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Europe and Chinese football
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In August 2017, China's State Council announced new rules to better manage China's foreign investment, limit so-called "irrational" investment, such as in real estate, leisure and sports.

A. Chinese investment in European football

For several years, Chinese companies have heavily invested in European football. In 2015, China Media Group became a shareholder of "Manchester City" at 13%. In Spain, the Atletico Club of Madrid, the Granada Club and the Espanyol of Barcelona have been totally or partially bought out by Chinese investors. Milan's two big rival clubs, AC Milan and Inter, have both for main shareholder a Chinese group.

In France, Chinese investors took equity stake in Sochaux club in 2015 and Lyon, Auxerre (AJA) and Nice in 2016. These French clubs are much cheaper (and less prestigious) than those of the first English league and the Spanish "Liga ", but have great potential. One of the consequences of this investment is the development of communication to the Chinese audience, including the setting of social network accounts in Chinese and the invitation of Chinese stars to several important matches. A recent decision taken by China's State Council may put an end to this type of acquisition¹. Despite this, European clubs must continue to take an interest in the Chinese market.

B. Football, a national strategy

Although China has not managed to qualify for the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Beijing still aims to become a major power of world football.

In 2011, before he became President, Xi Jinping declared that he wanted China to qualify for the World Cup, to organize this event, and hoped that one day the Chinese team would be world champion. In June 2017, President Xi Jinping told Gianni Infantino, FIFA president, that he wanted the football world cup to be held in Asia in the near future.

C. The creation of major clubs in China

Major clubs have emerged in China. They made themselves known around the world for the very expensive acquisitions of European players they have made (for example Nicola Anelka playing for Shanghai Shenhua club in 2012). These clubs have the financial capacity to attract great European and South Americans players.

¹ Partington, Richard (2017), "China moves to curb overseas acquisitions as firms' debt levels rise", *The Guardian*, 18 August, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/aug/18/china-moves-curb-overseas-acquisitions-firms-debt-levels-rise> .

These clubs also use foreign coaches who have proved their worth and brought their national team to the top. For example, Luiz Felipe Scolari, former coach of Brazil's national team who won the 2002 World Cup, is now the coach of Guangzhou Evergrande, who won the Chinese championship in 2016. However, these foreign contribution are not enough to bring a Chinese club to the level of Barça. The improvement of Chinese football requires the development of amateur clubs and football education.

D. Learning football

China has set up a national plan so that by 2025, football classes will be given in more than 50,000 schools throughout the country to accompany the most talented young players². Chinese clubs investing in Europe have also plan to replicate in China some good practices related to the learning of football they saw in Europe.

E. What opportunities for European clubs?

Major European clubs have understood the importance of the Chinese market. Clubs like Manchester United regularly organize tours and friendly matches in China.

Other clubs, such as the Glasgow-based "Celtic", have concluded several agreements in China to improve the football training of young Chinese players³. But these actions must not be limited to the major European clubs. Other important and smaller European clubs should seek to strengthen themselves in the Chinese market.

First of all, it is necessary to develop their image at the national, provincial or local level by strengthening their presence on Chinese social networks and by setting up events dedicated to the Chinese audience. But more importantly, European clubs need to focus on the development of football schools in China, especially in second-tier cities in China, in order to attract young Chinese players.

The strengthening of this cooperation in football should be achieved through the development of the twinning of local and regional governments in Europe and China. These agreements may include a chapter dedicated to the exchange of amateur players between Chinese and European football schools.

² "China to build 50,000 football schools by 2025" (2017), *CRI*, 22 February, accessed at <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0222/c90000-9181128.html>.

³ "Celtic take academy coaching philosophies to China" (2016), *Celtic*, 11 February, accessed at <http://www.celticfc.net/news/10039>.

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