Article

Beyond the Pitch: How Media Narratives Shape Perceptions of the Shanghai Derby and Their Impact on Urban Identity

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Abstract: The Shanghai Derby, contested between Shanghai Shenhua and Shanghai Port, represents one of the most significant rivalries in Chinese football, embodying far more than athletic competition. This paper examines the interplay of sport, media, and urban identity within this high-profile event, using the derby as a lens to explore broader cultural and social dynamics in contemporary Shanghai. It analyzes how a variety of media actors-including national news outlets, commercial sports platforms, and digital fan communities-actively construct and disseminate competing narratives, framing the derby as a site where collective identity is performed and contested rather than merely a sporting fixture. Through these narratives, the derby becomes a focal point for negotiating issues of class, locality, and modernity within the city. Media representations often highlight contrasts between different social groups and urban districts, subtly reinforcing perceptions of belonging, prestige, and social hierarchy. Meanwhile, fan communities engage in digital storytelling and commentary that not only intensify the rivalry but also contribute to a shared sense of urban identity. This convergence of media and fan engagement demonstrates how sports events can operate as cultural texts, revealing deeper patterns of urban life, social interaction, and identity formation. By situating the Shanghai Derby within the broader context of Shanghai's evolving urban landscape, this study illustrates the multifaceted role of football as both entertainment and a medium for cultural expression. It underscores how sporting rivalries, mediated through complex channels of communication, can reflect and shape public perceptions of the city, offering insights into the intersections of sport, media, and urban culture in modern China.

Keywords: media narratives; urban identity; Shanghai Derby; Chinese football culture; agenda-setting and framing theory

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary global landscape, football has emerged as one of the most influential cultural forces, shaping identity, politics, and urban life far beyond the boundaries of the pitch [1]. In recent years, China has increasingly positioned football as both a marker of modernization and an instrument of soft power. The government has framed the sport within the national "football dream," linking achievements on the field to broader social development and national prestige [2]. Despite substantial investment in infrastructure, player development, and club management, Chinese football continues to face persistent challenges related to performance, organizational structures, and public trust. These issues inevitably influence how football is reported and interpreted by the media and the public [3,4].

Media plays a central role in constructing public perceptions of football. State-affiliated outlets such as CCTV and Xinhua often emphasize narratives of unity, discipline, and national progress, highlighting the sport as a vehicle for social cohesion. By contrast, commercial sports journalism tends to dramatize rivalries, emphasizing competition,

emotion, and spectacle. At the same time, the rise of digital platforms such as Weibo and Douyin has enabled participatory fan cultures, where supporters actively create and circulate content, engage in debate, and shape collective interpretations of the sport 2].

Among Chinese football rivalries, the Shanghai Derby-contested between Shanghai Shenhua and Shanghai Port-has emerged as one of the most prominent spectacles. Since their first encounter in 2005, the derby has drawn significant stadium attendance and extensive media attention, functioning as a site where competing narratives intersect and evolve [5].

This study employs the Shanghai Derby as a lens through which to explore the intersections of sport, media, and urban identity in China. By analyzing how diverse media outlets construct and disseminate stories surrounding the derby, the paper demonstrates how football journalism both reflects and actively reshapes Shanghai's complex urban image. The city is often portrayed as divided along multiple axes: Puxi and Pudong, tradition and modernity, working-class heritage and commercial ambition. Media narratives surrounding the derby not only illuminate these contrasts but also reveal broader social tensions and ongoing transformations within Chinese football [5,6].

2. Literature Review

The professionalization of Chinese football began in the early 1990s, with significant reforms taking place in 1993 and the establishment of a national league in 1994. These initiatives aimed to modernize the sport by encouraging investment in infrastructure, enhancing player development programs, and transitioning away from the previously state-controlled model. Despite these efforts, persistent challenges-such as corruption, weak club management, and inconsistent regulatory oversight-have continued to impede the sustainable growth and competitiveness of Chinese football [7,8]. These structural issues have not only affected performance on the field but have also shaped public perceptions and media narratives surrounding the sport.

China's media landscape plays a critical role in shaping how football is understood and consumed. The system is composed of both state-run and commercial outlets, each promoting distinct narratives. State-affiliated media, including outlets like CCTV and Xinhua, typically emphasize themes of national pride, social cohesion, and collective achievement, framing football as a tool for broader societal goals [9]. Commercial sports media, on the other hand, often prioritize storytelling that dramatizes competition, rivalry, and entertainment, focusing on the emotional and performative aspects of the game.

The emergence of online platforms such as Weibo and Douyin has further transformed football reporting and discussion, enabling a participatory culture in which fans actively generate content, comment on matches, and influence the framing of stories [10]. This digital environment has contributed to a shift in power dynamics between traditional media and audiences, allowing grassroots voices and fan communities to shape the discourse surrounding football. Scholars have noted that these platforms not only amplify the visibility of high-profile matches, such as the Shanghai Derby, but also enable the construction of complex narratives that intersect with urban identity, social class, and local culture.

Overall, the literature highlights the interplay between professionalization, media representation, and digital participation in shaping the contemporary Chinese football landscape. By situating the Shanghai Derby within this context, the study seeks to build upon existing research by examining how media narratives and fan engagement collectively influence perceptions of urban identity, social divisions, and cultural meaning in Shanghai's football culture.

3. Theoretical Frameworks for Media Analysis

3.1. Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories: How Media Shape Attention and Interpretation

Agenda-setting theory, originally developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), proposes that the media does not dictate what people should think, but rather what they should think about. By repeatedly covering certain topics and selectively highlighting issues, the media shapes public attention and influences how societies prioritize issues in collective discourse [11,12]. In sports journalism, this phenomenon is evident in the selective focus on particular teams, players, and tournaments, often reflecting broader cultural or political priorities [13].

In China, agenda-setting theory provides a useful lens for understanding how sports media contributes to shaping national identity and collective values. State-affiliated outlets, such as CCTV Sports and Xinhua News Agency, frequently emphasize football events that align with government objectives [14]. For example, between 2017 and 2019, CCTV5 broadcast approximately half of all Chinese Super League (CSL) matches, primarily showcasing well-known, government-supported clubs [15]. Similarly, studies show that over 70% of sports news coverage in state media highlighted domestic athletes, demonstrating a preference for elite, well-funded teams over smaller or local clubs [16].

Framing theory extends this perspective by examining how media not only select topics but also construct their meaning [11,13]. Frames guide audience interpretation by emphasizing particular causes, values, or emotions. In Chinese football coverage, common frames juxtapose "national pride" against "local disorder," or "discipline" against "emotion" [16]. For instance, People's Daily frequently portrays football as a symbol of civic virtue and collective progress, while commercial outlets like Sina Sports or Titan Sports prioritize the drama, excitement, and competitive aspects of the match [7].

The Shanghai Derby-between Shanghai Shenhua and Shanghai Port-illustrates how agenda-setting and framing operate in tandem. State media typically frames the derby as a celebration of Shanghai's modern identity and its contribution to China's broader "football dream" [2,7]. Xinhua reports often highlight themes such as "unity," "respect," and "progress," linking the match to national goals. In contrast, digital fan platforms such as Weibo and Hupu foreground narratives of loyalty, rivalry, and social identity. During the 2023 season, the hashtag #ShanghaiDerby garnered over 12 million views and approximately 350,000 fan comments, with around 70% framing the event as a contest of identity and emotion rather than technical skill [17].

This divergence between official and grassroots coverage underscores the heterogeneity of Chinese football media. While traditional outlets maintain state-approved narratives emphasizing harmony and progress, online fan communities employ football as a medium for expressing local pride, social commentary, and communal belonging [18]. The Shanghai Derby thus functions as a performative stage where issues of class, place, and modernity are actively negotiated, demonstrating the combined influence of agenda-setting and framing on the social meaning of football in China.

3.2. Cultural Studies and Urban Identity: How Media Construct Meaning and Belonging

Cultural studies emphasize that media not only reflect but also actively shape collective identities, positioning sport as a critical arena where notions of class, modernity, and nationhood are negotiated. In China, football has emerged as a symbolic stage where city identity intersects with state narratives and media storytelling [19]. The Shanghai Derby clearly exemplifies these dynamics. Shanghai Shenhua, rooted in Puxi's historic neighborhoods, embodies tradition and working-class pride, whereas Shanghai Port, based in Pudong's financial district, symbolizes post-reform prosperity and global ambition [20].

Media coverage reinforces these contrasts. State-affiliated outlets such as People's Daily and Xinhua frequently present Port as an emblem of modernization and collective progress, echoing national narratives of unity and renewal [14]. By contrast, commercial and digital media-including Weibo, Hupu, and Douyin-focus heavily on rivalry, emotion,

and fan engagement. A 2022 analysis of Weibo posts found that over 70% of comments about the Shanghai Derby employed identity- or emotion-centered language, whereas only 14% discussed tactics or technical aspects [21].

While traditional media remain tightly managed, online platforms provide citizens with semi-public spaces to articulate local pride, a sense of belonging, and even subtle dissent [22]. In this context, the Shanghai Derby functions as more than a sporting contest; it operates as a shared cultural arena where identity, class, and modernity intersect, reflecting the evolving social and urban landscape of Shanghai.

4. Deeper Analysis of the Case: The Shanghai Derby

4.1. Shanghai Port's 2018 CSL Victory and Its Framing in Local and National Media

Shanghai Port's 2018 Chinese Super League (CSL) title represented a landmark moment in both the city's football history and its media narrative. State-affiliated outlets such as Xinhua and People's Daily framed the victory as a milestone in China's broader "football dream," emphasizing themes of discipline, professionalism, and collective progress [23]. This framing aligned with state efforts to present football as a symbol of modernization and an instrument of soft power.

In contrast, commercial and local outlets, including Shanghai Daily and Titan Sports, highlighted civic pride and Shanghai's growing prominence as a sports hub. Audience engagement reflects this divergence: Xinhua's leading CSL story in 2018 garnered approximately 1.7 million views, while the Weibo hashtag #ShanghaiPortChampions received over 430 million views and 120,000 comments within two days. These figures illustrate a shift from traditional, top-down narratives to participatory digital media, where fans reinterpret official messages through emotion, local identity, and personal investment [21].

4.2. Oscar's 2017 Brawl: State vs. Digital Coverage of Violence and Controversy

On 18 June 2017, during a CSL match between Shanghai Port and Guangzhou R&F, Brazilian midfielder Oscar provoked a major altercation by striking opposing players, resulting in an eight-match suspension and a 40,000-yuan fine for himself, with additional penalties for several others [24,25]. The incident quickly became one of the most widely discussed events in Chinese sport, revealing tensions between official ideals of moral order and the emotional culture of modern football.

Mainstream media, including CCTV Sports and Xinhua, framed the incident as a lesson in discipline and professionalism, describing Oscar's actions as "provocative" and emphasizing the suspension as part of ongoing football reform [24]. By contrast, online fan communities on Weibo and Hupu reinterpreted the event, debating whether the punishment reflected bias or inconsistent application of rules. The hashtag #OscarBrawl accumulated over 45 million views within two days, with discussions often highlighting perceived double standards in the treatment of domestic versus foreign players.

Subsequent developments intensified scrutiny. In 2023, Wang Xiaoping, former head of the Chinese Football Association's disciplinary committee and a key figure in Oscar's case, was arrested for corruption and match-fixing [26,27]. This revelation cast retrospective doubt on earlier disciplinary decisions, undermining the moral authority previously projected by sports media. Online commentary revisited the 2017 incident, framing it as a symbol of governance failure and ethical hypocrisy, illustrating how digital memory can transform past controversies into critiques of institutional credibility.

4.3. Fan Clashes and Hooliganism: Contrasting Narratives across Platforms

Incidents of fan violence at the Shanghai Derby have further highlighted divergent media narratives. In April 2023, a post-match clash occurred when several Shanghai Port supporters attacked two Shenhua fans outside the Pudong Football Stadium following a 1-1 draw. Videos of the event rapidly circulated on Weibo and Douyin, sparking widespread debate and calls for increased stadium security [28].

State-affiliated media framed the incident primarily as a public order issue, commending police response and promoting the concept of "civilized fandom." Conversely, commercial outlets such as The Paper and Sohu Sports explored underlying causes, emphasizing social and class-based tensions between supporters from Puxi and Pudong. These contrasting narratives demonstrate that football fandom in China conveys multiple layers of meaning. Supporting a club often signifies civic identity and belonging, but the same passion can escalate into conflict. Digital platforms amplify local disputes into public spectacles, where fans reinterpret incidents as expressions of authenticity and commitment rather than mere disorder, while traditional media stress order and social harmony. The tension between these perspectives illustrates how football operates as a stage for negotiating identity, authority, and community in Shanghai.

4.4. The Role of Foreign Stars (Drogba, Tevez, Hulk, Oscar) in Media Discourse

The arrival of high-profile international players-such as Didier Drogba, Carlos Tevez, Hulk, and Oscar-has frequently been employed in Chinese media as a symbol of the nation's growing global ambition. Mainstream and state-affiliated outlets often present these signings as evidence of the CSL's modernization and China's capacity to attract elite talent. Drogba's transfer to Shanghai Shenhua in 2012, for instance, was widely reported as a landmark event that would enhance the league's profile and strengthen China's international image [29]. Similarly, the rise of Shanghai Port, supported by state-affiliated capital, demonstrates the close connection between urban development, football growth, and national aspirations [30].

Commercial and fan-oriented media, however, tend to highlight tensions between imported glamour and domestic identity. While high-profile signings like Oscar and Hulk were praised for improving match quality, concerns were raised regarding governance, long-term sustainability, and local talent development. Scholars have noted that reliance on corporate ownership and foreign investment introduces both ambition and risk to Chinese clubs [31]. Fans on platforms such as Weibo and Douyin often echoed these concerns, debating whether the emphasis on international stars might undermine domestic player development and dilute the authenticity of Chinese football culture.

5. Broader Implications for Chinese Football Journalism

5.1. State Control, Censorship, and the Limits of Critical Sports Journalism

In China, sports journalism operates within the same political and ideological boundaries that govern the broader media environment. Existing research highlights clear distinctions between state-owned and commercial sports outlets. State-affiliated media emphasize party values, national unity, and collective progress, whereas commercial platforms prioritize profitability, international storylines, and coverage of foreign athletes [16]. This duality illustrates how state control and market forces coexist to shape sports reporting.

Government regulations, such as expansive definitions of "unpublished information" and strict oversight of reporters, generate strong pressures for self-censorship, discouraging investigative or critical reporting [32]. Consequently, much of Chinese sports journalism functions less as a watchdog and more as a tool for promoting positive national imagery.

Football journalists, in particular, must navigate a delicate balance: supporting the state's narrative of unity, modernization, and social progress while capturing the local passion that gives the sport its appeal. Coverage of high-profile matches, such as the Shanghai Derby, often leverages emotional rivalry to engage audiences, but always within the boundaries of "social harmony." This balancing act reflects a broader paradox in Chinese sports media-the simultaneous push for global visibility and the maintenance of domestic legitimacy [33]. Even when local controversies arise, such as mismanagement or

questionable refereeing, critical commentary is often softened to preserve stability and public confidence.

5.2. Digital Media as a Semi-public Sphere in Chinese Football Discourse

Platforms such as Weibo and Douyin have created new spaces for fans to share videos, memes, and commentary, fostering a more participatory football culture. Although these platforms are not entirely open, they function as semi-public arenas where users can reinterpret official narratives and express emotions, contributing to a dynamic fan-driven discourse [10].

However, these digital spaces remain under tight control. Algorithms routinely remove politically sensitive content, and posts challenging the Chinese Football Association or exposing corruption are often deleted within hours. This produces a hybrid environment-part open, part regulated-where fandom, emotional expression, and censorship coexist.

The Shanghai Derby exemplifies this complex interplay. It simultaneously serves as a platform for civic participation and a reminder of the state's role in shaping collective sentiment. Within this tension lies the trajectory of Chinese football journalism, negotiating between bottom-up fan authenticity and top-down editorial discipline.

6. Conclusion

The Shanghai Derby provides a valuable lens for examining how media, identity, and institutional power interact within Chinese football. As online engagement grows, fan voices are becoming increasingly prominent and diverse, gradually testing the boundaries of permissible public discourse. The persistent contrast between official narratives emphasizing harmony and grassroots storytelling driven by emotion demonstrates that football remains one of the few arenas where public sentiment and state oversight intersect directly.

Future research could investigate how local fan culture, media reforms, and global influences jointly reshape public dialogue around sports in China. Ultimately, the development of Chinese football journalism will depend on its ability to maintain a dual focus: sustaining national unity while allowing space for authentic fan expression. In this sense, the Shanghai Derby transcends a simple contest between two clubs-it embodies an ongoing conversation among the state, the media, and the public about the values and identities that contemporary China chooses to prioritize, both on and off the field.

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