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## Paolo Rossi and the origins of football fandom in China

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## **Paolo Rossi and all that: reflections on the origins of football fandom in China**

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Chinese football fans' interest in other nations' football teams was formed earlier than their support for the Chinese national football team and their local football clubs. [In 1978, Argentina hosted the 11<sup>th</sup> World Cup Finals and the match for third place between Italy and Brazil as well as the final between Argentina and the Netherlands were the starting points for Chinese people beginning to watch football games on television.](#) At that time, it was rare for a Chinese family to own a television and, once one did it was usual for a large group of people including friends, family members and neighbours to gather together to watch TV programmes, even on 9 inch black and white screens. [1978 was also the year when Chinese television stations resumed regular broadcasting so that only a few entertainment programmes were available.](#) Meanwhile, because of the technological support of the Beijing Television Station (the predecessor of present China Central Television) which 'borrowed' the satellite signals of foreigner broadcasting companies and [commentator Shixiong Song's \(宋世雄\) assiduous preparation, the World Cup games became the most impressive TV programmes to be enjoyed in China that year.](#) As a result, the Chinese people developed a special fondness for football, the World Cup, and those four countries, thereby establishing the foundations upon which Chinese football fans' support of overseas football teams would develop.

Although Chinese football fans could get match information at that time from the newspaper, *Football* (足球), and from radio, both of which could announce the results before television, most Chinese football fans still preferred to wait for nine hours to watch televised games. The

1982 World Cup Finals allowed Chinese people to learn the names of superstars such as Paolo Rossi, Zico, Michel Platini and Karl-Heinz Rummenigge and to enjoy their performances and so the fandom of the first generation of Chinese football fans was born. Rossi who scored a hat trick in the match against Brazil then three goals in the semi-finals and final brought 'Rossi mania' to China. His hairstyle was regarded as the height of fashion and was imitated by many, and one fan even changed his name to '罗西' (Luoxi, the Chinese translation of Rossi). [The fan was Wengang Li \(李文纲\), a worker in the Anshan Iron and Steel Group Corporation\(鞍山钢铁集团公司\), and in 1984, he organized the first football supporters' organization in China.](#)

Until that time, it had been hard for Chinese people to form an emotional attachment to their national football team. However, [the emergence of 'Zhixing Style' \(志行风格\), a nationwide idolization of the football player Zhixing Rong \(荣志行\), was the moment when they first began to show their admiration for a national football player.](#) China's World Cup adventures also started in 1982, and Rong was selected as captain of the national football team. Although China lost to New Zealand in a qualifying game for the 1982 World Cup Finals, Rong's excellent skills and good attitude, especially his respect for his rivals, led him to be praised; his behaviour was seen to represent the Chinese people's views on competition at that time (Shen, 2018; Ma, 2018). [The idea of 'Friendship first, competition second' \(友谊第一, 比赛第二\) still dominated Chinese people's attitudes towards sports and Chinese athletes were expected to perform in a friendly and polite manner in order to help the nation to forge good international relations.](#)

However, in 1985, Event 5.19 revealed, in a rather different way, how support for the Chinese national football team was also influenced by the World Cup as well as the Chinese

people's emotional attachment to the nation. [On 19<sup>th</sup> May, the national football team lost a game against the Hong Kong in Beijing and failed to qualify for the World Cup Finals in many properties.](#) Event 5.19, as the riot became known, was the first and largest in the history of Chinese sports. Although the Chinese police described it as organized sabotage, [the Agence France-Presse regarded it as an indication that the Chinese had finally begun to integrate with the world by adopting football hooliganism.](#)

From 1982 to 1985, the competitive capability of the Chinese national team was relatively strong. For instance, if the game against New Zealand had not been lost, China would have qualified for the 1982 World Cup Finals. Moreover, if the game against Hong Kong had been drawn, the Chinese national team would have qualified for the 1986 final stages. Thus, the defeat in the game against Hong Kong, although disappointing, did not detract from the growing pride in the national team.

Watching the World Cup on TV and following the fortunes of the national team enlightened Chinese football fans. [They had learned how the fanatical Argentinian fans demonstrated their passion for their team.](#) Furthermore, the 1980s was the decade when the Chinese people emerged from the shadow of the Cultural Revolution during which emotional outbursts had been suppressed. Now the atmosphere of the World Cup encouraged Chinese football fans to express their emotions at games, with those involving the national team providing opportunities to celebrate their national identity. In sum, therefore, initial fandom associated with the Chinese national football team was formed by a combination of television, the influence of the World Cup, the end of the Cultural Revolution and the desire to celebrate Chinese national identity.