

FOOTBALL IN CHINA IS ALIVE & KICKING!

**By Graham Lister, Chief Football Correspondent,
China Monitor (UK) Sports Division**

There are at least 100 million football fans in China, at a conservative estimate: more than in any other country in the world. And only Germany has more players registered with its national Football Association than China's 2,250,000. Yet Chinese professional league football is still in its infancy, and on the international stage China has yet to make a global impact – at least in the men's game.

The national team is currently seeking to qualify for the final stages of the 2002 World Cup, to be held in neighbouring Japan and Korea. Previous attempts to reach the final stages have ended in disappointment for Chinese fans, whose dreams of glory mean that the Serbian head coach, Bora Milutinovic, carries a heavy weight of expectation on his shoulders.

The team's qualifying campaign has run extremely smoothly so far – which is just as well given the Chinese public's earlier frustration about the perceived slowness of the national team's progress.

Such frustration reveals the tightrope that Milutinovic is walking. His predecessor, Englishman Bobby Houghton (who once guided Malmö to the European Cup final) was controversially sacked when China failed to qualify for the 2000 Olympics.

Impatience among Chinese fans is fuelled by exposure through TV to European football. They want to close the gap – and along the way to become more dominant within Asia. Yet it is probably unrealistic to expect football – whose professional roots do not run deep in China – to blossom too quickly in the global arena.

Encouragingly, however, China have just won Asian Qualifying Group 9 for World Cup 2002. And they have done so impressively with six victories out of six during the course of the last month, scoring 25 goals and conceding just three.

As group winners (with the maximum possible 18 points) they will now enter a second, stronger qualifying group made up of China plus four other

group winners. The winners of this group will participate in the final stages in Korea/Japan 2002. After the recent unbeaten run, expectations within China are growing although the next round of qualifying matches will be a lot more difficult than those just completed.

A difficult birth

Football in China has a chequered history. A primitive version of the game actually appeared very early, according to ancient paintings from the Song Dynasty (960-1297 AD) which show Chinese people kicking a ball with their feet. However, it is generally accepted certainly in the UK that the modern game of Association Football originated in Britain and was introduced into China from the West.

Although a national governing body (now the Football Association of the People's Republic of China) was founded in 1924, foreign aggression and civil wars stunted football's development before the communist revolution in 1949. There were football teams in some large Chinese cities during this period, but no national-scale tournaments.

Following the revolution, the Chinese mainland was unified and peace restored within its boundaries. Football now had a chance to develop. Nearly every province, autonomous region and key municipality established its own football team, as did some services, military commands and industry unions. Regular national tournaments and cup matches began to be staged.

Nevertheless, in terms of mass appeal, football still had a long way to go. In most small and medium-sized cities, not to mention enormous swathes of rural China, it was difficult to find a suitable patch of grass on which to play. Then the Cultural Revolution dealt the sickly infant a near fatal blow. During the decade from 1966 to 1976, almost all football teams in China were dismissed. Tournaments were no longer held. A few matches were occasionally staged, but purely for the purpose of promoting friendship.

When football revived after 1976, progress was painfully slow. Since most teams were sponsored only by government and army departments, they all suffered from a shortage of funds which severely limited fixture opportunities. From the mid-1980s, however, with the Chinese economy rapidly opening up and modernising, many teams began establishing links with large Chinese enterprises as a means of obtaining financial help and sponsorship support. Chinese football thus began to shed its government-run image.

Following the regional examples of Japan and South Korea, Chinese football embraced professionalism in the 1990s. An expansion in the number of professional clubs enabled a professional league to be formally launched in 1994. Professionalism has greatly enhanced the development of football in China, especially in economically developed regions and key municipalities. Enthusiasm for the game has reached a new high and is growing rapidly.

Dalian dominant

There are currently 26 professional clubs in China, organised in a 14-strong First Division and a second tier of 12. Until this season, the top two clubs from the lower level changed places with the bottom two from the First Division. However, relegation and promotion have been temporarily suspended by the Chinese Football Association in response to allegations that some clubs were resorting to bribery to maintain or improve their status. League football is complemented by the Chinese FA Cup, in which all 26 professional clubs compete.

Dalian Wanda became the first League Champions in 1994, and have since proved to be something of a Chinese Manchester United, winning the title again in 1996, 1997, 1998 and 2000, by which time they had become Dalian Shide. A club's full name can change as frequently as its sponsor, but its provincial or municipal base provides continuity and a sense of identity.

Dalian have maintained their successful momentum so far this season, which kicked off in March. The club's dominance of the Chinese League has only been interrupted by arch-rivals Shanghai Shenhua in 1995 and Shandong Luneng in 1999.

Chongqing Longxing (now Lifan) are the current Philips FA Cup holders, having beaten Beijing Guo'an 4-2 on aggregate in the two-legged final last December. Beijing had won the Cup themselves in 1996 and 1997.

Coach tour

Dalian's fortunes are being guided by Yugoslav coach Milorad Kacanovic, who hopes to challenge a belief in China that foreign players and coaches tend to be successful only in their first year. It is a theory that was given credence by Slobodan Santrac. He coached Shandong Luneng to the League and Cup double in 1999, but was unable to sustain that success last season and resigned. Ironically, Santrac's initial success attracted more than

half-a-dozen of his compatriots, including Kusanovic, to China to coach in the C-League.

Ironically, too, Santrac was favourite to succeed the popular Bobby Houghton (now at Sichuan Shangwutong) as national team coach, but elected to re-sign for Shangdong instead. Santrac is now coaching the Saudi Arabian national team, who could yet meet China in the second phase of World Cup qualification.

With the Team China job now in the hands of Milutinovic, his mission is simple: ensure China reach the finals of the 2002 World Cup.

A player with Partizan Belgrade and AS Monaco, the Milutinovic CV includes coaching appointments in four previous World Cup finals campaigns.

He was in charge of Mexico for the 1986 finals, Costa Rica at Italia 90, the USA in 1994, and Nigeria in France 98. However, in each case the team had already qualified for the finals (Mexico and USA as hosts). The Team China job therefore represents a different challenge.

Miro, as the Chinese have taken to calling him, must navigate the tricky qualification group stages. He's already halfway there; but to complete his mission he will need to break a pattern of underachievement, transforming a team long-criticised for being robotic into one capable of creative improvisation and invention. The maverick Serb may be just the man to achieve this.

Mind games

Like others before him, including Houghton, he has identified China's problem as a mental one. Too often in the past the team has been beaten by its own inferiority complex. So a key objective for the energetic Miro is to get his players believing in themselves. Confidence and concentration are two aspects he is working on.

There are signs that it is having an effect. Although China's Asian Cup 2000 campaign in the Lebanon ended familiarly with defeat in the semi-finals (making it six times China have reached the last four in this competition), the team often displayed great character and a new mental strength, particularly when battling their way back into matches after falling behind. These positives have been successfully carried over into the present World Cup qualification campaign.

Fan Zhiyi, captain during the Asian Cup games, comments that team spirit has never been better throughout his twelve years in the national squad, with coach, management and players all pulling in the same direction. Fan attributes the improvement to a combination of Milutinovic's approach and the growing benefits of professionalism.

The coach believes the next step must be to expose his players to more matches in more countries, so that they gain vital international experience. One way of achieving this is for Team China to tour and participate in more overseas friendly and competitive internationals. Another is for the best Chinese players to broaden their career horizons.

Go West

Fan himself has set an example. He joined Crystal Palace from Shanghai Shenhua in a £1 million deal that also took Sun Jihai from Dalian to Palace in August 1998, when Terry Venables was in charge at Selhurst Park. Fan has impressed in South London with his consistency and commitment, and in February signed a two-year extension to his contract. Sun returned to Dalian but recently attracted interest from Newcastle United and has also been linked with a possible return to Crystal Palace.

Both Fan and Sun came to Palace's attention through Ted Buxton, who had spent over a year as China's coach and was working at Selhurst Park during the Venables reign.

China's most successful player export so far has been Yang Chen, who plays for Eintracht Frankfurt in the German Bundesliga. Another member of the national squad, Zhang Enhua, recently enjoyed a productive loan spell at Grimsby Town in the English First Division, and has also been linked with Crystal Palace.

There are clearly financial incentives for moving to Europe. Fan's new contract at Palace is worth a reported £12,000 per week (144,000 yuan) to the player. In contrast, Chinese stars in the C-League are paid 160 yuan (£13) a day following a decision by the Chinese Football Association in March to double players' salaries across the board. The increase puts players' pay on a par with that of China's civil servants.

It remains to be seen whether the trickle of Chinese players into the European game becomes a flood, or is simply a flash in the wok. What is

certain is that traffic in the other direction is increasing as Chinese football opens its doors ever wider to the outside world.

Most clubs have hired some foreign players to strengthen their squads. However, Chinese clubs are not yet rich enough to attract the shining stars of international football - or even the fading ones. But they can afford to sign journeymen from the likes of South America, Eastern Europe and Africa.

Structural weakness

While Milutinovic addresses his players' psychology and tactics, he is aware that other obstacles need to be overcome in the longer-term. Organised professional football is still relatively new in China, so the physical and financial infrastructure that supports the game elsewhere is often lacking.

Domestically, the professional game is developing unevenly. Football enjoys much greater popularity in the economically developed municipal regions than in medium sized and small cities and towns. Large municipalities and coastal provinces such as Beijing, Shanghai and Liaoning are able to support more than one professional club, while some inner provinces have no clubs at all.

This imbalance has prevented Chinese football from really taking off as yet. Too many Chinese youngsters never get the opportunity to discover or develop their footballing talent. Lack of proper turf is still a hindrance, even in large municipalities. Consequently, boys who might otherwise become China's Pele or Maradona are denied the chance to show their potential.

If every large and medium-sized Chinese city established a professional or semi-professional club, and if each province (often equivalent in territory and population to a European country) organised its own regular league tournament, the selection options available to the national team coach would increase dramatically.

The fact that Chinese professional footballers play fewer competitive matches also militates against international success. With only 14 teams in the First Division, each one plays just 26 league matches per season. Even with Cup games, the total is only around 30 games - about one third fewer than the average number of competitive first class matches played by teams in Europe. The typical British club's diet of two big games a week is never demanded of a Chinese team.

Of course, many would argue that too much football creates staleness and injuries; on the other hand, too little football blunts a player's competitive edge and inhibits development of a big match temperament. One important step forward for China might therefore be to expand its top division to at least 16 teams, guaranteeing 30 C-League fixtures per season plus Cup ties.

European appeal

Meanwhile, Chinese fans avidly follow the game in Europe. Weekly screenings of matches from the English Premiership, Italy's Serie A and the Bundesliga have helped create a huge and dedicated fan base. English football is the most popular, with leading clubs like Manchester United, Liverpool and Arsenal (all of whom have sent teams to China) attracting huge followings. Players like David Beckham and Michael Owen are idolised in China, and several leading English clubs have recently set up Chinese language websites to feed the growing hunger for news and information among their Chinese fans. In contrast, the domestic Chinese clubs do not yet command such strong loyalties.

Nevertheless, football is playing an increasingly important role in Chinese society, where it acts as a useful safety valve. As the professional game becomes established, so football will loom larger in people's lives. International success will galvanise the game's development, as the Chinese women showed when reaching the final of the third Women's World Cup in 1999. The vibrant roses, as the team are poetically named, were eventually beaten 5-4 on penalties by host country the United States, but their exploits stirred the nation – particularly as they have subsequently beaten the USA in friendlies.

As a result, the dream of Chinese participation in the final stages of the men's World Cup is burning brighter than ever.