Research on the development of social football in China

Li Shuran[1, a, *], Zhou Shuyao[1, b], Zhao Gui[2, c],

[1]Xi'an Physical Education University, No.65 Hanguang North Road, Beilin District, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, 710068, China
[2]Henan University of Physical Education, No.2 Yinhe Street, Huiji District, Zhengzhou City, Henan Province, 450044, China
a.lishuran_lsr@foxmail.com, b.zhoushuyao_123@163.com, c.zhaogui@outlook.com
***Corresponding Author**

Abstract: By adopting the methods of literature review and logical analysis, this paper analyzes the current development of social football in China. It concludes that the development of social football has become a bottom-up demand for reform, which urgently requires top-down promotion. China's social football faces numerous problems including low popularization, insufficient standardized guidance and systematic organization, as well as inadequate inter-regional coordination. These hinder the formation of extensive social influence and the development of related industries and consumption. The underlying causes lie in the loss of football's grassroots nature, the disconnect between competitive football and social football, and the constraints brought by traditional concepts. Suggestions are put forward as follows: mobilize the joint forces of the government, market and society to build a tripartite system and operational mechanism for social football development; balance the relationship between public football undertakings and football industry; define appropriate government involvement; vigorously develop and standardize grassroots football and legalize social sports organizations; rationally allocate and coordinate human resources and venue facilities; construct a diversified competition system for social football. Only in this way can this "Chinese-style football revolution" substantially improve China's football competitiveness.

Keywords: China, Social Football, Development

1. Introduction

Known as "the world's No.1 sport", football is the most influential individual sport globally. It carries the sporting passion and spiritual demands of hundreds of millions of people, which cannot be matched by other sports. Brazil hosts the world's largest amateur football league with more than 500 participating teams and numerous fans. It is easy to imagine how its large football population supports the country's competitive football. Italy boasts a huge football population and a complete youth training system covering more than ten levels of competitions, including the U20 Youth League, U17 National Student League and U16 Regional Student League [1]. The United Kingdom incorporates social football into its overall competition framework under the governance of The Football Association, which greatly improves the integrity of its domestic football competition system.

Social football in developed foreign countries enjoys advantages such as high popularity, sound systems and standardized organization.

In China, the State Council issued Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry and Boosting Sports Consumption in October 2014. It clearly proposed to formulate medium and long-term development plans and venue construction plans for football, a relatively underdeveloped sport, and vigorously promote campus football and social football. The concept of "social football" appeared in official government documents for the first time [2], marking that football has reached an unprecedented strategic height in China.

https://doi.org/10.62852/css/2026/315
Copyright (c) 2026 Cambridge Sport Science

2. The connotation of social football

2.1. Concept of social football

Social football, also known as amateur football, mass football or public football, refers to football activities carried out by enthusiasts in their spare time. It targets all groups in society without restrictions on identity or age. Participants come from all walks of life and gather from various regions to engage in football activities. Boasting extensive inclusiveness, social football lays the foundation for other forms of football such as campus football and professional football and serves as a key driver for football development. In China, it features wide popularity, high public attention and huge market potential.

2.2. Functions of social football

On March 16, 2015, the General Office of the State Council issued Overall Plan for the Development and Reform of Chinese Football. It elevated football development to the level of a national strategy and triggered a nationwide football boom. Social football has become a major activity for the public, satisfying their demands for fitness, entertainment, social interaction and competition.

2.2.1. Physical fitness

For the public, there are numerous ways to keep fit through sports, and social football is one of them. Compared with other fitness methods, social football has unique advantages. As the only sport played mainly with feet, football requires sophisticated kicking, passing and shooting skills as well as solid physical qualities including speed and endurance. These capabilities can only be gradually improved through long-term training and matches. Therefore, football provides all-round physical exercise and continuously improves mental quality, making it one of the most comprehensive fitness options.

2.2.2. Leisure and entertainment

Football ranks among the most interesting and popular sports worldwide, earning its reputation as the world's top sport. It imposes relatively low barriers for participants. People of different heights and builds can take part, which makes social football widely favored by the public. A football match combines courage and strategy. It enables players to demonstrate individual skills as well as coordinated team tactics. People can also seek recreation by watching exciting football games. Football-related coverage occupies considerable space in newspapers, television and other media around the globe, and football has become an indispensable part of people's lives.

2.2.3. Social communication

According to Maslow, social needs refer to individuals' desire for care and understanding from families, groups, friends and colleagues, including the needs for friendship, trust, warmth and love [3]. As a sport highly dependent on teamwork, football requires multiple participants to cooperate and trust one another. Therefore, social football serves as a convenient channel for interpersonal communication. Participants engage in social football activities out of shared passion for football. Coming from various occupations, regions and age groups, they take football as a bond to satisfy their demands for making friends and emotional communication.

2.2.4. Personality shaping

Sport refers to physical and skill-based activities governed by rules or conventions and usually featuring competitiveness [4]. Football is an outdoor sport integrating strength, coordination, agility and flexibility. Through intense confrontation and tactical practice in matches, participants can improve their physical conditions and cultivate willpower, achieving physical and mental well-being simultaneously. For individuals, participation in social football helps shape personalities and foster perseverance. For the nation, it facilitates the formation of a national spirit characterized by perseverance and aspiration for excellence.

3. Current development of social football in China

Compared with the development of social football in developed foreign countries, social football in China is confronted with various problems:

The self-entertainment mode keeps social football at a low penetration level with weak foundations.

https://doi.org/10.62852/css/2026/315
Copyright (c) 2026 Cambridge Sport Science

The distribution of social football participants is unbalanced; they are mainly concentrated in cities, while rural areas have far fewer participants.

Due to the lack of standardized guidance, systematic organization and regional coordination, social football fails to generate extensive social influence, let alone cultivate related industries and boost relevant consumption. These factors restrict the popularization and development of social football in China.

3.1. Low popularity and weak foundation

The development of social football, which remains largely self-organized for recreation, is not optimistic in China at the current stage. A common phenomenon is that some football fans set up clubs with fixed communication platforms and basic organizational capacity to organize matches. Nevertheless, such groups are small-scale and relatively closed, exerting limited influence on the public and failing to attract more participants. This creates a vicious cycle: the population of football enthusiasts remains stagnant. Consequently, football cannot reach broader crowds. Most ordinary people only have superficial understanding of sport rather than in-depth cognition, resulting in the current situation of low popularity and weak foundation for social football.

3.2. Uneven distribution of participants

Participants of social football in China demonstrate four characteristics of uneven distribution:

In terms of gender, participants are predominantly male, while female participants are scarce. Most female players are current or former athletes with formal training experience [5].

In terms of age, participants are mainly young and middle-aged adults, covering a wide range of age groups.

Geographically, socially football enjoys sound foundations and rapid development in economically developed southeastern regions, whereas it develops slowly and remains underdeveloped in central and western areas.

In terms of regional resources, cities and well-developed towns in China possess sufficient venues, facilities and convenient information resources to boost the development of social football. In contrast, rural areas lag in economic development and feature scattered residential settlements. Coupled with inadequate allocation of sports resources, the development of football there is unsatisfactory.

In terms of urban-rural resource distribution, cities and well-developed towns in China are equipped with adequate venues, facilities and convenient information resources to facilitate the development of social football. However, constrained by backward rural economy and scattered residential layout compared with urban areas, rural regions suffer from insufficient sports resource allocation, leading to unsatisfactory football development.

3.3. Lack of systematic organization and inter-regional linkage

At present, social football in China shows an obvious development trend. Mass football activities organized by spontaneously formed amateur teams and civilian clubs have emerged in most medium-sized and larger cities [5]. Although participants in these organizations are highly enthusiastic and active, the groups lack systematic organizational capabilities, restricting social football activities to a primitive organizational level among the public. Meanwhile, participants of social football are usually free and flexible with loose constraints. Without professional and authoritative management, problems such as violation of competition rules and football violence may occur within teams. In addition, existing football competitions are mostly held between teams from identical institutions or the same locality, such as matches among enterprise teams or games between teams from government departments. To a certain extent, this greatly limits the exchange and development of social football.

4. Main reasons for the underdevelopment of social football in China

With growing public attention to social football, it will inevitably develop toward greater professionalism, systematic organization and mass participation. Nevertheless, judging from the current development status of social football in China, the main contributing factors are summarized as follows.

https://doi.org/10.62852/css/2026/315
Copyright (c) 2026 Cambridge Sport Science

4.1. Loss of grassroots nature of football

Jacques Defrance, a professor of sports sociology at the University of Paris, stated: "Football is not an elite sport but a sport for the underprivileged. Wealthy people tend to choose golf, tennis, equestrianism and fencing, while the poor love playing football."[6] This indicates that football is inherently the most accessible sport for ordinary people. However, the grassroots nature of football has nearly vanished in China, mainly for the following reasons:

Alongside population growth and advancing urbanization in China, open spaces for casual football on streets and in alleys have disappeared. Without accessible pitches, football has gradually faded out of ordinary people's daily lives.

In recent years, football in China has turned into a pastime for the affluent. It is widely believed that investment is essential to realize football's value. Sky-high salaries of professional athletes create an impression among ordinary citizens that football belongs only to professionals. Furthermore, the wide gap between distant clubs and fans, as well as scarce interactions between players and supporters, have steadily alienated Chinese football from its grassroots foundation.

4.2. Disconnection between competitive football and social football

Chinese people's passion for football is no less than anyone else's. Therefore, it may be inappropriate to claim that football is unpopular in China. Even so, the current popularization and development of football in China are indeed worrying. The serious disconnection between competitive football and social football constitutes one of the vital factors leading to the awkward situation of football development in China.

Competitive football seems unattainable for ordinary people. The public cannot gain genuine access to it, which to some extent creates the impression that football is a sport only for people of a certain status.

Governments still prioritize competitive football in resource allocation, planning and design, failing to meet the growing demand for social football.

Competitive football mainly focuses on tournaments and providing spectacular viewing experience for the public. It cannot comprehensively guide and promote ordinary people in physical fitness, technical skills and other aspects.

Lastly, professional competitive footballers and coaches merely concentrate on improving their personal competence and techniques. They hold the view that fulfilling the high-level mission of winning honors for the country suffices and fail to shoulder the grassroots responsibility of popularizing football among the public.

4.3. Influence of traditional concepts on social football

Some people believe that physical activities are a waste of time and unproductive. Under China's strict exam-oriented education system, parents think letting children play football will ruin their future. Some parents also worry that sports may cause injuries. The intense confrontation in football raises injury risks, and they even fear it may hinder children's growth. Some parents thus prohibit their children from taking part in sports at school. As a result, many children grow up with no interest in football or want to play but lack skills. Unable to fit into teams quickly, they suffer psychological setbacks and eventually quit. All these are misunderstandings of football. They overlook that playing football shapes and educates people and fail to recognize its profound educational and social functions. Meanwhile, influenced by traditional notions, many parents consider football merely aimless recreation. They believe amateur players cannot reach professional standards, so children should learn other artistic skills instead. This deprives children of the chance to enjoy football.

5. Suggestions on the development of social football in China

5.1. Give full play to the strength of the government, market and society

Elite football used to develop under the national system relying on the government. With the establishment and introduction of the market economy system, the market has gradually played its role. The continuous reform and transformation of government functions have brought social mechanisms into being. Likewise, the development of social football (mass football) needs joint participation and support from the

https://doi.org/10.62852/css/2026/315
Copyright (c) 2026 Cambridge Sport Science

government, market and society to construct a three-in-one development system and operational mechanism. It is necessary to handle the relations between the three, clarify their respective rights, responsibilities, obligations and boundaries, and prevent offending and absence of duties. For social football, social forces form its internal mechanism for vertical development via self-management and self-operation. The participation of the government and the market facilitate the standardized, sound and efficient development of social football. With respective football resources, they can drive their horizontal development.

5.2. Properly handle the relationship between football undertaking and football industry

In the 1990s, alongside the professionalization of football in China, numerous football schools emerged, yet very few remain today. One key factor behind this decline is that most football schools prioritized profit-making rather than talent cultivation. In other words, economic benefits came first, while talent training was secondary. Therefore, to advance social football effectively at present, priority should be given to developing football undertaking. Relevant national sports documents clearly demonstrate from government attention that the development of football undertaking has become a core priority of China's sports undertaking. Only sound development of football undertaking can drive better growth of the football industry.

5.3. Grasp the proper scope of government participation

The development of social football should conform to the direction of government institutional reform. First, as a public undertaking, the government bears the responsibility of moderate intervention within its scope of functions, mainly playing the roles of guidance, administration, supervision and service. Secondly, if social football is regarded as part of public cultural services, the government may conduct in-depth engagement. Football itself is not a public service, yet it carries public service functions. When defined as public cultural services, the government takes a leading role by supplying a range of basic public services including venue provision, technical guidance, training and consultation, exchange activities, information support and organization services, such as opening training pitches and publicizing training sessions. Meanwhile, certain special football-related demands can be satisfied through government procurement of services.

5.4. Vigorously develop and standardize grassroots football

Some provinces and cities in China have fostered a strong social football atmosphere, which boosts local social football development and facilitates the popularization of grassroots football. However, numerous problems still exist. Social football activities lack effective organizational guarantees, governmental guidance, policy support and institutional constraints, leading many existing social organizations to operate arbitrarily in an unstandardized manner, with problems such as organizational monopoly and violent conflicts. Therefore, it is necessary to resolve the legitimacy dilemma of spontaneous civil football organizations and grant them legal status. Qualified social football organizations should be supported to complete registration with civil affairs authorities and obtain legal recognition in due course. Small-scale organizations are encouraged to file records with grassroots government administrative departments. Meanwhile, foreign experience from standardized and well-developed social football organizations in Germany, the United States and other countries can be referenced. In this way, the development of social football organizations can be expanded in quantity while achieving standardized, professional and efficient operation.

5.5. Optimize allocation of human, venue and facility resources

Football resources are limited and often underutilized, so it is necessary to realize the rational allocation and coordination of human resources as well as venue and facility resources. In terms of human resources, influential star players and coaches in society can be organized to go to grassroots communities to create a good football atmosphere, and football teachers from schools and football majors in university sports departments can be arranged to grassroots units to conduct football culture promotion, technical training and professional guidance. In terms of venue resources, financial subsidies can be adopted to support large enterprises in renovating abandoned factories and vacant lands into football fields and sports venues.

https://doi.org/10.62852/css/2026/315
Copyright (c) 2026 Cambridge Sport Science

Government-owned football fields can be open to the public free of charge during appropriate periods, and access during non-free periods can be managed through reservation with nominal low charges. The operating costs brought by free opening shall be mainly undertaken by the government. Currently, many football fields attached to primary and secondary schools are poorly open to the public due to campus order, safety management, venue maintenance, staff salary and school teaching arrangements. It is proposed that the government purchase the use right and supporting services of primary and secondary school football fields during holidays.

5.6. Establish a sound and diverse social football competition system

The Overall Plan for the Reform and Development of Chinese Football issued by the General Office of the State Council points out that it is necessary to improve the competition structure, expand the scale of competitions and increase competition types, so as to gradually form a competition pattern featuring stable competition systems, clear hierarchy, orderly connection and coverage of urban and rural areas [7]. For social football, diversified forms, simplified conditions, mass participation and rich structures should be adhered to meet people's diverse demands for fitness, entertainment and competition. It is essential to establish a connection mechanism among different social football organizations and give play to the role of the Chinese Football Association as a connecting platform. Inter-organizational regional mass football leagues can be planned and organized, with teams dispatched by each organization to participate. Regional mass football leagues at the municipal level can be held, where qualified teams selected from various regional mass leagues compete against each other.

6. Conclusion

Football is a mass game and public sport that requires public participation, which constitutes its essence. Playing football strengthens people's physique and spirit, while watching football brings spiritual pleasure. Therefore, the General Office of the State Council clearly proposes promoting the development of social football in the Plan for the Reform and Development of Chinese Football. The continuous expansion of participants and improvement of standards in social football can lay a solid mass and talent foundation for the development of professional football. Meanwhile, accelerated development of professional football can facilitate the popularization and advancement of social football [8]. The development of social football relies on government planning, market assessment and social support. In brief, the development of social football represents a bottom-up demand for reform, which urgently requires active top-down promotion. Only through this "Chinese-style football revolution" can China truly elevate its football standard.

7. References

[1] Zhao Xiaoling. Reflections on Several Factors Affecting the Development of Chinese Football[J]. Journal of Chengdu Sport University, 2008(8):47.
[2] Dong Lu. A New Strategic Height of Social Football [EB/OL]. http://sports.sina.com.cn/zV.
[3] Maslow A H. Motivation and Personality[M]. Translated by Ma Liangcheng, et al. Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Press, 2010-06-01.
[4] Baidu Encyclopedia. http://baike.baidu.com/subview/50853/5033176.htm.
[5] Zhao Sheng, Zhang Ting'an, Zhou Yi. Research on Development Characteristics and Strategies of Mass Urban Football in China at Present[J]. Journal of Hebei Sport University, 2013(6):34.
[6] Xue Yong. Vanity Football[M]. Kunming: Yunnan People's Publishing House, 2005:42.
[7] General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-03/16/content_2834982. htm.
[8] Xinhuanet. http://news.xinhuanet.com/2015-03/16/c_1114653179.htm.

https://doi.org/10.62852/css/2026/315
Copyright (c) 2026 Cambridge Sport Science