



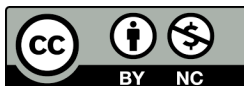
# Sport on the silk road; sport and Iran-China 25-year cooperation agreement

Mahdi Shariati Feizabadi

Department of Human Sciences, Technical and Vocational University, Tehran, Iran. (Email: mshariati@tvu.ac.ir)

Article Info	Abstract
<p>Original Article</p> <p><b>Article history:</b></p> <p>Received: 20 August 2020</p> <p>Revised: 29 August 2020</p> <p>Accepted: 1 September 2020</p> <p>Published online: 01 January 2021</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Iran, China, document, championship sport, medal, Olympics</p>	<p><b>Background:</b> China is the undisputed power of sports in the world today and due to the close relations of China and Iran in many different aspects, the bilateral scientific works can be considered as well.</p> <p><b>Aim:</b> The purpose of this study was to analyze the opportunities for the development of championship sports with a look at the cooperation document between Iran and China.</p> <p><b>Materials and Methods:</b> The present study was a qualitative (descriptive-analytical) type of library studies in terms of applied purpose and in terms of data collection, which examined scientific works including books, articles, and notes during 2010-2021 about Iranian sports and China took place.</p> <p><b>Results:</b> The research findings showed that the Islamic Republic of Iran and China, as two superpowers of West and East Asia, can have different sports interactions with each other in team and individual disciplines, respectively. In addition, the Iranians can use sport as a starting point and a tool to facilitate and accelerate their political-trade relations by winning 76 and the Chinese by winning 696 medals in the Summer and Winter Olympics; For example, the Chinese in the fields of swimming and diving, gymnastics, table tennis and recently weightlifting have emerged as the undisputed power of the world, while Iran can also compete in team sports such as football, volleyball and even Basketball to share its experiences in human resource development as the most important precondition for national excellence with this country.</p> <p><b>Conclusion:</b> All in all, sport as a facilitator between Iran and China can develop the future political communications. China is the pioneer of Olympic Games and 25 years agreement can lead to brilliant future for Iranians.</p>

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## 1. Introduction

Today, many countries around the world use sport as an opportunity for political and economic development. Among them, there are some countries known as emerging economies or BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, India and South Africa) [1]. In recent years, they have made great efforts to host various sporting events; For instance, China in a ten-year period, in addition to hosting the Summer Olympics (Beijing 2008), also hosted the Winter 2022 Olympics and introduce itself as new world sports power [2].

The Chinese held the 2008 Beijing Olympics with the slogan *Green Olympics, Human Olympics, and Science Olympics* during the presidency of Hu Jintao, to the point where they called the Olympics the *Olympics of the Century*; The Chinese defeated the Americans for the first time in the history of the Olympic Games and topped the medal standing [3].

The world's most populous country has made significant progress in continental events including athletics (461 medals), badminton (107 medals), cycling (104 medals), diving (122 medals), fencing (103 medals), gymnastics (250 medals), shooting (395 medals), Swimming (354 medals), table tennis (128 medals) and weightlifting (128 medals) [4].

China hosted a number of major sporting events, including the Asian Games and the Olympic Games, including the Beijing Asian Games (1990), Guangzhou (2010) and Hangzhou (2022) noted that the culmination of the country's performance can be seen in the systematic, beautiful and unique holding of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics.

On the other hand, in the past decades, Iranian sports diplomacy before and after the Islamic Revolution, although it has

taken measures, but has a passive mechanism, and in fact the complexity of our foreign policy has caused the slowness and inefficiency of public diplomacy in general and sports diplomacy in particular in the international arena [5]. Perhaps the highlight of pre-revolutionary Iranian sports can be considered the hosting of the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran being hold in Tehran, with 225 media representatives from 97 news agencies on three continents covering the Games [6]. In the first years after the revolution (1979) and in the midst of the Cold War, the Iranians modeled the foreign policy doctrine and the slogan of the Supreme Leader of the Revolution *Neither East nor West* at the 1980 Moscow and 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. With the simple slogan *We do not play*, they boycotted this issue, which has been unique among all member countries of the International Olympic Committee until today [5].

The 2012 London Olympics can be called the most historic of Olympic for Iranian athletes, where the Iranian convoy won 6 gold medals for the first time. In football, in the qualifying round of the 1998 FIFA World Cup in France, Iranian footballers were able to enter the world's largest single-sport sporting event after 20 years (after the 1978 World Cup in Argentina) and for the first time since the Islamic Revolution [7]. Recently, at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Islamic Republic of Iran won a gold medal for the first time in the two disciplines of shooting and karate in the Olympics.

After the US sanctions against Iran and Iran's inability to sell oil, the Chinese were able to enter the Iranian political scenario with a huge and well-codified plan [8]. The trip of the President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping to Iran on

February 24, 2016 and his meeting with the Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran are considered the beginning of a *comprehensive strategic partnership* between Iran and China. Six years after that visit and the frequent presence of Iranian representatives, including the Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran in China, the Comprehensive Cooperation Program between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the People's Republic of China on April 27, 2021 in Tehran signed by ministers of foreign affairs of the two countries [9].

Nowadays China is one of Iran's most important trading partners [10]. Shariatinia (2012) considers some overlaps in the foreign policy of the two countries, economic and military exchanges in the field of energy as factors in the development of relations between two countries [11]. Also, Sadeghi and Lotfi (2015) believe that after severe US and EU sanctions against Iran, the policy of looking east should be strengthened with a strategic alliance with China, using the country as a trading partner and strategic ally in international institutions [12].

Sazmand and Arghavani Pirsalami (2013) considered factors such as structural tension, lobbying of competitors in different regions, and the role of the United States as the most important obstacles to comprehensive cooperation [13].

Hafeznia et al. (2019) believe that common geopolitical concerns have a positive effect on Iran-China bilateral relations which have a positive effect on the defense strategies of the Islamic Republic of Iran [14].

Chaudhury (2020) entitled that the Silk Road and the subsequent supply of 50% of its oil needs through the Middle East and China's most important reason for

proximity to Iran in the form of cooperation document has done [15].

Phillips (2020) in a few Latin scientific works in this field said that the Chinese intelligence in recognizing Iran as the main gateway to the Middle East and focus on the country has indicated in order to reach a strategic agreement; In his view, Iran is a good lever to push back the Americans in the Middle East, and China has sought to gain access to this region rich in natural resources through Iran [16].

Singh (2021) in a few scientific works on sports between Iran and China, in an article entitled "Analysis of Iran-China relations through football headlines" such as "Chinese dragon does not compete with Iranian cheetah", "Wall to wall", considers the "battle of the two empires" and the "attack of the Cheetahs on the dragon" as among the reasons and functions of the media in the divergence of sports between the two countries [8].

Bakhshi Chenari et al. (2019) consider the role of sports in the country's diplomacy is very important and consider sports diplomacy as one of the important strategies to strengthen and develop Iran's diplomatic relations with other countries [17]. One of the prominent examples of sports diplomacy in Asia is between South and North Korea, which has been studied by Min and Choi (2019) [18].

by considering the presence of Chinese athletes as the superpower of Asia and one of the top three countries in the world, and on the other hand, the announcement of \$ 280-400 billion in Chinese investment in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it seems more necessary to explain cooperation in the 9 clauses of this memorandum along with Iran's sports interests from this document.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The present study was qualitative (descriptive-analytical) in terms of applied purpose and in terms of data collection, which was done through library studies. Research data was based on searches in 55 Internet sources and libraries, including books, articles, interviews, notes, etc., from 2010 to 2021, while categorizing the categories, the researcher tried to examine the performance of China and Iran in international sports and in the form of tables and charts to analyze the sports opportunities in the development of interactions between the two countries,

## 3. Findings

While examining the performance of Iran and China in the world's largest sporting event- summer and winter Olympics- the distribution of medals won by athletes from these two countries in medal-winning disciplines and the results of this issue are analyzed. Table 1 shows the performance of Chinese and Iranian sports in the Summer Olympics.

Since holding the first Winter Olympics in 1924 in Chamonix, France, the Chinese have been absent for more than half a century for the first time at the 1980 American Lake Placid Olympics (Figure 1). It should be noted that Iran has not yet won a medal in the Winter Olympics.

Among the many and varied Chinese sports at the Olympics, 12 sports have won many honors for the Chinese convoy at the Olympics (Table 2). In addition, the Iranians summed up their total of 76 medals in the following six disciplines, with wrestling having the largest share in the Olympic Games with about 61.8%.

The Chinese have already won medals in all disciplines of the Summer Olympics except equestrian, triathlon, rugby and water polo. The most prestigious Chinese athlete is Chinese gymnast Li Ning, who won 3 gold and 2 bronze medals at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics alone; Zoe Kai won 3 gold medals at the 2008 Beijing Olympics in gymnastics. The comparison of other elite Chinese and Iranian athletes in the Olympic Games shows in Table 3.

**Table 1.** Comparing Iran's performance against China's at Summer Olympics (1952-2020)

Lexicographic Ranking		No. of Athletes		Total		Bronze Silver Gold			Bronze Silver Gold			Olympic
Iran	China	Iran	China	Iran	China	Iran			China			Country
30	-	22	1	7	0	4	3	0	0	0	0	1952
-	4	-	216	-	15	Sanctioned			8	9	32	1984
36	11	27	273	1	5	0	1	0	11	12	28	1988
44	4	40	244	3	16	2	1	0	22	16	54	1992
43	4	18	294	3	16	1	1	1	22	12	50	1996
27	3	35	271	4	28	1	0	3	16	14	58	2000
29	2	38	384	6	32	2	2	2	17	14	63	2004
51	1	55	639	2	48	1	0	1	22	30	100	2008
12	2	53	396	13	38	1	5	7	31	22	91	2012
25	3	63	412	8	26	4	1	3	18	26	70	2016
27	2	65	406	7	38	2	2	3	32	18	88	2022

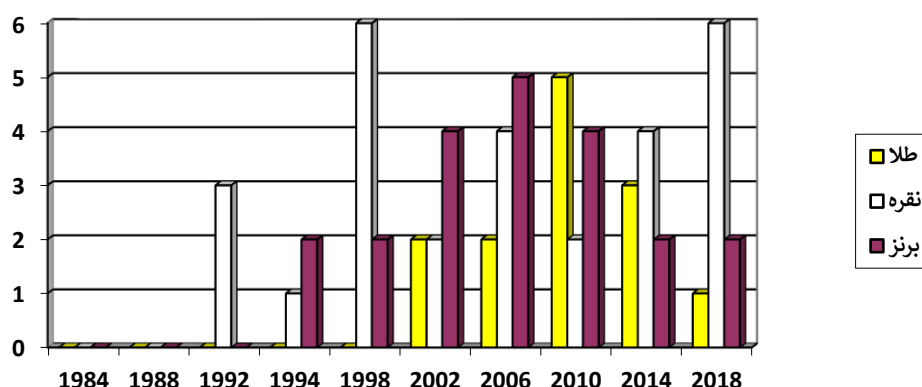


Figure 1. China's performance at the Winter Olympics (1984-2018)

Table 2. China's most medal-winning sports compared to Iran at the Olympics

Total	Bronze	Silver	Gold	Sport	Total	Bronze	Silver	Gold	Sport
Summer Olympic					Summer Olympic				
47	21	15	11	Wrestling	81	10	24	47	Diving
20	5	6	9	Weightlifting	62	8	16	38	Weightlifting
6	3	1	2	Taekwondo	84	25	26	33	Gymnastic
1	0	0	1	Karate	60	8	20	32	Table tennis
1	0	0	1	Shooting	64	25	16	26	Shooting
1	0	1	0	Track & Field	47	15	12	20	Badminton
-	-	-	-	-	49	12	21	16	Swimming
-	-	-	-	-	37	15	12	10	Track & Field
-	-	-	-	-	22	11	3	8	Judo
-	-	-	-	-	11	3	1	7	Taekwondo
-	-	-	-	-	15	3	7	5	Fencing
-	-	-	-	-	14	6	5	3	Boxing
Winter Olympic									
-	-	-	-	-	33	8	15	10	Short distance ski
-	-	-	-	-	11	4	6	1	Free ski

Table 3. Comparison of elite Chinese (at least 4 gold) and Iranian athletes (at least 3 medals) at the Olympics

Total	Bronze	Silver	Gold	No. of Attendance	Name	Sexuality/ country	Sport
7	1	1	5	4	Wu Minxia	Female/China	Diving
3	1	0	2	3	Hadi Saei	Male/Iran	Taekwondo
6	1	0	5	2	Zou Kai	Male/China	Gymnastic
0	0	0	2	2	Hoseyn Rezazadeh	Male/Iran	Weightlifting
5	0	0	5	3	Ma Long	Male/China	Table tennis
3	0	2	1	3	Gholamreza Takhti	Male/Iran	Wrestling
5	0	0	5	3	Chen Ruolin	Female/China	Diving
3	1	1	1	3	Mohamad Nasiri	Male/Iran	Weightlifting
6	0	2	4	4	Guo Jingjing	Female/China	Diving
5	0	1	4	3	Fu Mingxia	Female/China	Diving
5	0	1	4	3	Wang Nan	Female/China	Table tennis
5	1	0	4	3	Li Xiaopeng	Male/China	Gymnastic
4	0	0	4	2	Deng Yaping	Female/China	Table tennis
4	0	0	4	4	Shi Tingmao	Female/China	Diving
4	0	0	4	2	Zhang Tining	Female/China	Table tennis

#### 4. Discussion

The present study sought to create a literature on the place of sports in facilitating and accelerating political, strategic and economic relations between Iran and China. Following the signing of this Memorandum of Understanding by Mohammad Javad Zarif and Wang Yi, Foreign Ministers of Iran and China on April 27, 2021, despite the focus of the Iranian and world media on political, economic, tourism, education, etc., sports as a tool for development of public diplomatic engagement seems to have been neglected.

Most domestic studies have focused on the non-sporting aspects of Iran-China cooperation and have often focused on cooperation and constructive relations between two countries [12]. Economic and military exchanges in the field of energy [11], common geopolitical concerns [14] and oil needs [15] have been considered as important influential factors in the relationship between Iran and China.

Looking at the performance of sports in the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Iran as two superpowers in East and West Asia, there has been a lot of convergence in the field of sports.

From the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics onwards, the Chinese, with their active participation in all seasons of the Summer Olympics, were able to make a significant upward trajectory, winning a total of 608 medals (237 gold, 195 silver and 176) in a total of 9 appearances so far (Table 1). They won all Olympic disciplines except 4 equestrian, triathlon, rugby and water polo. The country has excelled in many Olympic sports and has been able to award the majority of medals to its athletes, including diving (64 medals), weightlifting (54

medals), gymnastics (73 medals), and tennis. On the table (53 medals), shooting (56 medals), badminton (41 medals), swimming (43 medals), athletics (32 medals) and fencing (14 medals) (Table 2).

According to Tables 2 and 3, it can be well understood that the Chinese, along with their emerging economy, are also the undisputed superpower of sporting events, especially the Olympic Games, in the new millennium sport. The hosting of two cloud events, the Summer and Winter Olympics, shows the interest of Chinese political decision-makers in the field of sports, especially championship and professional sports. For example, winning 100 medals at the 2008 Summer Olympics and being ranked first in the competition based on a lexicographic ranking among 206 member states of the International Committee of the Red Cross, shows the potential of the Chinese in the development of professional sports and it is a championship.

It seems that after almost 4 decades of the Islamic Revolution, politicians in the field of diplomatic relations of Iran, unlike other countries such as Brazil, Russia, China and even neighboring Turkey, still have a good "sports perception" of the diplomatic power of athletes, referees, coaches. In general, they do not have the position of sports in Iran, and despite the instrumental and indirect use of sports by other countries to convey their message to the international community, this issue has been neglected in our country's diplomatic apparatus. On the one hand, the lack of communication between the two departments of international relations and sports, and the "privacy" view of sports among decision-makers in the field of diplomacy has led to the loss of low-cost and useful diplomatic opportunities in sports.

Lack of macro-strategy, lack of proper executive guarantees, and synergistic (rather than sparking) diplomatic efforts in the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs have made sport, like other aspects of public diplomacy, unable to present itself as a political-economic lever to achieve the lofty goals of the system.

In the post-sanction's environment of the US government, Iranian sports can be used as leverage to facilitate and strengthen relations with other countries, including friendly countries such as China, in addition to strengthening sports interactions in the international arena, open Iran as a country and introduce to the world with high potential for the development of sustainable dialogue. Finally, it seems that if the Islamic Republic of Iran follows the example of training programs and competitions for Chinese men and women, it can lead to a leap in the field of championship sports of the Islamic Republic of Iran. On the other hand, Iranians can also compete in team sports such as football, volleyball, liver and even basketball due to their successful experiences in the World Cup, Asian Games, Volleyball Nations League, etc. The joint camp and the sharing of knowledge and information pave the way for greater convergence between Tehran and Beijing. Finally, the following items are suggested to the country's political and sports decision-makers:

- Redefining the role of sport in the development of political relations between Iran and China, such as what the Chinese did in ping pong diplomacy with the United States in 1971 or what the Iranians used in 1998 in the form of wrestling diplomacy with the United States; In fact, sport in the strategic document of Iran and

China can be a starting point to accelerate and facilitate political-trade relations between the two countries.

- Given the prominent role of sport in the development of public and cultural diplomacy of countries, using the charms of sporting events, especially in the disciplines of Chinese and Iranian style (Table 3) can develop friendship and respect reciprocity between people of the two countries.
- Sports ambassadors of countries as national symbols play an important role in strengthening national pride and vitality. The use of medal-winning Olympics (Table 3) such as Li Ning, Womin Jia, Hadi Saei and Hossein Rezazadeh can play an important role in the development of diplomatic interactions between two countries. In addition, the sports ambassadors' meeting with two countries' political officials, led by the presidency (such as the meeting of US basketball player Rapkin with North Korean President Kim) could help strengthen the 25-year cooperation document.
- Iranians have been left out in disciplines such as diving, gymnastics, weightlifting, table tennis, archery, badminton, swimming, athletics and judo, and despite distributing their impressive medals at major sporting events such as the Olympics, they have not even been able to do so. Have a representative in the Olympics; therefore, through the cooperation document, the experiences of the Chinese can be used in the form of employing coaches, athletes and sharing their experiences.
- Another important point is the presence of Chinese women athletes, which according to the approach of the

government of the Islamic Republic to empower women in the field of sports. According to this document, cooperation opens many issues in women's sports, among the 9 athletes who have won at least 4 gold medals at the Chinese Olympics (Table 3), 6 are female athletes and their dazzling brilliance in diving, table tennis and gymnastics. Meanwhile, disciplines such as table tennis or gymnastics are considered as pre-medal disciplines in the Olympic and Asian Games, and Iranian female athletes can take advantage of Chinese sports human resources in these disciplines while setting up joint camps.

- Finally, despite the presence of Iran for nearly 70 years in the Winter Olympics and the failure of Iranian athletes to win even one medal in this competition, use the ability of the Chinese (Figure 1) in these competitions, especially short-distance skiing. It can be another sporting opportunity of the upcoming cooperation document; In addition to importing winter sports equipment, setting up joint camps, especially in Beijing, the host of the 2022 Winter Olympics, can help achieve the goals of winter sports in Iran, especially the Ski Federation.

### Ethical considerations

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

### Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable

request.

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