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How China's Football Statues Symbolise a Developing Football Culture



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The Sporting Statues Project

'The monuments erected by a people... reveal who the people really are.'

Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation.*

Our aim is to examine sport history, social history and contemporary sporting, internal and national politics through the prism of sports statues

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Project progress

- ✦ Documenting statuary: www.sportingstatues.com
 - ✦ Providing context for case studies, a resource for further research collaborations and a site for disseminating research. World football statues database unveiled in April 2014, joining existing databases for UK sport, US baseball, world cricket.
- ✦ Developing theory around existence and form:
 - ✦ Seven papers, and two book chapters published, collectively assessing genre history, design, process, motivations and messages

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- ✦ 563 in situ football statues or statue groups
- ✦ Over 370 subject-specific statues
- ✦ 190 with anonymous subjects
- ✦ 450+ distinct players, managers, chairmen, etc. are depicted
- ✦ 85% of statues erected since 1990

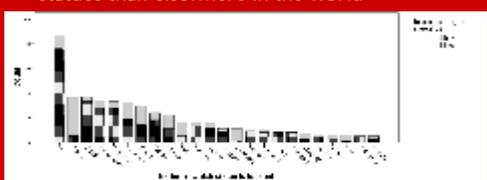


Further information on every statue at www.sportingstatues.com

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China's football statues: Abundance?

- ✦ More than you'd expect given lack of football success, and almost all erected post-2000
- ✦ Far higher percentage of anonymous subject statues than elsewhere in the world



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China's football statues: Abundance?

- ✦ Often form part of multi-sport statue ensembles erected in lead up to 2008 Beijing Olympics



- ✦ Post 2008, statues of footballers have continued to be popular... why?

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China's football statues: Abundance?

- Post Olympics, the FIFA World Cup is the next big sporting prize
- Engaging in and succeeding in world football offers economic and soft diplomacy opportunities and a boost to global status

but... a problem...

- China isn't very good at football

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China's football statues: Abundance?

- China has long history of footballing failure, since 1930s, initially due to internal conflict (e.g. Cultural Revolution)
- Since 1980s successive government blueprints have attempted to address the national team's failure, with minimal success (1 WC appearance)
- Corruption blighted domestic league football
- China's footballing performance seen as shameful, a last remnant of the 'century of humiliation'!
- Chronic lack of grassroots participation and little embedded football culture

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China's football statues: Abundance?

- So the unexpected frequency of football statues in China reflects not only popularity of public art in China – but also
 - the government's control of public art,
 - the government's desire to promote football,
 - the desire of artists to stay on the right side of the state

But why are China's football statues largely depicting anonymous subjects...

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China's football statues: Anonymity?

- National ethos of collectivism > individualism
- Lack of famous players from past to depict
- Lack of established club football teams

So anonymity partly reflects China's lack of success

However anonymous statues are useful if trying to decode a nation's football culture... anonymity of subject frees up the design, and means that the image depicted is about the sculptors and funder's view of football, not of an individual player...

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China's football statues: Tackling

- So how are Chinese football statues designed?
- Tackling!



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China's football statues: Tackling

- So how are Chinese football statues designed?
- Tackling!
- Tackling!



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China's football statues:Tackling

- So how are Chinese football statues designed?
- Tackling!
- Tackling!
- Tackling!
- Tackling is an unusual football statue design in the rest of the world - but accounts for a substantial majority of football statues in China



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China's football statues:Tackling

- Possibly... cheap raw materials -> multi-player statue
- Possibly... link to popularity of martial arts
- Most likely... promotion of political philosophy
 - Much Chinese public art depicts CCP narrative of 'the great struggle': workers or soldiers triumphing over enemies/adversity through selfless hard work and dedication to the nation
 - Tackling is element of football that fits this theme



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China's football statues:Tackling

- Only other nation with as many tackling designs is Russia: all sculpted in the Soviet Union era, in which a similar philosophy was promoted





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China's football statues:Training

- China has a higher proportion of statues sited in training facilities than anywhere else in the world
- Evergrande Football School, Qingyuan: 2500 pupils taught by Real Madrid coaches, 50 football pitches, five statues, including...




The World Cup.... Tackling....

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China's football statues:Training

- and... Bobby Moore and Pelé?





Moore/Pelé, Evergrande Moore, Wembley Pelé, Salvador

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China's football statues:Training

- China heavily influenced by Confucian philosophy
- Strong belief in the importance of respect for, and learning from elders, teachers
- Learning and copying > free-thinking
- China has tradition of elite-focused, intensive sports development: successful in Olympic sports
- China has tradition of importing coaches from other successful nations
- China has stated aim of hosting and winning World Cup in next few decades



China's football statues: Training

- ❖ Evergrande statues, and training/school statues generally reflect China's focus on intensive elite coaching, using foreign coaches from successful nations, with aim of winning the World Cup
- ❖ However... Chinese football held back by lack of free-thinking, imaginative, instinctive play, which is developed by playing football for fun at a younger age – funding greater grassroots participation would probably be more effective
- ❖ Statues brand Evergrande as winners; funding the school also 'buys' favour with government



China's football statues: Saving face

- ❖ China heavily influenced by Confucian philosophy
- ❖ Deep respect for family and elders leads to inflated sense of shame compared to western nations - can be personal and collective
- ❖ Hence need to 'save face' has primacy in many situations



China's football statues: Saving face

- ❖ China also has the world's largest football statue – and the largest team group statue in terms of numbers of figures...
- ❖ Both sited in Shenyang where, in 2001, China sealed qualification for their first World Cup Finals
- ❖ Statues reflected city's and nation's sense of pride, excitement – and anticipation of further success...



China's football statues: Saving face

- ❖ The Giant V, Wulihe Stadium, Shenyang



China's football statues: Saving face

- ❖ The 44 members of the 2002 World Cup Squad (players, coaches and Chinese FA officials)



China's football statues: Saving face

- ❖ China loses all three games at finals, and doesn't score a goal – a national humiliation
- ❖ Giant V is dismantled and removed when stadium demolished in 2007, and stored in warehouse



- ❖ Player statue group abandoned at former training camp site



China's football statues: Saving face

- ✦ In 2012 Shenyang is awarded hosting of National Games
- ✦ Relative face-saving for city (as site of training camp and stadium where WC qualification was achieved) trumps the national shame still felt for this squad
- ✦ Statues restored and re-erected in centre of city!
- ✦ China's need to save face makes it hard to embrace football, since it is starting from a lowly position – and even the best teams lose...



China's football statues: Kickabout diplomacy

- ✦ China need to save face on world football stage whilst it is improving to an acceptable standard
- ✦ Hence it has attempted to place itself as a world football power in terms of its heritage, by claiming to have invented the game
- ✦ Ancient Chinese ball game of cuju is one of a number of early football-type games around the world - but has no direct lineage to the modern game



China's football statues: Kickabout diplomacy

- ✦ China-Brazil Friendship statue, Rio de Janeiro
Pelé vs Emperor Han Wudi



China's football statues: Kickabout diplomacy

- ✦ Plaque describes Emperor Han Wudi as the 'Soccer Emperor' and places cuju as the first version of modern football!
- ✦ China using reflected glory of Pelé, but simultaneously exposing their lack of a world class player to place alongside him
- ✦ Statue also betrays China's lack of confidence, and football's global hegemony... China is denying the importance and authenticity of its own heritage by twisting it



China's football statues

- ✦ Designed narratives
 - ✦ Football as a metaphor for 'the great struggle': work hard and serve the nation
 - ✦ Past innovators, future champions
- ✦ Hidden narratives
 - ✦ Reliance on copying rather than developing own football culture
 - ✦ Reliance on elite-focused training as opposed to participation
 - ✦ Lack of tradition
 - ✦ Lack of Imagination and flair
 - ✦ Lack of self-confidence



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Copies of talk and other sporting statues papers available from me at end of session