Performing identity work in Chinese Super League football clubs:
Corporate guanxi, public relations & fan perceptions

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Abstract

In this thesis, I critically examine the development and issues within the Chinese Super League (CSL) by utilising Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC as a case study, focusing on sports policy, "Guanxi" (关系), football governance, and public perception. In academics, debates around the issues in football governance and public relations in China are frequently reduced to considering why policy fails or how to change the overall structure and system of football governance. I move beyond these debates to put on guanxi, stakeholder approaches, football governance and public perceptions in China. My approach entails examining Chinese mainstream sports media content and public comments on social media to provide opinions and enlightenment for sports managers and decision-makers within the Chinese Super League. I aim to critically review both clubs' organisational structures, policy context and strategic developments and understand the roles of mass and social media in the construction and perception of Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs' corporate identity.

To achieve this, I employ a qualitative case study design (documentary evidence, mainstream media articles, and social media contents) first systematically to collect archival material and policy and organisational governance documents. Secondly, to examine accessible online and print mass media and social media content related to Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs. The findings of the analysis are examined further through a theoretical framework influenced by the concept of guanxi and stakeholder theories.

The findings demonstrate the main characteristic features influencing CSL clubs' practices in performing their corporate image: Diverse interpretation of policies, media-constructed narratives, and social media-driven reputation management. The policy analysis, guided by Marsh and Rhodes' (1992) typology of policy networks, guanxi and stakeholder theories, identifies discrepancies between policy guidelines and club interpretations and executions, illustrating how clubs' deviations can disrupt intended policy outcomes. Furthermore, the media's role in shaping public perceptions of CSL clubs is examined, highlighting the impact of patriotism and collective online action on narratives and public opinions. The findings underscore the importance of clubs' collaborations with authentic and reliable influencers to enhance their reputation through transparency and values alignment.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Focus and Rationale

My research aims to explore the development and issues within the Chinese Super League (CSL), focusing on sports policy, "guanxi" (关系), football governance, and public perception. Specifically, I seek to understand the public perception of these issues among stakeholders of the league, particularly examining how the public's views influence CSL club behaviour, governance processes, and CSR practices from the perspectives of fans and media. My approach entails examining content from both Chinese mainstream sports media and public comments on social media to provide opinions and enlightenment for sports managers and decision-makers within the Chinese Super League. The following part of this chapter will demonstrate the research context and different segmentations that are significant to my research focus and central rationale.

As the key to framing my research, the concept of guanxi has emerged as a crucial framework in the analysis of business management and society, particularly within the context of China (Shi, 2021; Bian, 2018; Wong, 2007; Luo et al., 2012). Guanxi has been vaguely depicted by scholars as a "special" relationship or "particular connection to distinguish the term from ordinary personal relationships (Alston, 1989). More scholars have better understood the phenomenon by conducting further in-depth examinations of guanxi (Chi & Seock-Jin, 2017). Thereupon, guanxi has been depicted as relationships or social connections established on reciprocal interests and benefits. Favours exchange and the giving of social status between guanxi participants are the primary ways to accomplish it (Lee et al., 2001). Additionally,

guanxi has been identified as a significant part of Chinese commercial culture (Yang, 2001). China's unique commercial culture, shaped by Confucian principles emphasising 'sincerity,' 'faith,' and 'propriety,' has set the development pathway of Chinese business in any industry which contributes to a various system corresponding to European businesses (Bian, 2018). Despite continuous debates among Chinese and Western scholars attributing issues within Chinese football to a lack of systematic administration and supervision and insufficient professional football systems, I argue that these issues are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese business culture and the concept of guanxi. Therefore, understanding the local business and social culture is necessary for understanding organisational behaviour and governance issues within a specific context.

Due to the globalised market of football as well as the growing involvement of Chinese entrepreneurs in professional football, Central government introduced the "General Plan for Football Reform and Development" in 2015, that has prioritised the acceleration and further development of the professional league system, and also combining football development into national policy. This integration has driven continuous transformations by the Chinese Football Association to the evolving landscape. However, governance and corporate social responsibility challenges last due to football policy, economy, business culture, and environmental impacts. These include corruption, unethical club behaviour, and stakeholder conflicts (Sullivan et al., 2019). Therefore, Guanxi is instrumental in unravelling the complex dynamics of football governance, public perceptions, and elite networks within the Chinese Super League, which is a framework linking these concepts in my research. Based on the above discussion, the context of my research and the above-mentioned key themes will be illustrated

in detail in the following part of this chapter.

The Chinese Super League (CSL) is the highest-divisional professional football league on China's mainland which founded in 2004. A total of 16 professional football clubs participate (private or state-owned enterprises own most clubs) and are organised by the Chinese Football Association. According to the 2013 - 2018 global football league attendance ranking released by Drs Raffaele Poli (2019) on CIES, the CSL ranked sixth with an average attendance rate of 22,500 per game. According to Deloitte (2018), 300 million fans in China pay attention to the CSL, most of whom are also European League fans. Up to 1,050 media and 7,000 professional sports journalists also report on the China Super League (Deloitte, 2018).

The governing body of the CSL is the Chinese Football Association (CFA). It is defined as the national and non-profit sports association formed by organisations engaged in football in China. It is a social organisation with a social welfare mission to unite Chinese football organisations and develop football schemes (CFA, 2021). The CFA and the State Sports General Administration work together to comply with FIFA regulations, and governments should not interfere in football. Therefore, the Chinese Football Association can be understood as an arm of the General Administration of Sport of China (GAS). The football association's president is merely a nominal figure and is not responsible for daily affairs. The vice president of the football association, this role is responsible for daily affairs and acts as the chair of the football management centre. (Ma & Kurscheidt, 2019).

The Chinese Super League has developed into a top sports event in Asia, and by purchasing famous players from the European football league to improve its international reputation and exposure, it aims to develop into a globalised football league. The development over the years has attracted more interest groups, sponsors (even overseas sponsors such as Nike and TAG Heuer), and local and international fans. However, in the early stage of the development process, many issues emerged in league management and governance, resulting in slow development. The very first professional development agenda of Chinese football began in 1994. From 1994 to 2004, China's top professional League was named the Chinese football Jia-A (中国足球甲A联赛) league. In 2004, the China Football Association Super League was founded (Sullivan et al., 2019). The reform aimed to enhance the league status and reputation of the professional football league as a whole. Five years later, Chinese football news broke concerning corruption and match-fixing among CFA officials, referees, and players, which had an irreparable impact on the reputation of the league (Huang et al., 2020). This incident had a far-reaching impact on fans and the media. As an observer of Chinese football, it is common to hear discussions revolving around issues such as corruption and the national team's performance, which have contributed to certain perceptions. For example, CCTV suspended the broadcasting of the China Super League after the corruption incident. As the most significant national sports channel in China, CCTV has a considerable influence. Whether CCTV broadcasts CSL or not can determine a sponsor's judgement of the value of the CSL. In the beginning of 2011, to develop the CSL, the CFA decided to intervene and sent a document to CCTV, asking CCTV to resume the broadcasting of the Chinese Super League. Even Wei Di (韦迪), the vice-chairman of the Football Association, communicated with Jiang Heping (江和平), the director of the CCTV sports channel, so then CCTV could resume the broadcasting of the

CSL (Yang, 2023).

To avoid damage to the reputation of CSL and football development happening again, the central government decided to strengthen the degree of intervention in the evolution of professional football and the CSL. Since 2015, the CFA has printed many policies to regulate club behaviour and guide the development of CSL clubs. For example, 'The General Plan of Chinese Football Reform and Development' (中国足球改革发展总体方案) issued by the central government in 2015 represents that the CSL evolution has entered a new stage (Zheng et al., 2018). In 2021, affected by policies and COVID-19, many clubs, including 2020 CSL champion Jiangsu Suning FC, announced their dissolution, intensifying stakeholder contradictions.

According to the 'General Plan of Chinese Football Reform and Development' (CFA, 2015), China has included professional football development (mainly the CSL) in the overall national development plan, emphasising the priority position of the professional football sector and the CSL in China's national strategy. In recent years, professionalising Chinese football and the Chinese Football League has garnered substantial interest in academic circles (Hesketh & Sullivan, 2020; Zheng et al., 2018; Peng et al., 2019). These issues include various conflicts of interest among club stakeholders, the rationality of the governance and management policies of the CFA, club contract breaches, corruption of league officials, and other unethical behaviours.

Furthermore, academic debate has explored the analysis of corporate governance and effective governance in sports entities. (Ma & Kurscheidt, 2019; Hu & Henry, 2017). Smouts (1998) identified the crucial features of good governance practice, including the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and participation. Yu (2010) argues that the most significant issue within most Chinese organisations is the need for more transparency and accountability. Transparency is an important principle of good governance practice because clearness and directness about decision-making can help establish the capacity of the poor and marginalised to participate in policy formulation and implementation (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2013). Despite aspiring to the governance standards outlined by FIFA and exhibiting superficial displays of accountability and transparency on their platforms, CSL organisations face scrutiny regarding their entrenched governance practices and ability to effectively fulfil governance requirements.

Furthermore, scholars have explored corporate governance and good governance within sports organisations, alongside discussions on corporate social responsibility and stakeholder participation (Liu & Schwarz, 2020; Valeri, 2019). For instance, corporate social responsibility should be institutionalised within professional sports clubs, leveraging unique resources like donation votes, venue facilities, and strong relationships with the media, players, and sponsors to integrate enterprises and society, yielding significant comprehensive benefits (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). Liu and Schwarz (2019) noted that CSL's corporate social responsibility shares similarities with football entities in other nations, including responsibilities to its audiences, youth education, employees, finance, health, environment, and charity. However, significant differences exist between China and Europe in terms of their

perception and expectation of corporate social responsibility, particularly in relation to cultural norms like guanxi, as discussed earlier.

In the context of my thesis, the CSL has developed rapidly since 2015. While achieving a series of milestones, as mentioned earlier, many issues have been exposed in both governance and CSR practices. Fans and the media have widely discussed and reported on these issues, putting pressure on CSL clubs and the CFA. And the widespread use of social media in China also provides Chinese fans with a better platform to discuss the football league (Tan & Bairner, 2010). Social media facilitates the exchange of data and offers an area for interactions with customers, assisting organisations in building trust and connection with consumers (Askool & Nakata, 2011). Sashi (2012) and Drury (2008) contend that social media ought to be utilised to associate with clients since this sort of media offers a space to lock in discussions and upgrade client connections.

Additionally, social media is essential to help sports organisations humanise themselves by showcasing their efforts to make a difference in their local communities, including the coverage of charity events and initiatives that impact fans on the ground (Mastromartino & Naraine, 2022). These media outlets may present a broader range of narratives to suit their stakeholders' interests, focusing on market trends, commercial aspects, and global perspectives to attract sponsors and advertisers (Josselin & Wallace, 2001). A few CSL clubs have attempted to use social media to build their sports fan community and strengthen the relationship between fans and the club. However, the club's reputation can be tarnished due to erroneous organisational practices.

For instance, Jiangsu FC has engaged with fans on Twitter as well as Weibo, a popular social media platform in China, to solicit new club names aligned with the CFA policy guidelines. Initially praised by various stakeholders, this move aimed to build a positive image (Titan Sports, 2022). However, the club abruptly announced its cessation of operations, attributing it to financial difficulties and the unpaid wages of players and staff. This sudden decision, coupled with revelations of financial mismanagement and contract breaches, triggered widespread condemnation on social media, significantly damaging Jiangsu FC's reputation. This case underscores the dual role of social media in shaping a club's image, capable of enhancing and tarnishing its reputation based on public discourse and perception.

Public discourse refers to what people say and write to pursue public good, including speeches, publications, and other statements (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). It helps the government and individuals make fair and reasonable decisions for everyone. (Persson & Neto, 2018) These "ideals" in public discussion aim to help and protect the common good of the people, which corresponds to every citizen's private interests based on a shared public community.

In my research, the focus is on the perspectives of the actors who contribute to it: the stakeholders of CSL clubs, such as club fans, media commentators in China, club owners/investors behind the club, the Chinese Football Association, the central government and local sports bureau, as well as English media commentators. Public support and public perception are significant to sports organisations. The economic argument supporting this notion relates to elite sports generating positive externalities, which mostly have the characteristics of public goods (Wicker et al., 2012; Harger et al., 2016). Public goods are

organised as non-exclusive and non-rival in consumption, suggesting everyone can be satisfied (Kretsch et al., 2016). It suggests that sports as a public good also hold social and cultural importance (Noll & Zimbalist, 1997). In addition, the broad population can be satisfied by sporting success as national pride or level of contentment can rise (Wicker et al., 2012).

In the case that the market cannot provide essential goods, the government must step in to ensure the supply of goods. (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2006). The state interferes and budgets elite sports laboriously − for example, after corruption issues and the failure of China's men's national team, the Chinese government adopted policies to intervene in the development of the football league and clubs and tried to use policies to restore its reputation. However, states must moderate and support only if market failure lives and the product is socially desirable (Downward et al., 2009). Therefore, sports stakeholders must comprehend and pay attention to the public perception of the league and clubs if sports organisations should achieve public and sustainable financing (Hallmann et al., 2020). However, how the public perception influences football governance and CSR practices within the Chinese context and how public perception shapes club strategies and behaviour has rarely been investigated. My research wishes to address this gap, therefore the research questions and aims will be listed in the following section.

1.2 Research Question and Aims

Research Question: In what ways do Chinese Super League football clubs create and perform their corporate identity? And, how do these identity practices contribute to explaining the relationship between the professional sport sector, the state, commercial actors and Chinese public?

Research Aims:

1. To critically review the organisational structures, policy context and strategic developments of Guangzhou football club from 2015 to 2023 and Jiangsu FC from 2015 to 2021 (Due to the dissolution of Jiangsu FC in 2021) to understand the structures, systems and processes that shape club identity.

   Objective: To systematically collect archival material, policy and organisational governance documents (including at the CFA, club and local metropolitan, provincial and national levels).

2. To examine how the public representation of Guanghzou & Jiangsu football clubs' relationships organise their corporate identity.

   Objective: Collate and examine accessible online and print marketing media content from Guangzhou & Jiangsu football clubs to understand public identity characteristics.

3. To understand the roles of mass and social media in the construction and perception of Guangzhou & Jiangsu football clubs' corporate identity.

Objective: Collate and examine accessible online and print mass media content related to Guangzhou & Jiangsu football clubs

Objective: Collate and examine accessible online and print mass social media related to public & fan perceptions to Guangzhou & Jiangsu football clubs.

The actions of "create" and "perform" in this context refer to the processes and actions through which Chinese Super League (CSL) football clubs develop and present their corporate identity to various stakeholders. It involves strategically developing a club's brand, values, and image and how clubs enact and communicate their corporate identity to their audience. "create" includes initiatives such as organisational structures and defining the club's culture and values. Corporate identity creation is an ongoing process of aligning organisational culture, corporate vision, and external image (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Creating a corporate identity is a deliberate process of crafting how a club wants to be perceived by its fans, sponsors, the media, and the general public. This process often involves a combination of marketing, public relations, and strategic management practices (Cornelissen, 2014).

Furthermore, "perform" refers to the ways in which clubs enact and communicate their corporate identity to their audience. Performance can include public relations activities, social media engagement, CSR initiatives such as community outreach programs, sponsorship deals, and media appearances. Performing corporate identity is about bringing the created identity to society through consistent and strategic actions and communications. Goffman (1959) illustrates that performance involves both the conscious and unconscious ways organisations express their identity through interactions with various stakeholders.

Insights into the intricate relationships between the professional sports sector, the government, businesses, and the people of China can be gained by examining how CSL football clubs establish and communicate their corporate identity. Through a comprehensive analysis of identity practices, a deeper understanding can be gained regarding how clubs effectively navigate and manage various stakeholders' diverse influences and expectations. For example, the unity of club identity with national policies and cultural values can manifest the intimate relationship between sports institutions and the government. The integration of commercial entities in sponsorships and partnerships exemplifies the commercialization and market-oriented pursuits within professional sports. Additionally, interacting with the public via various media platforms and community events underscores the significance of a solid fan base and positive public perception in maintaining a club's distinct identity and overall success. An analysis of the establishment and implementation of corporate identity allows for a deeper comprehension of the complex and interdependent connections within the Chinese football community and the strategic significance of identity administration in attaining organisational objectives and preserving stakeholder relations (Melewar & Jenkins, 2002).

The research questions and aims have been formulated to comprehensively analyse the intricate process of corporate identity formation and performance within CSL clubs. The theoretical frameworks utilized in this study synergistically contribute to a thorough comprehension of the phenomena by offering multiple facets of analysis.

Examining organisational structures and strategic developments offers valuable insights into how governance and management practices influence the formation of club identity. The

viewpoint above is essential in comprehending the internal processes contributing to forming identity (Cornelissen, 2014). Moreover, an analysis of public representations and marketing media content illustrates the proactive efforts of clubs in shaping and conveying their identity to the public. This is consistent with theoretical corporate communication and branding frameworks, which emphasize the intentional tactics utilized to establish a preferred public perception (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Finally, a thorough analysis of the influence of mass and social media on club identity highlights the impact of external narratives and public engagement. This viewpoint integrates viewpoints from media studies, focusing on the interactive and dynamic aspects of identity presentation in the contemporary digital era (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Through the integration of various perspectives, this study thoroughly comprehends the mechanisms through which Chinese Super League (CSL) clubs establish and manifest their corporate identity. Furthermore, the study aims to elucidate how these practices reflect the intricate dynamics among the professional sports sector, governmental entities, commercial stakeholders, and the Chinese public. Every theoretical framework uniquely contributes to the comprehensive understanding of a subject by considering internal and external factors when addressing research goals and objectives.

1.3 Approach

My analysis focuses on the media and fan perceptions of the governance and CSR agenda of the CSL and policy intervention of the CFA. I focus on two specific CSL clubs, Jiangsu FC (江苏

足球俱乐部) and Guangzhou FC (广州足球俱乐部). There are several reasons why these two clubs have been selected. Firstly, both clubs have reached different levels of success in the league, consistently showing outstanding performance in domestic competitions and representing the Chinese Super League in international tournaments. Guangzhou Evergrande FC in particular has been one of the most successful clubs in recent CSL history, winning numerous league titles and continental championships. Secondly, both clubs have significant financial backing from prominent Chinese companies. Guangzhou FC (previously known as Guangzhou Evergrande FC) is held by the Evergrande Real Estate Group, one of largest property corp in China, while Jiangsu FC was owned by Suning Holdings Group, a major retail conglomerate. The involvement of these wealthy and influential corporations in football highlights the intersection between their businesses and the government, making them the focus of this research. I conducted a qualitative content analysis on the corresponding public statements, organisational policies, and online and print articles from mainstream sports media and social media from 2015 to July 2023, including all key policies on football reforms before July 2023. As mentioned above, the introduction of the overall plan for China's football reforms and development in 2015 marked a new phase in the government's attention to football, hence why I chose this period. Above mentioned issues such as corruption and clubs bankrupting have occurred continuously in the Chinese Super League club during this period.

The introduction of a comprehensive reform and advancement strategy for football in China in 2015 marked a crucial transformation phase with great significance. This phase also marks a critical turning point in the Chinese government's approach to advancing football, aiming to enhance the nation's worldwide standing in the sport. The reforms are a component of a

comprehensive national initiative to incorporate sports into the country's economic and social development strategies, demonstrating China's aspiration to establish a substantial presence in global football (Gong & Gao, 2019).

The present phase is associated with substantial transformations in global football, driven by the escalating globalisation trends and sports commercialisation. The reforms correspond to international trends in which football is regarded as a sport and a noteworthy economic and cultural phenomenon. Nations are demonstrating a growing understanding of the benefits associated with investing in football infrastructure, talent development, and governance to bolster their global reputation and create economic prospects (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009).

The proposed reforms in football governance are designed to enhance the professionalisation of football club and association management in China in alignment with global standards and best practices. Implementing measures aimed at improving transparency, accountability, and efficiency within football organisations and addressing critical global governance issues has been recognized as an imperative (Hamil & Walters, 2010). The endeavours of the Chinese Super League to entice foreign talent, allocate resources to infrastructure development, and revamp governance frameworks are indicative of a more significant trend towards assimilation with the international football community and enhancement of the quality of domestic football.

My research investigates how the identified features contribute to explaining the relationship between the professional sports sector, the state, commercial actors, and the Chinese public,

and has significant implications for understanding the dynamics of the sports industry in China. By examining how the CSL clubs' corporate identity's interact with these entities, this research can provide insights into the power dynamics, governance structures, and influence of the commercial interests within the Chinese sports landscape. As stated above, this research aims to critically review the organisational structures, policy context, and strategic developments of Guangzhou FC from 2015 to 2023 and Jiangsu football clubs from 2015 to 2021, which are essential for contextualising the research within the broader CSL governance and management framework. This research is essential because the organisational structures, policy contexts, and strategic developments of Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC provide critical insights into the broader governance and management framework of the Chinese Super League (CSL). It is significant for comprehensively understanding the league's operational dynamics and decision-making processes. Examining these elements facilitates comprehension of how clubs navigate and execute the reforms enacted in 2015. The comprehension of these dynamics is of utmost importance, particularly in light of the CSL's aspiration to adhere to international football standards and its potential implications for national identity, economic stability, and global reputation. This study addresses a lacuna in the scholarly literature by investigating how these clubs adjust to and impact the changing governance methodologies in Chinese football. By systematically analysing collected archival material and organisational documents, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the internal dynamics and external influences shaping the operations of these clubs.

Meanwhile, examining how the public representation of Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs' relationships organises their corporate identity and understanding the role of mass and social media in shaping these identities is crucial for gauging the perceptions of the public and fan engagement. By analysing the marketing media content and mass/social media coverage related to these clubs, this research aims to uncover the narratives, imagery, and messaging that contribute to shaping their corporate identitys in the eyes of the public. In summary, the research questions and aims address the significant gaps in the understanding of the corporate identitys of CSL football clubs and their relationships with various stakeholders, highlighting the broader implications for the professional sports sector in China.

According to my research question, the analysis is segmented into three sections; the policy aims, the fan perception of the policies and club practices, then the media perception of the CSL. For the first aspect of the policy aim, I adopted a policy content analysis approach to explore the purpose and focus of the above-mentioned CFA policies by scanning through the CFA policies from 2015 to 2023. All of the policy documents were collected through the official website of the CFA. With the second aspect, fan perception of the policies and club practices, I collected online documents, social media contents, and audio evidence. For the other aspect, the media perception of the Chinese Super League from mainstream sports media, I collected media releases and articles from Chinese mainstream sports media such as Titan Sport (体坛) and Zuqiu (足球报). Section 3.3.2 will explain the details of these media platforms and why they were chosen.

From the selected time frame, issues and conflicts have occurred in the league which have affected the discussion in society and public's perception, requiring a critical discussion from the perspective of Chinese society and cultural considerations. Drawing on organisational sociology and stakeholder theory (Crane & Ruebottom, 2010), this thesis employs an exploratory case study design. Given the multifaceted nature of the research focus, which involves examining the interplay between football governance, corporate social responsibility, public perceptions, and the cultural factors within the Chinese Super League (CSL) context, an exploratory case study allows for an in-depth exploration of these complexities (Yin, 2009). It enabled this research to delve deeply into the unique context of the CSL, considering various factors such as historical background, cultural influences, and specific organisational dynamics.

Documentary data collection, media content and netnographic social media data collection was carried out in this thesis. Stakeholder theory is relevant because it emphasises the importance of understanding and managing relationships with various stakeholders who have an interest or stake in the organisation. In the case of CSL football clubs, stakeholders may include fans, media, sponsors, governing bodies, government agencies, local communities, and commercial partners. By utilising stakeholder theory, researchers can identify and analyse the stakeholders' expectations, interests, and influence on the clubs' corporate identity and strategic decisions. For example, this research examines how the public representation of Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs' relationships organises their corporate identity. This involves collating and examining the accessible online and print marketing media content to understand public identity characteristics. Additionally, this research aims to understand the roles of mass and social media in constructing and perceiving the clubs' corporate identitys.

This aligns with stakeholder theory by focusing on the perceptions and expectations of various stakeholders, including the public and media, and how these perceptions influence the clubs' corporate identity. Through document analysis, it is an excellent opportunity to find out the fan and media perception of the accountability system of the CFA and CSL, and of the issues caused by transparency. This is as well as analysing the feedback and expectations regarding the accountability and transparency of the league from fans and media.

Aligning with the research questions and aims, this research intends to create an overview of the external perception, for example, by looking at the marketing of clubs, as well as their media portrayals, social media posts and comments, and exploring critical features of the corporate identity of CSL clubs and analysing the connection between media-corporate and the state. The details of the methodology conducted will be demonstrated in Chapter 3.

1.4 Contribution to knowledge

In this research, I aim to generate new knowledge by exploring the public perceptions of governance and CSR practices in Chinese football. Firstly, my thesis collected information from documentaries, media, and social media. The stakeholder theory is critical to my thesis because it highlights the importance of understanding and handling relationships with different people with a stake in the organisation. In CSL football clubs, stakeholders include fans, media, sponsors, governing bodies, government agencies, local communities, and commercial partners. Stakeholder theory can be used to understand and study what stakeholders expect and like and how they can influence the image and decisions of the clubs.

For instance, this study looks at how the way Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs are shown to the public affects how people see them as businesses. It means gathering and analysing all the marketing materials online and in print to determine what people think about a certain brand. In addition, my thesis wants to determine how much influence mass media and social media have on creating and shaping the public image of clubs. It supports stakeholder theory by examining what different people, like the public and media, think and expect from the clubs and how this affects their reputation. By analysing selected documents, my thesis helps understand what fans and media think about the accountability system of the CFA and CSL, as well as the problems caused by the lack of transparency.

The research questions examine the role of stakeholders in shaping football governance in China, aligning with the stakeholder theory literature. Scholars such as Freeman (1984) have emphasised the significance of understanding and managing stakeholder relationships for organisational success. My thesis contributes to the theoretical discussions on stakeholder theory by examining the interactions between football clubs, the CFA, commercial partners, media outlets, and fans. Additionally, the study expands upon the previous research by Peng et al (2019) and Xue (2020), highlighting the relationship between organisational and political orientation in Chinese football. Peng et al (2019) pointed out that the Reform Plan that occurred after 2015 was because the three streams synchronised, the window opened, and an influential role was played by policy entrepreneurs (the President and his administration), highlighting the significance of the relationship between the organisation and political orientation. Xue's study (2020) argues that Chinese football is utilised by the state mainly as a

tool or appliance for generating (debt) connections and stakeholdership rather than as a straightforward revenue-generating associate or carrying within a broader corporate portfolio.

Secondly, my thesis guides the media and fans to the club and the Chinese Football Association. It can help them work together and take on more responsibilities for the people involved. In today's world, people want sports organisations to make their decisions openly and be responsible for what they do because everyone is watching them closely. By talking and listening to the people involved in sports, organisations can earn their trust and be seen as more legitimate by the public. Fans and the public are essential for sports organisations. Clubs and leagues must keep them interested and loyal to be successful in the long run (Buhler & Nufer, 2012). By listening to and using the fans' ideas and opinions, clubs can strengthen their bond with supporters, create a feeling of being part of a community, and make fans more loyal and involved. In today's digital world, information spreads quickly through different media sources, so organisations need to work hard to keep their reputation positive. Sports groups can limit how much people think badly of them and keep their good name by talking to the media and dealing with problems or criticisms honestly and quickly (Boyle, 2009).

Thirdly, my research desires to determine people's opinions and perceptions about how Chinese football is managed and how companies are socially responsible. It will offer helpful ideas and careful thinking. The study wants to help the Chinese Football Association and clubs work together with fans, media, sponsors, and government agencies. Nowadays, people want sports organisations to be open and responsible because everyone watches them closely (Parent, 2010). By asking for feedback from people involved, clubs can gain trust, improve

their credibility, and strengthen ties with their fans. It can help them be successful for a long time and keep going.

In addition, my research aims to understand how people's opinions affect how football is managed and how companies contribute to social responsibility in China. Also, my thesis examines how the Chinese government, media, and other essential groups are involved in sports, especially football. It also discusses how clubs in the Chinese Super League can build better relationships with the people who are interested in them and how they present themselves.

Another contribution of my research is to investigate the public and media perceptions of Chinese football, aligning with studies on media representation and public opinion in sports. By analysing media content related to Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs, the research contributes to the debates on media representation in sports and its impact on public perception. This adds to the body of literature on sports media studies, complementing the previous work by scholars like Rowe (2003).

In terms of football governance, the study critically reviews the organisational structures and policy contexts of Chinese football clubs, contributing to the understanding of the approach to football governance in China. Ma and Kurscheidt (2019) investigated the issues in operating Chinese football and how the government gets involved. Following Ma and Kurscheidt's work, the examination examines how the Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs are growing and changing, which helps further understand how football is operated in China. It offers insights

into the complex dynamics between government entities, commercial actors, and sports organisations. By engaging with recent academic debates and contributing new empirical evidence, this research advances the scholarly understanding of organisational sociology, stakeholder theory, sports governance, and media representation in Chinese football.

1.5 Thesis outline

This thesis includes seven chapters. In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of my research project, which includes an overall context of the Chinese football industry and the public perception of the current situation of Chinese football. The background of the Chinese Football Association's governance and policy strategy is also illustrated. I then explain the approach and theoretical framework applied in answering the research question and aims.

In Chapter 2, I contextualise the historical and academic debates connected to football governance in Chinese football, the concept of mass media and social media in China, stakeholder relationships, and the sport-corporate-media-state nexus in China. The first section of the chapter focuses on football governance in China related to stakeholder relationships, public relations, and corporate social responsibility in Chinese football. Combining these theories could provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of Chinese football governance, CSR practices, and public perception. This interdisciplinary approach allows for the exploration of the interplay between formal structures, informal networks, and cultural dynamics in shaping the landscape of Chinese football. Combining the guanxi and stakeholder models could help understand the controversial football industry in

the Chinese context and further explain the deeper connection between the different actors. This section will also discuss about Chinese professional football governance and the state's influence. The second section of the chapter focuses on Chinese mass media, sports propaganda, and the development of the sport-corporate-media-state nexus, especially on how influences the whole sector. The third section is about social media and sport in China which includes debates on social media in China, sport and social media relationships in China, and how football is influenced by social media.

The theoretical framework for my research project is demonstrated in Chapter 2. The beginning of the chapter introduces the theories and analysis in the context of Chinese sports. I then develop a discussion around stakeholder theory, actor-network theory and the guanxi (关系) network. In each section, I connect the theory with my research question and aims, and also consider how the proposed theoretical framework supports my thesis theorising and analysis.

The third chapter presents an outline and explanation of the research methodology used for the thesis, including the research paradigm, case study approach, data gathering, and data interpretation. In this study, I elucidate the decision-making process and illustrate the application of the selected design. The ensuing chapters, namely Chapters 4, 5, and 6, will expound upon the primary content of the study. This will be succeeded by the conclusive chapter, which aims to encapsulate the author's reflections, principal arguments, and research contributions. The theoretical perspectives and concepts outlined in the introduction are mutually reinforcing, offering a comprehensive framework for comprehending the intricate

interplay of governance, corporate social responsibility (CSR), public perception, and media portrayal within the Chinese Super League (CSL) context.

To summarise the theories mentioned above and concepts, stakeholder theory is a foundational framework for understanding the relationships and interactions between various stakeholders in CSL football clubs, including fans, media, sponsors, governing bodies, government agencies, and commercial partners. The present theory delves into the significance of stakeholder management and engagement and examines how these stakeholders impact the operations of a club, the decision-making processes, and the corporate image (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Comprehending these dynamics is paramount as it establishes the foundation for examining how internal and external influences impact these organisations' character and operational aspects.

In addition to stakeholder theory, organisational sociology provides valuable perspectives on the structural characteristics of CSL clubs and their broader institutional environment. Critically evaluating these clubs' organisational structures, policy contexts, and strategic developments provides insight into the internal dynamics and external influences that shape their operations and identities (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2013). Furthermore, the concept of guanxi, which is essential for comprehending the origins of stakeholder theory and organisational sociology in the Chinese context, emphasises the distinct cultural and social networks that impact these organisations (Chen & Chen, 2004; Tsang, 1998). This intersection thoroughly examines the formal and informal mechanisms that regulate CSL clubs, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Drawing from a structural and stakeholder analysis foundation, examining media representation and public opinion offers valuable insight into the general public's portrayal and perception of CSL clubs. Examination of media content and public discourse plays a significant role in elucidating the narratives, imagery, and communication that mould corporate images of organisations and impact the public's perceptions (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 2007). This viewpoint is pivotal for analysing the construction of external perceptions and their interaction with the internal stakeholder dynamics and organisational structures elucidated earlier. The narratives about CSL clubs are greatly influenced and spread by various media, such as news articles, television broadcasts, social media, and online forums. Entman (2007) discusses how media organisations convey information that has the potential to shape public understanding and analysis of events and topics. If the media consistently focuses on the favourable aspects of a club, such as its successful performances, community outreach efforts, or accomplishments of star players. In such an instance, it can improve the club's corporate reputation and cultivate positive public perception. On the contrary, when the media directs its attention towards controversies, deficient performance, or management deficiencies, it can potentially cultivate a detrimental public perception.

Moreover, examining governance practices and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in CSL clubs introduces an additional level of intricacy to the analysis. This viewpoint adds to the extensive discussion on governance and ethical considerations in sports by investigating the concepts of transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct (Walters & Tacon, 2010; Hamil & Morrow, 2011). This investigation delves into the practices of CSL clubs to reveal the difficulties and potential advantages they encounter in their efforts to manage their

operations and engage with stakeholders. In doing so, it effectively connects theoretical principles with real-world implementations.

This study seeks to comprehensively comprehend the intricacies within the CSL by incorporating various theoretical perspectives and concepts. The different theoretical perspectives interact and contribute to each other in effectively addressing the research goals and objectives. The stakeholder theory provides a framework for identifying and analysing diverse stakeholders and their respective impacts. The study of organisational sociology, augmented by the concept of guanxi, offers a more profound insight into the structural and cultural environments in which these clubs function. Research on media representation and public opinion seeks to understand the external perception of clubs. At the same time, governance and corporate social responsibility (CSR) studies aim to illuminate the ethical and operational guidelines governing these organisations. These viewpoints provide extensive insights into the interconnections among football governance, corporate image, media portrayal, public perception, and stakeholder involvement in the Chinese Super League (CSL), ultimately facilitating a nuanced comprehension of the league's complex characteristics.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter provides a literature review and theoretical framework for my thesis. The theoretical framework of my thesis is underpinned by understanding stakeholder relations, social networks and governing. The theoretical framework for my research project will be demonstrated in this chapter. The beginning of this chapter introduces the different levels of theory and analysis in the context of Chinese sports. I then develop a discussion around stakeholder theory and the guanxi (关系) network. In each section, I connect the theory with my research question and aims and consider how the proposed theoretical framework could support my theorising and analysis.

As mentioned above, this chapter is divided into subsections that engage with the crucial theories guiding my thesis. The initial discussion is about the significant concept of understanding Chinese business and Chinese society named "guanxi," which will be demonstrated. It helps to understand how Chinese people build relationships and networks, which became the most essential concept to learn before understanding Chinese business operations. With my thesis, the guanxi network will assist in better demonstrating and analysing the networks and relationships beneath the surface of Chinese football. In the second section, the discussion is about stakeholder theory and its application within sports management. As a fundamental management theory, stakeholder theory guides the thesis to understand the relationships between key players of the football industry in China.

The chapter's second part contains the literature review themes, including the globalisation of Chinese football, organisational behaviour, public relations and CSR, football governance and stakeholder relations, Chinese media (mass/social media), public perception and football.

2.2 Theoretical framework

2.2.1 The concept of "guanxi"

The Chinese term "guanxi" has been discussed in Western and Chinese management publications (Zhang & Zhang, 2006; Ren & Chadee, 2017) since the 1980s, and it has been noticed when Western companies started thinking about doing business in China. To do well in China, Western companies have spent a long time figuring out what guanxi is and how to use it in their business. In China, guanxi holds significant importance in both the cultural fabric and the functioning of the economy.

According to the Chinese Xinhua Dictionary, the basic meaning of guanxi comes from combining two Chinese words: guan (关) and xi (系). Guan (关) means a "gate or barrier," and xi (系) means "connection or link." So, guanxi means "going through the gate and getting a connection." The Chinese authority's dictionary defines guanxi as "certain properties of contacts or relations among people," personal or social connections.

Scholars previously characterized guanxi as a unique bond distinguishing it from ordinary connections. Due to in-depth studies, Western scholars have increased their understanding

of guanxi. Guanxi is later understood as connections or relationships formed through exchanging favours and social status between partners with mutual interests and benefits. Guanxi occurs when individuals engage in business while forming social connections by exchanging favours (Dunning & Kim, 2007). Guanxi is often described as a personal relationship in which individuals offer each other mutual support (Yang, 2002). New research has shown that the same kind of relationships people have with each other can also be used within organisations. From a corporate perspective, guanxi is not only a cultural element but also a method of conducting business and a framework for decision-making. In a corporate setting, guanxi involves building and maintaining positive relationships and connections with others to drive profitability and expand the customer reach. At the firm level, guanxi can be regarded as social capital and a cooperative resource to gain clear advantages regarding financial performance, marketing channels, and so on (Cai et al., 2010; Cao et al., 2014; Gu et al., 2008). More Western investors have favoured guanxi studies in recent years. They see guanxi as a "magic weapon" to access Chinese markets and gain a competitive advantage. Guanxi's study is also seen as relationship marketing in Chinese markets (Davies et al., 1995).

In real life, individuals can establish relationships with the people around them such as relatives or even neighbours. Guanxi bases illustrate connections between people, but they may not always result in active guanxi. Having strong guanxi allows individuals to leverage their connections to achieve their objectives. For instance, if you ask a favour from a classmate you haven't talked to in 10 years, they might say no because it's been a long time since you last spoke. However, people can also build guanxi with others even if they didn't know each other before. Someone is necessary to support them in establishing connections

and developing a relationship with one another in this situation. A guanxi friendship can be formed through social media connections. In today's society, the use of social media has led to an increase in making connections through online platforms. In contrast to earlier times, this new method is grounded in pre-established connections. The approach to doing things highlights a developed relationship over time (Fan, 2002).

The term guanxi can be understood in multiple ways, including as relationships, traditions, and social interactions, depending on the perspective of scholars. Guanxi often involves the process of creating and maintaining relationships and connections. The relationships among individuals, companies, and the authorities. Such a connection is founded on emotions and utilizing one another for pragmatic purposes. Guanxi states are derived from guanxi bases. Guanxi refers to how individuals interact and carry themselves in relationships. Guanxi practices involve establishing new connections through socializing and sharing meals. It is not set in stone; it can develop over time. Building solid relationships is essential for maximizing advantages for everyone involved. For instance, guanxi begins when one party looks for favours from another party. If the other party cannot always respond to this favour, he or she will ask others to fulfil this favour through his or her guanxi networks. This process will involve more actors and conclude only when the problem is solved or abandoned (Fan, 2002). For example, just like the loaning of players between football clubs, when a player is loaned to another team with a good relationship for training and the cooperative club does not continue to extend the loan contract after the lease term, the club needs to use the relationship to find another club to achieve their goal. Because guanxi is a utilitarian relationship based on

exchanging favours, it can be used for the purpose of exchange as social capital in China's current society.

2.2.2 Guanxi exchange mechanism

1. *Renqing (人情)*

Renqing is usually translated as (1) sensibility, human sympathy, and human kindness; (2) favour, favouritism; and (3) a gift. However, renting often incorporates humanised obligations such as gifts and favours (Kipnis, 1997). It is often used as: "The special treatment of an individual, the allocation of resources to another party as a 'gift' in a market transaction, to tighten up the bonds between parties" (Leung & Wong, 2001, p.46). Renqing reflects reciprocity. Methods of materialising positive emotion, such as gift-giving, wining and dining, and practising ritualised decorum are also used to exchange renqing. From the organisational perspective, it has to follow the rule of reciprocity. For example, take Guangzhou Evergrande football club as an example. Their owner, Xu Jiayin, benefits from the CFA through a relationship exchange. He helps the CFA pay a high salary to the head coach of the Chinese national team, Renqing.

In return, CFA will provide convenience for the Guangzhou Evergrande club regarding future regulatory policies—this social obligation of reciprocity especially bonds people who share guanxi in business. For instance, if someone gets a favour, they owe something in return and should be ready to pay it back when they can. Building strong relationships in China requires

reciprocating when someone offers assistance. Failing to repay is considered unethical (Park & Luo, 2001). Saying no to an individual's offer can be distressing and may make them feel self-conscious. In Chinese culture, the face (mianzi or lian) symbolises an individual's esteem and ethical standing. Face implies one's respect, status, and moral reputation in Chinese society (Leung & Wong, 2001), and it is also a form of self-image in terms of approved social status (Ren & Chen, 2018). Causing a Chinese person to lose face is like physically attacking him or her. It will harm guanxi and result in noticeable damage to the long-term relationship.

In the case of the CSL club, the owners of the major clubs are famous entrepreneurs in the Chinese business community, and they are very cautious about the relationship because it involves reputation and the resources they can obtain in the future. However, renqing may not always be returned in some circumstances, particularly if one party decides to break the reciprocal rule (Park & Luo, 2001). It usually occurs when one party has lost interest in maintaining guanxi, so they decide not to return the favour requested by the other.

2. *Xinyong* (信用)

Xinyong means one's trust, including reliability and sincerity (Leung et al., 2005). The Chinese people judge whether a person is trustworthy is based on their history and reputation to assess the degree of a person's commitment. When this idea is transferred to the business environment, Chinese businesspeople believe that Xinyong should be a central mechanism and lubricant in a complex business network. The Chinese people's emphasis on trust comes from environmental uncertainty (Park & Luo, 2001). In countries where commercial standards,

laws, and regulations are not fully implemented, trusts play an important role.

Moreover, it helps to eliminate risk and smooth trading. In short, in the absence of strict law enforcement, trust limits the possibility of opportunistic behaviour (Park & Luo, 2001). It becomes an asset that Chinese people attach great importance to (Leung et al., 2005). The exchange of guanxi through mutual trust among stakeholders will accelerate the organisation's development but, at the same time, it will bring about the risk of moral problems. In addition to Renqing, Xinyong is considered to be one of the most critical components of a relationship and is a vital component of any successful cooperation (Reuvid & Yong, 2006). According to Chen and Chen (2004), trust emphasises the different order of a person's network: the higher the degree of trust between the two sides, the better the relationship. For example, Guangzhou Evergrande has established an excellent social image through different social responsibility activities. In addition to the reputation of its boss, Xu Jiayin, the Guangzhou Evergrande Club has good guanxi with many top Chinese entrepreneurs, such as Alibaba owner Jack Ma. Xinyong can significantly enhance the business relationship between Chinese businesspeople. Trust is the most essential stage in China.

2.2.3 "Guanxi" practices within Chinese football industry

According to the mechanism and purpose of the guanxi exchange described above, this concept is used by Chinese people as an essential tool in their daily work in various industries. The football industry is no exception, as I mentioned in the above chapter regarding the problems arising from the development of Chinese football in recent years, such as bribery,

corruption, and match-fixing. The reasons for these problems are a backward regulatory system and an imperfect legal system. Scholars have identified that one of the issues of sports governance in China under the guanxi culture is the lack of a stable legal and regulatory system, which relies on personal relationships based on trust to obtain resources and operate clubs in China (Park & Luo, 2001). Therefore, Chinese football managers and stakeholders must understand these relationships and cultivate legal, clean, and sustainable relationships for themselves. In the field of governance, relationships mainly promote the transactions between the company and its stakeholders, providing information and, in turn, providing the company with reliable social resources. Bian (2019) argues that although those who generally exchange guanxi's benefits are not corrupt, weak legal structures and the rule of law support corruption. As an informal mechanism of favouritism and malpractice within the group, Guanxi's internal logic has a structural tendency and cultural value, allowing official corruption to occur and operate under a weak rule of law. Bian further points out that although the relationship is not corrupt, official corruption in the legal system does not decouple from the network of strategic political and legal roles. After President Xi Jinping came to power, the government published more policies on corruption control, which was the first step in the control of corruption in the football industry. There is a significant social class imbalance in the resources available through guanxi networks. Professional and organisational elites have guanxi ties, which allow them to exert notable power and authority over other social groups. I think this is why there is an inequality in the stakeholder relations and engagement within professional clubs, because of this power and control. As Bian (2019, p.36) puts it, "an analysis of guanxi also tells a story about the shape of Chinese society and the inequality within it".

Within the Chinese football context, guanxi shapes stakeholder relations (especially between the owner and the government) through capital exchange. I argue that when companies collaborate, they utilise various resources to strengthen their partnership. According to Bourdieu's concept in 1986, capital comprises financial resources, social ties, and status. Economic capital encompasses monetary resources, tangible goods, and other physical properties that hold value. Social capital encompasses the benefits and support gained from maintaining a robust network of relationships. It is similar to holding a valuable qualification that enables you to establish trust and access new opportunities. Symbolic capital refers to the honour and prestige associated with a family and their reputation, representing a unique recognition that only the group can bestow upon those who consistently provide exceptional support and status. Demonstrating symbolic capital is a means for individuals to exhibit their affluence and influence to others (Bourdieu, 1977). Symbolic capital is not legally enforceable, but it holds significant value due to the importance of social standing in Chinese culture. Individuals with this status can form a web of commitments with others within the group. For example, in China, many people prefer to gain influence by performing favours for others as opposed to earning money since property rights are not well-protected by the government and laws.

Arising from the symbolic capital, they can easily use their social capital in the form of a guanxi network to get more economic capital, as having social and symbolic capital may lower the transaction costs, allowing quicker access to resources through the informal business channels. The symbolic capital can be a substantial resource if one's social status is influential within Chinese society. The brand image could represent the club and owner's symbolic capital.

Symbolic capital can be built through CSR activities. CSR can be a way to build guanxi between stakeholders through brand image. CSR not only creates brand awareness among consumers but also leads to the positive construction of corporate identity in the minds of key stakeholders.

2.2.4 Stakeholder approaches

Freeman et al (2010) proposed that 'stakeholders' refers to all individuals and groups that can influence the realisation of an organisation's goals or are affected by the process of an organisation's realisation of its goals. Clarkson (1995) believes that stakeholders have invested physical capital, human capital, finance, or another valuable thing in the enterprise and thus assumed some risk, according to Chinese scholars (Hoi et al., 2018; Guoyou et al., 2013). The "special investment" here includes human resources (such as event staff, volunteers, etc.), material resources (in kind, such as physical sponsorship, urban sports, and infrastructure), financial resources (capital, such as monetary sponsorship by fund providers), policy support, and other investments (such as media support).

Stakeholder theory fundamentally emphasises the enterprises' and organisations' business ethics and values (Freeman & Phillips, 2002). Compared with traditional shareholder superiority, stakeholder theory believes that the evolution of any business cannot be isolated from the input or participation of different stakeholders and that the business follows the prevailing interests of stakeholders, not just the interests of some subjects (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Of course, as a modern management theory with a wide range of applications

and good explanatory power, stakeholder theory benefits my research.

The advantages are mainly shown according to three aspects: First, there is emphasising the importance of "relationship" and "relationship management." This is of great significance in the modern market environment where the social division of labour is becoming more detailed (Zhang et al., 2016). This is crucial for my research as it will help understand stakeholder connections and behaviours by combining them with the guanxi concept. Secondly, this theory emphasises the social responsibilities of individuals or organisations. This is strategically significant for sustainable economic and social development. Finally, this theory has greater theoretical significance for the festival event industry, including sports events (Wallace & Michopoulou, 2019). The reason for this is that the products and services that such industries provide are more public or quasi-public than traditional industries, so the stakeholders involved will be more complex (Harrison & St. John, 1996).

Some scholars (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004; Breitbarth & Harris, 2008) believe that, based on the fact that football meets the spiritual needs of the general public and can be defined as a public product, they believe that the production and supply of professional league matches, a special public product, should be monopolised by government agencies and thus deny the interests of the investors of professional league clubs. They believe that it is only necessary to meet the interest demands of enterprises in advertising. It does not take into account the rights and interests of investors to benefit from the operation of professional football clubs and professional leagues (Mason, 1999). As a result, many investors have been discouraged and reduced their investment in professional football. The reduced part was not invested in

infrastructure such as youth football, which has made the situation faced by Chinese football more difficult. There is a need to consider the interests of the public and government agencies, while ignoring the presence of investors as an important side reference as a direct consequence of interest considerations.

Based on the above discussion, stakeholder theory and the characteristics of China's sports events, I argue that the stakeholders of sports events in China are as follows: individuals and organisations that have made a certain amount of specific investment in the process of holding sports events and undertaken a certain amount of competition risks, whose activities can affect or change the successful holding of sports events, and who may also be affected by the process of holding the sports events. This will guide the following chapters and lead to the discussion on stakeholder relations in the Chinese Super League.

The application of stakeholder theories can assist the answering of my research question. Stakeholder theory considers the salience or importance of stakeholders to the organisational or policy processes (Buchholz & Lopatta, 2017). Policy network analysis can complement this by examining the centrality of stakeholders in policy networks. Therefore, the basic theoretical framework of the combination of stakeholder theory and network theory is the best framework for discussing the complexities of the Chinese Super League in this chapter. The above discussion on network analysis is combined with the stakeholder salience model. In Chapter 4, the CFA, the State General Administration of Sports, CSL clubs, and sports media will analyse the Sports-State-Media nexus and how it affects the construction of corporate identity for CSL football clubs.

2.3 Globalisation of Chinese football

The globalisation of Chinese football has become a subject of increasing scholarly interest as China emerges as a significant player on the global sporting stage. This section synthesises critical findings from seminal articles exploring this phenomenon's various facets. Rowe (2021) argues that using football as a tool for soft power in China highlights the intricate relationship between globalisation, football, and national influence. It underscores the multifaceted nature of football's role beyond the sporting arena, contributing to China's soft power agenda. Beech and Chadwick (2007) explores the globalisation of Chinese football through the prism of international competitions, emphasising the role of events like the Asian Cup and the World Cup. These competitions, and the plan used in hosting these competitions, shapes China's football landscape and contributes to regional rivalries. Junior and Rodrigues (2023) argues that the political dimensions of football in China, particularly in the context of the Beijing Olympics, unravel the intricate connections between sports and politics, shedding light on how football has become a tool of global political expression. Li & Hong (2017) examines the role of football in shaping and reinforcing national identity in the context of the neoliberal economic reforms in China. It identified the paradoxical relationship between financial liberalisation and nationalistic fervour in Chinese football. Connell (2018) discussed the state's role and international connections. His overview of the globalisation of football in China offers a comprehensive perspective and contextualises the state's influence and global networks that shape China's football trajectory. Newman et al (2021) examination of football reform in China explores policy, governance, and development challenges. The article provides a contemporary understanding of the evolving landscape of Chinese football, particularly in the

face of recent reforms. My research will expand from their discussion and lead the conversation into specific football clubs in China.

Promoting the Chinese Super League (CSL) has significantly enhanced China's engagement in international football. According to Szymanski (2016), CSL has been growing in international football since famous European footballers arrived in the league, resulting in media coverage and the exposure brought about by worldwide media. Having a keen personal interest in the sport, President Jinping Xi actively supported the growth of the Chinese Super League by making substantial investments (Rick & Li, 2023). Although the trend has recently shifted, football remains a prominent fixture in China's sports scene and extends its influence beyond the nation's borders (Gúdel & Hernández, 2023). The growth of the Chinese football industry, driven by substantial investments and governmental support, has profoundly impacted the development of CSL clubs and the league structure (Wang & Ren, 2022). It has elevated the league's financial capacity, player quality, infrastructure, and international presence, positioning the CSL as a significant player in the international football landscape. However, while the changes have brought about significant positive situations, they have also brought in challenges and negative consequences. These include financial imbalance, unsustainable business models, inadequate investment in youth development, and match-fixing issues. Therefore, understanding how the general growth of the game has filtered the development of the specific CSL clubs and league structure in China is significant in order to addressing these negative aspects, which is crucial for the sustainable development and long-term success of Chinese football.

While there has been much research on the connection between the globalisation of football and the government's ambition to construct a national identity, only some researchers have considered how the globalised/commercialised football sector impacts policymaking. Also, there is a need for an examination of the micro-level impact of the globalisation of football, for example, looking into professional football clubs. Therefore, my research aims to fill the gap and contribute to the above-mentioned academic field.

2.4 Corporate identity

2.4.1 –The concept of corporate identity

Corporate identity encompasses the unique traits and principles that set apart an organisation. Corporate identity includes tangible visual elements, such as logos, colours, and designs, and intangible elements, such as organisational culture, values, and communication strategies (Balmer & Greyser, 2006). Albert and Whetten (1985) contend that organisational identity comprises an organisation's fundamental, persistent, and unique characteristics. The theoretical framework presented in this study will be instrumental in examining how corporate identities are formulated and enacted by Chinese Super League (CSL) football clubs, explicitly focusing on Guangzhou Football Club and Jiangsu FC.

Establishing and sustaining corporate identity are pivotal components that rely on active stakeholder engagement. Hatch and Schultz (2010) propose a co-creation strategy for brand identity whereby stakeholders actively shape the brand. The authors propose that involving stakeholders in brand-building activities promotes a feeling of ownership and genuineness. This perspective is consistent with the research objective of investigating how Guangzhou and

Jiangsu football clubs engage stakeholders, focusing on fans and sponsors, in their identity-building strategies.

One notable example is the engagement of Guangzhou Evergrande FC with its fan base using community outreach programs and grassroots football development initiatives. These activities promote a stronger sense of community and loyalty among fans while bolstering the club's reputation as a supporter of local talent and overall community well-being. The strategic use of social media platforms by Guangzhou Evergrande to engage with fans, disseminate behind-the-scenes content, and elicit feedback demonstrates stakeholder co-creation in practice. This approach fosters a sense of direct fan involvement in the club's progression and identity. Before it was dissolved, Jiangsu Suning FC created strong ties with sponsors and fans by arranging special events and offering sponsorship packages that allowed for a prominent brand presence and chances for engagement. The club's endeavour to uphold transparency and engage in open communication regarding its financial difficulties, regardless of the final result, also demonstrates an effort to engage stakeholders in its narrative. The provided instances illustrate the implementation of stakeholder engagement practices by the mentioned clubs, which is in line with the recommendation by Hatch and Schultz (2010) to establish and maintain their corporate identities authentically.

Furthermore, external stakeholders' perceptions of corporate image and stakeholder engagement are significant. As an essential component of corporate identity, corporate image refers to the external stakeholders' perception of an organisation, which is shaped by the organisation's corporate communication and image (Cornelissen, 2004). Conversely,

corporate reputation is a persistent and aggregated perception grounded in the organisation's capacity to consistently fulfil the expectations of its stakeholders over an extended period (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2003). Cornelissen (2004) underscores the fluidity of corporate image, emphasising the potential for external stakeholders' perspectives of an organisation to change over time. This perspective posits that the corporate image is dynamic and subject to influence from continuous corporate communication efforts and evolving corporate identity. The corporate communication strategies have a profound impact on the corporate image. Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) posit that successful communication is crucial in cultivating a favourable organisational image by influencing stakeholders' interpretations of the organisation's values, behaviours, and achievements. The perspective above highlights the significance of strategic communication in managing and improving corporate image. The significance of identity in influencing the corporate image is paramount. Balmer and Greyser (2006) illustrate the significance of an organisation's identity, as demonstrated through its values, culture, and behaviour, in shaping the perception of external stakeholders. Organisations can exert influence and control over their corporate image by integrating their identity with communication.

For instance, Guangzhou FC's proactive communication strategy and community engagement have significantly enhanced its corporate image. The club has been consistently featured in both state-owned and non-state-owned media for its grassroots football development programs and community engagement, cultivating a perception of the club as socially responsible and community-focused. The intentional integration of its organizational identity with its communication initiatives has benefited public perception and bolstered its corporate

reputation. Conversely, Jiangsu FC's corporate reputation suffered adverse effects from financial mismanagement, as documented by non-government affiliated media outlets. The club's dissolution, as portrayed by state-owned media as a requisite reorganization by national policies, was marred by a dearth of transparent communication and a failure to meet stakeholder expectations, resulting in a tarnished reputation. This case highlights the significance of maintaining a positive corporate image and reputation through consistent and transparent communication.

Fombrun and Van Riel (2003) posit that corporate reputation constitutes a significant, enduring asset, reflecting an organisation's historical performance in fulfilling its commitments and satisfying the expectations of its stakeholders. In contrast to the immediate impact that short-term communication endeavours can have on the corporate image, reputation is cultivated gradually through sustained performance and behaviour over a prolonged period. Corporate image and reputation are closely intertwined, although they are distinguishable. Deephouse (2000) posits that the corporate image significantly impacts the corporate reputation, as stakeholders' perceptions of the organisation's image inform their expectations and assessments of its reputation. The interaction between image and reputation highlights the significance of concurrently managing both aspects.

For example, in my research, media content analysis revealed that Guangzhou Football Club has effectively cultivated its corporate image through deliberate and strategic communication. The club has consistently emphasised its accomplishments in the CSL, including attaining multiple league titles across various media platforms. The consistent communication strategy

has contributed to establishing a favourable perception of the club as a prominent and influential entity in Chinese football. Over time, this formidable image has played a pivotal role in cultivating a resilient corporate reputation. The corporate image of Jiangsu FC underwent fluctuations due to inconsistent performance both on and off the field. The club experienced significant achievements, including the 2020 CSL title, but the abrupt dissolution in 2021 profoundly impacted its corporate reputation. The club's dissolution prompted apprehensions regarding its financial stability and managerial methods, resulting in a deleterious impact on stakeholders' perceptions and anticipations.

These contrasting examples underscore the importance of understanding the evolving nature of organisational identity in response to internal and external factors. It is imperative to comprehend the dynamic nature of organisational identity in order to conduct a thorough analysis. Gioia et al.(2013) pointed out a dynamic conceptualisation of organisational identity, positing its evolution, especially during organisational change. This perspective emphasises the adaptive characteristic of identity, demonstrating its capacity to change in reaction to internal and external stimuli. Albert and Whetten (1985) advance a contrasting perspective, positing a more static portrayal of identity, conceptualising it as relatively stable and persistent. This discourse is relevant for comprehending how Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs navigate their identities in light of evolving circumstances, including the disbandment of Jiangsu FC in 2021.

Moreover, it is crucial to recognise that visual and non-visual components significantly shape a corporation's identity. Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) emphasised the significance of

the interaction between visual and non-visual components in influencing corporate identity. Acknowledging the significance of non-visual components in identity construction allows CSL clubs to foster a unique organisational culture and principles that appeal to Chinese audiences.

The distinct nature of the sports industry gives rise to particular challenges and opportunities for corporate identity. The sports industry poses distinctive challenges and opportunities for corporate identity due to its fervent and emotionally driven fan base. Corporate identity in sports is intricately linked to the team's performance, heritage, and involvement in the community (Chadwick & Arthur, 2008). In their study, Ferrand and Pages (1999) expound upon the mechanisms by which sports teams establish a robust brand identity, emphasising the importance of cohesive messaging, active engagement with the community, and the delivery of memorable experiences for their fan base. The present theoretical framework will inform the exploration of how corporate identities are utilised by Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs to amplify brand loyalty and fan engagement. Sponsorship and partnerships are pivotal in influencing the corporate identity of sports teams. Bühler and Nufer (2010) present a discussion on the impact of strategic alliances with brands on enhancing visibility and credibility and integrating commercial elements into the team's identity. This factor holds particular significance for CSL clubs, given their operation within a sports market undergoing rapid evolution. The State, commercial entities, and diverse supporters influence it.

The theoretical viewpoints outlined above provide a complete framework for exploring this study's research inquiries and objectives. The correlation between corporate branding and organisational culture and values (Hatch & Schultz, 2003) and the collaborative construction

of brand identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2010) are crucial factors for comprehending how Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs establish and demonstrate their corporate identities. The theoretical framework of identity formation and management in these clubs will be informed by the dynamic view of identity (Gioia et al., 2013) and the interaction between visual and non-visual elements (Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006).

The pivotal significance of media representation and public opinion in shaping corporate identity (Cornelissen, 2004; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007) is essential in analysing the organisation of Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs' relationships with stakeholders. This is consistent with the research objective of interpreting the public portrayal of the relationships between these clubs. The analysis of corporate identity within the sports industry, as outlined by Chadwick and Arthur (2008), Ferrand and Pages (1999), and Bühler and Nufer (2010), offers valuable insights into the strategies employed by CSL clubs in effectively managing the intricate interplay among the professional sports sector, the State, commercial entities, and the Chinese populace. Establishing this connection is paramount in analysing the overarching forces influencing the sports sector in China.

The present literature review offers a comprehensive framework for investigating the development and enactment of corporate identity within Chinese Super League football clubs by synthesising various theoretical perspectives. Harmonising corporate branding with organisational culture and values, the collaborative development of brand identity, and the fluidity of identity will be essential for examining Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs. A comprehensive analysis of the impact of media portrayal and public perception on corporate

image and reputation will enhance our understanding of the interaction between these organisations and their various stakeholders. This thorough approach aims to improve the comprehension of the sports industry in China, as well as the dynamics between corporate identity, stakeholder engagement, and external influences. The subsequent section will explain how corporate identity has been formulated and enacted within the Chinese cultural and business context.

2.4.2 Corporate identity in Sport and China

Corporate Identity in the Sports Industry

The sports industry presents unique challenges and opportunities for corporate identity due to its emotional and passionate fan base. Corporate identity in sports is closely tied to team performance, heritage, and community engagement (Chadwick & Arthur, 2008). Teams must balance commercial objectives with the expectations of fans and the community. Sports organisations often leverage their corporate identity to enhance brand loyalty and fan engagement. Ferrand and Pages (1999) discuss how sports teams create a strong brand identity through consistent messaging, community involvement, and memorable experiences for fans. This includes using team colours, mascots, and slogans to create a sense of belonging and loyalty among fans. Sponsorship and partnerships play a significant role in shaping the corporate identity of sports teams. Through strategic alliances with brands, sports teams enhance their visibility and credibility. For instance, the branding of stadiums and jerseys with sponsor logos integrates commercial elements into the team's identity (Bühler & Nufer, 2010).

For example, Manchester United's global branding strategy emphasizes its heritage, success, and community engagement, aligning with the club's corporate identity (Chadwick & Arthur, 2008). Hence, sports organisations are required to manage the intricate relationship between financial objectives adeptly, and supporter demands to establish and maintain a robust corporate image. The present study aims to investigate the strategic methods Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs employ in cultivating their corporate identities through branding initiatives, community engagement, and strategic alliances. A comprehensive understanding of these processes will yield valuable insights into the interconnected dynamics between the professional sports sector, the state, commercial entities, and the Chinese public. This paper examines the processes by which CSL football clubs establish and embody their corporate identities and the impact of these practices on their relationships with various stakeholders.

Corporate Identity in China

The concept of corporate identity in China is influenced by unique cultural, political, and economic factors. The role of the state, the importance of guanxi (discussed further on section 2.2), and the rapidly evolving market dynamics shape how organisations develop and express their identity (Chow et al., 1997). In China, the government plays a significant role in shaping corporate identity, particularly in strategic industries like sports. The State's involvement in promoting sports as a means of enhancing national pride and international reputation influences how sports organisations construct their corporate identity (Hong, 2007). In China, the government indeed plays a significant role in shaping corporate identity, especially in strategic industries like sports. This influence manifests in various ways, including policy

directives, financial support, and regulatory oversight. Hong (2007) emphasizes that the State's involvement in sports aims to enhance national pride and bolster China's international reputation. This top-down approach ensures that sports organisations align with broader national objectives, such as fostering social cohesion and projecting a positive image of China on the global stage. Several scholars support the idea that government policies significantly impact corporate identity in China. Li (2011) notes that the government's strategic plans, such as the "Outline for Building a Leading Sports Nation," dictate the priorities and identity of sports organisations. These policies encourage sports entities to develop identities that reflect national values and contribute to the government's social and political goals. Another perspective focuses on the financial aspect of government involvement. Gao and Yu (2018) argue that government funding and sponsorship are crucial in shaping the corporate identity of sports teams. State-backed financial resources allow sports organisations to invest in infrastructure, talent, and marketing, creating a strong and cohesive identity aligning with governmental objectives. Contrary to the government-centric view, some scholars argue that market forces and commercial actors significantly influence corporate identity in China's sports industry. Xu (2016) posits that the increasing commercialization of sports, driven by private sponsors and market competition, plays a crucial role in shaping corporate identity. This perspective suggests that while government influence is significant, market dynamics and commercial partnerships are equally important in determining how sports organisations present themselves.

Beyond financial and regulatory aspects, cultural and social factors also shape corporate identity. Yang (2015) highlights that the government's promotion of traditional Chinese values

and culture influences how sports organisations construct their identity. This cultural promotion is part of a broader effort to integrate national heritage into the corporate identities of sports teams, enhancing their appeal to the domestic audience and fostering a sense of national pride. However, another counterargument focuses on the impact of globalization. Liu and Brock (2017) contend that international influences, including foreign investments and global branding strategies, increasingly shape the corporate identity of Chinese sports organisations. This view highlights the dual pressures of adhering to national objectives (and domestic audiences) while appealing to global audiences and standards.

The debate over the role of the Chinese government in shaping corporate identity provides a rich context for examining the corporate image practices of CSL football clubs. These clubs operate within a framework heavily influenced by State objectives, aligning their identity with national pride and international reputation. The government's top-down approach ensures that these clubs promote values that resonate with national interests, but it also raises questions about the authenticity and flexibility of their corporate identities.

From a practical perspective, CSL football clubs construct their corporate image through State-aligned initiatives and commercial partnerships. They engage in community activities and youth development programs that reflect national priorities while leveraging sponsorships to enhance their visibility and financial stability. These identity practices highlight the complex interplay between the professional sports sector, the State, commercial actors, and the public. By examining these practices, this research aims to uncover how CSL clubs navigate the dual pressures of adhering to State directives and responding to market dynamics. Understanding

this balance can shed light on the broader relationship between the sports industry and socio-political structures in China, offering insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by sports organisations in this context.

The role of commercial actors, such as sponsors and media partners, is also crucial in shaping the corporate identity of Chinese sports organisations. These partnerships provide financial support and enhance the visibility and credibility of sports teams (Hamil & Chadwick, 2010). Public perception in China is shaped by a mix of traditional values and modern influences. Sports teams must navigate these cultural nuances to build a corporate identity that resonates with Chinese audiences. This involves balancing commercial interests with cultural sensitivity and community engagement (Zhang, 2015).

CSL football clubs create and perform their corporate image through visual branding, strategic communication, and community engagement. One of the key characteristics to building up their corporate image is the tightness of connections between the ownership's brand identity and the football club, apart from visual elements such as logos, team colours, and mascots, which create a distinct identity. In other words, the brand image of the mother company is highly influencing the corporate image of professional football clubs. For example, the owner of Tianjin Quanjian FC, Quanjian Corp, was accused of fraud in medical production by the council. It turns out that Tianjin Quanjian FC was named "诈骗队" (Team Swindle) and "传销队" (Team Pyramid Sale) by the public. Furthermore, strategic communication through media, sponsorships, and social media enhances visibility. It engages fans, which is also a way of building and enhancing their brand image. For example, Guangzhou Evergrand FC held

community engagement activities, such as youth programs and anti-drug campaigns, to build a strong connection with the public and the government.

The identity practices of CSL football clubs illuminate the complex relationship between the professional sports sector, the State, commercial actors, and the Chinese public. The State's involvement ensures that sports clubs align with national objectives, promoting national pride and international reputation. Commercial actors, through sponsorships and partnerships, provide financial support and enhance the corporate image of the clubs. Influenced by cultural values and modern trends, the public interacts with the clubs through fan engagement and community involvement. These interactions create a dynamic corporate identity that reflects the interplay between various stakeholders in the Chinese sports industry. The rest of the thesis will align the concept of "guanxi" and stakeholder theories to map out the interactions between the club and its key stakeholders.

2.5 Organisational behaviour, public relations, and CSR

Organisational behaviour is a behaviour rule formed by the interaction between the whole organisation and its external environment using systematic analysis and knowledge of anthropology, sociology, and psychology (Rollinson, 2008). Organisational behaviour critique/study involves multiple levels of analysis, such as macro and micro perspectives, which are necessary to understand the behaviour within organisations because people do not act in isolation. That is, workers influence their environment and are also influenced by their environment (Onday, 2016).

The dynamic relationship between organisational behaviour, structure, and culture requires careful consideration to create a harmonious and effective corporate environment (Martins & Martins, 2002). The system defines roles, responsibilities, and reporting relationships, and influencing behaviour patterns. The structure significantly affects organisational behaviour. Clear lines of authority, reporting relationships, and job roles prescribed by the form shape how individuals behave within the organisation (Tsai, 2011). For example, a hierarchical structure may lead to different behaviours compared to a flat organisational structure. Successful organisations strive for alignment between these three elements. A cohesive corporate culture aligned with the design fosters positive organisational behaviour, increasing efficiency, employee satisfaction, and achieving the organisational goals (Du et al., 2011).

2.5.1 Organisational structure in Chinese football

China's sports industry management system consists of a "government management system" (政府管理体制) and a "social special management system" (社会专项管理体制). "Government management system" refers to the government departments that conduct exceptional business management and guidance for developing sports industry organisation activities, composed of the sports industry management departments of sports bureaus at all levels (Zheng et al., 2018, p.74). The primary department of sports in China is the General Administration of Sports of the People's Republic of China, one of the institutions directly under the State Council. Under the State General Administration of Sports, there are organs of the General Administration, project management centres directly under the General Administration and sports bureaus of all provinces, cities, and districts, responsible for the

planning, organisation, and management of the national sports industry (Theodoraki, 2004). The "social special management system" is composed of associations under the guidance of the General Administration of Sport to manage the work of the sports industry. China's primary national sports associations include the Chinese National Sports Federation and the Chinese Olympic Committee. Significant individual sports associations include the Chinese Football Association, the Chinese Basketball Association, etc. (Liang, 2014).

The football club is a trade association under the Chinese Football Association. The China Football Association is the only national non-profit social organisation legally voluntarily formed by units and individuals engaged in football in mainland China (Gratton et al., 2012). It is one of the members of the China National Sports Federation and is under the management of the State General Administration of Sports and the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The main functions of the Chinese Football Association are to study and formulate the development plan and policies of football; to be responsible for and guide the construction of the project club and the cultivation of reserve talents; to manage the national teams at all levels of the project; to study, formulate and organise the implementation of the national competition system, competition planning and referee law of the project; to organise the training of coaches and referees; to be responsible for the researching of technology and improving the level of training; to establish the football field standards and football equipment research and development; and to carry out international exchanges and technical exchanges (Xinhuanet, 2015). The chart below shows the organisational structure of Chinese Super League clubs (Zheng et al., 2018).

Organisational Structure of Chinese Super League Clubs

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                        ┌─────────────────────────┐
                        │  Stakeholders Conference │
                        └─────────────────────────┘
                                    │          ┌──────────────────────┐
                                    │──────────│  Board of supervisors │
                        ┌────────────────────┐ └──────────────────────┘
                        │ Board of Directors │
                        └────────────────────┘
                                    │          ┌──────────────────────┐
                                    │──────────│  Secretary of the     │
                        ┌────────────────────┐ │  board of directors   │
                        │  General Manager   │ └──────────────────────┘
                        └────────────────────┘
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| Department of International Affairs | Competition Department | Logistics Support Department | Internet Business Department | Business Development Department | Operation Office | Financial Department | Youth Department |

Figure 1. Organisational structure of Chinese Super League clubs

As football clubs participate in the Chinese Super League, they also accept the management of CSL and are bound by the articles of association of the CSL. The CSL Committee was founded on April 14, 2006, with a registered capital of 2 million Yuan. The Chinese Football Association has contributed 720,000 Yuan to occupy 36% of the equity, and 16 CSL clubs, including football clubs, have contributed 80,000 Yuan each, accounting for 64% of the equity in total (Wei et al., 2013).

2.5.2 Organisational culture

Kilmann and Saxton argue that organisational culture is a norm developed in working groups (Kilmann & Saxton, 1986). In contrast, Deal and Kennedy (1983) suggest that culture is comprised of the central values that an organisation agrees with. According to Schneider et al (2016), organisational culture is an emotion or atmosphere transmitted through the natural

environment and the interaction between organisational members, customers, or other external personnel. Fleury (2009) recognises organisational culture as the common understanding of something formed by the interactions of organisational members. Schein (1990) believes that the above debates on organisational culture need to reveal the essence of the organisational culture fully. He defined *organisational culture* as a series of basic assumptions created, discovered, and developed by an organisation in adapting to the external environment and when conducting internal integration. These basic assumptions are considered adequate due to their excellent operation, so they are taught to new organisation members as a way of thinking, feeling, and acting correctly when facing similar problems. Schein thinks that the deepest level of organisational culture is a basic assessment because he thinks that the basic assumption is that organisation members take it for granted and cannot negotiate. Value can be discussed, and some organisation members cannot follow these values. He thinks that there are three levels of organisational culture: one is an artefact, such as visible organisation structure and operation process; the other is exposed value, such as the organisational strategy and goal. The third is the basic assumption, such as beliefs, ideas, and feelings (which is the ultimate source of value and action). He believes that to grasp the culture of an organisation correctly, we should grasp the basic assumption of the organisational culture according to the following aspects: the study of the organisation's adaptation to the external environment, and the study of how the organisation manages the internal factors; the understanding of human activities and the nature of human relations. Hofstede (2011) first put forward the theory of organisational culture as involving differences in national culture. He believed that national culture is mainly different at the value level, while organisational culture is so mainly at the surface practice level.

The study of organisational culture in China is still in a superficial stage, and the study of organisational culture in China lags behind the practice of the development of organisational culture in China (Tsui et al., 2006). In transitioning from the scientific management of sports, we should not only perfect the system and implement the rule of law but also build a corresponding organisational culture to assist the system. Cultural management is the management of the 21st century (Lau et al., 2017). Under cultural management, the construction of a sports organisation culture has become the "guiding target" of sports organisation management. The combination of sports organisation culture and an associated mechanism system has pointed out the direction for the Chinese sports community (Tsui et al., 2006). Many sports organisational culture constructions in China are still in the period of enlightenment or entry but updating the concept in the reform of the system is essential. A change in sports organisational culture must accompany the reform, and the modern sports organisational system must be matched with the modern sports organisational culture.

2.5.3 Corporate social responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a concept that has attracted worldwide attention and acquired a new resonance in the global economy (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). Heightened interest in CSR in recent years has stemmed from the advent of globalisation and international trade, which have reflected the increased business complexity and new demands for enhanced transparency and corporate identity. In this context, the spotlight is increasingly focusing on the role of business in society and progressive organisations seek to differentiate themselves through their engagement in CSR. The fundamental idea of CSR is that business

corporations should work towards meeting the needs of a more comprehensive array of stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995; Waddock et al., 2002). More specific than this, these interests are directed towards causes deemed to be 'socially responsible'. In so doing, the company explicitly evidences its ethics and morals. More generally, CSR is a set of management practices that ensure that the company maximises the positive impacts of its operations on society and is operating in a manner that meets and even exceeds the legal, ethical, commercial and public expectations that society has of business (Jamali & Mirshak, 2007). For example, professional sports clubs can use their unique resources (ticket donation, stadium facilities, good relationship with the media, players, club staff and sponsors) to fulfil their social responsibility, which can produce more significant comprehensive benefits than other social industries. CSR has dragged the focus from researchers and turned to different academic debates around the concept. Babiak and Wolfe (2009) put forward that social responsibility should become the institutionalised responsibility of professional sports clubs.

At the core of the CSR debate is the idea that corporations should transition from compliance to a mode of engagement, from harm minimisation to value creation (Luetkenhorst, 2004). This view has become central to the CSR discourse. Also implied in the debate is the idea that the private sector is the dominant engine of growth – the principal creator of value and managerial resources – and that it should contribute to economic growth and opportunity – in a manner that is equitable and sustainable. CSR is founded on the more substantial recognition of the role of business as an active partner in a world of scarcity and dwindling resources. However, while increasing attention has been accorded in recent years to CSR as a postulate for ethical and responsible behaviour in business, very little is known about the

practice of CSR in developing countries (Peloza & Shang, 2011).

Various scholars (Cannon et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2014) have highlighted the Western-centric nature of academic publications. For instance, most of the CSR studies conducted so far have been in the context of developed countries such as Western Europe, the USA, and Australia, and we still need to learn more about the practices in developing countries (Belal, 2003). Belal also highlights the need for more CSR research in the context of developing country, given the valuable insights it can offer to the jaded palettes of Western scholars. There is thus a certain level of lingering academic curiosity about diverging CSR's understanding and practice in light of the vastly different economic, social, and cultural conditions. In his exploration of the institutional determinants of social responsibility, Jones et al (2009) highlights the importance of the national socio-cultural environment and the level of national economic development as important variables influencing CSR interpretation and practice. In this regard, it is valuable to explore the concept of corporate social responsibility in developing countries and to measure the practice of corporate social responsibility in developing countries.

Combined with the background and questions of this research, as a developing country, China's corporate social responsibility practice will provide different ideas from a different perspective. Due to the differences between culture and society, the concept of corporate social responsibility in Chinese organisations and companies still needs to be more specific.

Yin and Zhang (2012) argue that organisations use their professional advantages to solve a series of social, environmental, employee and other problems so that when organisations fulfil their social responsibilities, their economic benefits can also be improved simultaneously. This means that their responsibility competitiveness can be enhanced. Secchi (2007) also believes that although it is not utilitarian for an organisation to fulfil its social responsibility, it can be transformed into an organisation's competitiveness, which is conducive to the development of the international market. Corporate social responsibility can enhance not only the social image of an organisation but also its long-term profitability. For example, China's Suning group has accumulated a good reputation in Italy by collecting donations for the earthquake disaster in Italy, which also helped them to acquire the Inter Milan club and open Suning group's trade operations in Europe.

2.6 Football governance in China and stakeholder relations

2.6.1 Football governance and Chinese Football Association (CFA) practices

In 2014, the CCP put forward the slogan of building a sports power. Brownell (1995) explores how sports have been used as a tool for nation-building in China. The Chinese government, particularly during the Communist era, utilised sports to foster a sense of national pride, to cultivate a collective identity, and to promote socialist values—sports have shaped Chinese nationalism and constructed a modern Chinese identity. After China engaged with global sports events, such as the Olympic Games, it has been leveraged to enhance China's international image, promote national interests, and boost diplomatic relations (Brownell,

2013). Hence, nations have demonstrated an eagerness to bolster their national identity, particularly after the 2008 Olympics which marked a substantial growth phase. Beyond the 2008 Olympics, the continuous procession of numerous significant sports mega-events has further perpetuated the perception of China as a global sporting powerhouse and prominent sports market. Notable instances include the Winter Olympics in 2022 and the intended hosting of the Asian Cup in 2023 (the host was changed due to China's COVID-19 policies). Football is a critical focal point for development and reform within this trajectory. This holds great significance for this chapter, offering insights into the corporate growth strategies of clubs and their inclination to navigate the fringes of state policies to optimise revenue and expand their visibility. At the league-governance level, the Chinese Football Association (CFA) has prioritised professional football club (PFC) salience. At the club-governance level, the CFA has adopted a gradualist approach to institutional reform by introducing private or state-owned enterprises (Ma & Zheng, 2022).

Peng et al (2019) suggests that the failure of previous policy attempts at improving Chinese football, match-fixing scandals, the continuing underperformance of the national men's team, the increasingly critical national mood towards football, and the turnover of the Presidency combined in the mid-2010s to open up a 'policy window' that facilitated this significant change. Most of the existing literature has focused on the overarching impact on Chinese football development and Chinese society, showing that there needs to be more exploration at the organisational level discussion. My research will follow Peng's work but explore the perspective of football clubs and how these issues impact their identity as a business.

2.6.2 Chinese professional football organisational and governance structure

The milestone starting point of Xi's government-driven development of the Chinese football industry was the publishing of "The Overall Plan of Reform and Development of Chinese Football" in 2015. It regards football as economic and social development content and implements a "three-step" strategy. This is based on the principle of the separation of government and society, clear rights and responsibilities, and autonomy according to policy guidelines (CFA, 2015). The CFA's dual identity, being both a government agency and a social organisation, was transformed following the introduction of "The Plan." In March 2015, the State Council introduced "The Plan," signalling that the development of football was now a national priority extending beyond a singular industry. Detailed elaboration of this policy will be presented in the subsequent section. This marked a significant turning point in the reform of Chinese football, elevating football to a national priority, surpassing numerous other sectors. This crucial policy document necessitated the reorganisation of the CFA, demanding autonomy from the Sports Ministry. According to Titan Sports (2019), the directive emphasised that the Chinese Football Association should operate on the principle of self-management, establishing a clear separation from both governmental and societal realms. Consequently, the policy outlines that the CFA should be detached from the General Administration of Sports of China, granting it a substantial degree of independence concerning its internal structure, the development of work plans, financial and salary administration, personnel affairs, and international engagements.

The new organisation, the Professional League Council, became responsible for the league organisation and its operations, including the Chinese Super League, the China League, and the Yi League. Zhang Li, the official investor of Guangzhou R & F Club, said in an interview with the media that since October 2019, the preparations for the professional league (that is, the "Professional League Council" in the "Overall Plan for the Reform and Development of Chinese Football") have "stagnated" (Ma, 2021). Zhang Li also has another identity as leader of the preparatory group of the professional league council. He is regarded as showing dissatisfaction with the role and actions of the Chinese Football Association in relation to the preparatory process of the professional league council. The preparatory team includes investors from Guangzhou Evergrande and involves an in-depth cooperation "guanxi" with Zhang Li's R&F Group in Guangzhou real estate. The two parties were developed together through the club's cooperation. The club seeks freedom of development, and establishing a professional league council will give it independent management and distribution rights. The Football Association only has the right to supervise significant issues and, through the exchange of representatives to ensure the perfection of the mechanism, the Football Association will follow the football reform and do what the program requires.

Regarding this matter, the media questioned the Chinese Football Association on its reluctance to delegate power (Titan Sports, 2020). In addition, the CFA took charge of youth training, coach training and the CFA Cup. Figure 2 shows the proposed structure of professional Chinese football after 2015 (Gao & Chappelet, 2021). Figure 3 shows the organisational structure of the CSL post-2015. We can also infer from the 2015 decision that the club owners will own the league soon.
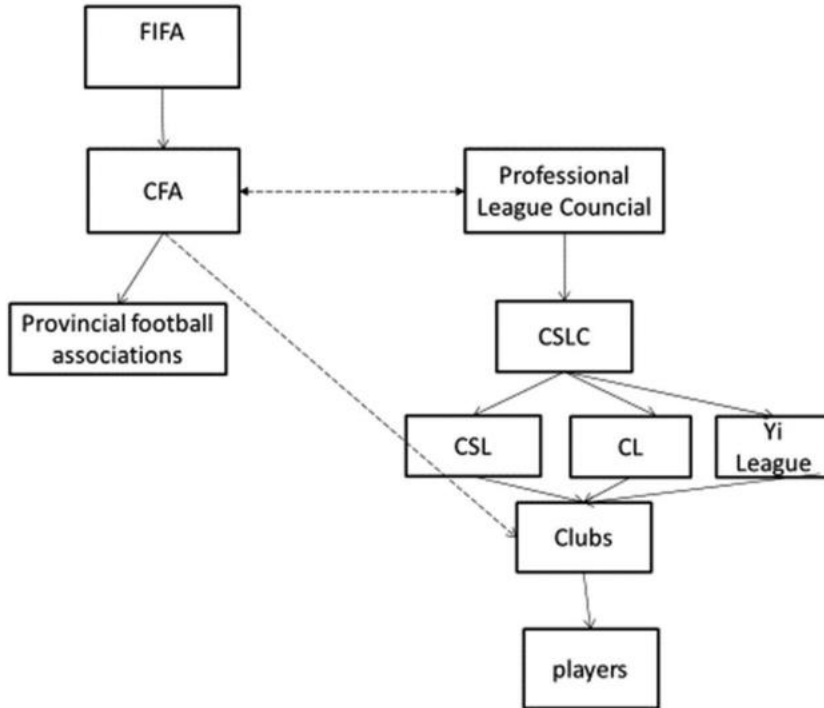
Figure 2. Proposed structure of Chinese professional football (Gao & Chappelet, 2021).
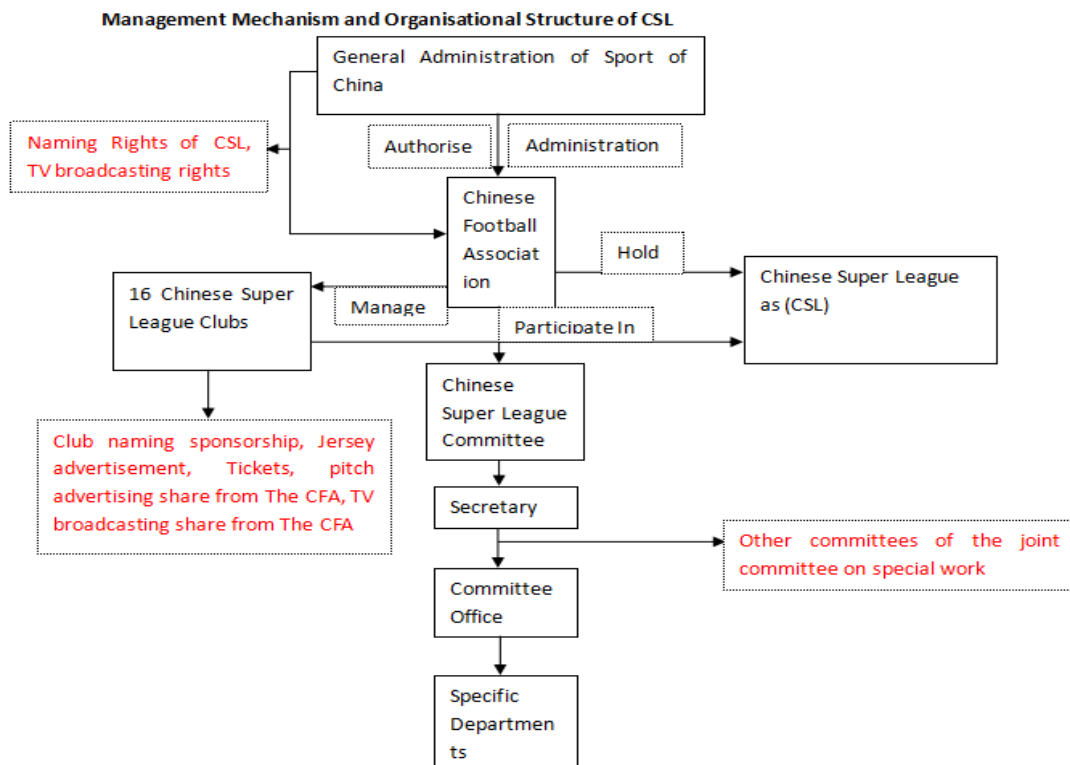
Figure 3. Organisational structure of the Chinese Super League after 2015

During the two years following the 2015 decision, there has been continuous discussion of a plan for a new organisation that is expected to manage professional leagues independently, to be referred to as the Professional League Council or a similar title. The function of the new organisation is still in doubt. It has been seven years since "The overall plan" (CFA, 2015) believed that the CFA would be separate from the Sports Ministry and become an independent Non-Governmental Organisation. The CFA's separation from the Sports Ministry and establishment as an NGO was able to grant it greater autonomy and independence in decision-making. It allows the CFA to operate more flexibly, develop its strategies, and set its policies without direct government interference.

In 2017, establishing the Professional League Council (PLC) marked a pivotal moment in the supervision of the Chinese Super League (CSL) and its subordinate leagues, seeking to elevate the levels of professional administration, governance, and sustainability within the realm of Chinese football. This initiative underscored a paradigm shift towards a meticulously organised and professionally managed approach to overseeing league operations. Following this period, structural reforms were introduced to empower the CFA with greater authority over its internal functions, encompassing strategic planning, financial administration, workforce management, and international involvement. The inception of the Professional League Council represented a significant stride in transforming the landscape of league governance and decision-making towards a more decentralised model. Within this context, the preparatory group associated with the Professional League Council assumed a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of professional football in China, steering the league's strategic course, and determining its future trajectory.

However, the decision to separate from the Sports Ministry and attain a higher degree of autonomy for the Chinese Football Association (CFA) introduced complexities in the coordination of various government entities, sports organisations, and stakeholders (Peng et al., 2019). This transition required the establishment of novel relationships, the negotiation of partnerships, and independent navigation through bureaucratic processes. These changes were anticipated to be intricate and time-consuming.

In practical terms, following the separation from the Sports Ministry, the CFA embarked on an initiative to redefine its relationships and partnerships. For example, seeking cooperation with club owners, especially real-estate companies like the Evergrande Group. The CFA had to proactively engage with diverse stakeholders in Chinese football and beyond, fostering collaboration and coordination. They needed to navigate bureaucratic channels and administrative procedures independently, shaping the trajectory of Chinese football in alignment with the new policy directives. This transformation aligns with the study by Peng et al (2019), which has highlighted the challenges and complexities that can arise when an organisation seeks greater autonomy and independence, particularly while establishing new relationships and negotiating bureaucratic procedures autonomously. The process of navigating these intricacies in a new operational context was an expected outcome of the CFA's shift towards autonomy.

After the reform, as an independent entity, the CFA was required to adhere to higher governance standards, financial management, and reporting. This can improve transparency, minimise conflicts of interest, and enhance public trust in the organisation's operations (Klijn

& Skelcher, 2007). However, while independence can bring greater autonomy to the CFA, it raises questions of accountability. As an NGO, the CFA must establish transparent governance structures, adhere to best practices, and be accountable to its stakeholders (Buchholz & Lopatta, 2017). Balancing autonomy with effective governance and accountability mechanisms can be challenging. In fact, the recent corruption scandals involving the president of the CFA and previous national team manager Li Tie shows that the CFA hasn't met the requirements of the reform policy. For example, the latest reports (Xinhuanet, 2023) show that ex-president Chen Xuyuan utilised his position and authority to seek benefits for others and illegally accepted other people's property and possessions, also having moved unauthorised CFA funds.

After the reform, the governance structure of the CFA as an independent NGO may differ from the structures typically seen in European football. The CFA will have a board of directors or governing council responsible for decision-making and strategic planning. European football governance structures often consist of elected officials, committees, and executive bodies that oversee different aspects of the sport's administration (Geeraert, Scheerder & Bruyninckx, 2013).

2.6.3 Autonomy of the Chinese Football Association

Legitimacy, the rule of law, and transparency are the essential principles of good governance, and dealing with the relationship between the sports industry's autonomy and the rule of law is an essential prerequisite for good governance. For example, after a long development

history, FIFA has a high degree of autonomy in football. As a member of FIFA, the China Football Association should also have a certain autonomy in the field of domestic football and not be excessively interfered with by the government. However, in 2002, a series of corruption cases involving the principal director of CFA as the defendant aroused social discussion on the good governance of the CFA, and the core of the discussion was the CFA's autonomy as well. Like FIFA, the "pyramid" organisational structure and power level of the CFA also significantly impacted its autonomy. The CFA authorises its subordinate provincial (city) football associations, league organisations and clubs to carry out their football activities, which other external forces support. Therefore, the CFA can influence any football association, organisation, and club of its subordinate through governance means, influencing the development of domestic football affairs, which is also an essential embodiment of the autonomy of the CFA in the field of football. This leads to the phenomenon of ineffective governance. For example, due to the "foreign aid restriction order" issued by the Chinese Football Association, major football clubs have spent large amounts of money recruiting excellent domestic players to maintain competitiveness. However, the lack of excellent domestic players means that the major football clubs have to focus on youth training (Peng et al., 2019). According to the law of football development, youth training is a long and arduous process, while the pursuit of football clubs for team performance is urgent, so a paradox is formed. Some clubs, to obtain excellent young players as soon as possible, even instigate young players to violate the discipline of their training institutions deliberately, meaning that these clubs can obtain young players at a lower price. At the same time, the training institutions that have lost outstanding young players have suffered losses, and their enthusiasm for training talent has also been frustrated. Peng et al (2019) highlighted the

challenges and complexities that can arise when an organisation seeks greater autonomy and independence, particularly when establishing new relationships and negotiating bureaucratic procedures autonomously. The process of navigating these intricacies in a new operational context was an expected outcome of the CFA's shift towards autonomy.

2.7 Chinese media (mass/social media), public perception and football

2.7.1 Mass media and public perception

The role of mass media in sports is to communicate and transmit messages from sports organisations or athletes to the intended audience. Considering the effects of sports on different dimensions of personal and social life, the role of mass media as a mediator is essential. Potter's (1998) work lays the theoretical groundwork by emphasising how media plays a pivotal role in shaping the social reality. Understanding the media's influence on public perception is crucial in unravelling the corporate identitys of the CSL football clubs as media narratives contribute to constructing the image of these clubs. Wenner (1989) defines the reciprocal relationship between sports and media. The framework aids in understanding how media portrayal shape's public opinion of CSL football teams. It connects the professional sports sector, the government, businesses, and the Chinese public. According to Lynch and McGoldrick (2015), the new media significantly impacts the narratives shared by clubs and their fans. It provides insight into the relationship between clubs and their supporters. The transformation of new media demonstrates its impact on people's perception of CSL football clubs. This study provides valuable insights into the sports media industry, giving us a better

understanding of how CSL football clubs operate within the larger context. Raney and Bryant (2009) researched the impact of media on perceptions of companies and its influence on perceptions of sports teams. Their goal was to grasp the impact of media on shaping public opinions of businesses and sports teams. It helps me to build on their idea in my research. In 2004, Crawford emphasized the significance of being a fan in shaping the relationship between clubs and the general public. This argument needs a concrete, real-life example. My research will be based on Crawford's work and will demonstrate how this theory can be applied to various situations through examples.

Mass media, with its established credibility and widespread distribution channels, holds considerable sway as a source of information, although its narratives are subject to potential editorial biases. In contrast, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok offer real-time engagement and viral potential while catering to younger demographics with targeted reach. The influence of mass media is often tempered by limited control over narratives, given the editorial shaping of stories. In contrast, sports organisations wield more direct power over their image through social media, engaging with fans and generating content. However, this direct control exposes organisations to public opinions and discussions beyond their complete management. Mass media primarily operates as a one-way conduit of information, fostering passive audience reception. In contrast, social media fosters interactive engagement, enabling audiences to actively contribute, share, comment, and participate in discussions, ultimately creating a more participatory and dynamic experience.

2.7.2 Social media in China and its uniqueness

The popularity of social media is growing globally. It is the primary method for individuals to communicate with each other publicly. Social media usage is on the rise in China, according to (Yu et al., 2013; DeLisle et al., 2016) social media significantly influences self-perception and national identity in China. It assists in forming a collective national identity and understanding one's place within the wider society. Hao (2023) discusses how digital platforms intertwine with China's history, culture, and politics, influencing people's understanding of their identity.

The trend of promoting national identity, as highlighted by the convergence of patriotism, historical glory, and cultural heritage in narratives on social media (Stratoudaki, 2022), has significantly shaped the Chinese public's perception of competitive sports. This influence extends to the relationship between the nation's sporting achievements and the development of its national identity. For instance, comments on social media posts about top-tier football clubs often link the national team's poor performance to the slow growth of said clubs. Moreover, critiques are directed at the perceived inaction of the CFA. These discussions on social media platforms influence how the corporate identity of CSL clubs is constructed. This phenomenon is closely tied to digital collective consciousness (Yu et al., 2013), where content resonates with national emotions, bridging personal experiences and collective identity to shape the perception of the football clubs and their role in contributing to or detracting from national sporting success.

Meanwhile, debates about social media research in China have highlighted the interplay between global influencer trends and practices and China's sociocultural context (Li & Peng, 2021). One focus of the debate is the balance between the aspirational ideals propagated by Western influencers and the emphasis on relatability and authenticity inherent in the Chinese culture (Meng & Nansen, 2022). As will be demonstrated, while Western influencers often project aspirational lifestyles, China's cultural backdrop underscores the significance of authenticity in building trust between influencers and followers (Wang & Song, 2020). Chapter 6 will combine the findings to analyse the critical role of social media in Chinese society and the Chinese sports industry.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Chapter introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the research design of the thesis. It illustrates my research approach, data collection methods and data analysis process. The difficulties faced during the data collection and the subsequent alterations made to the research design will be depicted as following the explanation of the research design. Furthermore, ethical considerations and research limitations of my thesis will be demonstrated.

My research was undertaken under an interpretative paradigm which acknowledges that life may be explained in terms of multiple interacting factors and that cause, and effect are mutually interdependent (Skinner et al., 2015). The interpretive paradigm is initially rooted in the fact that methods used to understand knowledge related to human and social sciences cannot be the same as its usage in physical sciences because human interprets their world and then act based on such interpretation while the world does not (Hammersley, 2013, p. 26). The philosophy of qualitative research is "interpretive, humanistic, and naturalistic" (Creswell, 2007, p.28). It places significant importance on subjectivity. According to interpretivism, there are multiple perspectives to comprehend something instead of a single objective truth. Scholars who approach knowledge from an interpretative perspective seek to comprehend the complexity of a situation within its specific context rather than making broad assumptions for everyone (Creswell, 2007).

My interrogation of Chinese football, for example, positions the phenomenon as multifaceted, complex, and influenced by various stakeholders, cultural factors, and institutional dynamics. Understanding multiple realities in this situation means realizing that different actors in Chinese football may see things differently regarding governance structures, CSR practices, and public perceptions. For instance, stakeholders, including clubs, the CFA, fans, media, and government agencies, may have different perspectives on transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement in Chinese football.

My thesis follows a qualitative case study research design. The philosophy of qualitative research is "interpretive, humanistic, and naturalistic" (Creswell, 2007, p.28). The ontological assumption is that no single reality encompasses multiple realities for any phenomenon (Speziale et al., 2011). The ontological assumption of multiple realities implies interpretive flexibility in analysing and understanding Chinese football governance. It implies that there is no single explanation that can fully describe Chinese football. Instead, I delved into various perspectives and narratives on the management of football, corporate responsibility in China, and public perception of these issues. It entails acknowledging and contemplating diverse viewpoints and information on a particular subject and then reflecting on them thoughtfully for a thorough comprehension. I thoughtfully looked at Chinese football, understanding their viewpoints and opinions and considering how their background, experiences, and views might affect their understanding of Chinese soccer management. Additionally, I have contextualised my findings within China's broader socio-cultural, political, and economic context to understand how these contextual factors influence the dynamics of football governance, CSR practices, and public perception.

In relation to this research, this position enables me to understand, interpret and articulate a particular interpretation of the corporate identity of Chinese Super League clubs, offering a perspective grounded within a critical contextual understanding of the Chinese sport system, and the interaction between two specific clubs and their stakeholders. My thesis is valuable because I am constructing a narrative of Chinese football based on existing documents and public discourse. The chapter demonstrates how these philosophical underpinnings have informed the methods I applied, which are then examined in detail in the following sections. More details of the interpretive paradigm and its connection to my research have been stated in section 3.2.

This research investigates critical factors within the Chinese business environment, integrating political and social elements. This includes organisational structure, stakeholder relations, public representations, and the media-sport-corporate nexus. While scholars outside China have extensively explored these ideas, they still need to be addressed within the Chinese sports field (Connell, 2018; Zhang, 2020). These factors are crucial in identifying the key features of the Chinese Super League (CSL) club corporate identitys and establishing connections between the professional sports sector, the state, commercial actors, and the Chinese public. This chapter outlines the methodological framework and research design for conducting the case analysis and interpretation to examine the corporate identity of CSL clubs, focusing on organisational behaviour, corporate social responsibility agendas, media perceptions, and public representation. Specifically, this study focuses on two prominent CSL clubs, Jiangsu Suning FC and Guangzhou FC, chosen due to their geographical distribution covering the entire nation and their current diverse situations, including dissolution, financial,

and political crises (Titan Sport, 2021). The original intention was to collect data and interpret cases related to their organisational structure, strategies, representation, responses to CFA policies, main survival issues, stakeholder relationships, media portrayal, and public comments on the clubs to explore the future implications of these issues.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, in 2015, the "General Plan of Chinese Football Development and Reform" was published. It marks the undertaking of Chinese professional football applying increased professionalisation, creating a chaotic phenomenon with both positive development and negative impacts on the football clubs and the whole sector. Therefore, the decision for the project's scope was set between 2015 and 2022. Following this phase, issues and conflicts occurred in the league, such as club dissolution, player pay cuts, corruption, etc., which affected the discussion in society and the public's perception, requiring a critical discussion from the perspectives of Chinese society and cultural considerations (Hoeve et al., 2014). Drawing on organisational sociology and stakeholder theory (Crane & Ruebottom, 2010; Freeman et al., 2010; Freeman et al., 2007; Strittmatter et al., 2021), this thesis has employed a case study design to conduct documentary data collection, media content data collection and netnographic social media data collection. In alignment with the research questions and aims, this methodology was designed as an appropriate way to examine the external image of two particular professional clubs within the CSL by looking at the marketing of the clubs, their media portrayals, social media posts and comments, and to explore the critical features of the corporate identity of CSL clubs. This is as well as analysing the connection between the media-corporate nexus and the state.

3.2 Research paradigm and case study design

As Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009) note, the interpretative paradigm focuses on the researcher's understanding of the construction of complex realities within the social world in which they live. Based on my understanding of CSL, its key features include a politically driven system, a negative public image, lack of transparency and accountability, chaotic management, and the conflict of benefits between stakeholders. This research aims to create a narrative and understanding of the issues and developments within the social phenomenon of the Chinese Super League from the perspective of stakeholder relationships and public perceptions. Positioning a research project within a paradigmatic framework is a necessary task that leads researchers to "reflect upon the broader epistemological and philosophical consequences of their perspective" (Perren & Ram, 2004, p. 95). The task is to simplify the text while retaining the original meaning. Each research paradigm has certain assumptions, strategies, methods, and limitations, and how the quality of the resultant research is evaluated differs. Researchers have to decide on the method they will use and understand its essence (De Vos et al., 2011).

Interpretivism is based on a life-world ontology that all observation is both theory- and value-laden. What individuals perceive is always impacted by our preexisting attitudes and concerns. Investigating how individuals interact in society does not centre on uncovering an objective truth unrelated to our emotions and experiences (Leitch et al., 2010). In my research, it was the most appropriate choice to follow interpretation, to build valuable theories, and to identify the social problems and the connections and capital exchange between stakeholders behind the surface. Epistemologically, the viewpoint of the interpretative paradigm is that our

knowledge of reality is a social construction by human actors. An interpretative paradigm indicates the inner connection between things by comprehending the subjective meaning of actors or chronological events (Spector-Mersel, 2010). For example, one thesis aims to give an overview of the organisational structures and policy.

Yin (2003, p.) defined case study research design as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used." Creswell (2009) defines a case study as exploring a system such as a program, events, activity, or group of people. The defining characters of case study research is its pay attention on 'why' and 'how' questions and investigating the complexity of a particular phenomenon (Myers, 2009). For example, in my thesis, I am asking how the features of CSL corporate identitys contribute to explaining the relationship between the professional sport sector, the state, commercial actors and the Chinese public, and why aren't the CFA policies working as expected. As mentioned in Chapter 1, my questions are: "What are the features of the CSL football clubs' corporate identities?" and "How do these features contribute to explaining the sport-state-media-public nexus?" To assist in answering the above questions, the case study design is capable of helping with both the interpretation and narrative analysis. Based on the above discussion, the specific context of Chinese football with its complex features has made the case study research design the most suitable approach for my thesis. A case study of CSL club corporate identity is appropriate for my thesis based on its characteristics of exploratory and descriptive research (Mouton, 2001).

A case study can be used to describe processes, individual or group behaviour in its total setting, and the sequence of events in which the behaviour occurs (Stake, 2005). The case method supports theory building (Yin, 2009). The insights from case study research can be used as hypotheses or propositions to build theory in further research. Research in the form of case studies is essential for advancing the understanding of a particular field (Merriam, 2009).

The emerging nature of Chinese football corporate identity research is the most appropriate to a qualitative interpretative approach that can yield a rich understanding of critical issues. In my case, I adopted a rigorous approach to the data collection, which included multiple sources (media articles, social media contents & organisational policies etc,.) and methods to build up as much of a comprehensive picture of the situation as can be known within the research parameters and constraints (see discussion below) to develop a practical and theoretical understanding and generate new and alternative theories and concepts. Further corroborating the chosen research approach for this project is the fact that other studies on the development of European and Chinese football/leagues have used a similar research approach (Yin, 2009). The following section illustrates the research data collection methods, containing a discussion for the trustworthiness measures where applicable.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Documentary evidence

Qualitative researchers can use a variety of (at least two) sources of evidence, that is, using different data sources and methods to seek convergence and confirmation. Within an interpretative approach, qualitative documentary data and analysis helps provide the means to discover and describe key features of the phenomenon under investigation.

Document analysis is a methodical process of scrutinizing and verifying printed and electronic documents, including those available on computers and the Internet. Document analysis, like other qualitative research approaches, entails scrutinizing and comprehending data in order to gain insight and knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Document analysis may be the most lasting form of qualitative content analysis in sports management research (Andrews et al., 2011). Document analysis is often used with other qualitative research methods as part of triangulation - "a combination of methods to study the same phenomenon" (Andrews et al., 2011, p.126).

In this project, documentary evidence was the critical data to collect. Accessible policies have been collected from the official website of the Chinese Football Association (see Appendix 1). Club statements and postings can be found on the official club website, but most were not fully accessible. The documents included CFA policies related to the documents targeted to be collected such as the general plan of the Chinese Football Reform and Development (The

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State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015), club documents such as marketing promotion documents, strategic reports, annual reports, etc. Significant policies included "Notice on non-enterprise change of club name in professional leagues at all levels" and "Proposal for men's professional football club, its players and coaches to adjust salary reasonably and overcome difficulties together". For a full list of every policy document collected for this research, see Appendix 2.

Public articles and comments have been collected from mainstream Chinese social media such as Weibo (微博), WeChat (微信), Zhihu (知乎), etc. All collected documents were related to the research question; publicly accessible documents were collected from Titan Sport (体坛周报), Zuqiu (足球报), Renmin Daily (人民日报), Hupu Sport (虎扑体育), All Football (懂球帝) and PP Sport (PP 体育) etc, which will be shown in more detail in the following sections. The following section will discuss the sources of media data and how I processed the media data collection. A detailed chart of my documentary data set has been shown in Appendix 1.

3.3.2 Social media data collection

I used the public comments from social media to understand the roles played by mass and social media in the construction and perception of Tianjin and Jiangsu football clubs' corporate identities from the perspective of historical and cultural factors. I collected social media content and articles from WeChat, Weibo, Zhihu and Douyin. WeChat has the largest user group in China (Lien & Cao, 2014). All CSL teams release club information, the latest events and community news through the WeChat official account. Weibo is also a social

media platform with many users in China. Chinese Super League clubs publish critical information and interact with fans through Weibo. Some Chinese Super League clubs have even closed their official websites and used Weibo accounts instead of official websites for publicity. For example, Tianjian FC shut down its club website after a change in ownership but kept promoting and being active on both Weibo and Douyin platforms. Douyin is currently the most trending social media platform in China. As a topic, Chinese football often becomes a trending topic on Douyin, providing a valuable resource for data collection.

For the media articles, I selected articles between 2016 and 2023 (even though Jiangsu FC was dissolved in 2021, there are still media articles and online debates were depicting its stories); the original plan was to start from 2015, but most of the 2015 media articles could not be accessed because their website shows that articles before 2015 were not publicly online. Therefore, I started in 2016 and conducted keyword searching to build up my data set. I gathered keywords from 2 different channels: keywords around clubs, based on 4 categories: articles from an existing policy from the government; from the existing football management literature in China; from existing media articles, and from articles with trending words around football in social media. Moreover, I segmented the second channel into four different categories. The strategy to expand the search was to make a combination of keywords to narrow down the number of key documents and reduce irrelevant content.

Two channels:

1) Initial keywords around Jiangsu, Guangzhou and Tianjin FC

广州恒大 Guangzhou Evergrande
恒大 Evergrande
江苏苏宁 Jiangsu Suning
苏宁 Suning
泰达 TEDA group
天津 Tianjin
津门虎 Jinmen Tiger
解散 dissolution

2) By searching relevant keywords based on four categories

Category 1 From an existing policy from the government	Category 2 From existing football management literature in China	Category 3 From existing media articles	Category 4 From trending words around football in social media
改革 reform	治理 Governance	冲突(摩擦) conflict	中性化(非企业化) neutral
投资人 investor	监管（问责制)Accountability	形象 representation	更名 re-naming
足协 CFA	透明度 Transparency	行为 behaviour	协商 consult
政策 Policy	社会责任 Social responsibility	市场 marketing	破产 bankrupt
职业化 professionalisation	关系 Guanxi	全球化 globalisation	归化 naturalisation
降薪 salary cut	互惠 Mutual benefits	金元足球（时代）golden-money football	欠薪 fail to pay wages

体育局 sport bureau	公关 Public relations	球迷 fans	退出经营 exit operation
集团 corps	利益相关者(合作伙伴) Stakeholoders	合作 corporation	好处 benefits
	赞助 sponsorship		现象 phenomenon

3.3.3 Mainstream media sources

The media can be accessed through a multitude of information sources. For instance, newspapers, magazines, and other types of printed content. Publications such as news articles and magazines provide insight into public perceptions on various topics. Meanwhile, Personal stories covering a range of life experiences can be told through books or online writings authored by the person. Using qualitative analysis, social scientists have studied things like textbooks, websites, political speeches, and patient information. Individuals have utilised online discussions and social media to observe various social behaviours (Hughes et al., 2012).There may even be open-access qualitative data archives of research interviews and focus groups that you could use for your purposes.

Discussions around media positioning and politics are trending topics in media-related research (Tang & Cooper, 2018; Mirer, 2023; Brooke, 2019. etc). Media positioning strategically places content on various media platforms for a specific audience. This placement affects the organisation's reputation, legitimacy, and stakeholder relations (Weizman, 2008). Public organisations and corporations were found to be similar, whereas corporations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) differed the most strongly in their

media positioning. Corporations appeared most prominently in the media. While corporations and public organisations were more often related to organisational issues, NGOs were more often linked to substantial problems and received more favourable coverage (Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2017). Therefore, the relationship and connection between media positioning and politics is significant in media analysis and research, corresponding to this study's consideration of political factors.

In this research project, media sources provide one of the critical data sets for my thesis. News and media articles were significant data sources through which to answer my research questions about the public perception and representations of the CSL football clubs. This enabled me to provide an in-depth narrative and analysis by reading through media articles. Media and magazine articles will help my thesis analyse the role that media plays in the nexus and show how different media portray issues and events in the CSL clubs. Media data has been gathered from the websites of Titan Sport (体坛周报), Zuqiu (足球报), Renmin Daily (人民日报), Hupu Sport (虎扑体育), All Football (懂球帝), and PP Sport (PP 体育) etc. While most documents are freely and publicly available online, additional documents may be obtained utilising existing connections with the club and through the formal process of requesting via administrators or interviewees. From the media, as mentioned earlier, platforms Titan Sport, Renmin Daily, and PP Sport are state-owned mainstream sports media. Zuqiu, Hupu Sport, and All Football are non-state-owned sports media in China. It is significant to list how these media are politically aligned and economically supported as this contributes to their precise optics and contributes to developing the understanding of the political framing throughout the analysis.

3.3.4 Ensuring credibility and trustworthiness

Ensuring credibility in qualitative research is paramount, as it underpins the trustworthiness and reliability of the findings. Credibility involves demonstrating that the research accurately reflects the phenomena, achieved through triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In my thesis, the phenomena being examined are the development and issues within the Chinese Super League (CSL), particularly regarding the organisational set-ups, policy environments, and strategic progress of Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC. Moreover, the concept encompasses the impact of sports policy, "guanxi" (关系), football governance, and public perception of the operations of these clubs. By maintaining the credibility of my research, I aim to validate the accuracy of the findings about the multifaceted phenomena. This approach provides reliable insights into various interpretations related to policies, media-constructed narratives, and reputation management within the context of the CSL.

Triangulation, for instance, uses multiple data sources or methods to cross-verify findings, enhancing their validity (Patton, 2002). In the present thesis, triangulation was utilized to augment the validity of findings by incorporating diverse data sources, including documentary evidence, mainstream media articles, and social media content. In qualitative sports research, where subjective experiences and social interactions are often central, maintaining credibility ensures that the nuanced insights and complex realities of the participants' perspectives are faithfully represented (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Consequently, credibility is crucial also for advancing theoretical understanding and informing practical applications in sports (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Within the Chinese Super League (CSL) context, the importance of credibility in research cannot be overstated, as it is pivotal in advancing theoretical comprehension and practical applications. Using a reputable qualitative case study design encompassing narrative evidence, conventional media articles, and social media content, my research ensures the validity and robustness of the findings. The establishment of credibility is indispensable for the advancement of theoretical comprehension in the fields of sports policy, guanxi, football governance, and public perception. Analysing Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC yields compelling and evidence-based insights into the varied interpretation and implementation of policies

across different clubs, thereby advancing China's theoretical framework of sports governance. Ensuring the preservation of stringent levels of credibility in research is paramount to its practical utility. Valuable insights derived from credible data are vital in guiding sports managers and decision-makers in the CSL to improve their clubs' corporate identities by implementing more effective media and public relations strategies. The findings of my investigation demonstrate that establishing transparent partnerships with credible and genuine influencers can have a considerable positive impact on clubs' reputations. The practical recommendations are based on my reputable research, rendering them beneficial for practical application in real-world scenarios. Therefore, by maintaining credibility, my thesis significantly contributes to the theoretical and practical aspects of sports management and governance within the CSL, as identified by Sparkes & Smith (2014). The inclusion and exclusion criteria of the collected data will be demonstrated in the following section.

Inclusion Criteria

The thesis includes only data and sources pertinent to the research questions and objectives. My research entailed a specific emphasis on the examination of content about the governance of Chinese football, corporate social responsibility practices, public perception, and stakeholder engagement, as thoroughly outlined in section 3. 32. The data utilised in the thesis was obtained from credible sources such as official club statements, mainstream media outlets (both state-owned and non-state-owned), as well as prominent social media platforms with substantial user engagement, such as WeChat and Weibo. The widespread usage and influence of these platforms are widely acknowledged, rendering them invaluable for capturing public opinion and fostering discourse (Zhang & Negro, 2013). Thirdly, the dataset was limited to 2015 to 2023, except for Jiangsu FC, which was disbanded in 2021. The data relating to Jiangsu FC was gathered within the period spanning from 2015 to 2021, by the parameters outlined in the "General Plan of Chinese Football Development and Reform" and its subsequent iterations.

Exclusion criteria

It refers to specific criteria to exclude certain individuals or groups from a study, experiment, or analysis (Robinson, 2014). These criteria ensure that the studied sample is representative and meets the specific research objectives. I excluded any unnecessary data that needed to be more of the main research objective, specifically leaving out content unrelated to football governance or corporate social responsibility initiatives. Additionally, information obtained from sources that have yet to be verified or lacking in credibility, such as unverified rumours or highly subjective personal opinions without substantiating evidence, were omitted. Additionally, duplicate content and highly repetitive information should have been included to preserve a varied and extensive dataset. The methodology adopts principles to uphold data integrity and dependability in social media investigations, as outlined by Moreno et al. (2013)

The credibility and limitations of social media content as data source

Numerous methods were implemented to ascertain the reliability of sources, primarily on social media channels such as WeChat and Weibo. The data underwent cross-referencing with information from well-established and credible sources, including official club statements and mainstream media reports, to authenticate its precision. The researcher utilised triangulation, a method involving multiple data sources or methods to corroborate findings to bolster the legitimacy of the research (Patton, 2002). This intervention contributed to the assurance of accurately representing the phenomena being investigated in the findings.

Recognising the constraints inherent in utilising data obtained from social media platforms is essential. Social media platforms frequently need help regarding the verification of user identities and the authentication of shared information. Individuals on these platforms can curate their online persona and express viewpoints that may not align with mainstream public opinion. The matter mentioned above has been extensively researched in social media, underscoring the challenge of ascertaining the trustworthiness of particular individual sources (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). My research aimed to collect data from accounts and sources with

significant followings and engagement to investigate these concerns, indicating heightened influence and reliability within the online community.

Despite these attempts, it is crucial to acknowledge that the opinions conveyed on social media may not wholly reflect the collective emotions of all fans. On the contrary, they manifest the personas and identities formulated within digital spaces. This is consistent with the notion that social media data should be construed as only one component of the broader public discourse rather than as an unequivocal gauge of public sentiment (Murthy, 2013). As a result, the information obtained from social media platforms provides critical perspectives on public attitudes and stories. However, it is essential to integrate this data with other sources to develop a thorough and well-rounded comprehension.

My research seeks to offer a rigorous and reliable analysis of the evolution and challenges within the Chinese Super League (CSL) by thoughtfully choosing and cross-referencing sources and acknowledging the constraints associated with research conducted on social media.

Data Filtering and Triangulation

The cross-referencing strategy is used in data fitting (Patton, 2002). For instance, data from social media platforms like Douyin was cross-referenced with mainstream media articles and official documents to verify accuracy and reduce bias. This helped identify consistent themes and narratives. Also, the triangulation of data was fulfilled by using multiple sources. It has ensured a balanced perspective, data was gathered from multiple sources, including state-owned (e.g., Titan Sport, Renmin Daily) and non-state-owned (e.g., Hupu Sport, All Football) media outlets. This provided a wider range of viewpoints and mitigated the risk of single-source bias. The credibility of these sources is established by their ability to present diverse perspectives within the Chinese media landscape. Publicly owned media organisations such as Titan Sport and Renmin Daily are esteemed sources with substantial reach and impact, frequently offering official perspectives and thorough examination of sports policies and administration. Non-governmental media platforms such as Hupu Sport and All Football provide alternative viewpoints. They are recognised for their active participation in public

discourse and comprehensive coverage of sports-related matters. By collecting data from both state-owned and non-state-owned media sources, the research attains a well-rounded and thorough comprehension of the phenomena, thereby establishing credibility by utilising diverse and dependable information sources.

A comprehensive keyword search strategy was implemented to filter relevant articles and social media posts. This involved using specific keywords related to clubs, policies, and trending topics to narrow the dataset to pertinent content. The table of keywords has been listed below.

Category 1 From an existing policy from the government	Category 2 From existing football management literature in China	Category 3 From existing media articles	Category 4 From trending words around football in social media
改革 reform	治理 Governance	冲突(摩擦) conflict	中性化(非企业化) neutral
投资人 investor	监管(问责制)Accountability	形象 representation	更名 re-naming
足协 CFA	透明度 Transparency	行为 behaviour	协商 consult
政策 Policy	社会责任 Social responsibility	市场 marketing	破产 bankrupt
职业化 professionalisation	关系 Guanxi	全球化 globalisation	归化 naturalisation
降薪 salary cut	互惠 Mutual benefits	金元足球(时代) golden-money football	欠薪 fail to pay wages
体育局 sport bureau	公关 Public relations	球迷 fans	退出经营 exit operation

集团 corps	利益相关者(合作伙伴) Stakeholoders	合作 corporation	好处 benefits
	赞助 sponsorship		现象 phenomenon

Both documentary evidence (e.g., CFA policies and club reports) and social media content (e.g., public comments on Weibo, WeChat, Douyin) were systematically collected and analysed. This dual approach ensured a holistic understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Trustworthiness

My research aimed to achieve a consensus or common understanding among different perspectives by collecting public comments and media reports from various platforms. This approach is consistent with social media research methodologies, emphasizing the significance of utilizing diverse data sources to capture a thorough understanding of public opinion and media narratives (Murthy, 2013). The research addressed the potential bias associated with single-source data by incorporating public commentary and media coverage from state-owned (e.g., Titan Sport, Renmin Daily) and non-state-owned (e.g., Hupu Sport, All Football) media sources. It facilitated a more encompassing array of perspectives.

Moreover, due to the predominant presence of data in the Chinese language, bilingual experts and the research team needed to translate the information to preserve its integrity meticulously. The precision of translation holds significant importance in social media research as it maintains the integrity of the original context and meaning, thereby contributing to the credibility of subsequent analysis (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). The scrupulous methodology resulted in a more impartial data analysis, bolstering the research outcomes' overall trustworthiness and dependability.

3.3.5 Categorising and reading documents

The process of gathering the articles involved scanning through both mainstream sports media (Titan Sport; Zuqiu and Xinhuanet) and social media platforms (WeChat; Weibo and Douyin), downloading accessible ones, and resorting to screenshots for password-protected articles, subsequently storing them in an online drive. I searched through every word listed above in every found article, which was how I read all of the articles and started my analysis, and 68 articles in total were collected. This was guided by the research aims and the theoretical framework in which I read these articles. I used keywords (see chart above) from the research question and their derivatives, for example, the keyword 'organisational structure' was guided by the first research aim.

3.4 Content analysis

Content analysis was utilised as the primary data analysis approach in my research. This was to infer whether the production process of any type (text, writing, image, icon, multimedia, etc.) is effective and trustworthy. Content analysis is a general term which refers to an infinite and quite diverse research method and technology. Comparing to the above definition, my analysis is about adopting a critical reading of the content messages, authors, and the ideas and assumptions able to be seen in their perspectives. Qualitative content analysis studies how the text connects with its audience, understanding that media texts can have many meanings—interpreting texts and attempting to understand how they are perceived by various readers (Patton, 2002). It considers the audience, the means of communication, and

the context, not just focusing on one aspect. Therefore, qualitative content analysis relies heavily on the researcher's comprehension and interpretation of media texts. Neuendorf (2002) describes content analysis as "the primary message-centred methodology" (p. 9).

Qualitative media analysis examines a text or speech's relationship with its likely audience. Because qualitative media analysis involves text interpretation, it mainly focuses on target audiences, media sources, and other contextual aspects (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). This helps to determine the different readings and perspective of a text, besides providing a more insightful idea of social impact than simple statistics can give (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). For the trustworthiness of the analysis, the concept of "intersubjectivity" will help. Essentially, there is a consensus among people with different perspectives on a provided subject or interpretation. When there is a consensus among many individuals regarding the interpretation of media content, it becomes more credible. For example, in my case, I collected public comments on media reports and social media to support the achievement of an objective interpretation. In recent years, especially with the emergence of mass communication, content analysis has been used for in-depth analysis and to gain an understanding of media content and logic. The content analysis includes four text types: books, papers, etc.; spoken language (speech, drama, etc.); audiovisual categories such as painting, icons (TV program, film, video, etc.); and hypertext (can be one or more of the above texts, on the Internet). My thesis has also used papers (articles), books, and materials about podcast/TV program recordings.

3.5 Ethical considerations and methodological limitations

There needs to be a unified concept and standard for the connotation definition of information transparency in China. The current research results (Cheung et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2017) show that scholars' understanding of information transparency is continuously deepening and developing. Understanding information transparency is a process that goes from one-sided to comprehensive, from only considering the local quality characteristics of financial information to comprehensively investigating the information characteristics of the whole company, systematically integrating the output products, and finally focusing on the evaluation of the users (Marquis et al., 2011). Its content has also developed from covering financial information to covering all information related to the company. The specific transparency progress in Chinese organisations makes it difficult to get documentary data such as annual reports and club statements from their official website or any other channel. Contrary to general global good governance practices and standards of sport organisations (Xu et al., 2014), most clubs in China do not have the habit of publishing their financial and management reports, which brought about substantial challenges for my research. Therefore, I tried to connect with clubs or former employees to help me access the key documents I targeted. Unfortunately, there was difficulty getting detailed answers or responses from them. For example, another situation detected when I was trying to get interview permission from an employee from Tianjin FC, was when the first sentence he mentioned was: "I am afraid that I cannot answer certain questions around club strategy or any policy-related". Such a response, I assumed, reflected a presumed tendency for officials to cite club privacy and transparency as excuses for refusing to answer specific questions and issues.

There were some potential limitations when it came to the data collection of this research. Firstly, some of the key policies, such as the CFA salary cut announcement, were not publicly accessible while having an influence on this research; therefore, how to engage in the document analysis using publicly available data was the matter considered. For instance, in China, because there is a lack of transparency about club documents, I created alternative solutions such as asking for inaccessible documents from the club managers during the interview. Secondly, most of the data has been translated from Chinese to English; however, some words or phrases has been translated accurately due to language differences. The solution was getting help from people with bilingual teaching, and the research team also checked the research background and transcript.

Chapter 4

A contextual history of Chinese football and organisational policy within Guangzhou & Jiangsu football clubs

4.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter will be based on the definition proposed by Rhodes and Marsh (1992), analysing the organisational structure of the Chinese Super League and the significant policies issued by the CFA since 2015, and combining the cases of Guangzhou Evergrande and Jiangsu Suning to map out football clubs and countries, the relationship network between interest groups such as the media, and thinking about the role of such a relationship network in the construction of the club's corporate identity.

This chapter aims to provide a detailed analysis of football governance in the Chinese context and the consequences of football policies on three specific football clubs (Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC). This chapter expounds on the organisational and governance structure of the CSL and analyses the critical policies issued since 2015 by the Chinese Football Association. Here, 2015 was when "The Overall Plan of Football Development in China" was published which signposted the start of state-driven football reform. In light of the research aims to give an overview of the organisational structures, policy context and strategic developments of the Chinese Super League as well as Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs over time, this chapter provides a foundational policy analysis focusing

on key strategic football policies and governance structures that have informed the CSL clubs. This evaluation of policies is also valuable for establishing the context that has informed the public relations and media practices to be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Hence, in this chapter, I argue that there are substantive differences between the policy guidelines and clubs' interpretations and practices. Correspondingly, the clubs' interpretations and practices that differ from policy guidelines can distort the intended outcomes of the policies (Fischer, 2003). This may occur due to the clubs' varying priorities, interests, or resource constraints (Han & Ye, 2017). It can undermine the effectiveness of policies and lead to unintended consequences that may hinder the overall goals and objectives of the policy framework (Baumgartner, Jones, & Mortensen, 2018). However, clubs can provide valuable feedback to policymakers when they find innovative ways to interpret and implement policies, leading to policy adjustments and refinements (Ansell, Sørensen & Torfing, 2017). While the state develops follow-up policies in response to the clubs' responses after the policy, communication is ineffective and hampers long-term league development. As an example, governmental regulations concerning stadium development, upgrades, or utilisation for CSL matches frequently undergo sudden adjustments without thorough communication and adequate lead time. These abrupt changes have an impact on the clubs' home games, engagement with fans, and income generation, causing disturbances in long-range planning and investments linked to stadiums. As the fundamental concept of this section, an in-depth policy network analysis will be conducted according to the literature data obtained from the above research methods. Appendix 1 shows the documents and sources of all policy documents used for this chapter.

This chapter provides firm evidence that the football clubs' responses and interpretations of the CFA policies began to change, and that these different interpretations impacted the club's behaviour and identity. Due to the high investment between 2015 and 2019 (such as naturalising foreign players and high-priced purchase of top European players), the club's financial crisis directly led to significant clubs beginning to have different interpretations and responses to the new policy to safeguard their interests. Capitalists from China responded swiftly and significantly to the Chinese Communist Party's call for involvement. This led to challenges for the CSL clubs facing difficulties, players being frequently transferred in and out of the national league with minimal positive outcomes, and the sports enterprise tending toward financial instability. The above arguments further build upon the research conducted by Xue (2020).

In keeping with the framework of this thesis (outlined in Chapter 3) , this chapter will use stakeholder and policy networks theories to conceptualise the analysis. There is no single, widely accepted definition of what constitutes a policy network. The definition used in this paper is provided by Marsh and Rhodes (1992), who defined policy networks as "formal institutional and informal linkages between individuals, groups, and organisations with a stake in a particular decision-making problem or set of problems collection" (p.56). However, it has been argued that Marsh and Rhodes' definition may be too inclusive in terms of defining the stakeholders in a policy network (Han & Ye, 2017). Not all actors involved in policy issues necessarily have a stake in or actively participate in policy networks (Klijin & Skelcher, 2007). This raises questions about determining policy network boundaries and which actors should be included in the analysis. In this case, the league is akin to other prominent football leagues,

representing an intricate framework encompassing diverse entities, including football clubs, players, governmental entities, sponsors, and enthusiasts, among others. While all these entities can be categorised as stakeholders, it is pertinent to note that not all possess a direct stake or actively partake in the policy networks steering the league. Pivotal stakeholders come to the forefront when focusing on policy determinations concerning player transfers and remunerations within the CSL. This category comprises club proprietors, player representatives, the CFA, governmental bodies overseeing sports regulations, and supporters whose opinions and critiques sway decisions. However, it is evident that not all participants in the CSL bear a direct stake or are actively involved in the policy networks that formulate regulations about player transfers and salaries. For example, enthusiasts undeniably possess a stake in the league's operation yet their direct engagement in policy networks dictating transfer protocols or salary limitations may not be prevalent. Nevertheless, their viewpoints and conduct can indirectly influence policies through market demands and the sphere of media influence.

Measuring the boundaries of actors should usually include those directly involved in policy issues (Henry, Lubell & McCoy, 2012). This includes actors who have a stake in the policy issue, those who are affected by the policy, and those who have decision-making power or influence over the policy domain (Follesdal, Christiansen & Piattoni, 2004). In China, this includes government bodies and the CFA, the club and its owners, players and their agency company, sponsors, supporters, the media, and communities. Who has the decision authority is another criterion that can set the boundaries of the analysis. For instance, actors who can make important decisions or have the power to affect policies. Actors consist of people in the

government, legislators, regulatory bodies, interest groups, and other influential individuals who can influence policy decisions. Understanding the policymaking and implementation process requires considering the dynamics of different individuals and groups working together. It is essential to comprehend guanxi and its influence on decision-making, power dynamics, interests, and policies within a network. Understanding the level of involvement and concern of various individuals and groups in decision-making will provide insight into CSL policy development. This section has determined that the key individuals in the network include the CFA, clubs and owners, sponsors, and media.

In the qualitative network analysis, public administration or policy process happens in networks made up of different people who all depend on each other (Koliba et al., 2017) In the case of the CSL, the CFA, states, sports media, and football clubs interact and form the policy process. The construction, formulation, implementation, and changes in policy are shaped, restricted, and influenced by the policy network. In China's complex political system, it is essential to link the football reform agenda with the concept of policy networks to understand the relationships between guanxi and the league actors behind the scenes. Although scholars (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992; Rhodes, 1997) initially believed that policy networks play a crucial role in the policy process (political process), understanding the connotation and nature of policy networks is still limited. Early policy network analysis has focused on revealing the relationship between government agencies and interest groups. For example, Considine and Lewis (1999) argue that power struggles, negotiations, and interactions between actors from different sectors, including the government and interest groups, characterise policy networks. Later, scholars raised the concept of policy networks to

the governance category at the macro level (Henry, 2011; Kolleck, 2016). The relevance of understanding policy networks in the context of the CSL lies in grasping the intricate relationships and dynamics, particularly the influence of guanxi (social connections) and the involvement of various actors behind the scenes within China's complex political framework. The evolved analysis model extends to the governance realm at the macro level, emphasising the importance of these networks in shaping policy processes and outcomes within the CSL. The evolving nature of the analysis and its broader application sheds light on the critical role of policy networks in understanding the dynamics of the CSL's policy landscape. The following sections examine the 5 critical significant policies established by the CFA from 2015 to the present, and their effects upon and consequences for Guangzhou Evergrande and Jiangsu Suning, as well as to find out how the state-sports-media network is helping to construct the corporate identity of CSL clubs.

4.2 Policy settings and analysis

4.2.1 中国足球改革发展总体方案 The overall plan of the reform and development of Chinese football

As the foundation of the new reform since 2015, the overall plan of the reform and development of Chinese football marks a milestone in Chinese football development. This section will list important instructions from the policy and conduct analysis according to each of the instructions by examining the cases of Guangzhou Evergrande and Jiangsu Sunning football clubs. The analysis below includes the most relevant goals to CSL clubs.

1. 三步走战略 "Three Steps."

"In addition to the short-term goal, the medium-term plan is for the national men's football team to rank among the top in Asia and the women's football team to return to the world's first-class. The long-term goal is to actively bid for the men's football World Cup and the national men's football team to rank among the world's top teams." (CFA, 2015).

This goal is the essential point of the "Plan" because, in the past, Chinese football has lacked long-term planning and often only aimed at reaching the World Cup or the Olympics. It is precisely because of the lack of long-term planning that the development direction of Chinese football is very blind, often only periodically preparing for a game. The policy states: *"It can be believed that after Chinese football has made great progress, the bid to host the World Cup will be a matter of course. The first task of Chinese football is to strengthen the national team's performance" (CFA, 2015)* This is usually considered a means of establishing a national identity (Peng et al., 2019). This also maintains the dominant position of the country in the policy network.

The policy proposed by the Chinese Football Association (CFA) in 2015 delineates immediate, intermediate, and long-term objectives for both the national men's and women's football teams. The aspirations are formidable, aiming to position the national men's team among the premier teams in Asia, elevate the women's team to a globally recognised standard, and actively vie for the hosting rights of the men's football World Cup while striving for a top-tier global ranking (CFA, 2015). This signifies a deviation from historical practices within Chinese football, which has frequently concentrated on sporadic preparations for specific events like

the World Cup or the Olympics.

From the standpoint of those affected, this policy is crucial for various factions within Chinese football, including teams like Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC. The performance of national teams significantly impacts how football is perceived in China and sparks more interest in the sport. It also assists in attracting more funding from sponsors and further advancing the growth of football. Clubs like Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC are very involved in helping Chinese soccer get better. They aim to elevate their reputation, acquire top-notch players, and grow their fan base. The CFA tries to improve national teams by working with clubs and using their skills and resources. Building strong relationships between the CFA and clubs is crucial for reaching these goals. It illustrates the interconnectedness of the football network.

The accentuation of sports as a tool for constructing national identity can influence the inclusion or exclusion of stakeholders within the policy network. Accordingly, stakeholders whose activities, expertise, or interests align with the national identity-building agenda may receive heightened attention, access, and involvement in the policy network. Conversely, stakeholders whose activities are less aligned or perceived as conflicting may encounter hurdles in relation to being included or considered in policy discussions and decision-making processes (Gerlak et al., 2023). For instance, in 2016, more than 10 football clubs, including Guangzhou Evergrande and Tianjin TEDA in the Chinese Super League, collectively opposed the Football Association's adjustments to the club's schedule and training arrangements during the winter national team training (Sohu Sports, 2016).

However, the policy's focus on enhancing the national team's performance underscores potential tensions. Clubs like Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC may need to balance their club interests, such as player availability and fatigue management, and their commitments to the national team. Conflicting interests might arise, necessitating negotiation and effective management within this network of actors. Evidence demonstrates that the CFA employs a uniform policy approach when resolving such conflicts (Ma, 2022). For instance, when the CFA organised a training camp for the national team in 2023, the Beijing and Zhejiang teams declined to recruit club players from the national football team and have since faced consequences. Since 2015, Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC have voiced grievances about the policy. Yet, for the most part, they have actively accommodated the national team's player recruitment for their teams and expressed their endorsement of the policy.

Simultaneously, this implies that national accomplishments steer the advancement of the Chinese Super League clubs. Although this objective appears unrelated to the progress of the Chinese Super League clubs, it mirrors the nation's emphasis on augmenting the potency of the men's national team. This, in turn, has influenced the league schedule and club training to align with the national team's match schedule. Undoubtedly, this compounds the managerial challenges for Super League clubs.

2. 管办分离 Triple uncoupling

"Following the principle of separation of government and society, apparent power and responsibility, and autonomy according to law, the Chinese Football Association was adjusted

and established. The organisational structure of two brands and one set of people of the Chinese Football Association and the Football Management Centre of the General Administration of Sport was changed. The China Football Association has decoupled from the General Administration of Sport. It has autonomy regarding internal organisation setup, work plan formulation, financial and salary management, personnel management, international professional exchanges, etc. China Football Association has no administrative level." (CFA, 2015)

The organisational structure of the Chinese Football Association was adjusted and reconstructed. Before the reforms, the CFA operated as a department within the General Administration of Sport (GAS), which led to conflicts of interest and a lack of independence. In 2015, the CFA was restructured as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and became a separate entity from the GAS. The CFA underwent modifications to improve its management processes. The purpose of this change was to enhance the organisation's management, decision-making, financial handling, and planning. The organisation, preparation, financial management, and other tasks were completed without outside assistance (CFA, 2015). The change to an NGO structure made football decisions more transparent and superficial. By addressing football-related issues separately from other government tasks, this change could lead to improved governance. This updated way of conducting business aims to expedite the decision-making process on critical football league rules and changes, which are vital for the smooth running of football clubs.

Furthermore, the CFA can now independently manage its finances, leading to improved planning and more efficient use of resources. It assisted organisations in improving their financial management, increasing stability and growth. Two such examples are Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC. These developments materialised in Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC to a certain degree. Guangzhou FC experienced the benefits of enhanced governance and a more football-centric organisational focus. This enabled a favourable environment for strategic planning and development aligned with the league objectives. Similarly, Jiangsu Suning FC also reaped similar advantages, particularly in governance, financial operations, and strategic planning. However, the outcome, leading to the dissolution of Jiangsu FC, underscores that policy outcomes have varied based on individual club practices despite the policy's initial intent.

3. 足球文化 Organisational Culture

"*Strict access and standardised management of professional football clubs. Optimise the equity structure of the club. Promote the localisation of clubs and encourage qualified clubs to realise the non-enterprise name gradually. We will improve the corporate governance structure of clubs, speed up the construction of modern enterprise systems, base ourselves on long-term and systematic planning, strive to build a century-old club, and actively cultivate stable fan groups and urban football culture.*" (CFA, 2015)

Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC have implemented rigorous criteria for the admission of new clubs to maintain high professional standards, particularly in terms of financial stability and proficiency management. Adhering strictly to the established norms governing operations,

finances, and managerial conduct constitutes standardised management. In line with stakeholder theories, both clubs strive to align with these standards and meet the expectations of crucial stakeholders such as governing bodies, sponsors, and fans.

Addressing the policy's goal of optimising equity structures, Guangzhou FC pursued a partnership with Alibaba, resulting in a name change to Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao FC. The collaboration demonstrated the interconnectedness of finances and a proactive approach to equitable policies and improvements. In contrast, Jiangsu FC, which Suning Group manages, explored methods to modify its ownership structure to align with the policy's objectives. Suning Group decided to transfer ownership of a section of its company to ensure continued control over its operations. It demonstrates their careful consideration and response to the policy's implications for their stakeholders and business connections.

Guangzhou FC is committed to engaging with the local community under the city's name, demonstrating its alignment with the policy objective of promoting local involvement. The Evergrande Group's choice to reduce investment and ultimately pull out demonstrates the challenge of balancing compliance and financial viability. Jiangsu FC tried to engage with the community and demonstrate its support for the local area through its initiatives. However, the sudden ending was caused by a lack of money and a decrease in how well the company was known. This illuminates the intricate dynamics of adhering to policies amidst the broader landscape of stakeholder involvement and economic viability.

4.鼓励企业投资足球 Encouraging enterprises to invest in football

Guangzhou FC is the founder of the Golden Yuan Era (金元时代) of the Chinese Super League.

In response to the CFA policy, Evergrande Group began to invest funds in the club. Guangzhou Evergrande has demonstrated a comprehensive response to the plan, illustrating a mutually beneficial relationship among stakeholders, influenced by guanxi, and integrated into policy networks (Knoke, 2011). The club actively embraced the plan, showcasing a strong dedication by injecting considerable funds into the CSL and establishing educational and charitable institutions like the Evergrande Football School and Evergrande Football Foundation, respectively. This involvement extended beyond the club, impacting the selection of Chinese national team coaches at a competitive level.

The interaction of stakeholders within this network is exemplified by Xu Jiayin, a prominent figure linked to Evergrande Corp. His dual roles as a real estate magnate and club owner intricately link the club's initiatives with broader socio-political dynamics. In 2018, he was named a Standing Member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, in 2018 underlines the merging of football, politics, and business interests (Xinhuanet, 2019). This combination showcases the impact of fostering relationships and connections with influential figures in society and politics on improving football and society.

In this complicated web of connections, guanxi is very important. Xu Jiayin uses his influence and money in football to build good relationships with different people, helping everyone

involved. The exchange of resources, both apparent and concealed, constitutes the foundation of this network. An example of this exchange is Evergrande Group's financial backing of the CFA for the national team coach's remuneration, a tangible representation of resource exchange within this network.

Resource exchange in policy networks has access and inclusiveness issues. Scholars argue that the resource exchange in policy networks should be inclusive, ensuring that all relevant stakeholders can access the necessary resources (Boumgarden, Nickerson & Zenger, 2012). But in China's social environment, the quality of "guanxi" determines the available resources (Su & Littlefield, 2001). For example, when the CFA announced the naturalisation of foreign players, Guangzhou Evergrande was designated as a pilot club for foreign players, which meant that most of the naturalised players joined Guangzhou Evergrande.

Jiangsu FC's post-2015 responses to the policy are noteworthy, showcasing a sophisticated strategy to engage stakeholders comprehensively. Their substantial investments extended beyond the club, encompassing football-related ventures and their parent company's broader concerns. This approach underscores a stakeholder-centric strategy, aiming to involve a wide array of parties, including foreign players, football academies, and international clubs like Inter Milan, all of whom hold stakes in the football ecosystem.

Additionally, their deliberate engagement with Inter Milan and Suning Group underscores the significance of guanxi, emphasising the impact of cultivating strong relationships and networks with influential entities such as international clubs and parent companies on the club's functioning. The connections likely played a role in assisting the club in acquiring funds

and resources, as well as in drawing in significant sponsors, thereby impacting the club's decisions.

Nevertheless, the need for more transparent financial reports is concerning despite the importance of involving everyone and establishing solid relationships. The club's reluctance to share its financial information has made it hard for everyone to understand its financial health. The repercussions could be felt by investors in the club, corporate sponsors, and the club's parent company. From the standpoint of a policy network, unclear finances can pose a challenge to enacting policies. It implies that the measures promoting financial disclosure may not have been followed entirely. Overall, this intricate interplay of stakeholder involvement, guanxi, and policy networks has illuminated the multifaceted dynamics affecting a football club's trajectory and contributed to its unanticipated dissolution in the case of Jiangsu FC.

Both clubs display different positions within their policy networks. Guangzhou Evergrande has established a "guanxi" network with leading actors (states). As a state-owned enterprise, Suning Group does not have much evidence in terms of resource exchange showing that they benefit from guanxi with the state. Correspondingly, the autonomy of sports organisations in policy networks plays a crucial role in shaping their brand and image (Atkinson & Coleman, 1992). Organisations with greater autonomy can design their brand identity, including visual identity, messaging, and positioning (Henry, Lubell & McCoy, 2012), meaning that they can cultivate their reputation and manage their public image to reflect their corporate identity. Facts have proved that Jiangsu and Guangzhou have more autonomy to build their corporate identity. However, huge investments into football clubs from both Evergrande Group and

Suning Group have laid the foundation for the subsequent financial collapse.

4.2.2 中国足球协会调整改革方案 Chinese Football Association adjusts the reform plan

To further implement the overall reform plan, the 'Chinese Football Association adjusts reform plan' (2015) of the Chinese Football Association was issued in August of the same year, which closed the football project management centre from the GAS. The plan outlines the CFA's governance and organisational structure and has direct management responsibility for the football industry, implementing a more efficient and transparent regulatory framework to govern various aspects of football, including transfers, finances, and operations (CFA, 2015). In principle, the intention of such a structure change means that the CFA can reduce bureaucracy from the organisational structure and directly engage with professional football reform (Peng et al., 2023). Then, the organisational structure of the Chinese Football Association was developed towards a flat structure. A flat organisational structure is distinguished by its minimal or absence of intermediary management tiers connecting staff to executives. Within this structure, decision-making power is usually dispersed across different employee levels, fostering an environment that thrives on collaboration and individual autonomy (Browning, 1991). The organisation typically has a wide span of control, with each division overseeing a larger number of subordinates. The fundamental contrast between a flat arrangement and a hierarchical one lies in the number of management tiers and the extent of decision-making authority at each tier (Christensen & Knudsen, 2010). A flat structure possesses few tiers and promotes decentralised decision-making, whereas a hierarchical structure entails multiple tiers and adheres to a clear chain of command with centralised decision-making.

In February 2016, the football management project centre was officially disbanded based on the policy guideline and the Chinese Football Association began independently carrying out the football cause. Seven years have passed, and the separation of management and the management of professional football in China is still in the initial separation stage regarding administrative agencies and industry associations. The separation of the government body and the national sports department has not been well-implemented until now, as the new corruption scandals occurred in 2023 is proof of. The intensity and scope of the anti-corruption actions that appeared in 2023 have greatly exceeded expectations, which also reflects the determination of the country's high-level officials to completely rectify the complexities in the Chinese football industry (Xinhuanet, 2024). This was a sign of a new phase re-constructing the professional sports sector. GAS appointed CFA officials at the beginning (Titan Sports, 2023). The Chinese Football Association's lack of a long-term monitoring mechanism and accountability mechanism, as well as its dominant position in the network, makes it the most direct factor hindering the development of Chinese football clubs. The Football Association is a non-government industry self-government organisation, and it always seems stretched when dealing with complicated problems on the professional football field.

Ideally, the development of the Chinese Football Association towards a flat structure was intended to ensure improved communication between the upper and lower levels of the organisational structure. The assumption being that the lower level can participate in the organisation's decision-making, and the higher level can understand the situation of the lower level promptly. Fu (2019) mentioned in their article about CSL reform tracking that: 'The flat organisational structure has reduced the cumbersome levels of the original China Football

Association, effectively streamlined the staff, ensure the professionalism of each post in the Football Association, improved the quality of staff, and reduced management costs.' I believe that the reduction of the intermediate level within the Football Association, the time delay and information distortion of decision-making and action will be diminished, which will make the management of the Football Association more flexible, the decision-making response more sensitive, the speed of information transmission accelerated, and the work efficiency improved accordingly. In addition, the flattening of the organisational structure of the Chinese Football Association results in the organisation implementing a decentralised and centralised management model. General affairs are entrusted to the lower level to complete (Zheng et al., 2018).

In contrast, the upper level only retains the supervision and decision-making power of significant issues, conducive to reducing the delay in decision-making in time and space. The decentralised allocation relationship ensures timely communication between the upper and lower levels, and the decision-making level gives more independent freedom to the staff at each level internally. It is helpful to understand the logic of policymaking while analysing the decision-making structure.

The central entity or governing body holds significant authority and decision-making power in a centralised governance structure (Roy & Tisdell, 1998). It can make critical decisions, establish policies, and set guidelines that govern the activities of other entities or stakeholders within the system (Grimble & Chan, 1995). This indicates that the current communication and policy-making process still matches a centralised structure. The influence on both Guangzhou

and Jiangsu FC is substantial. The centralised system of governance suggests that crucial determinations regarding league regulations, policies, and advancements are largely overseen and influenced by a central body, namely the CFA. CSL clubs may possess restricted independence in directly shaping these policies. Their capacity to impact or engage in policy determinations might be directed through interactions with the central body. Furthermore, this centralised framework can expedite decision-making but might pose challenges as well. CSL clubs could encounter obstacles when customising policies to their specific requirements or swiftly adapting to evolving market dynamics. This could be particularly confining if the central body's decisions do not align with the clubs' objectives or the shifting landscape of international football.

4.2.3 中国足球协会关于 2020 赛季职业联赛政策调整的通知 Notice of the China Football Association on the Policy Adjustment of Professional League in 2020

Towards the end of 2019, the Chinese Football Association (CFA) issued a notification, the '2020 League Policies,' which introduced new regulations addressing contentious issues like naturalised players and salary caps. These regulations were subject to intense discussion and debate during the preceding year. They played a crucial role in shaping the course of professional football leagues in China for the upcoming season (Xinhuanet, 2019).

The discussion regarding naturalised players gained significant traction in 2019, fuelling debates on how they could potentially enhance the performance of the Chinese national football team and the fairness of league development. The 2020 League Policies specifically

featured detailed guidelines concerning naturalised players, underscoring its importance. Regarding policy network, choosing Guangzhou Evergrande as a pioneer club for naturalized players shows how many connections are involved in making this decision. Additionally, it indicates how the swaps of assets among this network can affect the actions of assimilated participants. The Jiangsu Team's commitment to making Alex Teixeira a citizen exemplifies the importance of this policy. The plan was unexpectedly cancelled with the breakup of the Jiangsu Team in 2021. It highlights the impact of outside influences, such as personal connections, on one's ability to carry out their plans. (Wang, 2021).

Furthermore, the decision to decrease players' salaries had far-reaching effects, impacting various individuals in the football industry, such as agents, club managers, and coaches, indicating the interconnectedness of all those involved in the sport. The Football Association's decision to decrease players' wages had a major influence on the entirety of the football community. For example, Tianjin FC club reduced player salaries to follow the rules. As a consequence of this, problems arose and TEDA Group decided to leave (Luo, 2021). It illustrates the influence of rule modifications on the connections and interactions within guanxi networks, potentially causing conflicts and individuals to drift apart.

Furthermore, the salary restrictions policy seemed to support changes in the shares and investments of clubs, which slowed down their ability to grow quickly and freely. Changes in policy can lead to the exclusion of key sponsors, which can alter the power dynamics within the guanxi networks of football. Understanding these changes is crucial for ensuring that everyone's viewpoints and interests are taken into account equitably, especially those who

may be marginalized when creating new policies. Ensuring equitable and fair treatment for all individuals is crucial when revising policies. The CFA must manage policy changes cautiously, considering potential conflicts of interest among stakeholders and ensuring fair and inclusive policies within guanxi networks.

4.2.4 关于男足职业俱乐部与所属球员、教练员合理调整薪酬、共克时艰的倡议书

Proposal for men's professional football clubs, its players, and coaches to adjust the salary reasonably and to overcome difficulties together

According to the policy: *"Covid Pandemic has had different impacts on the production and operation activities of various industries in China, and the football industry has also been impacted. Due to the forced postponement of professional leagues at all levels this year, the club could not operate normally, the market income was low, the personnel cost was high, and the economic pressure was increasing. To this end, in response to the general requirements of clubs at all levels, the Chinese Football Association has conducted many investigations and discussions on issues related to the reasonable adjustment of contractual remuneration for professional players and coaches during the epidemic and has effectively communicated with FIFA" (CFA, 2020).*

In Article 10 of the Proposal: *"it is suggested that the club negotiate with all players and coaches to determine the range of salary adjustment within the salary adjustment cycle agreed upon by both parties; It is suggested that the reference proportion should be between 30% and 50%, but the club and the player should agree with the specific scheme according to*

the actual situation" (CFA, 2020).

After introducing the policy, major football clubs promptly responded, indicating the intricate dynamics of stakeholders and policy networks. Tianjin and Guangzhou initiated talks with players regarding potential salary reductions, embodying stakeholder theories where clubs aimed to balance financial sustainability and wellbeing (Freeman et al., 2010). The policy emphasised the importance of amicable salary negotiations with players and employees, reflecting a stakeholder-centric approach.

Nevertheless, the clubs displayed varied interpretations of the policy, shedding light on the influence of guanxi and policy network dynamics. Guangzhou Evergrande's interpretation of the policy potentially justifying delayed payments showcased how relationships and network influences can shape how policies are put into practice. Conversely, Jiangsu FC's response, culminating in the club's closure and outstanding player salaries, has emphasised the significant impact policy interpretation can have on stakeholders such as players, staff, and sponsors, underlining the interconnectedness within policy networks (Goodwin & Grix, 2011).

The case of Jiangsu FC demonstrates the difficulties that arise when implementing a complex plan involving multiple individual. Suning Group, the company that owns the club, misunderstood the policy. It illustrates how the interactions between different groups can influence one another. Misunderstanding the rules resulted in numerous problems, causing harm to various people and tarnishing the reputation of the CSL club. These incidents demonstrate the necessity of closely monitoring policies and addressing any ambiguous

aspects.

This scenario also reflects Colebatch's (2018) notions of how policies with good intentions can unintentionally lead to unfavourable outcomes. The dissonance between policy intentions and practical implementation, demonstrated through detrimental organisational practices like delayed payments and club closures, signifies policy failures, emphasising the imperative for a more aligned and effectively monitored policy framework (Calista, 1986).

4.2.5 关于各级职业联赛实行俱乐部名称非企业化变更的通知 Notice of the non-enterprise change of club name in professional leagues at all levels

The policy outlines the guidelines for club names: "*(1) Official club name structure, limited to four Chinese characters; (2) Standardised club abbreviation during league registration, avoiding specific terms and non-Chinese characters; (3) Restrictions on names related to shareholders; (4) Names promoting healthy values and regional culture; (5) Permission for using shareholder names; (6) Restrictions on using club names for unauthorised enterprises or affiliates. Name changes for non-compliant cases should be completed within six months after the 2021 season registration.*" (CFA, 2020)

This policy can enhance the clubs' autonomy and further promote Chinese football's professionalism. The country has overlooked the corporate culture and the names of multiple football clubs have long been deeply ingrained in people's hearts. For example, Evergrande has become the label of Guangzhou football and the TEDA fan base in Tianjin. Renaming some

teams is like overturning their corporate culture. This "instrumentalisation" can impact the organisational culture by prioritising the outcomes aligned with the state's agenda rather than fostering a club's unique identity and values. Correspondingly, state-controlled governing bodies may view sports clubs as tools for achieving broader political, social, or economic objectives (Denison & Spreitzer, 1991). Therefore, this instrumentalisation compromises the authenticity and autonomy of clubs, leading to a more instrumental and subservient organisational culture.

The policy under consideration involves stakeholders, including football clubs like Guangzhou Football Club and Jiangsu Football Club, the Chinese Football Association (CFA), shareholders, investors, and local government agencies. In stakeholder theory, the Chinese Football Association assumes a central position as a crucial stakeholder, wielding significant influence when it comes to implementing and upholding the naming regulations stipulated by this policy (Friedman et al., 2004).

Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC initially displayed proactive compliance with the naming regulations outlined in the policy. This clearly impacts their branding and marketing strategies. Their responses indicate the pivotal role that policy frameworks play in shaping the identity and connection of football clubs with their fan base. Notably, the reliance of the parent company on team naming to shape reputation and promote the brand resonates with discussions concerning branding strategies in stakeholder-oriented approaches (Bonnafous-Boucher & Rendtorff, 2016).

The policy significantly affects the stakeholders and investors who hold importance in this context. The club's previous name is closely tied to the interests of those in the football industry, illustrating the intricate connections within the sport. The varying responses from Suning Group and Jiangsu FC highlight how individuals can interpret policies differently depending on their unique perspectives and situations. The variance in interpretation illustrates how the diverse interests of stakeholders can impact the organisation. It is something that academics continue to discuss. The financial troubles at Jiangsu FC have sparked discussions about how easily clubs can struggle under specific policies. Having stable finances is crucial for clubs to handle relationships with stakeholders effectively.

4.3 Chapter conclusion

In summary, this chapter highlights the substantial discrepancies between the policy directives and how clubs interpret and put them into practice. Consequently, when clubs diverge from these policy guidelines, their understandings and actions can disrupt the intended policy results (Fischer, 2003). These divergences may stem from the differing club priorities, interests, and resource constraints (Han & Ye, 2017), compromising policy efficacy and potentially resulting in unintended consequences that hinder the overarching policy goals (Baumgartner, Jones, & Mortensen, 2018). Nevertheless, clubs can provide valuable insights for policymakers by devising innovative methods for interpreting and executing policies, enabling policy adjustments and improvements (Ansell, Sørensen & Torfing, 2017). Despite these interactions, the communication between clubs and the state regarding post-policy responses remains ineffective, hindering the league's long-term development.

The research offers robust proof that the football clubs' responses and interpretations of CFA policies have undergone a transformation, impacting the clubs' behaviour and identity. Examining seven distinct policies from 2015 to 2023, the data reveals that Guangzhou FC, Jiangsu FC, and other CSL clubs swiftly responded to the policy upon its release. However, owing to the substantial investments made between 2015 and 2019 (e.g., naturalising foreign players and the high-value acquisition of top European players), the financial crisis in the clubs prompted distinct interpretations and responses to the new policy to protect their interests. This further builds on the research by Xue (2020), underscoring that football in China is not solely a revenue-generating tool within a broader corporate portfolio but a mechanism for establishing debt-based relationships and stakeholdership. Chinese capitalists have promptly and significantly answered the Chinese Communist Party's call for involvement. This has resulted in the CSL clubs grappling with challenges, frequent player transfers in and out of the national league with limited positive outcomes, and the sports enterprise tilting towards financial instability.

Chapter 5

Mass media perception in Chinese super league and CSL clubs

5.1 Chapter Introduction

In Chapter 5, I focus on the roles of mass media in constructing and perceiving the corporate identitys of Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs through media article content analysis. Media content analysis systematically examines diverse types of media content to find patterns, themes, and trends (Macnamara, 2005). In this context, I looked at the internet and print media information about Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs. It aids in the identification of the recurring themes, narratives, and essential traits linked with the football clubs' corporate identitys. Specifically, this chapter examines how the State, corporate actors, and the general public view and interact with football teams. Understanding stakeholder relationships and how they affect the identity of the clubs is essential. Drawing on Hijman's (1996) work, I used a narrative technique for my media content analysis. The narrative concentrates on the characters' challenges, decisions, and conflicts. Not the materials themselves but the actors who carry the narrative. The narratives frequently shape the corporate identitys that media material creates (Sun et al., 2022). Understanding how CSL football clubs are viewed and how these portrayals help to shape their corporate identitys may be better understood by analysing media narratives. Understanding these interactions' dynamics requires a narrative perspective, which helps to analyse how professional sports sectors, the state, commercial actors, and the Chinese people are represented in the media. Additionally, in media narratives, symbols and stories frequently convey corporate identitys

(Urboniene, 2016). This strategy also makes it possible to analyse these symbols and the media's narrative methods, resulting in information on how CSL clubs create and display their corporate identitys.

As Chapter 3 explained, I filtered down the total sample of over 150 articles to 75 Chinese-language articles from both state-owned and non-state-owned media. All articles were published between 2015 to the present. In parallel, 39 articles were relevant to Guangzhou Evergrande FC, and 33 were relevant to Jiangsu Suning FC for analysis. I conducted open coding to categorise the content into significant themes based on occurring frequency and prevalence. The coding process was as follows. Firstly, I collected the texts that met the inclusion criteria (keywords indicated based on the key concepts and theories listed within Chapter 2) using the online search engine of official media websites to collect the most appropriate data in the media context. Then I developed a coding scheme in Mandarin as its original language, translated the content and themes from Chinese into English, and inductively organised the most regularly occurring topics and articles with the most relevance to my research into themes. The analysis will be presented in the upcoming sections of this chapter.

The rest of this chapter will analyse the content of magazines/online articles from four mainstream sports media on the issues that have arisen in Jiangsu Suning FC and Guangzhou Evergrande FC over the past seven years. In this chapter, first and foremost, I argue that state-owned media and non-state-owned media work together to help sports organisations construct narratives and stories around the issues that have arisen in the reform of the

Chinese Super League to influence the construction of the corporate identity of CSL clubs. Correspondingly, journalists, commentators, and analysts often emphasise certain aspects of organisational history, achievements, values, and culture (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2001). Scholars critiquing the media have drawn attention to how media channels help shape the corporate identity and identity of sports organisations (Waters & Jones, 2011). However, narratives in mass media sometimes reinforce stereotypes or stigmatise specific sports organisations or individuals (Kian & Hardin, 2009). For example, the media always portrays Jiangsu Team and Suning Group as clubs with a sustained and stable development and operations, but the actual situation is that opaque information leads to a sudden financial crisis and, eventually, the team is dissolved. This image gap has had a huge impact on the Chinese Super League. Stereotypical descriptions can perpetuate biases, limit opportunities, and hinder the growth and development of sports organisations and it can also alienate potential audiences and stakeholders (Cottingham et al., 2015). Therefore, in the context of the reform of the Chinese football league, both state-owned and non-state-owned media reports have a certain extent of subjectivity and create stereotypes for specific clubs. For example, sports media in China always portrays Guangzhou FC and Evergrande Corp as the richest clubs and as giants of Chinese football. However, their narratives still serve as a communication bridge between the CFA and clubs.

Subsequently, this chapter is laid out as follows. Section 5.2 presents the major themes of the media perception analysis and the comparison of both perception and analysis for state-owned media and non-state-owned media. Sections 5.3 will present the media perception analysis of Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC based on the themes outlined in

section 5.2 and relevant article content. In the end, section 5.4 will summarise the findings/discussions and my arguments to contribute to answering the research question.

5.2 Overview of the themes from Chinese mainstream sports media

Table 1 below presents an overview of the themes from relevant Chinese mainstream sports media articles that have analysed policy (presented in Chapter 5) outcomes and overall league club practices, as well as the differences between media portrayals. It lists the major themes from all relevant articles about policy outcomes and general league club practices. As indicated, some pieces have covered more than one theme (Mishra & Dey, 2022), therefore I have stated the number of articles underlying each theme in the table.

Major themes from relevant articles analysed about policy outcomes and overall league clubs practices	State owned media sources examples (n = 26)	Non-state owned media sources examples (n = 49)	Key arguments, themes and tensions are across these two different sources
The chaos of Chinese Super League governance and policy making The content related to this theme directly focuses on issues related to decision-making, organisational structure, transparency, and accountability in CFA governance CSL. Simply put, this theme covers discussions about who is responsible for the failure of football reform and what they believe are potential	"The modernisation of football/social governance should not be eager for quick success" (Xinhuanet, 2016) "CSL needs to find the right direction during the reform period" (Xinhuanet, 2017)	"State sports general administration structural change brought change to CSL" (Zuqiu, No.3827, 2022) "CSL enhancing governing practices" (Zuqiu, No.3784, 2021) "Governing football industry in China" (Zuqiu, Dig.567, 2021)	Sports organisations, governments, or other influential entities largely shape public perception and control information by manipulating media narratives—the majority of the media perception that the government intervention is problematic here. State media plays a role in reverse contradictions.

solutions.			
Organisational culture construction and the fan culture The content related to this theme directly pointed out that CFA's intention to help clubs building or re-build their club culture which including articles about club culture and fan culture.	"Pushing Chinese football forward" (Xinhuanet, 2018) "Where does a healthy fan culture come from" (Xinhuanet, 2016) "The Multicultural Significance of Football" (people.cn, 2022)	"Chinese Football Ecology from the perspectives of Football agents" (Zuqiu, No.3803, 2022) "Chinese Super League Dispute Doubts the Responsibility of the Club Owner" (Titan Sports, No.3748, 2022)	The media often relies on simplified and generalized descriptions of organisations, which can perpetuate stereotypes. Historical issues, corruption scandals and poor performances of the national team have combined to shape a critical and often sceptical public opinion regarding football in China.
Club renaming chaos and CFA decision-making The content of this theme is including articles portraying the club renaming policy and its policy making process.	"Behind the "Mount Taishan FC Defense Battle": what has the club changed by renaming" (people.cn, 2021) "A small step towards renaming the club, a big step towards career development" (people.cn, 2021)	"Unscramble the new policies of CSL" (Titan Sports, No.3220, 2019) "New Exploration of Share Reform Mode"(Zuqiu, Dig.550, 2021)	The media's voice among clubs and the Football Association can be regarded as a channel or agenda setter, affecting the governing body's decision-making. State-owned and non-state media in Chinese football play distinct roles that impact the development of the sport and have specific implications for clubs like Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC.
Corporate social responsibility practices and "Greenwashing" The content on this topic mainly about articles portrayal around club CSR practices and their intentions on doing CSR activities. Also this theme includes	"Supporting the Sustainable Development of Chinese Football" (Xinhuanet, 2022) "Signals released from the newest CFA policy" (Xinhuanet, 2021)	"Has the overall plan for the reform and development of Chinese football been appraised and implemented" (Zuqiu, No.3808, 2022) "The stability of Chinese football can	Chinese sports media does not extensively comment on the CSR agenda of the Super League clubs but only gives limited publicity to their corporate social responsibility activities. Media can also provide critical

media report about negative behaviour such as wage arrear, corruption etc. from CSL clubs and it influences to the league, as well as CFA's regulation on this issue as well as CFA's intention to stop this situation.		not be maintained by breaking rules" (Zuqiu, No.3828, 2022) "Progress of CSL club debt clearing" (Zuqiu, Dig.538, 2021)	analysis and commentary on sports washing practices, examining the ethical implications and potential impact on sports integrity.
Club dissolution and share reform The content related to this topic directly focuses on the continuous issue of club dissolution starting from 2019 and who should be blamed as well as articles about blaming football dissolution to the unitary ownership structure of club ownership. Contents showing CFA's intention on pushing the ownership reform.	"CSL needs to find the right direction during the reform period" (Xinhuanet, 2021) "How to continue professional leagues when multiple clubs have withdrawn from the league" (renmin.cn, 2020)	"New Exploration of Share Reform Mode"(Zuqiu, Dig.550, 2021) "Jiangsu Suning disbands the CSL champion and nobody takes over" (Titan Sports, No.3623, 2021) "The championship ended (Jiangsu Suning quit Chinese football)" (Titan Sports, No. 3612, 2021)	State-owned media is tightly integrated into the government's network of influence, ensuring a cohesive message aligned with government strategies, especially in sports objectives, including football. due to the conflicting views of the two media, football clubs tend to maintain a better relationship with non-state-owned media because non-state-owned media can become a channel for them to express their voices.

*n = total amount of articles

Table 1. Amount of articles collected related to Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC associated with major themes established.overview of themes from relevant Chinese mainstream sports media articles that analysed policy outcomes and overall league club practices.

5.2.1 The complexities of CSL governance and policy-making

"The overall plan" was published in 2015. The plan mentioned that separating the General

Administration of Sports from football management signalled that the Chinese Football

League would soon be dissolved from government management (Liu, 2016; Liu & Wu, 2017).

The CFA believes that this policy needs time to yield results, and that it is necessary to await further reforms in the country's league governance. Since then, Chinese media has mainly focused on how the government can best invest its financial and human resources to optimise the effectiveness of the reform initiatives. The Chinese government shows that they are keen to promote football as a priority on the national agenda. The media emphasises how the government investment can best align with this agenda to ensure the effective implementation of the reforms outlined in the overall plan. It is believed that the media portrayal during that period was a good way of utilising football development to enhance nationalism in China. For example, from the data, media articles from the period 2015 to 2019 always put words like "Interpreting government practices (解读政府举措)" and "Review CFA actions (复盘足协动作)" in. This is why there is a higher number of articles on this topic. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the reform of the governance structure of the Chinese Super League has stagnated so far.

First and foremost, as seen in media articles, Chinese sports media questions the stagnation of the football governance reform while acknowledging the state's role in the process. For example, in one of its articles published in 2022 named "State sports general administration structural change brought change to CSL", non-state-owned media Zuqiu pointed out that:

"Although the General Administration of Sports has separated from the football governance structure, it is still involved in formulating policies regarding the Chinese Super League. It even issues individual guidance opinions directly to the Chinese Football Association. But as the competent department of Chinese sports, it is natural for the State Sports General Administration to provide guidance and supervision." (Zuqiu, 2022, No.3827, p.1).

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This narrative supported that media narratives have changed over time and that the media is slowly changing opinions of the CFA. Correspondingly, this narrative also suggests that while there are doubts, Chinese football reporters may generally believe that the country must play a key role as supervisors in league development (Liu, Chen & Newman, 2021). Also, it is notable that the narrative frame used here shows that Zuqiu pointed out the argument in the beginning, addressing the government's process afterwards. The word "natural (理所当然)" used here sounds like not only trying to make the proposed argument softer but also making a statement to support the government's intervention in football development. Therefore, it is argued that mass influential entities like sports organisations and the government have the deterrent power to influence media narratives in China.

In parallel, sports organisations, governments, and other influential entities largely shape public perception and control information by manipulating media narratives (Luo, 2014; Sandersen, 2010). For example, in 2016, one of the articles from Xinhua Net named "The modernisation of football/social governance should not be eager for quick success" argues that football governance reflects society:

"We cannot expect that today's Chinese society, which still has some deficiencies in market integrity, an immature modern enterprise system, an immature public service and regulatory system, segregated sports and education systems, and extremely weak foundations in football tradition and football culture, will be able to quickly develop a mature and complete professional football system. Therefore, the reform of Chinese football is not only the reform of the football industry but also the reform of football society and Chinese society." (Xinhuanet, 2016).

This narrative emphasizes the need for government intervention and time to announce football reform to the public. It indicates that in some areas of the Chinese media there was a general believe that the governance of the Chinese Super League is closely tied to the supervision and participation of the state. Their message to the public is to strengthen the state power's role in developing the Chinese Football League. The majority of the media perception is that the government intervention is problematic. They believe that the CSL needs to become fully commercialised and independent like the English Premier League (Titan Sports, 2019). The below narratives from an article published on Titan Sports named "Disbandment of CSL Club" support the above argument:

"The administrative interference of the Chinese Super League is obvious. This can be seen from the fact that Du Zhaocai concurrently serves as the Party Secretary of the Football Association as the deputy director of the General Administration of Sports and is in charge of important business sectors in the Football Association. Because of the incomplete decoupling, many businesses in professional football have been severely affected." (Titan Sports, No.3738, 2019)

However, evidence shows that state media such as Xinhuanet and Renmin Daily have tried to engage society in thinking more, addressing the public awareness of the football industry rather than overemphasising the government intervention's disadvantages. For example, the following is from Xinhuanet's review of football reform in 2019:

"The reform has not been fully advanced following the "Plan". The phenomenon of "multiple management" exists to a certain extent. The society has not yet reached a consensus on the concept and path of football development and has not formed a joint force with the Football Association. " (Xinhuanet, 2019)

The narrative here emphasises the language "not yet reached a consensus."

5.2.2 Corporate social responsibility practices and "greenwashing"

Sports organisations have the obligation to engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to respond to the call for action from their stakeholders and society. In 2015, the "overall" plan suggested that football clubs must fulfil their social responsibility to society and its stakeholders. Articles and reports on social responsibility mostly criticize clubs for lacking integrity and social responsibility (Miller, 2017; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Wage arrears are a common occurrence, indicating their failure to uphold the essential spirit of the contract. Regarding clubs' CSR practices, Chinese sports media primarily discusses the importance of fulfilling social responsibilities and educating the public by comparing them with how foreign clubs fulfil their social responsibilities. For example, in an article by Zuqiu reporter Dexing Ma, he states:

"To a certain extent, the more developed the football level and the higher the management level, the management department pays more attention to the issue of 'social responsibility' and strives to promote football for the whole society. It is not only the football association, but also all clubs, whether professional or amateur. Moreover, in Western countries, including neighbouring Korea and Japan, this is actually engaged in 'public welfare' activities, but this 'public welfare' has long gone beyond the kind of 'public welfare' that we understand in China. For example, when European and American countries and regions build new stadiums, they specifically consider the disabled area and will provide various conveniences for the disabled." (Zuqiu, 2021).

These narrative highlights that Chinese sports media does not extensively comment on the CSR agenda of the Super League clubs but only gives limited publicity to their corporate social responsibility activities, such as urging the clubs to adhere to the CFA's social responsibility charter requirements. The media appears to overlook the clubs' violations of the CSR agenda, such as green-washing. Greenwashing can be seen as a marketing or public relations strategy aimed at improving a company's reputation, attracting environmentally conscious consumers, or evading criticism (Maier, 2011). There was a published article on Sina depicted the greenwashing strategy of Jiangsu Suning FC:

Some clubs engage in CSR initiatives merely to meet the CFA's "mission" or enhance their level of legitimacy (Balluchi et al., 2020). When organisations engage in misleading communication and attempt to influence stakeholders' perceptions, they fall into the phenomenon known as "greenwashing" in academic research (Ali, 2017).

"Jiangsu Suning Club launched an environmental protection activity in response to the upcoming "4.22 World Earth Day". Star players participated in the video recording. Captain Wu Xi also forwarded it on Weibo to invite more fans to participate. The club hopes to use the influence of football and players to get more people involved in environmental protection by combining sports and charity." (Sina, 2016).

Apart from the above narratives of green-washing strategies by both clubs, the media can also provide critical analysis and commentary on sports washing practices, examining the ethical implications and potential impact on sports integrity. This can involve scrutinising the relationships between sports organisations, sponsors, and governments to shed light on conflicts of interest or attempts to manipulate the public perception (Miller, 2017). Chinese

mainstream sports media must hold football clubs accountable for facilitating or disregarding sports washing. Through investigative reporting and public pressure, the media can prompt sport's governing bodies and football clubs to strengthen their ethical standards, enhance transparency, and prevent the misuse of sports events for political or reputational gain (Skey, 2022). There are sports washing issues in the Chinese Super League, such as establishing football schools but failing to operate them actively or actively supporting social events but constantly defaulting on player and sponsor salaries. Chinese sports media can expose these instances of sports washing to encourage the clubs to fulfil their CSR claims.

5.2.3 Club dissolution and share reform

As evidenced below, state-owned media tried to attribute the club's disbanding phenomenon to the club's single ownership structure and the Covid-19 outbreak. For example, an article in Xinhuanet in 2021 claimed:

"Large investment has not been recognised and returned by the market, and the continuous investment has dragged down the parent company; the second is affected by the Covid outbreak, and the current club investors are mostly real estate. As the main business, its profitability has weakened." (Xinhuanet, 2021)

The narrative here highlights the challenges that the CSL clubs face, particularly those heavily invested in by real estate companies. It points out that significant investments have not yielded expected returns, causing financial strain on the parent companies. The depiction here is interesting as it blames the considerable investment and negative outcome on the club ownership and management. It also mentions the impact of the pandemic, adding a layer of

external challenge, emphasising the need for caution and strategic planning.

"The diversified equity structure of professional clubs is nothing new. Foreign leagues have existed for a long time and adopted top-down reforms. The government or the Football Association formulates the rules, and they are mandatory. For example, the Japanese J-League was founded. Initially, the club was sponsored by the industrial consortium, and the team was also named after the industrial consortium. Still, the single capital made the development of the club in trouble. Since then, the Japanese Football Association has guided local governments, enterprises, communities, and individuals to invest in multiple subjects, and at the same time, requires the club's name to be non-enterprise. After the reform of the J-League, the stability has increased, the club's attention and fans' loyalty have increased, and the professional football market has prospered." (Xinhuanet, 2021)

This narrative delves into the global context, citing the experience of the Japanese J-League. It implies that diversified equity structures and strategic reforms can pave the way for the CSL clubs. The words used here tried to guide the audience to focus on the football clubs' structural and ownership change rather than policy itself. In essence, the narratives aim to provide valuable insights and lessons to the CSL and its clubs, urging careful financial planning, the adoption of successful international models, and encouraging a diversified ownership structure for a more robust and prosperous future. However, the narrative frame shows that the mainstream media was trying to lead the public perception and attention to the club itself rather than the issue in context.

The narratives from non-state-owned media are more inclined to not just look for the objective problem of the club's dissolution but to also need the CFA and the state to help the club tide over difficulties:

"A Chinese football authority said that the club's equity structure must be diversified. Diversification does not mean that state-owned enterprises must be the mainstay, but diversification can form constraints. Otherwise, the former Jiangsu Suning Club's withdrawal will not be the last time." (Zuqiu, 2021)

Another article from Zuqiu about the CSL club share reform states:

"Many Chinese Super League club executives believe that equity diversification reform is essential. First, the club's decision-making, investment and operation will be more rational, and new investors will come in. Putting forward requirements on the club, such as performance goals, management methods, profitability, etc., will force the club's management team to improve their capabilities and standards; second, with the possibility of backing up, even if a shareholder has a problem, the club will not be disintegrated in an instant."

This narrative shows that this sports media serves as a channel to help the club's high-level executives express their wishes to the club management and how they hope the management department can help the club overcome difficulties. The above narratives from the Xinhuanet article seem to be reversing the direction of the contradiction, distracting the public's attention from successful foreign cases, and instead inducing thinking about learning from foreign systems. The narratives show that Xinhuanet seems to be employing a strategic communication approach, subtly reversing the direction of the contradiction. Xinhuanet aims to shape public opinion about the issues that the CSL clubs face. By presenting the executives' perspective and desires for equity diversification reform, the media subtly guides the public's perception of the reform as necessary and positive for the clubs. Shifting the focus towards the benefits of the reform deflects attention away from the existing challenges within the CSL clubs, like financial instability and an overreliance on confident investors. The media's strategic communication in this context matters because it shapes the perceptions towards the reform.

It can potentially catalyse reform efforts by presenting a positive image of equity diversification. This matters as it can lead to changes in club structure, which could be pivotal when it comes to their financial stability and long-term success.

The starting point of the official media is different, and more is done to guide the public opinion from the country's perspective. For example, the collected articles from state-own media have mentioned many times: "Football reform needs patience and time," which is more like the concept of "Guanhua (官话)" mentioned in the guanxi part in Chapter 2. For instance, the following are the narratives from non-state-owned sports media Titan Sports in an article on the shareholding reform of football clubs in 2019:

"The most important thing for the development of Chinese football is time, and what is lacking is a unified and concrete system reform, which also includes CFA Governance System Reform and Football Club Shareholding Reform". (Titan Sports, 2019)

From the narratives above and compared with the analysed narratives from Xinhuanet, the two sides stand at different angles and have resulted in different views, and even opposing narratives. State-controlled media often aligns with government interests, promoting state policies and goals (Huang & Wang, 2020). In Chinese football, this could entail emphasising nationalistic pride, government initiatives, and achievements in football development to boost China's global football position. State-owned media is tightly integrated into the government's network of influence, ensuring a cohesive message aligned with government strategies, especially in sports objectives, including football. Conversely, non-state media in China has diverse stakeholders, such as private investors, sponsors, and the general public

(Lund, 2016). These media outlets may present a broader range of narratives to suit their stakeholders' interests, focusing on market trends, commercial aspects, and global perspectives to attract sponsors and advertisers (Josselin & Wallace, 2001). They have a more varied network of actors, including commercial entities, investors, and sports organisations, influencing a more market-oriented portrayal of football, emphasising profit-making opportunities, player transfers, and international collaborations. Guanxi in non-state media involves connections with various commercial stakeholders, investors, and sports organisations, potentially steering the representation of football towards commercial prospects and demonstrating the sport's growth and potential in a market-driven context. Hence, these different representations significantly influence how the public perceives Chinese football, with state-owned media accentuating national pride and government efforts, while private media underscores market dynamics and financial potential. These perceptions impact public engagement, support, and investment in the sport.

On the other hand, state-owned media can be used for government propaganda and agenda-setting in China's society (Jiang, 2014). Chen and Rowlands (2022) note such a method of state-owned media to prioritise official narratives of events and policies, to publicise government policies, and to shape th public perception to align with official agendas. However, non-state media may be more autonomous in terms of setting their own agenda and offering alternative perspectives (Guobin, 2013). Therefore, due to the conflicting views of the two media, football clubs tend to maintain a better relationship with non-state-owned media because non-state-owned media can become a channel for them to express their voices.

5.2.4 Organisational culture construction and the fan culture

In the previous section, I discussed club renaming and the media's role in dealing with such events. What is apparent in the media data I collected was an evident belief that the renaming of the club will inevitably destroy the club's corporate culture and fan culture. The general public is still deeply impressed by the individual fan groups of Chinese football clubs (Huang, 2012). For example, Titan Sport wrote in an article reporting on the fan culture of Chinese Super League clubs:

"The Beijing Guoan team has established an excellent corporate culture and fan culture in the Chinese Super League club. It has a unique football culture, and the stadium stands are the second home for most fans. People are used to coming to this stadium every Saturday or Sunday night to cheer for the Beijing team. "Guoan" has become an important label for sports." (Titan Sports, 2019)

The public has firmly established stereotypes and prejudices against Chinese sports organisations due to constant dishonesty and poor performance (Gries, Crowson & Sandel, 2010). This has a significant impact on the construction of club culture. The media is still labelling football clubs. For example, the words "don't let fans down anymore" can be found in most articles on this topic. Social media posts show that such motivational narratives will deepen the public's negative stereotypes of Chinese Super League clubs, as will be demonstrated in detail in the next chapter. For example, from 2012 to 2019, the Chinese media reported heavily on jin yuan (金元) football and created topics. The most significant label of the Chinese Super League club is still 'rich' (Zuqiu, 2021), while countless football clubs have gone bankrupt due to financial problems. The article "The championship ended (Jiangsu

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Suning quit Chinese football)" depicts this chaos:

"In the past four years since the "post-Jin and Yuan era", 39 professional football clubs have disappeared. Among them, as many as 14 professional teams withdrew in 2020, including the "Ten Champions League" Liaoning Football Team and Tianjin Tianhai (formerly Tianjin Quanjian), which was the "powerful player" in the Jin and Yuan Dynasties. A total of 6 professional teams "died" in 2021. Although the number has declined, the sudden withdrawal of the defending champion Jiangsu team is undoubtedly a blockbuster, impacting the fragile league system." (Titan Sports, No.3612, 2021)

The media often relies on simplified and generalised descriptions of organisations, which can perpetuate stereotypes (Burrell et al, 2022). These stereotypes may be based on historical issues or failed organisational practices. In China, most of the pressure of public opinion comes from the public's shaping of the past corruption scandals of Chinese football and the national team's poor performance. In China, public opinion about football has been significantly shaped by corruption scandals and the underperformance of the national football team. These factors have considerably impacted how the public perceives the sport and football clubs like Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC. Zuqiu published the following article "Governing Football Industry in China" which depicts:

"Football in China has been marred by corruption scandals, revealing deep-rooted issues within the sport. Historically, these scandals have involved match-fixing, bribery, and other unethical practices. Such scandals erode public trust and confidence in the integrity of the game. For example, the infamous case is the 2009 Chinese football match-fixing scandal, where several players and officials were implicated. (Zuqiu, No.567, 2021)"

The narratives show here that the media believes the scandals are shaping the public perception and that they are deeply rooted in the different club's perceptions as well. For example, in 2010, Zheng Zhi, the captain of Guangzhou Evergrande FC and national team captain, was banned for six months due to his involvement in the match-fixing scandal. This tarnished the reputation of both the player and the club, illustrating the pervasive influence of corruption on even the most prominent football figures. This led to the public linking Zheng Zhi's scandal with the consistent underperformance of the Chinese national football team, which has frustrated fans and the public. This has the potential to affect public morale and dampens enthusiasm for the sport, impacting China's overall perception of football.

5.2.5 Club renaming policy consequences and CFA decision-making

In the media discussion related to the club's name change, most media articles serve as a medium to help the clubs and the Football Association express their appeals to each other and try to influence the decision-making of the Football Association. Different forms of media also play different roles. For example, there are the clubs opposed the Football Association's "one size fits all" policy (non-discretionary implementation) through the media. In 2018, the official media Xinhuanet reported that the Chinese Football Association was going to issue the "Chinese Football Association Professional Club Name Specification" (draft for comments).

"The opinion draft mentions that out of the consideration of both national conditions and the development status of professional leagues if the club's name or abbreviation is originally non-neutral but has been used by the club for a long time and continuously, its name will have a high reputation in the football industry. , form a club brand or have general influence among fans, the club can apply and approve the name to the Chinese Football Association within the specified time limit, and the name can be identified as a neutral

name." (Xinhuanet, 2018).

This narrative is in response to several clubs opposing the name change. Clubs such as Beijing Guoan FC and Henan Jianye FC etc. have stated that the name change policy will destroy the corporate and fan culture established by the club. These clubs announced in 2019 that they would discuss the exemption of their re-naming based on their fan club's protest (Xinhuanet, 2019). Fans think that it is reasonable to believe the policy is destroying the club culture. Non-state-owned media TITAN Sports mentioned the following in their article named "Exit of owners of CSL clubs":

"After introducing the Football Association's neutral name policy, many senior members of the board of directors of Henan Jianye Group said that if they do not bring the word "Jianye" is not recommended to invest in football again. I hope the club can apply for name recognition to preserve the team culture. However, the proposal was not approved, and Jianye still chose to compromise and support the club."(Titan Sports, 2019).

The CFA believes that the clubs that apply for this kind of name recognition should be the clubs that have participated in League A or League B before the 2004 Chinese Super League and have participated continuously so far. This also gives some professional football clubs with a long history, such as Beijing Guoan, Shanghai Shenhua, Shandong Luneng, Tianjin Teda, Changchun Yatai and others, the opportunity to retain their existing name (CFA, 2018). Afterwards, the Chinese Football Association held a meeting in Suzhou. When announcing the neutral name "one size fits all", many fans and the media also raised this proposal again. It's evidenced from the article from Titan Sports what the narratives shows:

The Football Association stated in the "Chinese Football Association Professional Club Name Specifications" issued in 2018 that if the original name of the club is not neutral but is used continuously by the club for a long time and has a high reputation, it can apply for the name to be recognised as a neutral name. However, a "one size fits all" approach was adopted in the final implementation process. It is difficult for fans to agree with such a radical policy indeed. (Titan Sports, 2020)

This narrative shows the policy's negative impact on fans and the public. The word "radical" is used in the last sentence of the narrative. It has rarely been used in previous narratives on other policies. However, the policy was not officially announced in the end, and the final result was that the CFA used its own discretion to force some of the clubs to retain their original team names, such as Beijing Guoan and Shanghai Shenhua.

The analysis of related articles and the narrative above shows that state-owned and non-state-owned media play different roles in this process. There are challenges to balanced and objective media reporting and its impact on decision-making, shaping policy and the decision-making agenda of governing bodies (Getz & Fairley, 2004). For example, after pressure from the media, the Football Association extended the time limit for the name changes to give the clubs more time to make a decision and negotiate (dfsports, 2021). However, most governing bodies base their decisions on strategic considerations, long-term planning, and expert advice rather than media perception (Parent, 2010). Governing bodies prioritise financial sustainability, stakeholder interests, sporting integrity, and long-term development plans over media-driven narratives (Hutchins & Boyle, 2017). Therefore, the media will affect the decision-making of the Football Association, but it will not be the main factor. In the environment of Chinese football, the direction of national development is still the main factor

guiding the development of football leagues. The state-owned media plays the role of interpreting policies and responding to club behaviour instead of the state. In contrast, non-state-owned media does more to help the football clubs put forward their opinions and voices, especially in Chinese football. This directly helps the club communicate with governing bodies.

State-owned and non-state media in Chinese football play distinct roles that impact the development of the sport and have specific implications for clubs like Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC. By aligning with the government objectives, state-owned media can promote a unified narrative supporting state-led initiatives. However, it may limit the diversity of perspectives and hinder critical discussions. With its diverse stakeholder representation, non-state media can facilitate a more dynamic discourse, reflecting the various perspectives in the sport's development. Specifically for Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC, state-owned media might emphasise national pride and government initiatives, aligning with state strategies. On the other hand, non-state media might focus on market dynamics, financial stability, and the clubs' perspectives, aiding in a broader understanding of the challenges and opportunities. The following section will expand on this to tell the story of both clubs, and to analyse the data to determine how the media perception has been shaped.

5.3 Mass media role in constructing corporate identity - analysis of Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC

Table 2 shows articles collected related to Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC.

Major themes	Article examples associated to Guangzhou Evergrande FC (n = 39) Selected state owned media sources (n = 7) Selected Non-state owned media sources (n = 32)	Articles examples associated to Jiangsu Suning FC (n = 33) Selected state owned media sources (n = 9) Selected Non-state owned media sources (n = 25)	Key arguments, themes and tensions are across these two different sources
The chaos of Chinese Super League governance and policy making	"CFA held meetings for governing clubs behaviour" (Zuqiu, Dig.570, 2022)	"CSL enhancing governing practices" (Zuqiu, No.3784, 2021) "Governing football industry in China" (Zuqiu, Dig.567, 2021)	Sports organisations, governments, or other influential entities largely shape public perception and control information by manipulating media narratives—the majority of the media perception that the government intervention is problematic here. Mainstream media plays a role in reverse contradictions.
Organisational culture construction and the fan culture	"The development of Chinese football requires its own fan culture" (Xinhuanet, 2017)	"CSL needs to find the right direction during the reform period" (Xinhuanet, 2021)	The media often relies on simplified and generalized descriptions of organisations, which can perpetuate stereotypes. Historical issues, corruption scandals and poor performances of the national team have combined to shape a

			critical and often sceptical public opinion regarding football in China.
Club renaming chaos and CFA decision-making	"The new phase of Guangzhou football" (Zuqiu, Dig.417, 2021) "Guangzhou Evergrande has a good future"(Zuqiu, Dig.411, 2021)	"Change of Jiangsu Suning Shares" (Zuqiu, No.3611, 2021) "As the deadline approaches, the club will collectively change its name" (Xinhuanet, 2021)	The media's voice among clubs and the Football Association can be regarded as a channel or agenda setter, affecting the governing body's decision-making. State-owned and non-state media in Chinese football play distinct roles that impact the development of the sport and have specific implications for clubs like Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC.
Corporate social responsibility practices and "Greenwashing"	"New strategy of Guangzhou Evergrande" (Zuqiu, Dig.455, 2022)	"CFA making moves on solving problems of salary arrears"(Zuqiu, No.3839, 2021)	Chinese sports media does not extensively comment on the CSR agenda of the Super League clubs but only gives limited publicity to their corporate social responsibility activities. Media can also provide critical analysis and commentary on sports washing practices, examining the ethical implications and potential impact on sports integrity.

| Club dissolution and share reform | "Three main issues of Guangzhou Evergrande" (Zuqiu, Dig.478, 2022)

"Guangzhou Evergrande strives for survival through share reform" (Titan Sports, No. 3673, 2022) | "Jiangsu Suning disbands the CSL champion and nobody takes over" (Zuqiu, No.3623, 2021)

"The championship ended (Jiangsu Suning quit Chinese football)" (Titan Sports, No. 3612, 2021) | State-owned media is tightly integrated into the government's network of influence, ensuring a cohesive message aligned with government strategies, especially in sports objectives, including football. due to the conflicting views of the two media, football clubs tend to maintain a better relationship with non-state-owned media because non-state-owned media can become a channel for them to express their voices. |

*n = total amount of articles
Table 2. Amount of articles collected related to Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC associated with major themes established.

5.3.1 Jiangsu Suning FC

From 2016 to 2021, among the 32 media articles targeting Jiangsu Suning Club, 22 belonged to the following themes: club dissolution and share reform and theme 2, social responsibility. This is because Jiangsu Suning announced their disbandment after winning the championship in 2021. Before this, the media praised the healthy operations of Jiangsu Suning. Xinhuanet stated in a 2021 article:

"Jiangsu Suning FC's success seems to be accidental, but in fact, there are inevitable factors. In the past few seasons, Suning's attitude has become more and more pragmatic. "No fuss" and healthy operations have gradually become a major label of Jiangsu football. Such a healthy operation is exactly what Chinese football

needs, and if Chinese clubs can follow the route determined by the football reform plan step by step, then Chinese football can take off." (Xinhuanet, 2021).

The above narrative shows that the official media, while shaping Guangzhou Evergrande's king label, has called for and praised financially healthy and stable clubs like Jiangsu Suning. I want to use Jiangsu Suning to remind small and medium-sized clubs how to develop their clubs in a stable manner. This is also what Jiangsu Suning wants to see; the media help a club establish a reputation for financial health and compliance with the CFA regulations. But according to the Titan Sports (2021) article:

"Jiangsu Suning Football Club had already started to default on wages before winning the championship. The opacity of club finances and the lack of oversight by league governance." (Titan Sports, 2021)

The above narrative shows that the non-state media is playing different roles in the depiction, unveiling the real things that happened behind the "stage". It can be seen as a reminder to the stakeholders of CSL clubs about financial transparency. Transparency plays a role in fostering accountability and maintaining integrity within sports organisations (Gardiner, Parry & Robinson, 2017). Transparency practices, such as disclosing financial information, governance structures, and decision-making processes, are essential for promoting trust, reducing corruption, and ensuring the responsible management of resources (da Cruz et al., 2016). This paved the way for the sudden dissolution of Jiangsu Suning. However, in 2021, Zhang Jindong, chairman of Suning Group, stated at the general meeting of shareholders that Suning Group will announce that Jiangsu Suning Club was to cease operations.

Sports media in China has expressed regret and disappointment at the disbandment of Jiangsu Suning and accused Suning Corp of lacking corporate social responsibility. From then on, Jiangsu Suning Club was labelled a "collapsed champion (崩塌的冠军)", and the club's public image instantly collapsed as well. The evidence from the Titan Sports article "Jiangsu Suning disbands as the collapsed CSL champion, and nobody takes over" proves the argument:

"After Jiangsu Suning defeated Guangzhou Evergrande in 2020, some netizens commented that an era that may belong to Jiangsu Suning is about to begin. It's a pity that this is just a good wish. The halo bonus of the league championship did not help the "collapsed champion" get out of the predicament. It is understood that Jiangsu Suning relied on the team's unity to survive last season's final stage despite arrears of wages. The colossal bonus promised by the club after winning the championship failed to materialise." (Titan Sports, 2021)

The above narratives shows that the media is creating a stereotype, giving the name "collapsed champion" to Jiangsu FC. It's possible to argue that symbolic media narratives related to a certain stereotype possibly create public concerns about the Chinese Super League and the continued development of Chinese football, further distorting the corporate identity of football clubs.

Mass media's narrative and perception also influences the framing and narrative construction around social responsibility in sports organisations (Bell, Applequist & Dotson-Pierson, 2019). The media's portrayal of responsible initiatives, successes, and failures can shape public opinion and the perception of the sports organisations' commitment to social responsibility (Carey, Mason & Misener, 2011). Positive media coverage can enhance the reputation and

credibility of organisations, while negative coverage can damage their image and public trust (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli & Schwarz, 2006). The non-state-owned media reported the whole process of the disbandment of the Jiangsu team in the article and believed that all stakeholders needed to take responsibility. Zuqiu's article stated:

"Suning Chairman Zhang Jindong wished for the exit for a long time because the chaos in governing system; rules and regulations of CFA have changed so often, and in the end they are useless." (Zuqiu, 2021)

However, the narratives below show that the state-owned media used Jiangsu Suning's disbandment to warn other clubs, declaring that all football clubs need to be held accountable. In July 2021, Chen Xuyuan, the chairman of CFA said the following in an interview program on national media, CCTV:

"We have seen the problems existing in these clubs. I have communicated with Suning investors many times. From the perspective of investors, football should be considered more. It is a social welfare product, and investors should consider social responsibility and social image issues and hope that similar things will not happen in the future." (CNTV, 2021).

Titan Sports mentioned the following in their article:

"This is an unacceptable point of view. If the Chinese Football Association still regards football as public welfare, it will always be pseudo-professional and never get up. Since it is the public welfare, investors might as well withdraw their capital from the club and directly Support rural construction and Hope Project so that the public welfare is stronger, so why invest in football? This statement may hurt the hearts of investors even more, and the future operation is not optimistic." (Titan Sports, 2021).

The media of both sides showed opposing positions and attitudes. Media perception holds sports organisations accountable for their social responsibility practices (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). Even though the media perception holds sports organisations accountable, it can sometimes have a limited effect. For example, sports media in China has been reporting the wage arrears of Jiangsu Suning FC but the issue was never resolved.

"Shanghai media "Oriental Sports Daily" broke the news, revealing that Jiangsu Suning has been in arrears with player wages for three months and has not even paid out bonuses for winning the Chinese Super League, which makes the team even more chilling. Less than ten days before the Chinese Super League club submits wages. The bonus confirmation form is less than a month away. If Jiangsu Suning does not submit it within the specified time, the worst result is that even the qualification for admission to the Chinese Super League will be cancelled." (Titan Sports, 2021)

The above narratives show that the media criticised the club and Suning Group's unethical behaviour. Through investigative journalism, critical analysis, and public scrutiny, the media can expose unethical or irresponsible behaviour, such as labour exploitation, financial misconduct, and environmental negligence (Berkan, Leonardo & Stefano, 2021). By spotlighting these issues, the media pressures sports organisations to improve their practices and align with societal expectations (Trendafilova & Babiak, 2013). Even though sports media in China have been reporting on the wage-arrear behaviour of the Suning Group, the situation still hasn't been resolved at present (Xinhuanet, 2023). Therefore, I argue that when the media exposes unethical behaviour or irresponsibility, sports organisations face increased public scrutiny which often necessitates them rectifying their actions and implementing changes to adhere to ethical and responsible standards. Indeed, exposing the social responsibility issues

of Jiangsu FC, including continuous reporting on salary arrears, will establish a negative example to remind other clubs to regulate their behaviour without harming their stakeholders' interests.

5.3.2 Guangzhou Evergrande FC

Entering 2023, Chinese football has set off a new storm of anti-corruption. At present, under the support of the media, the brand image of Guangzhou Evergrande has fallen to the bottom. Starting from December 25, 2022, Xinhuanet (2022) began to report that Wang Yajun, the chairman of Guangzhou Football Club and the principal of the Evergrande Football School, was dismissed by the Evergrande Group due to a "match-fixing case," and that they had been banned by the Football Association for life. Under the management of football-related activities, on January 6, 2023, Ke Peng, the former chairman of Evergrande Football Club, was taken away by police for investigation on suspicion of corruption. Before joining Guangzhou Evergrande, he was a reporter for Xinhua News Agency. Such a relationship also can't help but make people think about the subjectivity of some of the official media news reports on Guangzhou Evergrande and the fascinating relationship between them. A Xinhuanet article depicts Guangzhou Evergrande FC's recent relegation as below:

"After 2021, the debt problem of the Guangzhou team's parent company, Evergrande Group, affected the club, and many of the team's foreign players and domestic key players left the team one after another. The "Chinese Super League Overlord" that once created glory is now struggling to survive, and the glorious era of Guangzhou football has ended. " (Xinhuanet, 2022)

This narrative focuses on the strategic failure of the parent company, Evergrande Group, and the financial problems that led to the club's gradual collapse. After restarting the anti-corruption agenda, there have been fewer media reports on the Guangzhou Evergrande club (this is, of course, because Guangzhou Evergrande was relegated after the 2022 season). It has instead all been about the management change of the Evergrande Group.

During the heyday of Evergrande Group's investment in Guangzhou Club, the media narratives were very favourable. For example, Xinhuanet wrote in an article in 2015:

"Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao, a club that was only promoted to the Chinese Super League in 2011, came out of nowhere. It competed in the AFC Champions League for four consecutive years, conquered almost all Asian giants, and shocked Chinese and Asian football. Beyond the competitive level, it aims to Evergrande, which has contributed to Chinese football, is undoubtedly playing a big game of chess, and at least it has been a success so far." (Xinhuanet, 2015)

Xinhuanet used a metaphor here to compare Evergrande's football development plan to playing chess, which contains closely detailed steps and plans. The narrative difference before and after supports my argument.

From 2016 to 2021, most of the sports media's reports on Guangzhou Evergrande were praise and the building of the Evergrande club's brand image. The reports were mainly aimed at Guangzhou Evergrande regarding football youth training, the club's shareholding changes, actively cooperating with the name change and being labelled Guangzhou Evergrande, the eight-time champion. Among all 39 media reports that fit the themes selected from 2016 to

the present, the words "Guangzhou Evergrande as the CSL eight-time champion" appeared in 25 of them. The media hopes to create a league-dominant team for the Chinese Super League to create this identity for Guangzhou Evergrande Club and the signature team of the CSL. Titan Sports mentioned in three articles regarding the club's name change in 2020:

"Guangzhou Evergrande is the top club in the Chinese Super League. It can be said that Guangzhou Evergrande's sacrifice is very worthwhile. Because if Guangzhou Evergrande can take the lead in setting an example for other teams, then it will make the Chinese Football Association This provision has been successfully implemented." (Titan Sports, 2021).

The above undoubtedly express the media's positioning of Guangzhou Evergrande, and the vision of helping Guangzhou Evergrande continue to shape its corporate identity. Media perception can serve as a powerful branding tool for sports organisations (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos & Chadwick, 2015). Positive media coverage, strategic communication, and compelling storytelling can contribute to shaping the desired corporate identity of sports organisations and the role of media in framing and constructing narratives about sports organisations (Sant, Carey & Mason, 2013). Media perceptions can influence the public perception by selecting specific story angles, emphasising certain aspects of the organisation's identity, and framing events or issues in particular ways (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020). For example:

"Xu Jiayin's crazy spending on the football field in recent years has not been in vain. While the team's championship has greatly increased the popularity of Evergrande Group, it also allowed Xu Jiayin to complete the sublimation of his image from an ordinary real estate businessman to the redeemer of Chinese football. This seemingly uneconomical account is bringing it immeasurable potential benefits." (Renmin,

2014).

The above narratives show that the media's description of Guangzhou Evergrande as "crazy money-spending" and "Chinese Super League dominance" has shaped its public image as the wealthiest Chinese football club, leading to the public's high expectations. This caused the club's reputation to plummet after the sudden financial crisis in 2020.

McCombs and Valenzuela (2020) highlight how media narratives can influence the public perception by selecting specific story angles and framing events in particular ways. For Guangzhou Evergrande FC, how the media portrays the club, its achievements, community involvement, and its success stories can significantly influence how the public perceives the club. Therefore, it is evidenced that even though media can shape a narrative, it's not always within the club's control. Media can frame stories based on their agenda or the public interest. Guangzhou Evergrande FC's challenge is strategically managing its interactions with the media to ensure that the narratives align with the desired corporate identity.

After 2021, Guangzhou Evergrande encountered financial difficulty and began to owe wages, the management was chaotic, and its performance plummeted until it was relegated from the CSL. Among the five articles published after 2021 focused on the critical comments on the clubs that owe wages, Guangzhou Evergrande was criticised by the media. For example:

"For many Guangzhou fans, the discomfort caused by this achievement is persistent. According to the football media, the wage arrears problem for the Guangzhou team players has not yet been resolved. Even after being relegated to the Chinese Super League, they still face financial difficulties" (Titan Sports, 2022).

"In 2022, Evergrande Group, which encountered an economic crisis, once wanted to sell the football club. However, the conditions offered by Guangzhou Pharmaceutical Group, which was interested in taking over, were far from Evergrande's goals, so Evergrande chose to give up and instead allocated 1,500 yuan to the club. The club raises ten thousand, and the rest - from the original 1 billion or 2 billion to 15 million- is a cliff-like drop" (Tencent, 2023).

Football reporter Han Qiaosheng wrote:

"I believe that Evergrande 10 years ago was the beginning of many people's football dreams. I also believe today's Guangzhou team has hurt many people's hearts. A good way: who told us not to respect the laws of the market?" (Zuqiu, 2022).

The above narratives prove that under the general environment of national anti-corruption, the media chose to expose the problems of Guangzhou Evergrande and began to express their disappointment and accountability for the club in their statements. Correspondingly, the extent to which the state controls the media can contribute to or facilitate corruption within sports organisations (Peng, Skinner & Houlihan). Some argue that state media can expose corruption and hold sports organisations accountable, depending on the political context (Themudo, 2013). However, the state-controlled press can also be used to cover up or downplay instances of corruption, protecting the interests of influential individuals or organisations (Duffy, 2014). This indicates that the state media is currently choosing to expose the problems of Guangzhou Evergrande due to the current political environment of national anti-corruption involving several officials from Evergrande Group. Even the group president has been taken for investigation (Xinhuanet, 2023), and people have begun to express their disappointment and accountability regarding the club in their statements.

When faced with adverse events or scandals, sports organisations often rely on media strategies to manage their corporate identity and reputation (Kellison & Mondello, 2012). The effectiveness of different media strategies, such as issuing public apologies, conducting interviews, or engaging in social media campaigns, can help to rebuild the corporate identity of sports organisations (Len-Ríos et al., 2015). Guangzhou Evergrande FC utilised social media campaigns to stay closer to fans and the public to help them with their current crisis. Details of the contents of social media perception will be shown in the next chapter.

5.4 Chapter conclusion

Through the content analysis in this chapter, I believe that under the popular themes generated by China's football reform, state-owned media stands according to the perspective of national interests. From 2016 to 2021, the media coverage concerning Jiangsu Suning FC has predominantly revolved around two main themes: dissolution, sharing the reforms and social responsibility. This focus intensified notably after Jiangsu Suning FC announced its disbandment in 2021 following a championship victory. Official state-owned media initially lauded Jiangsu Suning for its healthy operations and advocated for financial stability in football, promoting it as a model for smaller clubs. This aligns with the government's agenda for responsible financial management in football (Xinhuanet, 2021). However, non-state media presented a contrasting picture, revealing financial defaults and a lack of governance in connection to Jiangsu Suning, portraying a different reality than the official narrative (Titan Sports, 2021). This discrepancy underscores the media's power to influence public opinion and the importance of transparency and responsible financial practices in football, with the

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sudden dissolution of Jiangsu Suning serving as a stark example. The media's role in shaping narratives and perceptions is vital, affecting the framing of social responsibility in sports organisations (Bell, Applequist & Dotson-Pierson, 2019). The case of Jiangsu Suning highlights that media portrayals, whether positive or negative, significantly impact public perception and trust in sports organisations, thus emphasising the need for responsible and transparent practices to maintain credibility (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli & Schwarz, 2006). Furthermore, the media's critical role in shedding light on unethical behaviour or irresponsibility holds sports organisations accountable and propels them to improve their practices to meet societal expectations (Trendafilova & Babiak, 2013).

In 2023, Chinese football witnessed a new wave of anti-corruption efforts. The media, particularly Xinhuanet, played a crucial role in shaping the public perception of Guangzhou Evergrande FC. The narrative shifted dramatically, heavily focusing on the financial struggles and management changes within the Evergrande Group, the parent company of Guangzhou FC. This starkly contrasts with previous years when media narratives were overwhelmingly favourable, positioning the club as a Chinese Super League (CSL) powerhouse and emphasising its dominance in the league (Xinhuanet, 2015). However, the narrative changed post-2021, with the media criticising GEFC for issues like wage arrears and financial instability, aligning with the national anti-corruption agenda. This underscores how media narratives can significantly impact a club's reputation and public image (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos & Chadwick, 2015). Even state-controlled media can expose issues in sports organisations, particularly under a heightened anti-corruption climate, illustrating the complex interplay between media, state control, and organisational reputation (Themudo, 2013). Consequently,

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sports organisations, including Guangzhou FC, often employ media strategies to manage their corporate identity and reputation, especially during crises (Kellison & Mondello, 2012). The changing media portrayal of Guangzhou FC is a pertinent case study highlighting the evolving dynamics between media, sports organisations, and the socio-political context in China.

In summary, I believe that state-owned media and non-state-owned media work together to help sports organisations construct narratives and stories around the issues that have arisen in the reform of the Chinese Super League to influence the construction of the corporate identity of CSL clubs. Sports media in China are powerful stakeholders which significantly shapes the corporate identity of both Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC. Journalists, commentators, and analysts often emphasise certain aspects of organisational history, achievements, values, and culture (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2001). By highlighting these elements, media channels help to shape the narratives and create a unique corporate identity for sports organisations (Waters & Jones, 2011). However, narratives in mass media sometimes reinforce stereotypes or stigmatise specific sports organisations or individuals (Kian & Hardin, 2009). Stereotypic descriptions can perpetuate biases, limit opportunities, hinder the growth and development of sports organisations, and alienate potential audiences and stakeholders (Cottingham et al., 2015). All in all, in the context of the reform of the Chinese football league, even though both state-owned and non-state-owned media reports have a certain degree of subjectivity and created stereotypes for specific clubs, their narratives still serve as a communication bridge between the CFA and clubs.

Moreover, the analysis of media narratives in sections 5. 2 and 53 sheds light on the significant impact of various media platforms on forming and representing corporate identity for football clubs such as Jiangsu Suning FC and Guangzhou Evergrande FC. Publicly owned media often aligns with government objectives, portraying football clubs as emblematic of national achievement and success by China's overarching football development objectives. On the contrary, media not owned by the state provides a more intricate viewpoint, emphasizing market forces, economic stability, and corporate efforts towards social responsibility. Contrary to these diverging narratives, corporate identity is not solely influenced by media perceptions but is also moulded by the organisations' actions, values, and behaviours.

For instance, my research revealed that state-owned media depicted the sudden dissolution of Jiangsu Suning FC in 2021 as an essential restructuring of national sports policies. In contrast, non-state-owned media emphasized issues of financial mismanagement and lack of transparency. Moreover, Guangzhou Evergrande FC's strategic community engagement initiatives, particularly its grassroots football development programs, received commendations from diverse media platforms, further solidifying its reputation as a prominent entity within China's football sector.

The influence of media narratives on public perception and reputation is significant. However, clubs can shape their identity through strategic communication, transparency, and authentic stakeholder engagement. The depiction of football clubs in the media can substantially influence their reputation, credibility, and long-term viability, emphasizing the significance of ensuring that media narratives are congruent with the desired corporate identity.

Chapter 6

Social media perception in the Chinese Super League and CSL clubs

6.1 Introduction

As argued in Chapter 5, mainstream sports media reports have a certain degree of subjectivity, and the authorship and style have created stereotypes for Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC. However, their narratives still serve as a communication bridge between the CFA, the clubs, and their fans. This differs from the impact of the perception through social media on Chinese football found in this chapter. This will be clarified in detail. Drawing back to the content of the differences between social media and established print/online media related to influencing public perception in Chapter 2, the differences here are significant because they highlight the contrasting dynamics between mass media and social media in terms of information dissemination and audience engagement. Baum and Potter (2008) underscore the extent of the influence held by mass media due to its credibility and broad distribution yet acknowledge the potential for biased narratives.

Callaghan (2016) emphasises the social media platforms' real-time engagement and viral potential, particularly among the younger demographics. In China, apps like Douyin (抖音) and Kuaishou (快手) are top-rated among Chinese youth. These platforms have influenced fashion trends and given rise to a new generation of internet celebrities and influencers. This underlines the interconnectedness of the CSL football clubs' corporate identitys with the

professional sports sector, the state, commercial actors, and the Chinese public. Social media is the dynamic medium through which these identities are crafted and disseminated, profoundly impacting the relationships and dynamics within the Chinese football landscape. In Chapter 6, I also delve into the varying levels of control that sports organisations possess over their image within these media landscapes, with social media allowing for more direct interaction and exposing them to uncontrolled public opinions. This chapter discusses the impact of social media perception on shaping the CSL clubs' corporate identity. I focus on the role of social media in constructing the particular perceptions of Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs' corporate identitys. I explore the development of these perspectives through media article content analysis. Drawing inspiration from the themes drawn on in the previous chapter, the main content of this chapter will present the research on the content of social media posts from four trending social media platforms in China (Weibo and Douyin, etc.) related to the issues that have arisen in Jiangsu Suning FC, Tianjin Jinmen Tiger FC, and Guangzhou Evergrande FC within the time frame of 2015 to present. This was to narrow down the number of posts based on the significant time frame. I reviewed a subset of the collected social media posts from across the time frame and identified recurring themes, topics, or patterns related to my research objectives based on keywords, hashtags, user discussions, and trends. I selected a representative sample of posts for each identified theme and topic.

Therefore, in this chapter, I argue that due to the prevalent negativity surrounding social media posts related to Chinese football, both Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC have initiated efforts to establish connections with social media influencers and engage in discussions about club practices and policies. Given how Chinese Super League (CSL) football clubs lack enough

of a direct influence to shape public opinion, they resort to collaborations with social media influencers (such as 山羊君 and 李宁话体坛 etc) as a strategic approach. In line with this, the landscape of social media platforms in China has given rise to a flourishing influencer culture, where influential figures termed Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) or influencers significantly impact public opinion and consumer behaviour (Liu et al., 2022). In the sports sector, influential athletes, sports commentators, and sports-related content creators can shape public perceptions by endorsing particular teams, brands, or events, impacting fan engagement and consumer behaviour (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2015). However, Rosário, Lopes and Rosário (2023) argue that overly promotional or insincere endorsements by influencers may undermine the credibility and authenticity of the organisation. Influencers are responsible for maintaining transparency and aligning their endorsements with personal values (Wellman et al., 2020). Therefore, in the context of the reform of the Chinese football league, the CFA has significantly contributed, along with clubs, to the mismanagement of the sport (such as corruption and poor national team performance), which has generated a poor public image. I argue that promoting the national identity has also led the Chinese public to combine their understanding of competitive sports with national identity. For example, many comments on social media posts about Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC attribute the poor performance of the national team to the slow development of the club and even criticise the inaction of the CFA, which affects the construction of their corporate identity by Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC.

Based on the findings in both Chapters 5 and 6, I argue that the media content from different perspectives makes the public's understanding of Chinese football more ambiguous. It guides the Chinese public to rely more on self-awareness to understand the problems caused by

Chinese football. This will be explained and evidenced throughout the chapter. Social media influencers often give negative reviews on Chinese football issues to gain discussion and traffic (Wang, 2020).

The layout of this chapter is as follows. In section 6.2, I present an evaluation of social media platforms in China and how they are essential to the Chinese football industry. I then explain what roles these particular social media platforms play in shaping the public perception and the corporate identity of Guangzhou Evergrande and Jiangsu Suning FC by showing examples from the data. Then, section 6.3 will present the social media perception analysis of Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC based on collected social media posts and comments. In the end, section 6.4 will summarise the findings/discussions and my arguments in order to contribute to answering the research question.

6.2 Social media platforms and the Chinese football industry

Social proof is significant to understanding this chapter as it underlines the impact of collective behaviour and consensus related to influencing trust within the relationships between social media influencers, KOLs, and the public (Sanak-Kosmowska, 2021). Social proof, a psychological phenomenon where individuals tend to adopt the actions or opinions of others when uncertain about their own decisions, plays a pivotal role in shaping how trust is formed and solidified in this context (MacCoun, 2012). Social proof supports that the opinions and recommendations of social media influencers can have an impact. When followers observe others expressing trust and positive experiences within an influencer's content, they are more

likely to trust that message (Shamim & Islam, 2022). Peer influence is essential in building trust in the influencer's message (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). The impact of Chinese social culture on social media and public perception will be analysed in section 6.3, combined with club cases.

6.2.1 China's social media landscape

The nature of China's social media landscape is uniquely characterised by a combination of cultural, technological, and regulatory factors that set it apart from social media environments in other countries (Davison, Ou & Martinsons, 2018). China's social media landscape is unique due to the convergence of its cultural heritage, government regulation, platform diversity, and evolving consumer behaviour (Fang, 2022). China's social media landscape is deeply intertwined with its rich cultural history and values (Cao, 2011). The prevalence of collectivism, the emphasis on group identity, and the resonance of nationalistic sentiments shape the content that is shared, discussed, and celebrated on these platforms (Fang, 2022). For example, regarding Renmin Daily, their Douyin account posted a short video in 2021 showing President Xi Jinping's passion for sports, and the president was given the slogan: *"Let's give hope to the young generation, China will be strong when Chinese sports are strong."* Most of the comments under this post absolutely agreed with the president's words from the video. Such as: *"Come on China!"; "China, strong!"; "Strengthen your body and strengthen your country through sports"*. Social media in China often serves as a conduit for expressing and reinforcing cultural pride and national unity.

In parallel, the Chinese government exerts significant control over the digital realm, leading to a unique regulatory environment. Content censorship, monitoring, and the influence of "public opinion guidance" policies impact the types of discussions on social media (King, Pan & Roberts, 2017). This regulatory framework shapes the tone and scope of online discourse, differentiating China's social media landscape from that of more open societies (Chen, Chen & Xia, 2022). Due to the unique nature of China's social media landscape and the government's control over online platforms, social media in China plays a vital role in shaping public perception (Stockmann & Luo, 2017). Chinese social media often fosters strong nationalist sentiments among its users. Nationalistic content and discussions about China's achievements, cultural heritage, and sporting achievements are often shared and celebrated (Hong & Lu, 2016). This can influence the public perception by creating a sense of pride, solidarity and support for Chinese sports teams and athletes (Weiss, 2019). For example, Douyin blogger Su posted a short video in 2022 stating: "If sports are strong, China will be strong; if national sports are prosperous, sports will be prosperous" (体育强则中国强，国运兴则体育兴). Under this post, there are comments such as "Sports culture and spirit coexist" and "A strong country must have a place for sports". This also explains the public invective against the poor historical record of the men's football team compared to the women's football team's feat of winning the Asian Cup in 2022. On Douyin in 2022, influencers from various fields across the country congratulated the Chinese women's football team for winning the championship, while the majority of the comments below most of the posts were insults directed to the men's football team and accusations against the CFA. There was even a famous comment that "the women's football team is winning the championship and the men's football team is disbanding" to satirise the disbandment of the Chinese Super League

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clubs.

Within the stakeholder framework (Freeman et al., 2010), Chinese social media influencers emerge as distinct entities skilfully aligning by sharing their personal narratives and viewpoints. This strategic positioning becomes evident on platforms like Douyin where many bloggers embrace titles such as "former reporter" or "sports commentator." These designations, inherently synonymous with opinion leadership, correspond to their role as stakeholders who adeptly mould public perception during pivotal instances such as the unveiling of new policies by the Chinese Football Association (CFA) or critical deliberations within football clubs.

For example, previous Jiangsu FC player Wang Chuqi became a social media influencer after the dissolution of Jiangsu FC. He used his retired Jiangsu FC player title, which earned him a huge fan base on Douyin. He keeps posting football news in China on the Douyin platform. For example, he posted a short video about his Jiangsu FC career in 2023: *"Don't even mention Suning Corp here; they still owe me salaries; they had no trust."* This post had 66k likes and over 5k comments under the post. His statement about Suning Corp led to criticism in the comments on Jiangsu FC. These influencers navigate the interactive discourse realm by situating themselves as integral stakeholders within the Chinese Super League (CSL) clubs, fostering comments that spark nuanced deliberations. These discussions meticulously dissect the authenticity and potential biases inherent in the information presented, thus reflecting elements of stakeholder engagement and scrutiny (Gasser et al., 2012).

Notably, a trend that materialises is that a considerable proportion of these comments not only validate the credibility of the disseminated content but also distinctly exhibit a palpable inclination toward the influencers' genuineness and dependability when juxtaposed with conventional media outlets. This observable preference underscores the influencers' role as stakeholders and resonates with stakeholder theories, emphasising trust and authenticity in the relationships between stakeholders and organisations. This alignment between the influencers' authenticity and stakeholder engagement echoes the findings of Shu et al. (2017), who expounded on the influencers' prowess to emanate an aura of sincerity and trustworthiness, effectively diverging from the perceived biases linked to traditional media channels, often entangled with political and commercial motivations. In my findings, the Chinese public more likely tends to recognise the authenticity of social media influencers who describe themselves as journalists/previous club employees. The interplay between social media influencers, stakeholder engagement, and authenticity reflects the intricate dynamics embedded in stakeholder theories and models, accentuating the influencers' pivotal role in shaping and steering public perception.

Regarding community activism and building fan culture, social media influencers engage fans and build communities around sports organisations (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Influencers can promote fan engagement, create a sense of belonging, and foster loyalty (Vale & Fernandes, 2018) by posting and creating fan groups. For example, "Loyal Blue and White Supporters", "Zhang Yanming", and "North stand director Cui" are local Tianjin fans with over 4k local followers on their Douyin accounts. They are deeply associated with Tianjin FC based on their influence on Tianjin fans. The club engaged them to help with organising fan activities and

they even participated in home game ticket sales. Regarding grassroots development, social media has become a platform for discovering and developing young talent in sports (Radicchi & Mozzachiodi, 2016). Many CSLs look for potential players through youth organisations on social media platforms. For example, renowned Chinese football commentator Dong Lu heavily promoted his "Football Junior" youth training program in Douyin, from which Hebei FC signed their 10-year-old player Wan Xiang in 2018. The other players involved in the program have also been familiar to many people and have even been noticed by significant clubs in the Chinese Super League. It allows aspiring athletes to showcase their skills, gain recognition and connect with coaches, scouts, and sporting organisations (Newman, Peck & Wilhide, 2017).

6.2.2 Social media influencers and KOLs in China

Chinese social media influencers are sometimes viewed as sources of information that bypass traditional media bias and censorship (Appel et al., 2020). They offer alternative perspectives and narratives that resonate with individuals seeking a different perspective. Followers may believe that influential people are independent voices, less influenced by political or commercial interests (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). For example, when the CFA introduced the club's name change policy, it was opposed to by the public. Beijing FC and Guangzhou FC, as well as their team reporters, all posted posts explaining the content of the policy, and most of the comment areas under these posts were full of abuse. Bai Guohua, a famous football journalist, posted the following on Douyin in 2019: *"This policy is trying to help CSL clubs to build up their own long-live club culture just like European football clubs."* The comments

under the post showed: *"What a mess"* and *"The Chinese Football Association made another mistake"*.

The above data shows that they have asked the club to fight against the policy. When some football influencers posted similar posts, most of the comments below their posts were rational discussions about the new policy. For example, in 2021, a social media influencer named Donglaosi posted his analysis about the club's renaming policy. The comment below shows: *"Finding ways to reserve talents and improve performance is serious work"* and *"Indeed, most of the names of foreign clubs only have local names."*

As found from within the data, social media influencers always need eye-catching headlines and content to attract traffic and increase their posts' views. Only when the number of views and fans reaches 1000 does the platform allow them to conduct commerce/live commerce and place advertisements to make profit. This is one key reason why there are more eye-catching headlines such as *"What kills Chinese football"*; *"Who literally ruined Jiangsu FC"* posted. Because of this, social media bloggers have the power to guide public perception in Chinese society. Social media platforms enable sports organisations to monetise their digital presence, such as through sponsored content, endorsements, and partnerships with brands seeking to reach the platform's user base (Kunkel et al., 2021). Influencers and KOLs related to the sports industry can generate income through brand partnerships and product endorsements (Giannoulakis & Apostolopoulou, 2011).

It is worth noting that Chinese social media landscape differs from platforms popular in Western countries, such as Facebook or Twitter (Ghiselli & Ma, 2015). Popular social media platforms in China include WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin (TikTok). Each platform has unique features and user behaviour and plays an essential role in shaping public perception and influencing the Chinese sports industry. This chapter collects data from the above three platforms for analysis. These three platforms are currently the social media platforms with the most users in China.

In sports, influencers often assume the role of experts or opinion leaders within their respective domains. They effectively monetise their knowledge and expertise through content creation, offering followers information, tips, and advice (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). The principles of social confirming and social proof underpin this dynamic. Social proof is significant to understanding this chapter as it underlines the impact of collective behaviour and consensus on influencing trust within the relationship between social media influencers, KOLs, and the public (Sanak-Kosmowska, 2021). Social proof, a psychological phenomenon where individuals tend to adopt the actions or opinions of others when uncertain about their own decisions, plays a pivotal role in shaping how trust is formed and solidified in this context (MacCoun, 2012).

Followers place immense trust in the influencer's insights and depend on them as a steadfast and reliable source of knowledge in their field (Martínez-López et al., 2020). This trust manifests vividly on platforms such as Weibo and Douyin. A quick scroll through the comment sections of these influential figures reveals a striking pattern. Most comments express

unequivocal support and unwavering trust in the influencer's words, with frequent phrases like *"I absolute agree with what he said"* and *"That's so right"* dominating the discussions. This demonstrates how social confirming, and proof mechanisms significantly influence the perception and validation of these sports influencers' expertise.

Firstly, cultural factors shape the trust in Chinese social media influencers and KOLs. Confucian values of respect for authority and hierarchical structures impact how followers perceive these figures as trustworthy sources of information and guidance (Zhou et al., 2021). This cultural lens highlights the significance of filial piety and respect for experts, fostering a distinct form of trust in the opinions of influencers (Schneider, 2018). For example, the data shows that social media accounts with profile descriptions like journalists and a high number of comments under similar topic posts, comments under accounts with famous sports journalists, famous football commentators, etc., generally agree with the poster's comments. In contrast, accounts without particular profile descriptions are the opposite. The reference to the data shows that there are comments under posts from accounts with recognisable descriptions, such as Yan Qiang, Dong Lu and Zhan Jun etc. People tend to agree with the poster's comments, while accounts without particular descriptions elicit differing opinions, illustrating the influence of social proof. The comments' alignment with well-known figures' views indicates the public's tendency to follow the lead of prominent figures, reinforcing the significance of these influencers' perspectives and establishing a collective sense of trust.

Meanwhile, the key role of authenticity and transparency relates to building trust between social media influencers and the public. Given China's history of counterfeit products and trust

challenges, Lou (2022) believes that the transparent disclosure of influencers of affiliations, sponsorships, and conflicts of interest is more likely to be perceived as trustworthy by Chinese audiences. For example, the famous football journalist Li Xuan revealed more than 9,000 comments before the news in 2023 about the President of the Football Association being investigated by the government. Most of them strongly agreed with the reporter's stance: *"The Football Association is always corrupt"*, *"It's time to investigate him"*, and *"Looking forward to more insider information"*, all of which represent the Chinese public's sensitivity to corruption and trust issues. This further promotes the relationship between influencers and the public. The concept of echo chambers, as expounded by Terren and Borge-Bravo (2021), becomes pertinent in such scenarios. Echo chambers refer to self-reinforcing environments where individuals are exposed to information, perspectives, or opinions that align with their existing beliefs. In sports journalism and in the commentary on platforms like Weibo, Douyin, and others, this concept comes into play as followers tend to engage more readily with like-minded individuals and commentators who echo their views. This phenomenon can intensify the sense of validation and trust among followers and contribute to the symbiotic relationship between sports commentators and their audience. As comments and interactions predominantly reflect support and agreement, it solidifies the standing of influencers like Li Xuan as reliable sources of information and shared sentiments. In this manner, echo chambers help explain these influencers' substantial impact, especially to do with issues like the investigation of corruption within the Football Association, where public sentiment has found a collective, resonating voice in these digital spaces. The above example demonstrates the pervasive nature of social proof (Naeem, 2021). The public's collective alignment with the journalist's viewpoint reflects the influence of social proof in amplifying the credibility and

trustworthiness of the information shared by influential figures, substantiating the impact of social proof on trust-building.

The guanxi concept is also significant in terms of understanding how the relationship between social media influencers and the public was built up. KOLs often leverage their guanxi to enhance their credibility and trustworthiness (Chung & Hamilton, 2001). The ability to form connections and relationships reflects positively on their authenticity and reliability. For example, many social media accounts claim to be former employees of Guangzhou Evergrande to expose the insider information of Guangzhou Evergrande Club, or to help the club promote their contributions to Chinese football. The influencer with the Douyin account name Gongsong posted his views on the financial crisis of Guangzhou Evergrande Club. Most of his posts are from the perspective of Guangzhou FC to help answer the public's questions about the club's operational strategy. He also actively responds to public comments in the comment section, which also helps strengthen their relationship with the public. The influencers' connections and relationships contribute to the perception of their opinions as credible, as endorsements or affiliations with influential individuals or organisations serve as indicators of the validity of their content. This phenomenon echoes the social proof concept, where the collective acceptance of these connections strengthens the trust in the influencer's message. It was evidenced that in the context of CSL clubs, echo chambers can form around the fans' beliefs and biases. For instance, fans who strongly support a particular club may engage more with content supporting their performance or decisions. This can limit their exposure to different perspectives on the club's performance and potentially lead to the propagation of one-sided narratives. I argue that under the social media perception of CSL

clubs, echo chambers and social proof can intersect. For example, if a particular narrative or perspective about a club becomes dominant within an echo chamber, it can serve as social proof for those within it. This means that the views, beliefs, and opinions expressed within the echo chamber gain credibility and influence behaviour.

From such evidence, the concepts of social proof and echo chambers are instrumental in understanding the dynamics of trust-building between social media influencers, KOLs, and the public within China's unique digital landscape. It is possible to argue that collective influence and consensus-driven behaviour underscore the pivotal role of social proof in shaping trust perceptions, and this concept resonates throughout the relationship-building process described.

6.3 Social media perception analysis

6.3.1 Guangzhou Evergrande FC

Guanxi/relationship with the CFA

As can evidenced from the collected data, the most discussed issues related to Guangzhou Evergrande FC are, respectively, whether the club will be disbanded, Guangzhou Evergrande's CSR practices and football academy, and the relationship between Guangzhou Evergrande and the Football Association. The collected data reveals the most discussed issues related to Guangzhou Evergrande FC. Notably, during the prime of the league between 2015 - 2018, discussions about the relationship between the CFA and Guangzhou Evergrande FC became

prominent on social media platforms.

There was a significant discussion about the salary distribution of the ex-Chinese men's football coach Marcelo Lippi. Some influencers on Weibo and Douyin mentioned in their posts that *"CFA only paid 4.5M Euro, and the title of consultant of Guangzhou Evergrande Football School paid the remaining 15.5M"*. Many people did not mention the exchange of interests between the CFA and Evergrande Group, but there were many comments in the comment area questioning the exchange of interests between the two parties. The public accused the real estate company, Evergrande Group, of having received preferential policies in real estate. This example highlights the presence of public scepticism and inquiry regarding the potential exchange of interests between the Chinese Football Association (CFA) and the Evergrande Group. This observation holds significance from both the perspective of stakeholder theories and guanxi, shedding light on the complexities of trust, relationships, and power dynamics within the realm of Chinese sports and business.

Stakeholder theories emphasise the interconnected relationships and interests among the various parties affected by an organisation's decisions (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). The public's comments expressing concerns about the exchange of goods between the CFA and the Evergrande Group reflect a heightened awareness of these potential relationships. This scrutiny resonates with stakeholder theory, as the public perceives itself as a stakeholder invested in the transparency and ethical conduct of these interactions (Freeman, Harrison & Wicks, 2007). The public's questioning also underscores the idea that stakeholders, including the public, play an essential role in shaping organisational behaviour and accountability

(Dempsey, 2007). The public's inquiries about these possible dealings highlight their sensitivity to the interplay between influential entities, and they reflect the value placed on transparency and trust in business relationships.

A well-known Chinese football breaking news influencer, Bai Guohua, stated the following in his post:

"Companies know that Chinese football requires huge investment and has little direct return."; *"Why do companies like Evergrande Group insist on engaging in football? It is because if a company connect a city and its local professional clubs very closely/tight, this football club is equivalent to a "hostage", which is in the hand of that company. It often plays the role of "kidnapping" the government, sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't."*

Other influencers such as Donglaosi have posted that *"Enterprises have their own goals in football, and Chinese football clubs have strong corporate attributes."*

The data above reveals that by investing in football clubs, the government gives preferential policies or other benefits to other enterprise projects. The data reveals that companies, particularly those like Evergrande Group, investing in football clubs in China intersects with stakeholder theory, emphasising the complex web of relationships and interests. Companies invest heavily in Chinese football despite its low direct return because they recognise its importance in Chinese society. The connection between companies and local football clubs acts as a strategic leverage. These clubs can be seen as "hostages" in the hands of the investing

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company, allowing them to exert influence over the local government. This practice underscores the significance of stakeholder theory concerning various factors such as companies, football clubs, and local government, as well as the intricate interplay of interests and power dynamics in the context of Chinese football development. Companies like Evergrande are not solely motivated by a passion for football; their investments in these clubs are strategic, aiming to secure preferential policies and benefits in other enterprise projects. This underscores the importance of stakeholder theory in understanding the multifaceted relationships and motivations at play in China's intersection of business and sports.

From the stakeholder perspective, the relationship between Guangzhou Evergrande FC and the CFA can be understood as a complex network of stakeholders with distinct interests and power dynamics (Ackermann & Eden, 2011). Guangzhou Evergrande FC, as a football club, represents the interests of its owners, sponsors, players, and fans. In contrast, the CFA represents the interests of the broader football community and the governing body of the sport in China. Within this stakeholder network, the influence and role of social media influencers is significant. Key stakeholders acting as mediators help build trust and relationships among the stakeholders (Hillenbrand et al., 2013). Mediators build and sustain relationships through impartiality and credibility, enhancing collaboration and long-term stakeholder engagement (Roloff, 2008). These influencers act as mediators, shaping public perception and facilitating discussions on platforms like Weibo and Douyin. These discussions often revolve around the financial aspects, such as the salary distribution of ex-Chinese men's football coach Marcelo Lippi and the perceived exchange of interests between Guangzhou Evergrande FC and the CFA.

For example, the influencer PSS Panweili, in his post about Marcelo Lippi's salary, stated: *"Evergrande doing this to contribute to the nation, to Chinese football."* Most comments under the post were *"Evergrande made me feel hope for Chinese football"* and *"Guangzhou Evergrande World NO.1."*

The above example highlights the role of influencers as mediators who actively shape public perception and stimulate discussions on platforms like Weibo and Douyin. When viewed through the lenses of stakeholder theories and stakeholder networks, this phenomenon enables an insight into the motivations and implications within the complex interplay between the CFA, media, and CSL clubs.

Influencers, the public, media, clubs, and governing bodies like the CFA constitute a complex network of stakeholders with varying interests and influences. Influencers, acting as mediators, playing a pivotal role in voicing the concerns and opinions of the public and are a significant stakeholder group, shaping perceptions (Dowler et al., 2006). Considering stakeholder networks, the interactions between influencers, the public, media, and CSL clubs constitute an intricate web of relationships that intersect with the CFA.

Public relations in social media and relationships with influencers

When Guangzhou Evergrande had financial problems in 2020, the public opinion was full of criticism (Wang, 2021). For example, data shows that the public believes that the Guangzhou team will also face bankruptcy and dissolution. The influencer named Yuan Jia posted in 2023

about club dissolution and the current situation, claiming that Guangzhou City FC was dissolved. In the comment section of this post, people were talking about whether Guangzhou Evergrande will be the next club to dissolve. Such as *"Its a joke that Guangzhou Evergrande still alive"*, *"Evergrande will be the next"*, *"I don't believe Evergrande could hold the club for more than a year."*

Even after the club issued an official announcement stating that Evergrande Group would not withdraw, the direction of the public opinion has not changed. After that, former employees of Guangzhou Evergrande and social media influencers from Guangzhou posted on social media to promote Guangzhou Evergrande's contribution to Chinese football, asking fans to view Guangzhou Evergrande's contribution to Chinese football reform rationally. Guangzhou Evergrande changed its public perception through social media. The titles of their posts are all positive titles, such as *"What did Guangzhou Evergrande bring to Chinese football?"*, and *"Please respect Guangzhou Evergrande."*

Most of the discussion in the comments below such posts is to express support and to show that they think that Guangzhou Evergrande has contributed enough to the development of Chinese football. For example, *"Why should the club contribute to the country?"*; *"Guangzhou Evergrande is the most successful club in the history of China and even Asia."* However, there are a small number of comments such as *"Guangzhou Evergrande has brought the Chinese men's football team to the third-rate in Asia but brought the players' wages to the world's first-rate."*. Most commenters oppose such ironic comments.

From the above evidence, Guangzhou Evergrande provides a compelling example of leveraging social media influence to alter and shape public perception of the club strategically. It is possible to argue that Chinese Super League clubs, as stakeholders themselves, lack sufficient leverage to control public opinion directly. Instead, they must engage and collaborate with social media influencers to guide public perception effectively. Consequently, they are compelled to foster collaborations with social media influencers to effectively navigate and steer public perception. By employing the lens of stakeholder theory, it becomes apparent that social media influencers constitute a distinct stakeholder group replete with their unique interests, influence, and expectations (Chung & Crawford, 2016). As stakeholders, their endorsement of clubs transcends mere promotional advantage, wielding the authority to mould public sentiment, influence fan engagement, significantly contributing to the overall standing and triumph of the football clubs they support (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Through synergistic partnerships with social media influencers, Chinese Super League football clubs can harness their reach and credibility, engaging fervently with fans and stakeholders. This interactive engagement allows clubs to harmonise their messaging, values, and goals with the influencers' follower base, thereby considerably shaping and directing public opinion (Stoldt et al., 2020).

6.3.2 Jiangsu Suning FC

Club dissolution and CFA governance

Most of the accessible social media posts surrounding the Jiangsu Suning club were about the club's disbandment, and the public focus was on "who to blame?". Everyone is trying to find

out the real reason for and culprit behind the disbandment of the Jiangsu team. Jiangsu Suning Club is a project invested in by Suning Group, and Suning Sports, which oversees the club, is a subsidiary of Suning Group. Jiangsu Club announced its dissolution in 2021 due to issues including operating funds. This has been a prevalent topic of public discussion in Chinese football since 2021 (Ma, 2023).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, most of the mainstream media have adopted journalistic positions that considered that the last-minute straw that crushed the Jiangsu team was the "club name change policy" promoted by the CFA. However, there are different opinions on social media. For example, a Douyin influencer said in his video post titled "Jiangsu Suning's disbandment has nothing to do with the neutral team's name policy" that it was due to a problem with the investor group. The reason cannot be attributed to the introduction of the policy, but the real culprit is the club's excessive investment in the "Golden Dollar Football" era.

The blogger used *"no bottom line"* to describe the club's exaggerated investment. The financial difficulty of Suning Group is the primary reason for the disbandment of the club. Among the 82 comments in the comment area below the post, more than half of the people did not agree with the blogger's remarks, such as: *"If there is no such policy, Jiangsu club will have many companies choose to take over. Because of this policy, most companies Stay away."* In response to this comment, someone replied: *"Not necessarily; many companies do not need football as a tool for exchanging resources."* Also, in other posts about the club's name-change policy, most describe it as *"the biggest cold joke in Chinese football"*. In the comment area of

these posts, more than 80% of the comments were negative comments on the CFA and expressed incomprehension of the policy. The following comments are some examples: *"Does the enterprise have anything to do with the quality of playing football?"* and *"The premise of de-corporate the name of the Chinese football club is to de-enterprise the Football Association."*

The above comments represent another position, where the public believes that the CFA and the football clubs bear corresponding responsibilities. The unrestrained spending of football clubs to buy players has led to the financial crisis of the parent company and sponsors, which is the root cause of the team's financial difficulties today (Chen, 2021). Consideration of the interests of all stakeholders is critical to the long-term success and sustainability of the organisation (Friedman, Parent & Mason, 2004). Organisations can build trust, improve reputation, and create shared value by proactively managing and addressing stakeholder concerns (Hills, Walker & Barry, 2019). This contributes to improved financial performance, innovation, and resilience to challenges. This is a vision for CSL clubs to consider when taking care of social media perceptions.

Another social media influencer tried to analyse everything that happened before the disbandment of Jiangsu Suning Club. An article from Douyin about the disbandment of Jiangsu Suning said: *"In the two or three months before the 2020 Chinese Super League final, where Jiangsu Suning defeated Guangzhou Evergrande when it was rumoured that Evergrande Group had operational and financial problems, Suning Evergrande provided financial assistance, so the Jiangsu players had a higher desire to win than the Guangzhou players in*

that match-up."

This statement has also appeared in several other posts about the disbandment of Jiangsu FC.

Rowley (1997) mentioned that resource exchange with competitors can influence an organisation's strategic choices and behaviours. Organisations can adjust their strategies, such as cooperation or competition, according to the resources obtained through exchange (Twum-Darko & Harker, 2017). When an organisation integrates new resources into its operations, the exchange can influence decisions related to product development, market positioning, and innovation (Sivadas, E., & Dwyer, 2000). For example, Douyin influencer PSS Panweili stated in his post in 2022:

"Suning Group needed the Chinese Super League title to help Jiangsu find suitable buyers, while Evergrande Group needed funds due to the financial crisis due to the downturn in China's real estate industry."

The above data shows that there were possibly benefit exchanges between Jiangsu FC and Guangzhou FC. Combined with the Renqing exchange in guanxi (Park & Luo, 2001), it is not difficult to analyse that there is an exchange of interests between Guangzhou Evergrande and Jiangsu Suning, which makes the parent companies of both parties mutually beneficial. Rowley (1997) underscores that resource exchange with competitors can significantly influence an organisation's strategic choices. In this case, Jiangsu Suning and Guangzhou Evergrande, typically competitors, engaged in resource exchange to achieve shared goals. As

a result, both organisations adjusted their strategies for mutual benefit, with Suning Group seeking a Chinese Super League title to facilitate Jiangsu's sale and Evergrande Group aiming to obtain funds due to the financial crisis in China's real estate sector. This exchange of interests aligns with the concept of Renqing exchange in guanxi (Park & Luo, 2001), which emphasises the importance of social exchange in Chinese culture. The interactions between these football clubs and their parent companies extend beyond mere competition. They involve resource sharing and strategic cooperation, illustrating the multifaceted nature of stakeholder relationships within Chinese football. Pursuing mutual benefit drives these alliances and reveals the intricate interplay of business and sports interests in a rapidly evolving context.

Social media influencers' disclosure of insider information can affect the organisation's reputation and image (Leite & Baptista, 2022). Depending on the nature of the information disclosed, it may enhance or damage the organisation's image (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Positive disclosures about innovative strategies or ethical practices may improve an organisation's image, while harmful disclosures about misconduct or controversial activities may damage its reputation (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021). In the case of Jiangsu FC, the disclosed information behaviour is controversial, which has also led to discourses questioning the fairness of the league and ethical considerations in the comment area of the posts.

In addition, the public criticism of the CFA is also an essential part of the CSL clubs' social media perception. Jiangsu Taizhou fans mention in their WeChat posts about the disbandment of the Jiangsu team: *"CFA's "one size fits all" club name change policy has hurt investors, CFA*

has always lacked a qualified management model, or it is too open, or control it too tightly."

The above comments are on the central theme of public perception. Angry fans blame the CFA and the fall of Jiangsu football on the issue of CFA governance and the overall football reform plan.

Weibo blogger Sun Lei posted about the disbandment of the Jiangsu and Chongqing teams in 2022, expressing his embarrassment about the current situation. The 65 comments below the post included over 50 accusing CFA Chairman Chen Xuyuan. There are even posts on Douyin claiming that Chen Xuyuan is the culprit of Evergrande and Suning's decline. He used, *"the man who set Chinese football back 20 years by himself"*. The comments below the post are all *"This person needs to be investigated"; "Such a person needs to be held accountable."*

These comments represent that the public is still vividly aware of the corruption incidents that have occurred in the history of the Chinese Football Association, which still affect the public perception. The public has long, if albeit, fickle and changeable histories and interpretations of the club that matter to them and their public and personal allegiances, loyalties, and identities. The above statement shows that the public's understanding of the CFA is subjective and negative, caused by past corruption scandals and poor game results. Public perception against the governing body may extend to the sport (Nelson, 2017). If the public perceives that a governing body is not acting in the sports or its stakeholders' best interests, this can lead to negative perceptions of the sport (Nicoll, 2012). This may decrease public interest, participation or support for the sport, as a result. In the context of China's unique social media

culture, controls, and policies, the arguments above still hold relevance. Still, their impact might be subject to specific considerations. China's social media landscape is characterised by stringent government controls, content censorship, and the influence of "public opinion guidance" policies (Cao, 2011). This distinctive environment shapes the dissemination of information, discussions, and narratives on digital platforms. While negative perceptions of the CFA due to corruption scandals and poor game results could still circulate, their extent might be influenced by the level of censorship and control over such discussions. For example, since the dissolution of Jiangsu FC in 2021, the number of comments and posts on major social media platforms on Jiangsu FC has rapidly decreased, and even bloggers have reported that their videos about Jiangsu FC's salary arrears have not passed the upload review.

Combining the positive portrayal from mainstream sports media mentioned in the previous chapter, it is not difficult to see that the government is trying to control and reduce the public criticism of Chinese football clubs. The impact of negative perceptions on public interest, participation, or support for elite sports could still hold. Still, the effectiveness of these perceptions in driving tangible changes might be influenced by the authorities' ability to manage and manipulate public sentiment, possibly minimising the extent of negative repercussions (Yao et al., 2021).

In essence, while the above arguments from scholars maintain relevance in the Chinese context, they should be evaluated within the confines of China's unique social media culture, controls, and policies. The weight and value of these arguments may be tempered by the state's ability to influence discourse, control information flows, and shape the public

sentiment to align with its desired narratives. From such evidence, it is possible to argue that the impact and outcomes of negative perceptions could be mitigated to some extent by the state's control over information dissemination and social media discussions.

In Chapter 4, through the interpretation of the overall plan for China's football reform, it is evidenced that the purpose of the CFA's continuous issuance of policies is to accelerate the reform of Chinese football and to try to enter the European football league model. The club's name change is one classic example. However, due to the frequent changes in policy and the poor results of previous governance, the public perception of the CFA is very harmful. In addition, the public distrust of this CFA governance also includes doubts about its transparency.

Transparent communication is an essential practice for organisations seeking to foster positive relationships with stakeholders. To effectively bridge the gap between organisations and the public, the proactive communication of transparency efforts, disclosure of pertinent information, and the establishment of accessible feedback channels are all imperative (Men & Hung-Baesecke, 2015). This transparent engagement strategy not only strengthens trust but also enhances the public perception of the organisations (Geeraert, Alm & Groll, 2014). For example, Guangzhou FC is one of the few CSL clubs to publish annual financial reports. In Douyin, PP sports and Huashang Sports accounts have posted about Guangzhou FC's annual report. Many fans in the comment area below have expressed concerns, such as:

"The club has a regular financial deficit each year of 1.9 billion yuan. However, it is offset by the potential for Evergrande Real Estate Group to generate a profit of 19 billion yuan. The substantial financial deficit experienced by the club renders its operations nonviable, necessitating a reassessment and modification of its strategic approach. Significant issues manifest themselves either immediately or eventually.".

This description indicates the importance of disclosing key information for public awareness and increasing public participation. Particularly within the sports domain, where public support and participation are integral, addressing concerns surrounding transparency becomes paramount (Henne, 2015).

To regain trust and emphasise ethical commitment, organisations can enact reforms that prioritise transparency and openness (Gillespie, Dietz & Lockey, 2014). Such measures not only demonstrate a dedication to ethical practices but also yield improvements in public perception. The public discourse on social media platforms has echoed concerns about the governance of the Chinese Football Association (CFA), underscoring the pertinence of addressing transparency-related issues. For example, some people in the comments continue to question the transparency of the Chinese Football Association, such as:

"Where is the 1.7 billion adjustment fee and the 8 billion Chinese Super League naming rights fee for five years? Do you need to tell everyone where it is used?".

There are comments like: *"Why didn't the Football Association invest/use emergency funds to help the teams tide over the difficulties/avoid disbandment when the Jiangsu and Chongqing teams were on the verge of disbanding?"*.

As the data above shows, bloggers have actively inquired across various platforms about the disclosure of extensive adjustment fees, showcasing the significance of fostering transparent practices within organisations.

In essence, the evidence highlights the essential role of transparent communication in maintaining stakeholder relationships, building trust, and enhancing public perception. Therefore, it is possible to argue that as organisations, particularly those in the sports sector, who are navigating the complexities of transparency and governance, addressing these concerns becomes pivotal for sustaining public engagement and positive relationships. These concepts mean and are employed differently within Chinese mainstream and sports governance. As such, it may be more challenging to draw links between any potential effects of social media to make a difference regarding how an organisation might act or not act. Also, the severe lack of transparency and accountability in CFA governance has created public stereotypes of corruption in both the CFA and clubs, which has had a negative effect on the club's ability to construct their own corporate identity.

Club practices and wage arrears

Social media platforms have become a platform for club stakeholders to use to assert their interests. Social media can facilitate increased dialogue and engagement among organisations and stakeholders (Zhao et al., 2022). It provides a platform for stakeholders to express concerns, voice their opinions, and communicate directly with the organisation. By enabling open and transparent dialogue, social media can help identify and resolve stakeholder conflicts more effectively (Lee & Kwak, 2012). In the case of the Jiangsu team, there were still many unresolved issues after the dissolution of the Suning Club. After announcing the suspension of operations, Suning still had no plans to make up for the previous wages and bonuses. The players could do nothing about it, even after the arbitration. At most, Jiangsu Suning can only be sentenced as being unable to obtain qualifications for the Chinese Super League. Douyin influencer Huashang sport stated the following in a post in 2022:

"This is not painful for the Suning Group, which does not want to continue engaging in football, and the players cannot get back their money. Therefore, the players used the massive influence of social media to ask Suning Group for wage arrears."

For example, former player Yang Jiawei once again asked for a salary from their former club Douyin. Yang Jiawei posted:

"It is only natural to pay back the debt. The contract signed in black and white cannot be repaid because it is dissolved. It is a normal company bankruptcy. , The first time was to compensate

the employees' wages, but Suning ignored these contracts and invested in Inter Milan in Serie

A. This gap made many former Suning players feel uncomfortable."

However, most of the comment area below this post is: *"This player is not playing well, but it is very keen to ask for money."* The above narration shows that most of the public abhorred the failure of Chinese football, leading to negative remarks regardless of right and wrong when discussing hot issues. Comments like this do secondary harm to footballers who have already lost interest. However, some oppose the above comments in the comment area: *"Comments supporting players asking for salary point out that the players are the ones who are harmed, and the Jiangsu team did not follow the spirit of the contract."* Some comments again pointed out the CFA's inaction and governance transparency issues. Social media can increase transparency and hold organisations accountable for their actions (Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2012). Stakeholders can use social media to share conflict-related information, evidence, and documents, ensuring a higher standard of accountability for organisations.

It is evidenced that this increased transparency can help resolve stakeholder conflict by exposing issues and prompting organisational action. Social media influencers released more internal information about the Jiangsu team and what happened behind the scenes by posting to warn the CFA and other clubs to avoid repeating similar situations. According to Dhanesh and Duthler (2019), stakeholders can monitor organisational activities through social media updates. This higher visibility holds organisations accountable for their actions and decisions, preventing practices that may lead to conflicts or disputes (Keohane, 2005). Meanwhile, organisations can directly interact with stakeholders through social media platforms.

This open communication channel can cultivate a sense of trust and mutual understanding, allowing stakeholders to express concerns and seek clarification (Andersson & Wikström, 2017). This participation can proactively resolve conflicts and establish more transparent relationships. In this regard, Jiangsu FC did not respond on social media after the team dissolution crisis, and the public did not receive any explanation from official channels about the club's salary arrears and reasons for dissolution. This has also led to the public still criticising Jiangsu FC at present. Guangzhou FC can use social media to showcase its transparency initiatives and commitments. Sharing information about corporate social responsibility work, sustainable development practices, and ethical considerations can promote trust and demonstrate a commitment to transparency (Amran, Lee, & Devi, 2014). For example, Guangzhou FC has posted on Weibo and WeChat platforms about Guangzhou Evergrande Football School and made calls for social events.

Another example is that in 2021, Inter Milan chairman Steven Zhang (Son of Zhang Jindong, chairman of Suning Corp) bought an ultra-luxury sports car worth more than 3 million euros in Italy. This incident was frantically reported and commented on Weibo and Douyin. Many people commented: *"If you have money to buy a car but don't have the money to pay wages"*, *"The shame of Chinese football", "Give me back my Jiangsu team!"* and *"Repay the money!"*

These comments mean that Suning Group currently has rare comments on the Chinese Internet. The inadequate public opinion environment of Jiangsu Suning Club has brought negative impacts to the Chinese Super League and even other clubs. It is also worth noting that among all the social media posts about the Jiangsu team, those with more than 10k

comments, the voices of abuse against Chinese football, the Football Association, and the club account for the majority. On posts with less than 2k comments, there are more rational discussions about football reform than accusations and abuse.

China has a long tradition of groupism, emphasising collective interests and social harmony (Lee, 2015). In this cultural context, individuals may be more inclined to follow group consensus and social norms to avoid causing conflict or disharmony. Such cultural values may contribute to a greater vulnerability to social fads and trends (Mueller et al., 2016). As mentioned in the guanxi section of Chapter 2, the phenomenon of Chinese people following suit (跟风) can be regarded as a manifestation of social interaction and group psychology (Gerth, 2003). People tend to follow the actions, words, and opinions of others to gain a sense of identity, belonging, and collective identity (Seligman, 2008). This trend-following phenomenon is even more prominent in social media because information spreads quickly and widely. In this environment, biased comments or comments that are not based on facts will significantly affect the construction of public perception, which can also easily create stakeholder conflicts (Enikolopov, Petrova & Sonin, 2018). From such evidence, it is possible to argue that under the social media environment of China's unique culture, it will be difficult and time-consuming to reverse public perception, which will significantly impact the construction of a football club's corporate identity. It is also related to the overall hostile and tightly controlled nature of social media in football topics, and the reluctance and inability of individuals to hold counter-opinions that go against the group think.

The social media perception is crucial to the Chinese sports industry as it directly affects an organisation's reputation and brand image (Khan & Sukhotu, 2020). The case of Jiangsu Suning FC provided another negative case to the public, related to their perception of both CSL football clubs and the CFA. Negative perceptions on social media can damage a sports organisation's reputation, impact sponsorships and partnerships, and discourage fan engagement (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015). Therefore, actively managing and addressing social media perceptions is critical for sports organisations to maintain a positive image and secure their presence in the Chinese market.

6.4 Chapter conclusion

Social media's surging global popularity, particularly in China, is reshaping public communication. In China, it weaves narratives of patriotism and historical pride, constructing a collective digital consciousness. This trend links sports with national identity, sparking debates about the poor national team performance's impact on clubs like Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC. China's social media landscape is unique due to its cultural heritage, regulations, platform diversity, and evolving user behaviour. Collaboration and intense patriotism make people feel proud and unified. Regardless of government limitations, social media enables individuals to exhibit national pride and shape conversations about their country's successes.: Chinese influencers strategically portray themselves as influential decision-makers, influencing people's perspectives authentically. Their allegiance showcases insights about people with an interest in the business, and it underscores credibility. The various ways in which people communicate in China demonstrate the significance of social media in shaping

public opinion about sports. My research influences the way people collaborate in China. Sharing resources among various groups in Chinese football is critical. For example, the situation with Lippi's salary and the trades between Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC show this.

Chinese social media influencers create engaging content to influence public opinion and generate income through endorsing products in their posts. Apps like WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin significantly impact people's thoughts and sports. Influencers gain people's trust by sharing common values and garnering support from others. Influencers can gain people's trust by leveraging their connections and relationships. When influencers in the digital realm promote something, it gains increased credibility.

The analysis of social media perception surrounding Guangzhou Evergrande FC encompasses a range of topics, including the club's potential disbandment, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, its football academy, and the complex relationship with the Chinese Football Association (CFA). These discussions, framed within stakeholder theories and the guanxi concept, reveal the intricate web of trust, relationships, and power dynamics in Chinese sports and business. Influencers play a crucial role in this landscape, acting as mediators who shape perceptions and facilitate discussions. By viewing this dynamic through stakeholder theories and networks, it becomes evident that influencers have the potential to impact public discourse and influence behaviour within this intricate network. Consequently, recognising influencers as integral stakeholders in shaping public perception and promoting transparency within Chinese football is a central consideration.

There is a discussion on social media about the breakup of the Jiangsu Suning Club and who should be held accountable. They want to understand the reasons behind it. Chinese football encounters a significant challenge with this. According to the media, the issues can be attributed to the Chinese Football Association's policy of renaming clubs. However, individuals on social media hold varying perspectives on the matter. Well-known individuals, including Douyin creators, claim that the extravagant expenditures of the "Golden Dollar Football" era have resulted in financial challenges. The narratives also delve into the intricate connections between corporations such as Evergrande Group and Suning Group. The companies illustrate the mutual trade of resources and cooperation. The discussions are linked to stakeholder theory and illustrate the diverse networks within the football world. In these discussions, individuals consistently emphasise the CFA's approach to handling issues and stress the significance of transparency and honesty with all parties involved. The regulations and restrictions on Chinese social media impact how individuals communicate and disseminate information. It is crucial to contemplate aligning traditional academic principles with China's social media platforms and regulations. Chinese Super League teams should consider partnering with influential figures on social media to enhance their public image and draw in more supporters.

Chapter 7 Thesis Conclusion

7.1 Concluding thesis thoughts

My thesis's central rationale and aim was to discover the critical features of the CSL clubs' identity that influence key football industry stakeholders in China. My thesis sought to elucidate the distinctive attributes characterising the 'corporate' identities of Chinese Super League (CSL) football clubs, with a specific focus on their implications related to understanding the intricate interplay between the professional sports sector, governmental authorities, commercial entities, and the general public within the Chinese context. Leveraging the insights from prior chapters, this concluding section serves the dual purpose of encapsulating the primary research outcomes and ascertaining the extent to which the research inquiries have been addressed. Furthermore, it endeavours to recognise the limitations inherent in this research endeavour and proffers prospective avenues and prospects for future scholarly investigation.

Understanding these characteristics and their interplay helps shed light on the state of Chinese football. The CSL clubs' corporate identitys reflect their ambitions and missions and mirror China's broader socio-political and economic landscape. They represent the government's efforts to use football as a soft power tool, the opportunities for commercial growth in the sport, and the passion of Chinese fans. This insight aids in comprehending the multifaceted nature of Chinese football and its evolution as a significant player in the global football arena.

My thesis highlights that football clubs in the Chinese Super League (CSL), particularly Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC, often deviate from policy guidelines due to varying club priorities, interests, and resource limitations. These deviations can compromise policy effectiveness and lead to unintended consequences. Importantly, clubs have the potential to offer valuable feedback to policymakers by devising innovative approaches to interpreting and implementing policies, which can facilitate policy adjustments and refinements. This dynamic underscore the complexities of implementing policies within complex organisational structures and the importance of considering practical implementation challenges.

Also, it demonstrates that both state-owned and non-state-owned media outlets collaborate in shaping the narratives and stories about the challenges arising from the reform of the CSL, and its influence on the construction of the corporate identity of CSL clubs. Media professionals, such as journalists and commentators, accentuate specific dimensions of organisational history, accomplishments, values, and culture, contributing to creating distinctive corporate identitys for sports organisations. However, media narratives can also perpetuate stereotypes or stigmatise organisations and individuals. In the Chinese context, public sentiment is influenced by historical issues and corruption scandals within Chinese football, and media coverage can either reinforce or challenge these stereotypes. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for CSL clubs in managing their interactions with the media to foster transparency and counteract unfavourable stereotypes.

My thesis underscores the pivotal role of social media platforms in China in constructing narratives centred on patriotism, historical pride, and collective digital consciousness. It

reveals the influence of social media in connecting sports and national identity, and the power of social media influencers in shaping public perception authentically. The engagement of social media users and influencers aligns with stakeholder theories, emphasising stakeholder credibility. This phenomenon introduces a novel dimension in stakeholder theory, illustrating the stakeholders' expanding and diversifying nature in the digital era. Moreover, it highlights the importance of authenticity and credibility in influencer collaborations and acknowledges the enduring influence of historical issues on public perception and corporate identity in sports organisations.

In practical terms, these findings provide valuable guidance to CSL clubs on shaping their corporate identity, effectively managing media interactions, and engaging with their target audience. Clubs can utilise strategies such as engaging with social media influencers, addressing stereotypes, and aligning their values with influencer collaborations to improve their reputation and public perception. These insights enrich our understanding of how sports organisations can navigate the complex landscape of stakeholder relationships, media narratives, and influencer-driven reputation management, particularly within the unique context of Chinese football.

This culminating chapter is structured into three principal segments. Section 7.2 encapsulates the main findings emerging from this research, encompassing the outcomes of the policy analysis, assessment of mass media perceptions, and examination of social media perceptions, thereby contributing to the resolution of the overarching research queries. Each one of the subsections will discern this primary contribution from the findings and import both a

theoretical and pragmatic vantage point. Lastly, Section 7.3 delves into the research

constraints and presents recommendations for subsequent researchers, unveiling prospective

research trajectories and uncharted opportunities.

7.2 Main research findings and contributions

7.2.1 Diverse interpretation of policies and guanxi influences

In alignment with the research aim of giving an overview of the organisational structures,

policy context and the strategic developments of Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs over

time, my policy analysis followed Marsh and Rhodes' (1992) typology of policy networks and

stakeholder theories. Firstly, although most empirical policy network research has been

conducted at the central government level, by not specifying this, the definition allows the

concept to be used at the single context level of this research (Dowding, 1995; Thomas, 2004;

Seippel & Belbo, 2021). Secondly, the definition encompasses all partnerships between

Jiangsu and Guangzhou and the CSL governance system. As mentioned in the Methodology

Chapter, these were undoubted 'dependency relationships' because of the requirement for

them to be developed to access policy benefits and competitive advantages (Enroth, 2011).

In Chapter 5, I contend that significant disparities exist between policy guidelines and how

clubs interpret and execute them. Consequently, when clubs deviate from these policy

guidelines, their interpretations and actions can disrupt the intended policy outcomes (Fischer,

2003). Such deviations may arise from the varying club priorities, interests, or resource

limitations (Han & Ye, 2017), compromising policy effectiveness and potentially leading to unintended consequences that hinder the overarching policy objectives (Baumgartner, Jones, & Mortensen, 2018). Nevertheless, clubs can offer valuable insights to policymakers by devising innovative approaches to interpreting and implementing policies, facilitating policy adjustments and refinements (Ansell, Sørensen & Torfing, 2017). Despite these interactions, the communication between clubs and the state regarding post-policy responses remains ineffective, impeding the long-term development of the league.

The research provides firm evidence that the football clubs' responses and interpretations of the CFA policies began to change, and that these different interpretations impacted the club's behaviour and identity. After analysing seven different policies from 2015 to 2023, the evidence shows that Guangzhou FC, Jiangsu FC and even other CSL clubs responded to the policy as soon as it was released. However, due to the high investment between 2015 and 2019 (such as naturalising foreign players and the high-priced purchase of top European players), the club's financial crisis directly led to significant clubs beginning to have different interpretations and responses of the new policy to safeguard their interests. This further builds upon the research conducted by Xue (2020), which emphasised that football in China serves not only as a means to generate revenue within a more extensive corporate portfolio but as a tool or mechanism for establishing debt-based relationships and stakeholdership. Capitalists from China responded swiftly and significantly to the Chinese Communist Party's call for involvement. This led to the challenges encountered by the CSL clubs facing difficulties, with players being frequently transferred in and out of the national league with minimal positive outcomes, and the sports enterprise tending toward financial instability.

My research sought to comprehend the collaboration between media, government, businesses, and the public in China, as well as the impact of the Chinese Guanxi principle on these dynamics. This approach assisted in comprehending the rationale behind certain policies, especially in decision-making that considers mutual benefits and connections. Furthermore, discussions in Chapters 4,5 and 6 demonstrate the significant variances between the regulations and the practical implementation by sports associations. It highlights cultivating positive relationships and connections in shaping these actions and interpretations. Also, the analysis further illustrates the challenges of formulating policies within complex organisations and the influence of solid interpersonal connections on policy results. Breaking the rules due to close relationships can alter the intended functioning of the rules.

Furthermore, clubs breaking the rules due to their close connections can cause a shift in the intended operation of the rules. Moreover, breaking the rules because of their close relationships can change how the rules are meant to function, making it essential to talk about how well the rules are working when Guanxi is involved in making decisions. It is crucial to reflect on tangible issues influenced by Guanxi dynamics. Additionally, by employing novel methods for compliance with regulations, clubs can assist policymakers in modifying regulations in line with these methods. All in all, the above arguments further emphasise the importance of policymakers and organisations working together. It examines how Guanxi influences the capability of sports organisations to implement policies.

By the stated research objectives, the analysis presented in Chapter 5 illuminates the varied interpretations of policies and the impact of guanxi on Chinese Super League (CSL) football

clubs, with a specific focus on Guangzhou and Jiangsu, spanning the years 2015 to 2023. The research critically reviewed the clubs' organisational structures, policy contexts, and strategic developments by systematically collecting and examining archival materials, policy and organisational governance documents, and media content. The study was aimed at exploring the organisational structures, systems, and processes that influence the identity of clubs (Research Aim 1), examining how the public portrayal of clubs contributes to their corporate identity (Research Aim 2), and analysing the influence of mass and social media in shaping and influencing the perception of club identity (Research Aim 3). By employing Marsh and Rhodes' (1992) typology of policy networks and stakeholder theories, the research delved into the organisational structures, policy context, and strategic developments of these clubs, uncovering significant disparities between policy guidelines and their interpretation and execution by the clubs. These deviations, driven by varying club priorities, interests, and resource limitations, have implications for policy effectiveness and unintended consequences, ultimately shaping the clubs' corporate identity. The study reveals how clubs' responses and interpretations of CFA policies evolved over time, particularly in response to financial crises and high investments, leading to challenges such as frequent player transfers and financial instability. Furthermore, the research examines the influence of Guanxi dynamics on policy implementation, highlighting the importance of cultivating positive relationships and connections in shaping club actions and interpretations. By examining the roles of mass and social media in constructing and perceiving club identity, the study underscores the complex interplay between media narratives, government policies, commercial actors, and public perceptions, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of CSL football clubs' corporate identity practices and their relationship with various stakeholders.

7.2.2 Media-constructed narratives

One of my research aims is to understand the roles of mass media in the construction and perception of Guangzhou and Jiangsu football club's corporate identitys. In align with it, I conducted a media content analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013) based on collected accessible online and print mass media content related to Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs. Media and magazine articles helped my thesis analyse the role that media plays in the nexus and show how different media portray issues and events in CSL clubs. Media data has been gathered through the websites of Titan Sport (体坛周报), Zuqiu (足球报), Renmin Daily (人民日报), Hupu Sport (虎扑体育), All Football (懂球帝) and PP Sport (PP 体育) etc. It was significant to list in Chapter 3 how these media are politically aligned and economically supported as this contributes to their precise optics and contributes to developing the understanding of the political framing throughout the analysis.

Grounded in empirical evidence, Chapter 6 of this dissertation posits that both state-owned and non-state-owned media collaborate in shaping narratives and stories about the challenges emerging from the reform of the Chinese Super League (CSL) and its consequential influence on the construction of the corporate identity of CSL clubs. In parallel, media professionals such as journalists, commentators, and analysts tend to accentuate particular dimensions of organisational history, accomplishments, values, and culture, a phenomenon well-documented in the literature (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2001). Through this emphasis, media channels actively mould narratives, crafting distinctive corporate identitys for sports organisations, a concept supported by prior research (Waters & Jones, 2011). However, it is

crucial to acknowledge that mass media narratives occasionally perpetuate stereotypes or subject-specific sports organisations and individuals in the manner of stigmatisation, as noted in the scholarly literature (Kian & Hardin, 2009). These stereotypical depictions can sustain biases, constrict opportunities, impede the progress and maturation of sports organisations, and estrange potential audiences and stakeholders, as highlighted in previous studies (Cottingham et al., 2015). Consequently, within the backdrop of the Chinese football league's transformation, it is apparent that both state-owned and non-state-owned media outlets, despite their inherent subjectivity and propensity to cultivate stereotypes concerning individual clubs, function as crucial conduits of communication between the Chinese Football Association (CFA) and the clubs themselves.

Moreover, the media frequently depends on simplified and broad portrayals of institutions, potentially prolonging stereotypes (Burrell et al., 2022). These stereotypes might be rooted in historical incidents or organisational shortcomings. The corruption scandals in Chinese football and the national team's disappointing performance have caused considerable anger and frustration among the Chinese public. However, the portrayal of football clubs in the media can uphold or dispute certain beliefs, ultimately shaping the public's perception. It contributes to our existing knowledge about how media narratives can uphold or question stereotypes in professional environments. Previous research has proven this (Deeb & Love, 2018; Francique & Richardson, 2016; Desmarais & Bruce, 2010). This corresponds with research in media studies, specifically regarding its relevance to sports organisations. Also, it adds to the overall discussion about how media portrayals affect the public's views of organisations, especially regarding Chinese football. This scenario illustrates how historical

events continue to influence people's emotions. It demonstrates how the media can endorse or criticise popular beliefs, impacting perceptions of CSL clubs.

The results show crucial information about the Chinese Super League clubs and how the media affects their reputation, how they collaborate with the media, and how they connect with their fans. Clubs can enhance their reputation by participating in storytelling and dispelling misconceptions, ultimately shaping how they are perceived positively. Understanding the partnership between government-owned and private media can help CSL clubs navigate the media's coverage of the league's issues and developments. Sports clubs can employ this knowledge to enhance their standing and esteem among supporters, sponsors, and influential individuals. Due to potential negative portrayals by the media, CSL clubs must improve their communication strategies. This approach promotes open and honest communication to address and move past any negative perceptions or biases stemming from past events within an organisation. Utilising media outlets can assist clubs in effectively showcasing their ideas and accomplishments to the public.

In conclusion, the findings of this research shed light on the multifaceted role of mass media in the construction and perception of corporate identities for Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs within the Chinese Super League (CSL). By conducting a comprehensive media content analysis, this study has provided valuable insights into how state-owned and non-state-owned media outlets shape narratives surrounding these clubs, influencing public perception and understanding of their identities. Aligned with the research aims, the analysis has demonstrated some of the nuances of the organisational structures, policy contexts, and

strategic developments of Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs, spanning 2015 to 2023. By systematically collecting archival material, policy documents, and organisational governance documents, this research has illuminated the factors contributing to forming and evolving club identities, offering a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play. Specifically, my research findings indicate that the Guangzhou Football Club has effectively established a robust corporate identity through the strategic emphasis on its achievements in the Chinese Super League, including the attainment of multiple league titles. Implementing strategic communication has solidified the club's position as a prominent and influential force within the Chinese football landscape, enhancing and preserving its corporate reputation over an extended period. The corporate identity of Jiangsu FC underwent variations due to inconsistent performance and substantial organisational restructuring, such as the acquisition of the 2020 CSL title, followed by its unexpected dissolution in 2021. The volatility of the club raised concerns regarding its financial solvency and managerial protocols, thereby adversely affecting the perceptions and anticipations of the stakeholders.

Furthermore, this study has examined the public representation of Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs' relationships, elucidating how these representations organize their corporate identities. Through the collation and examination of accessible online and print marketing media content, the research has identified key identity characteristics and highlighted how these clubs are portrayed to the public.

Moreover, the roles of mass and social media in constructing and perceiving corporate identities for Guangzhou and Jiangsu football clubs have been thoroughly explored. By

analysing media narratives and public perceptions, this research has demonstrated the influence of media channels on shaping the identities of these clubs. The findings underscore the importance of strategic communication and transparent governance in managing corporate identities amidst media scrutiny and public discourse.

Overall, this research contributes to understanding the intricate relationship between mass media and corporate identity in professional sports organisations. By illuminating how media narratives shape public perceptions and organisational reputations, this study offers valuable insights for CSL clubs seeking to navigate the complex media landscape and cultivate positive corporate identities.

7.2.3 Social media-driven reputation management

One of the research aims is to understand the role of social media in the construction and perception of Guangzhou and Jiangsu Football Club's corporate identitys by interviewing communication managers and analysing their social media homepages. This research has examined what the public has said about CSL clubs and CFA policies on trending Chinese social media platforms and how their perceptions are shaping the corporate identity of clubs.

Simultaneously, my findings indicate that social media plays a crucial role in China in showcasing narratives of patriotic love and historical pride. The findings assist in bringing people together who share common online beliefs. It illustrates the relationship between a country's identity and its sports. The national team's performance caused concern about the

potential repercussions on clubs like Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu FC. The intense unity and pride in the country on the internet makes people feel connected and proud (Li et al., 2017). Despite government regulation and censorship, social media continues to promote patriotism and shape public discourse on national achievements (Billings et al., 2019). Unexpectedly, Chinese influencers have grown to be significant figures in this field, and their impact shapes public perceptions significantly. The method of interacting with individuals aligns with the concepts of stakeholder theories. It emphasizes how important it is to be trustworthy in relationships with stakeholders. Therefore, the importance of China's social media in influencing people's perceptions of the sports industry is evident.

These findings significantly contribute to the body of stakeholder theories by shedding light on the evolving dynamics of stakeholders, particularly in the distinctive context of China's social media environment. This notion offers a novel viewpoint on how social media, spurred by patriotism and collective online action, can elevate regular individuals and influential figures to pivotal roles.- The shift in focus is not in line with the traditional scope of stakeholder theory, which typically concerns individuals or groups directly interested in a company, like employees, investors, or customers (Freeman et al., 2010; Friedman & Miles, 2002). In China, the power of social media and influential figures significantly impacts public opinion and holds significant sway in the sports sector. - It indicates a growing number and variety of individuals engaged in the digital landscape.

The above social media content analysis further revealed that due to the prevailing negativity surrounding social media posts related to Chinese football, both Guangzhou FC and Jiangsu

FC have initiated measures to connect with social media influencers and discuss club practices and policies. Given how the Chinese Super League (CSL) football clubs lack the direct influence to shape public opinion, they use collaborations with social media influencers as a strategic approach. In line with this, the landscape of social media platforms in China has given rise to a flourishing influencer culture, where influential figures termed Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) or influencers significantly impact public opinions and consumer behaviour (Liu et al., 2022). In the sports sector, influential athletes, sports commentators, and sports-related content creators can shape public perceptions by endorsing particular teams, brands, or events, impacting fan engagement and consumer behaviour (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2015). However, Rosário, Lopes and Rosário (2023) argue that overly promotional or insincere endorsements by influencers may undermine the credibility and authenticity of the organisation. Influencers are significant in influencing the public opinion of companies by remaining sincere and endorsing only what resonates with their convictions. (Wellman et al., 2020) Over the past three decades, the Chinese football league has not shaken off its negative reputation. There have been incidents of corruption and underperformance by the national team. The public still remembers past adverse events, such as corruption scandals involving the Chinese Football Association, which shaped their perception of football clubs and their operations. The above arguments demonstrate the unpredictability and complexity of people's sentiments and loyalty toward football teams.

The study's findings provide valuable insights into public perceptions and attitudes towards companies, particularly within Chinese football. CSL football clubs are implementing innovative strategies such as collaborating with influential social media personalities and

engaging in discussions about club events to address the challenges of managing their public image in a competitive digital landscape. Influential individuals must influence public perceptions and engage with their followers. Nevertheless, the research also highlights the significance of authentic and dependable influencers in their partnerships. As Rosário, Lopes, and Rosário (2023) stated, it is essential to prioritize honesty and sharing as fundamental principles. This perspective enhances existing theories by emphasizing the significance of transparency and values alignment between influencers and others in the relationship.

In other words, the findings demonstrate that CSL clubs can utilize fresh online approaches to enhance their public perception. Engaging with social media influencers and facilitating transparent discussions about club events are successful methods for clubs to enhance public perception and alter the conversation surrounding them. The research enables football clubs to manage their perceptions and cultivate favourable impressions.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates the significance of CSL clubs collaborating with authentic and reliable influencers. Clubs have the option to collaborate with influencers who uphold similar values in order to enhance their reputation through authenticity and transparency. - It is highlighted that CSL clubs should prioritize openness and transparency when engaging with influencers. It would be positive for them to ensure these partnerships align with their values and enhance their reputation.

Understanding the impact of history on people's perspectives provides valuable insights for clubs. CSL clubs can employ this knowledge to address historical challenges, such as

corruption or negative performances. By recognising these historical underpinnings, clubs can formulate strategies to either counteract or mitigate their impact on their corporate identity, ultimately contributing to the cultivation of a more favourable public image.

In conclusion, the results of my research offer significant contributions to understanding how Chinese Super League football clubs, notably Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC, establish and demonstrate their corporate identities within diverse contextual influences. This study offers a critical analysis of organisational structures, policy contexts, and strategic developments from 2015 to 2023. It aims to provide insights into the complex processes that influence the formation of club identity.

The research elucidates the influential impact of mass and social media on the construction and representation of the corporate identities of CSL clubs. State-owned media frequently portray clubs by national achievement narratives, whereas non-state-owned media prioritize financial and market dynamics, exerting a notable impact on public perception. Guangzhou Evergrande FC and Jiangsu Suning FC have implemented distinct strategies to develop their corporate identities. The consistent prioritization of competitive success and strategic communication by Guangzhou Evergrande has contributed to developing a solid and favourable corporate image. On the contrary, the erratic performance and sudden dissolution of Jiangsu Suning in 2021 underscores corporate identity's precariousness in light of financial instability and management difficulties.

It highlights the significance of guanxi, or interpersonal relationships and connections, in influencing the understanding and execution of policies. The cultivation of positive guanxi dynamics plays a critical role in effectively navigating the intricate regulatory and commercial landscape of Chinese football, thereby shaping the decision-making processes of football clubs and their understanding and application of policies established by the Chinese Football Association (CFA). This investigation underscores the adaptive characteristics of club identities, elucidating their transformation in reaction to internal and external stimuli. The identity of Guangzhou Evergrande has been solidified through sustained success and strategic branding, whereas Jiangsu Suning's identity underwent fluctuations due to financial difficulties and, ultimately, dissolution. Both clubs have endeavoured to balance commercial objectives, community engagement, and social responsibilities, recognizing the importance of fostering brand loyalty and bolstering their reputations among their fan base and the wider public.

My thesis has made significant contributions to the body of knowledge by presenting empirical evidence highlighting the influence of state-owned and non-state-owned media on the corporate identities of CSL clubs. Additionally, it has advanced a nuanced understanding of the media's impact on sports management and corporate branding in China. The in-depth examination of the policy environments and administrative frameworks serves as a valuable addition to the overarching dialogue concerning sports governance in China, shedding light on football clubs' distinctive obstacles and tactics in managing these intricacies. The examination of guanxi presents a novel viewpoint on its pivotal significance in the execution of policies and organisational tactics, yielding valuable perspectives for the management of

sports entities in China. The thesis presents a comprehensive framework for examining the construction and manifestation of corporate identities within sports organisations. This framework integrates various elements such as media narratives, policy contexts, organisational strategies, and stakeholder engagement. In its entirety, my thesis enhances scholarly comprehension of corporate identity within the sports industry, primarily within the CSL framework. Moreover, it provides valuable practical implications for sports managers and policymakers in China.

Additionally, the research findings highlight the critical role of social media in representing narratives of patriotism, historical pride, and collective online action within the context of China. For instance, despite governmental regulation and censorship, social media platforms continue to significantly impact public discourse regarding national accomplishments, fostering a sense of unity and pride among the populace. The emergence of Chinese influencers, commonly known as Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), has further amplified the influence of social media on public perceptions, especially in sports. To manage their public image, CSL clubs have collaborated with influential social media personalities, such as when Guangzhou Evergrande FC partnered with popular KOLs to promote their achievements and engage with fans. This collaboration helped the club to maintain a positive public image despite various challenges. The research underscores the significance of authenticity and transparency in these collaborations, emphasizing the need for clubs to engage with influencers who share their values to enhance their reputation genuinely.

Moreover, the research underscores the importance of understanding historical obstacles, such as corruption and poor performances, in influencing public perceptions of clubs within the Chinese Super League. For example, Jiangsu Suning FC's dissolution in 2021 highlighted the lasting impact of financial instability and management issues on public perception. By recognizing and addressing these historical influences, clubs can develop strategies to mitigate their effects on corporate identity, ultimately fostering a more positive public perception. My research significantly contributes to understanding how CSL football clubs develop, execute, and oversee their corporate identities amid changing media environments, public attitudes, and historical inheritances. By examining the interactions between media narratives, organisational strategies, and historical contexts, the study offers practical insights for sports managers and policymakers on effectively managing corporate identity in a complex and evolving landscape.

7.3 Methodological reflection and limitations

The first point to address is my advocation of an interpretivist stance and the political ambition and increased wealth impact on sports professionalisation in China (Zheng et al., 2018). Since embarking on my thesis in 2020, the Chinese political and social landscape has experienced an extensive transformation and challenges, especially after the pandemic's start. The focus of sports development has been laid back due to the top priority of bringing back the economy (Chadwick, 2023). The comprehensive commentary on the football sector in the media, professional and personal contexts (social media) affected the positioning of my thesis. As noted in Chapter 4, my positionality has been influenced by the specific findings, for

instance, challenging my own bias around the high political drive in the sports sector in China. One positive reflection on this political ambition is being proactive in how my thesis connects to contemporary and academic debates.

Part of my thesis is conducting qualitative document analysis. Documents are produced for purposes other than research; they are created independent of a research agenda. Consequently, they usually do not provide sufficient detail to answer a research question (Bowen, 2009). Firstly, limited access to data was the primary limitation. The interview data was complicated because of the speciality of conducting virtual interviews with Chinese citizens, and they were also impacted again by the outbreak. Most Chinese football clubs were affected heavily by the pandemic; some clubs even stopped operations without ticket sales and government support (Xinhuanet, 2021). Some Chinese companies tightened their privacy protocols during the pandemic. For example, I reached out to a professional from a selected club, and my interview request was accepted in the beginning of my research. However, it was denied after the pandemic started. Documentary data was limited based on accessibility, and most club statements or reports were never published to the public; therefore, this was approached by contacting relevant personal relationships within the clubs and trying to ask for help on getting specific documents. This was still limited due to in-transparency and privacy protocols. An online accessible document focus study was conducted instead. This is a considerable point, as future research can conduct interviews to cover more comprehensive perspectives by reaching out to key stakeholders from inside clubs.

7.4 Contribution to knowledge and implications

My thesis employs an interdisciplinary approach to synthesise the dialogues and controversies on football governance, corporate identity, and the public perceptions of Chinese football. Guided by analytical and methodological reflections, along with an acknowledgement of the inherent limitations of the thesis, I put forth contributions to knowledge and implications for both the scholarly community and governing entities.

I would argue that the theoretical and methodological approaches explained in this thesis make an original contribution to the academic study on the intersections between sports governance, public perception, and corporate identity. My thesis has brought together established debates around politically-driven sport development (e.g. Coalter, 2010; Lin, Li & Nai, 2008; Darnell, Field & Kidd, 2019) and how public perception impact sports organisations (e.g. Rycke, 2019; Kim, Hull & Choi, 2018) My thesis also contributes to extending the notion of stakeholders to include social media users and influencers (e.g. Balci & Yuen, 2020) within academic research. Unlike the traditional stakeholder theory, this study considers social media users and influencers as stakeholders in addition to employees, investors, and customers who are directly involved in a company. It illustrates the impact these individuals have on public opinion and sports associations. This updated stakeholder definition reflects the changing landscape in today's digital world.

My thesis contributes to the conversations surrounding the influence of football clubs and other organisations on the interpretation and implementation of policies (O'Gorman, 2011;

McFadyen, 2018). It signifies that individuals or groups with a concern in a company can impact the decisions and strategies the company undertakes. (Freeman & McVea, 2001). In the case of CSL clubs, how they understand and react to policies affects what the policies achieve. However, my thesis highlights the interconnectedness of stakeholders, company perception, and public opinion. It illustrates how partnerships between clubs and figures like social media influencers can shape public opinion through narrative. The perspective emphasises the intricate nature of stakeholder relationships within sports organisations and their significant influence.

My thesis further develops the arguments made by Xue (2020) that football in China serves to generate revenue within a more extensive corporate portfolio and as a tool or mechanism for establishing debt-based relationships and stakeholdership. My findings supported that capitalist in China responded swiftly and significantly to the Chinese Communist Party's call for involvement. This led to the CSL clubs facing difficulties, players being frequently transferred in and out of the national league with minimal positive outcomes, and the sports enterprise tending toward financial instability.

The recent advancements in Chinese football emphasise the imperative of ongoing scrutiny and examination of the institutions and football customs within China. In 2024, anti-corruption measures have been implemented in the Chinese Football Association, with a particular focus on addressing misconduct among prominent individuals such as CFA President Chen Xuyuan and former national team coach Li Tie. Chen Xuyuan has been subject to investigation for "serious violations of the law" by the anti-corruption agency of the

Communist Party, highlighting persistent apprehensions regarding corruption and financial mismanagement within the sports sector. Likewise, Li Tie has been scrutinised, exposing persistent systemic issues that have long afflicted Chinese football.

The occurrences mentioned above demonstrate the enduring difficulties inherent in the administration and supervision of football in China, highlighting the crucial necessity for a comprehensive comprehension of the organisational framework and cultural intricacies in operation. The anti-corruption initiatives demonstrate a paradigm shift towards increased accountability within football governance. However, they also reveal the intricate and deeply ingrained challenges that impede cultivating a sustainable and esteemed football culture. The continual turnover of leadership and persistent investigations engender a climate of instability, impinging upon the organisations' capacity to establish and perpetuate a unified corporate identity.

Additional research is imperative to examine further these issues' impact on the corporate identities of CSL clubs and their relationships with stakeholders. Examining the influence of governance reforms, media narratives, and historical legacies on club identity holds significant potential to offer valuable insights for sports managers and policymakers. The continuous examination and revision highlight the significance of transparency, efficient communication, and strategic engagement with stakeholders in cultivating a favourable and resilient corporate image.

Ultimately, my thesis contributes to the scholarly dialogue on corporate identity within the sports industry, specifically focusing on the Chinese football landscape. The work provides a comprehensive analysis of the complex mechanisms that influence the formation of club identities in the face of evolving media environments, shifting public opinions, and historical obstacles. The research underscores the necessity for ongoing examination and flexible approaches to effectively manoeuvre through the continually changing environment of Chinese football, thereby guaranteeing the enduring viability and favourable perception of CSL clubs.

7.5 Limitations and suggestions for future research

7.5.1 Limitations

The research findings, while offering valuable insights, are not without their limitations. One limitation pertains to the research's exclusive focus on policy network analysis at a single contextual level, potentially constraining the applicability of these findings to broader national or international settings. By concentrating solely on policy networks within the specific scope of this investigation, this research may not fully capture the intricate dynamics of policymaking across various administrative tiers. Furthermore, this research's exclusive reliance on specific media sources, namely Titan Sport, Zuqiu, Renmin Daily, Hupu Sport, All Football, and PP Sport, could introduce selection bias, potentially restricting the extent to which the findings can be generalised. It is imperative to recognise that diverse media outlets may espouse varying perspectives and exhibit inherent biases. Additionally, while a comprehensive content analysis of media narratives has been undertaken, it does not incorporate interview data to present

an alternative perspective or provide insight into the subjective intentions underlying the creation of these articles.

7.5.2 Suggestions for future research

Future research has the potential to delve deeper into the comparative analysis of how diverse Chinese Super League (CSL) clubs interpret and respond to identical policies, shedding light on the role of "guanxi" in shaping their actions. The research will assist in our understanding of the implementation of policies in diverse clubs and the influence of "guanxi" on the outcomes. Analysing the changes in clubs and policies can provide valuable lessons about adaptation. I focus on examining the influence of "guanxi" on clubs' compliance with rules. Additionally, exploring the influence of "guanxi" on media narratives and its impact on the perception and appraisal of sports teams and organisations can provide insight into the influence of media on branding. Examining "guanxi" within the context of consumer behaviour and marketing perspectives can enhance our understanding of its impact in these areas. Additionally, analysing how influencers are utilized for reputation management in various sports leagues globally could highlight the disparities between Chinese Super League clubs and those in Europe and the USA, with "guanxi" as a significant factor for these distinctions.

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Appendicies

Appendix 1. Media articles from media platform

TITAN sports		
No. 3785	中超制欠薪，动真格了	CSL governance is in arrears with salary, which is very serious
No. 3748	中超争议拷问责任心	Chinese Super League Dispute Doubts the Responsibility of the Club Owner
No. 3738	中超再无不死鸟	Disbandment of CSL Club
No. 3700	2021 被疫情改变的体育	2021 Sports Changed by COVID-19
No. 3673	广州恒大股改求生	Guangzhou Evergrande strives for survival through share reform
No. 3623	江苏苏宁解散 中超冠军无人接手	Jiangsu Suning disbands the CSL champion and nobody takes over
No. 3622	何日再见江苏队	When will you see Jiangsu Team again
No. 3620	中超寒冬以退为进	Exit of owners of CSL clubs
No. 3612	冠军谢幕（江苏苏宁）	The championship ended (Jiangsu Suning quit Chinese football)
No. 3611	江苏苏宁股份更迭	Change of Jiangsu Suning Shares
No. 3594	金元足球终结	Jinyuan Football Ends
No. 3523	恒大开除于汉超	What does Evergrande explain by dismissing Yu Hanchao
No. 3518	减薪抗疫势在必行	It is imperative to reduce salary and fight against pandemic
No. 3483	足球限薪势在必行	Football salary restriction is imperative
No. 3474	金元足球破碎	Jinyuan Football Broken
No. 3399	中国足球非典型归化	Atypical domestication of chinese football
No. 3387	新政阻击金元中超	The new policy blocks Jin Yuan CSL
No. 3282	中超 U23 政策升级	CSL U23 policy upgrade
No. 3220	六解中超新政	Unscramble the new policies of CSL

Zuqiu		
No. 3841	江苏足球归位	Jiangsu football come back to Chinese football
Dig. 633	江苏需要中超	Jiangsu needs to play in CSL
No. 3840	河北队走到生死关头	Hebei FC has come to the critical moment of life and death
Dig 628	清欠扣分 处理欠薪	CFA deal with pay off arrears and deduct points to deal with arrears
No. 3839	清欠行动中国足协进行中	CFA making moves on solving problems of salary arrears
Dig. 596	归化军团冰河期	Current situation of the naturlisation policy and players
Dig. 574	中超外援最大罚单	The largest penalty to CSL foreign aid players
Dig. 570	足协开会整治俱乐部行为	CFA held meetings for governing clubs behaviour
No. 3830	中国青少年联赛调查	Investigation regards to CSL youth league
Dig. 567	中国足球行风整肃	Governing football industry in China
No. 3828	中国足球的稳定不能用破坏规则来维护	The stability of Chinese football cannot be maintained by breaking rules
No. 3827	体育总局局长更替 中国足球或迎变化	Director General of the General Administration of Sport Replaces Chinese Football or Embraces Changes
Dig. 550	股改模式新探索	New Exploration of Share Reform Mode
Dig. 544	球员拒绝清欠方案	Players refuse to follow proposed salary arrears resolution
Dig. 538	中超清欠进度一览	Progress of CSL club debt clearing
Dig. 531	失信人中国足球	Dishonest Chinese Football and accountability
Dig. 478	广州队三大问号	Three main issues of Guangzhou Evergrande
Dig. 468	足协为开赛各种妥协	CFA made various compromises for the start of the league
Dig. 464	恒大关津浩罚款	Fine of Evergrande Guanjinhao
Dig. 455	广州队新博弈	New strategy of Guangzhou Evergrande

No. 3810	分阶段还款保住生机	Repayment to player by installments to maintain vitality
No. 3808	中国足球改革发展总体方案鉴定落实了吗	Has the overall plan for the reform and development of Chinese football been appraised and implemented
Dig. 430	欠薪俱乐部准入细则约束最重要	It is the most important to restrict the admittance rules of clubs in arrears
No. 3803	经纪人眼中中国足球生态	Chinese Football Ecology from the perspectives of Football agents
Dig. 422	强行降薪背后	Behind the Forced Salary Reduction
Dig. 421	广州不进反退	Evergrande proposing exits from Guangzhou
No. 3801	维系归化看状态不靠钱	Money is not the vital factor of naturalisation policy
Dig. 418	最严限薪令来了	Tightest restriction on player salary is coming
Dig. 417	广州足球新亮相	The new name of Guangzhou football
Dig. 416	津门危机	The crisis of Tianjin FC
No. 3798	股改不该是阻碍备战的借口	Share reform should not be the excuse of stopping prepareation of the new season
Dig. 411	广州队前程无忧	Guangzhou Evergrande has a good future
No. 3792	2021 CSL 总结	2021 CSL Summary
Dig. 396	广药集团与广州恒大	Guangzhou Pharmaceutical Group and Guangzhou Evergrande
Dig. 385	租场变主场 中超增收	Income increase of CSL from renting to having own stadium
No. 3786	中国足球自救请从尊重联赛开始	Chinese football should show respect to the league development
No. 3784	中超重启监管力度加大	CSL enhancing governing practices
No. 3781	清理欠薪，推动股改	Clearing up salary arrears and promoting share reform
No. 3779	中国足球最低谷	The lowest point of Chinese football

Xinhuanet		
20220426	让体育从"一门作业"到"一	Let sports change from "

			种习惯"	homework" to "habit"
	20220415		入局者为中超带来变局	Entrants bring changes to CSL
	20220330		中国足球向前走	Pushing Chinese football forward
	20211202		变革期下的中超需要找准方向	CSL needs to find the right direction during the reform period
	20210822		足协新政散发的新信号	Signals released from the newest CFA policy

Appendix 2. List of collected policy documents

	Title of policy	Author	Date published	Status	Brief summary of the document
1.	中国足球改革发展总体方案 General plan of the reform and development of Chinese football	CFA	16/03/2015	Publicly accessible, official, policy document	The plan proposes the "three-step" strategy, which is divided into short-term, medium-term and long-term goals: the short-term goal is to straighten out the football management system, formulate the medium and long-term development plan of football, and innovate the management mode of football with Chinese characteristics. The goal is to achieve a significant increase in the youth football population and to achieve the first-class level of professional league organisation and competition in Asia.
2.	关于各级职业联赛实行俱乐部名称非企业化变更的通知 Notice on non-enterprise change of club name in professional leagues at all levels	CFA	14/12/2020	Publicly accessible, official, policy document	The notice specifies the specifications, relevant requirements and name change procedures of the club name, and requires all clubs of the China Super League, China a league and China B League to complete the name non enterprise change before the start of 2021 season. It is stipulated that the neutral name of the club shall not include brand name, and non-Chinese characters shall not be used. Moreover, from the 2021 season, the Chinese Football Association will not handle the registration formalities for the clubs whose names do not meet the requirements.

3.	关于男足职业俱乐部与所属球员、教练员合理调整薪酬、共克时艰的倡议书 Proposal for men's professional football club, its players and coaches to adjust salary reasonably and overcome difficulties together	CFA	08/05/2020	Publicly accessible, official, policy document	It is suggested that the club negotiate with all players and coaches to determine the salary adjustment range; It is suggested that the reference ratio of salary reduction should be between 30% and 50%.
4.	中国足球协会调整改革方案 Chinese Football Association adjusts reform plan	CFA	07/08/2015	Publicly accessible, official, policy document	Adjustment and reform of the Chinese Football Association is the key to the reform and development of Chinese football and the basis for straightening out the football management system and innovating the football management model. In order to implement the requirements of the "Overall Plan for the Reform and Development of Chinese Football", do a good job in the reorganisation and reform of the Chinese Football Association, and play a leading role in promoting football reform, this plan is specially formulated.
5.	中国足球协会关于 2020 赛季职业联赛政策调整的通知 Notice of China Football Association on Policy Adjustment of Professional League in 2020	CFA	31/12/2019	Publicly accessible, official, policy document	On December 31, 2019, the Chinese Football Association issued a notice on the adjustment of professional league policies for the 2020 season. The notice stipulated that naturalized players should register as domestic players; the salary of domestic players is limited to 10 million yuan, and the salary of national players will be increased by 20%.

Appendix 3. analysis process of content analysis

Step	Analysis process	Example quote
1	Meaning unit	The mainstream voice has always supported the reform of the club's neutral name. However, reform cannot be simplified, divorced from the actual situation and the general public opinion. This practice not only did not help, but also cut away the only outstanding organisational culture of Chinese football (Titan Sports, 2021).
2	Consideration	Reform cannot be simplified, divorced from the actual situation and the general public opinion. This practice not only did not help, but also cut away the only outstanding organisational culture of Chinese football (Titan Sports, 2021).
3	Code	Side effects of a particularly arbitrary policy (Titan Sports, 2021).
4	Category	Administrative and structural issues between the governing body and the club (Titan Sports, 2021).
5	Theme	Barriers to football development in China (Titan Sports, 2021).