

Ilker Gündoğan: The Politics of Football in China: Institutional Change and Political Steering Under Xi Jinping.

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Since Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012, football has unexpectedly emerged as a prominent component of China's political landscape. The elevated political attention given to a sport in which China has historically underperformed appears paradoxical at first glance. Yet, as Ilker Gündoğan compellingly demonstrates in his incisive study, this apparent paradox is precisely why football constitutes an ideal analytical lens through which to understand deeper institutional transformations and modes of political steering under Xi Jinping. Football thus becomes a revealing prism reflecting the systematic recentralisation of governance structures – a hallmark of Xi's leadership style.

To conceptualise this profound institutional transformation, Gündoğan draws on the notion of “Top-Level Design” (顶层设计), which underscores a clear hierarchical governance logic markedly distinct from the fragmented authority patterns preceding Xi's tenure. Methodologically rigorous, the study employs detailed process tracing, reconstructing institutional shifts through careful examination of official policy documents, media reports, and structured expert interviews. Theoretically, Gündoğan grounds his analysis firmly within Actor-Centred Institutionalism (ACI), following Mayntz and Scharpf, which allows him to examine institutional dynamics and their effects on actor behaviour. He complements this framework with Political Steering Theory (PST), analytically distinguishing between “hard” instruments such as direct control and disciplinary sanctions, and “soft” mechanisms including symbolic politics and incentives. By combining these approaches, Gündoğan convincingly bridges sinological research with broader governance analyses, demonstrating the analytical richness inherent even in seemingly peripheral policy fields.

Gündoğan systematically unfolds his central argument of recentralisation and intensified political steering through a clearly structured and persuasive chapter progression. In the opening chapter, “Why Football Helps Understand Xi Jinping's China”, he succinctly captures football's symbolic and strategic significance as a key component within the broader political narrative of China's “national rejuvenation”. He convincingly argues that football is far from a trivial or purely symbolic domain; rather, it reveals central political ambitions and core governance dynamics of the contemporary Chinese regime.

Chapter 2, “Anti-Corruption and Disciplinary Campaigns in Chinese Football”, vividly illustrates the practical implementation of this hierarchical steering logic through sweeping anti-corruption initiatives. Gündoğan examines campaigns that

have intensified significantly since 2022, persuasively interpreting these measures not merely as short-term disciplinary interventions but as strategic instruments for consolidating long-term political control. This chapter effectively demonstrates how institutional norms and expectations have been systematically redefined to align football governance tightly with central political objectives.

Chapter 3, “Emergence of New High-Level Governing Bodies”, further develops this analysis by exploring the creation and empowerment of new central institutions, such as the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reforms Commission and the Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference on Football Reform. Here, Gündoğan carefully delineates the shift from fragmented, decentralised authority towards clearly defined hierarchical governance structures. Particularly insightful is his nuanced examination of the ambivalence surrounding the officially proclaimed autonomy of the Chinese Football Association (CFA), contrasting sharply with the reality of increasing political oversight and central control.

Gündoğan deepens this institutional analysis by considering local policy experiments and societal impacts in Chapters 4 (“Policy Experimentation Under the ‘Extended Shadow of Hierarchy’”) and 8 (“Chinese Parents and Campus Football”). His examination of the Campus Football initiative compellingly demonstrates how local actors – particularly schools and parents – find themselves under increasing political pressure to comply with centrally imposed policy directives. His analysis astutely captures how recentralisation, while enhancing immediate compliance, simultaneously undermines local flexibility, innovation potential, and broader social acceptance.

Internationally, this logic of intensified political steering generates notable tensions, vividly analysed in Chapter 5 (“‘Irrational’ Overseas Football Investments”). Gündoğan expertly dissects China’s politically motivated investments in prominent European football clubs between 2015 and 2017, revealing how these initiatives, driven primarily by political rather than economic rationales, ultimately proved both financially and politically counterproductive. The subsequent corrective actions undertaken by Chinese authorities underscore the inherent limitations of exporting centralised governance models to international markets.

The global implications of China’s authoritarian steering are examined further through detailed case studies in Chapters 6 (“The DFB and Tibet”) and 7 (“Mesut Özil, Arsenal FC and Xinjiang”). In both cases, Gündoğan convincingly elucidates how China employs diplomatic and economic leverage to compel international actors into aligning with its political preferences. Collectively, these chapters underscore how China’s domestic institutional logic increasingly shapes global interactions, influencing international norms and behaviours well beyond its borders.

In his concluding chapters (“Lessons from Chinese Football in the Xi Jinping Era” and “Conclusion and Prospects of Chinese Football”), Gündoğan synthesises his empirical findings within a coherent theoretical framework. He carefully dissects the complex ambivalences of authoritarian steering, arguing convincingly that

systematic recentralisation, while facilitating effective short-term policy alignment, poses substantial risks to the regime's long-term adaptability and innovative capacity. From this perspective, he outlines three plausible development scenarios, ultimately identifying an "institutional recalibration" – a strategic balance of centralised steering with limited local flexibility – as the most realistic trajectory.

Overall, Gündoğan masterfully demonstrates how an ostensibly peripheral domain such as football provides profound insights into the political and institutional transformations currently reshaping Xi Jinping's China. The innovative integration of China Studies, governance theory, and sports politics, underpinned by rigorous methodological grounding, produces a nuanced and compelling analysis of contemporary authoritarian governance mechanisms. The study's greatest strength lies in this analytical synthesis, bridging theoretical precision with detailed empirical investigation.

With this impressive analytical achievement, *The Politics of Football in China* constitutes a substantial contribution to contemporary scholarship on China, authoritarian governance, and globalised sports politics. The book is thus highly recommended to scholars specialising in China and governance studies, as well as practitioners and policymakers interested in understanding the complex political dynamics shaping global sporting arenas.

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