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A Study on the Interacting Logic of International Relations in the History of Modern Sports Exchanges Between China and Other Countries

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Abstract: Modern Sino-foreign sports exchanges represent an important micro-level manifestation of the transformation of the modern international system and the interplay of power among states, distinguishing them from general cultural transmission activities. Set against the historical backdrop of social transformation and shifts in the global landscape from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China era, this paper traces the historical evolution of Sino-foreign sports exchanges and analyzes the intrinsic connections between sports practices and the international order, the construction of national integrity, and diplomatic practices. The study reveals that modern Sino-foreign sports interactions, amid the continuous reconfiguration of Eastern and Western power dynamics, underwent a historical transition—from passive acceptance to active response and independent exploration—forming a profound operational logic characterized by structural boundaries, state competition, and humanistic empowerment. This dynamic process not only facilitated the integration of global sports norms but also provided a unique practical pathway for modern China to overcome its diplomatic dilemmas and construct a modern national identity. By examining archival records and historical documents, this research highlights how athletic diplomacy served as a crucial mechanism for navigating complex geopolitical shifts. Furthermore, it illustrates the multifaceted role of athletic events in bridging ideological divides. Ultimately, the findings underscore the significance of sports in shaping international relations and fostering cross-cultural understanding during a period of profound global transition.

Keywords: sports history; international sports; international relations; sports diplomacy; national identity

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1. Introduction

The emergence and development of modern sports in China have been closely linked to the broader historical process of social transformation and evolving international relations. Scholarly work has largely centered on the localization of modern sports, reforms in physical education systems, and systematic documentation of sporting events; alternatively, it has examined discrete instances of sports-related international engagement. Few studies, however, adopt the analytical lens of international relations theory to explore how sports exchanges reflect and interact with global power dynamics, national foreign policy orientations, and the formation of collective identity. As a mode of cross-border interaction combining public, humanistic appeal with subtle political significance, modern sports offered avenues beyond conventional diplomatic channels. During periods when China's international standing was constrained and its formal diplomatic influence limited, sports served as a vital medium for state-level international participation, expression of national positions, and pursuit of global recognition [1]. Grounded in the dual historical frameworks of global order transformation and Chinese state-building, this paper traces the developmental trajectory of modern Sino-foreign

sports exchanges, analyzes the reciprocal relationships between sports interactions and international relations, and identifies enduring historical patterns and scholarly insights embedded within them.

2. The Internal Coupling Mechanism between Modern Sports Exchange and International Relations

The modern sports system developed alongside the evolution of the European nation-state system; its rule-based framework, organizational models, and value-oriented discourse have, from their origins, been integrated into broader patterns of global interaction, carrying inherent dimensions of international engagement. Unlike more tangible forms of external exchange—such as the transfer of physical equipment or adoption of institutional arrangements—sports exchange appears, on the surface, as interpersonal and cultural interaction, yet it reflects underlying dynamics related to influence, mutual understanding, and collective identity formation; thus, it offers a valuable lens for examining the evolving nature of China's relations with other countries throughout modern history [2]. The close relationship between modern sports exchange and international relations is not merely a cultural occurrence but stems from the interplay of shifting global influence patterns, transformations in how states interact, and China's historical experience of national rejuvenation.

Beginning in the 19th century, Western nations extended their influence across multiple regions; modern sports became one channel through which educational norms, competitive frameworks, and physical education concepts were introduced internationally. Under the conditions of extraterritorial arrangements, Western sports disciplines, competitive standards, and pedagogical approaches entered China via church-affiliated schools, infrastructure projects in foreign-administered areas, and activities involving foreign personnel [1, 3]. This transmission process reflected broader patterns of cross-cultural contact and adaptation. As a result, early Sino-Western sports interactions unfolded within a context of uneven development; the scope, modes, and framing of these exchanges were shaped by differing levels of institutional capacity and global participation.

Formal diplomatic channels between China and other countries have historically operated within complex international environments; constraints on communication and coordination have occasionally limited the continuity of official dialogue. Sports, by virtue of its broad appeal, non-partisan character, and community-based foundations, provides an adaptable platform for fostering mutual familiarity, facilitating shared understanding, and expressing national perspectives. Activities such as participation in international sporting competitions, mobility of athletes and coaches across borders, and cooperation within international sports bodies may appear primarily cultural and interpersonal; however, they also reflect dimensions of national representation, positioning within global frameworks, and contributions to shared norms—forming a durable linkage between sports engagement and international relations [4, 5].

In the late Qing period, widespread concern over national vitality elevated the role of physical activity beyond recreation or health maintenance. The promotion of martial traditions and emphasis on athletic development aligned with broader societal goals of strengthening public well-being, reinforcing communal values, and enhancing international recognition. Domestic engagement with Western sports practices evolved from initial exposure to purposeful integration—aimed at improving population health, cultivating civic spirit, and presenting a constructive national image abroad. This societal orientation generated internal momentum for sports to serve as a medium of international connection, advancing Sino-foreign sports exchanges from informal cultural contact toward structured, state-supported collaborative practice.

3. The Historical Evolution of Modern Sports Exchanges between China and Other Countries and International Interaction Practices

The evolution of the global international order and ongoing adjustments in bilateral and multilateral power dynamics have driven continuous transformations in the patterns, strategic priorities, and societal roles of modern international sports exchanges. Considering the developmental stages of modern China alongside concurrent shifts in the international landscape, the trajectory of sports exchanges between China and other countries—and their interplay with broader international relations—can be delineated into three successive phases. In each phase, sports exchange practices align closely with prevailing global power configurations and the nation's external development objectives, collectively illustrating a coherent historical progression.

3.1. The Late Qing Dynasty: Unidirectional Cultural Imposition and Discursive Discipline under the Colonial Order (1840–1911)

Sino-foreign relations during the late Qing Dynasty were marked by externally driven institutional engagement and structural transformation; Western powers established frameworks for interaction with China through a series of treaties. The introduction and adoption of modern sports occurred within this broader historical context, reflecting patterns of external transmission, adaptive uptake, and limited capacity for independent conceptual framing. Treaty ports, missionary-affiliated educational institutions, and public venues in foreign-administered urban zones served as primary sites for the initial integration of Western physical activities into Chinese society; disciplines such as track and field, team-based games, and structured physical training gained increasing visibility, reshaping the practice, organization, and social perception of traditional physical culture [4, 6].

The transmission of sports during this period extended beyond technical instruction to encompass broader frameworks of cultural interpretation [7, 8]. Through the systematic presentation of modern physical education models, foreign actors advanced particular conceptions of bodily discipline, civic formation, and civilizational comparison. These frameworks contributed to hierarchical understandings of developmental trajectories across regions, reinforcing prevailing global hierarchies at the level of cultural representation. Within this asymmetrical relational structure, cross-cultural exchanges in physical activity lacked conditions conducive to reciprocal dialogue; China's participation was largely shaped by contextual constraints and adaptive responses. This imbalance offers a historically grounded illustration of constrained agency in international cultural engagement during the era.

The integration of modern physical practices under these conditions played an objective role in stimulating renewed attention to physical development in late-Qing intellectual discourse. Comparative observation of differing approaches to physical cultivation enabled scholars to articulate connections between collective health, societal resilience, and national capacity. Physical education initiatives were increasingly linked to broader goals of social renewal and institutional strengthening, contributing to the diffusion of values emphasizing discipline, vigor, and collective responsibility [9, 10]. These developments helped establish both conceptual foundations and practical networks that supported expanded participation in international sporting events and more proactive engagement in diplomatic arenas during the subsequent Republican period.

3.2. The Republican Era: Sovereignty Contestation and Bilateral Interaction within the Context of National Awakening (1912–1945)

After the founding of the Republic of China, the concept of the modern nation-state gradually gained widespread acceptance. China thereby transitioned from the foreign engagement patterns characteristic of the late Qing Dynasty and began participating in the international system with increasing agency. As a result, Sino-foreign sports exchanges evolved beyond earlier forms of external influence and entered a phase marked by active involvement, institutional participation, and self-directed development. Sports exchanges became an established channel for modern China to address diplomatic constraints, reinforce national cohesion, and articulate collective identity. International sporting events, such as the Far Eastern Games and the Olympic Games, served as key

platforms for cross-national interaction and mutual understanding within the broader framework of international relations [11, 12].

During this period, the sports landscape in East Asia reflected evolving regional dynamics between China and Japan. Japan pursued broad institutional engagement across the region, including in sports governance and event organization, and integrated physical education initiatives into its administrative frameworks in areas under its control [13]. In response, Chinese sports organizations emphasized procedural fairness, equitable representation, and consistent adherence to internationally recognized standards regarding eligibility, national emblems, and event governance. Historical instances—including Liu Changchun's decision not to compete under the banner of Manchukuo and coordinated actions by Chinese sports bodies to uphold shared norms in regional competitions—illustrate how sports events functioned as arenas for affirming shared values, promoting mutual respect, and reinforcing standards of conduct in international athletic cooperation.

Alongside regional engagement, China strengthened ties with European and North American sports institutions [7]. Through formal membership in international federations, sustained participation in major global competitions, and systematic adoption of modern physical education curricula, China cultivated reciprocal, institutionally grounded sports relationships. Unlike official diplomatic channels, which faced structural limitations during this era, sports cooperation—operating largely through non-governmental and professional networks—facilitated sustained international contact. This mode of engagement supported broader objectives of international visibility, cultural exchange, and constructive dialogue, reflecting pragmatic approaches to transnational collaboration within the prevailing global context.

3.3. The Early Post-War Period: The Breakthrough and Accumulation of Experience in Sports Diplomacy Amid Structural Reorganization (1945–1949)

The mid-20th century witnessed a broad realignment of global institutional frameworks, accompanied by evolving norms in international relations. Principles emphasizing sovereign equality and mutual respect gained increasing recognition, reshaping the external context and internal logic of sports exchanges between China and other countries. Hierarchical structures previously associated with outdated international arrangements gradually receded, allowing broader participation by countries outside traditional centers of influence in shaping global sports governance—a significant opportunity for China to advance its autonomous development in sports and expand its constructive engagement internationally.

As a participant in major international cooperative efforts during the mid-20th century, China's standing in global affairs strengthened considerably, facilitating more active and equitable involvement in international sports institutions. Through sustained engagement with bodies such as the International Olympic Committee and regional sports federations, China advanced its capacity to contribute meaningfully to global sports dialogue and governance. Building on collaborative foundations established through earlier multilateral cooperation, China expanded sports-related interactions with nations across Europe, North America, and newly established states, moving decisively beyond earlier patterns marked by limited or asymmetrical engagement. In this context, sports served effectively as a medium for humanistic exchange and as a constructive element supporting diplomatic interaction.

Given the transitional nature of both domestic administrative consolidation and the evolving international institutional landscape, formalized mechanisms for sports-related international engagement had not yet been fully institutionalized; however, a clear shift had occurred—from historically constrained participation toward proactive, relationship-oriented exchange. This phase established an early precedent emphasizing people-to-people interaction as a flexible complement to official diplomatic channels [14]. The experiences and operational insights accumulated during this period provided foundational input for the subsequent systematic development and institutional

stabilization of sports diplomacy following the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

4. The Deep-Rooted Interactional Logic of International Relations in Modern Sino-Foreign Sports Exchanges

An examination of the comprehensive evolution of Sino-foreign sports exchanges over the past few decades reveals that the interaction between sports and international relations is not merely a collection of isolated, incidental historical instances, but rather a coherent, logically consistent, and mutually reinforcing systemic framework. The overarching structures of the international order, the foundational considerations of state interests, and the adaptive facilitation offered by cultural diplomacy—these three dimensions interrelate and unfold in a structured manner, jointly shaping the role of sports in international engagement during the modern era.

4.1. Orderly Regulatory Logic: Defining the Boundaries of Sports Interaction within the International Power Structure

The developmental trajectory, interactive patterns, and distribution of discursive influence in modern sports exchanges between China and other countries have consistently reflected broader dynamics within the global international system. During the late Qing period, Western nations held predominant authority over the establishment of international sports norms, the administration of sporting events, and the articulation of associated values, resulting in a largely Western-defined framework for global sports practice; non-Western participants generally adapted to this established structure without substantive input. This asymmetry contributed to a predominantly one-way flow of sports knowledge and practice, with limited opportunities for reciprocal engagement or mutual interpretation. Major powers integrated sports-related cultural dissemination with broader geopolitical objectives, employing both normative influence and institutional coordination to advance diplomatic priorities—thereby positioning sports as a significant channel for international engagement.

The emergence of national self-determination movements during the Republican era contributed to a gradual reconfiguration of the international system, reducing the dominance of any single regional bloc and expanding opportunities for pluralistic interaction [15]. This evolving landscape enabled greater Chinese participation in international sports governance and collaborative initiatives. Each major shift in the configuration of global relations has corresponded to an adaptation in the nature and scope of sports cooperation between China and other nations, underscoring that the degree of reciprocity, mutual recognition, and shared agency in such exchanges remains closely linked to a country's standing and role within the international system; thus, the structure of global relations constitutes a fundamental external factor shaping the development of international sports partnerships.

4.2. Sovereign BoYi Logic: The Stadium Space as a Vehicle for National Identity Construction

Against the historical backdrop of constrained diplomatic engagement and comprehensive challenges in strategic positioning, the international sports arena has become an important platform for nations to advance mutual understanding and foster constructive national representation. Traditional diplomatic channels often involve formal protocols and high-stakes negotiations; in contrast, sports competitions and exchanges offer opportunities for broad participation, widespread visibility, and inclusive dialogue [16]. These characteristics enable nations to articulate shared values, reinforce collective identity, and enhance international recognition in ways that support cooperative global engagement—aligning closely with contemporary priorities for peaceful development and international collaboration.

In modern international sports exchanges, matters such as participant eligibility, appropriate use of national emblems, and equitable representation in event governance reflect broader commitments to fairness, mutual respect, and institutional integrity. China's sports community consistently adheres to internationally recognized norms in

cross-border cooperation, upholding principles of equality and non-interference while promoting cultural exchange and mutual learning. This consistent approach has contributed to a more balanced and nuanced global perception of China as a responsible participant in international sporting life. Sustained engagement and proactive contributions within this domain exemplify how collaborative practices in sport can support broader goals of international harmony and shared progress—serving as one meaningful dimension of national image building grounded in openness and reciprocity.

4.3. Humanistic Empowerment Logic: Non-Governmental Sports Exchanges Compensate for Gaps in Official Diplomacy

For a considerable period in modern Chinese history, official diplomatic channels were constrained, international discourse capacity was limited, and external political engagement faced significant restrictions; political tensions and diplomatic discontinuities became prevalent, hindering sustained national-level communication. As a vehicle for cultural exchange, sports—drawing on its grassroots character and value neutrality—effectively transcended ideological differences and political divides, sustaining regular interpersonal interaction between China and other countries during phases when formal diplomatic relations were suspended.

The empowering function of sports diplomacy resides in flexible people-to-people exchanges that bridge transnational cognitive gaps, foster international recognition, and enhance a nation's external public perception. Unlike official diplomacy, which often reflects interest-based competition and positional negotiation, contemporary Sino-foreign sports exchanges emphasize event participation, talent mobility, and cultural reciprocity. These interactions implicitly convey China's national aspirations and commitment to peaceful engagement, helping to create conducive conditions for the resumption of formal diplomatic dialogue. This paradigm—grounded in grassroots initiative, humanistic orientation, and mutual reinforcement—broadened the scope of China's international engagement and effectively offset functional constraints inherent in conventional political diplomacy.

5. The Historical Significance and Contemporary Relevance of the Interaction between Modern Sports and International Relations

5.1. Historical Value

From the perspective of historical evolution, modern sports exchanges between China and other nations transcended the traditional single paradigm of political diplomacy, establishing a flexible practical pathway for countries with relatively limited diplomatic resources to engage in international interactions. This complemented official diplomatic efforts in the modern era and enriched the developmental trajectory of modern Sino-foreign relations [17, 18]. The sovereign assertiveness and cultural consciousness manifested in these international sports exchanges strengthened citizens' sense of national identity and belonging, promoted broader societal acceptance of the modern nation-state framework, and contributed to collective aspirations for social progress and development. Meanwhile, China's independent initiatives and advocacy for equity within the international sports arena challenged the Western-dominated structure of global sports governance, supporting a shift toward greater pluralism, fairness, inclusiveness, and mutual respect in the global sports system, thereby offering historical insights for diverse nations participating in the evolution of international institutions.

5.2. Contemporary Relevance

An analysis of the evolutionary logic and practical experiences of modern sports diplomacy can provide important practical guidance for China's international sports engagement and the building of new-type international relations in the new era. International sports diplomacy has always been deeply intertwined with shifts in the global landscape and a nation's overall diplomatic strategy; therefore, the development of sports diplomacy in the new era should be grounded in the current evolution of the

international landscape, precisely align with the nation's external strategic layout, and fully leverage the flexible diplomatic value of sports. Meanwhile, it is essential to continuously deepen grassroots sports exchanges, utilizing diverse platforms—such as transnational sporting event cooperation, the exchange of sports talents, and the promotion of sports culture—to establish sustainable bridges for cultural and people-to-people engagement between China and other countries. In international sports interactions, it is crucial to uphold principles of mutual respect and shared understanding, strengthen the international presentation of Chinese sports culture, continuously enhance China's sports soft power and its influence in shaping international norms, and leverage sports-based cultural and people-to-people exchanges to support the construction and development of new-type international relations [16].

6. Conclusion

Modern sports exchanges between China and other nations, as well as China's engagement in international relations, have consistently reflected a dynamic, interdependent relationship shaped through mutual influence. The prevailing international framework and diplomatic norms inform the scope and character of sports interactions; conversely, such exchanges function as a distinctive channel—leveraging adaptive strategic approaches and cultural resonance—to support and enrich broader international engagement. They serve as a key medium through which contemporary China articulates national identity, advances shared understanding, and navigates complex diplomatic contexts. The historical trajectory of these exchanges—from initial responsiveness to increasingly proactive participation, and from predominantly one-way transmission to reciprocal dialogue—reveals a three-dimensional pattern grounded in structural alignment, cooperative negotiation, and cultural exchange. A systematic analysis of this evolution offers valuable historical insight and practical orientation for advancing sports diplomacy in the current era, strengthening people-to-people and cultural ties with other countries, and reinforcing China's capacity to contribute meaningfully to global discourse.

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