: I am El Diego. (Maradona, 2004, p. 253).

Levinsky (1996) defends the controversial behavior of Maradona, both on and off the field, seeing him as a “rebel with a cause” who fights to correct injustice, and who has been abused and misrepresented for threatening the world’s football power structure (Coakley & Dunning, 2000, p. 548). The strategy of Xi Jinping, however, would be an essential part of this world’s football power structure building a new football world power (Revolcaba & Zhang, 2018).

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