



FOOTBALL FEVER – SHANGHAI STYLE

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[Edited versions of this article were published in;

- *THE WEEKLY TELEGRAPH, February 13, 2002*
- *Shanghai Courier, April 1996]*

Was it Confucius or Chairman Mao who said that the game of football [soccer to some] is more important than life or death?

Neither actually, so it all the more surprising to report that China, particularly Shanghai, has been developing all the signs of football fever in recent years. The qualification of the China national team for next years world cup is yet another sign of how China can develop so quickly to world class standards.

In the period 1995 to 1997 I lived in Shanghai and was one of the few foreigners, perhaps the only one, with a season ticket for the local team.

Hongkou Stadium in the NE of the city was the place to go for a surprising display of all the elements that make football the world's most popular sport. This of course involves a volatile mix of sporting skill, emotion, energy, rivalry, aggression and humour. Combine this with some examples of cross-cultural transference, such as throwing bottles of water at the police and insulting the referee, and you have all the ingredients of an excellent game of football.

However, this is China you may say and such public emotion and unconstrained behaviour are surely not characteristic. So I thought until I made my first visit to see the local team, Shanghai Shenhua, play Tianjin in the early rounds of the China Cup. In torrential rain the crowd chanted songs, jeered the opposition, heckled the referee and protected by the anonymity of a crowd taunted the police and threw water bottles at them. On the pitch Tianjin had 3 players and their manager sent off – the final result, a 4-1 victory for Shanghai, seemed barely to matter after all that excitement.

At the Tianjin game we also got a fight in the crowd between two Shanghai supporters which the police eventually managed to break up...the cause remains the subject of speculation. On the assumption that it was not alcohol related, it was not between rival supporters and it was not religious bigotry then perhaps there is a culturally unique form of football related violence in China. My guess is that the constant ringing of a mobile telephone, a sport in which China leads the world, triggered it!

After the Tianjin game I became a committed fan of Shanghai and a regular at the Hongkou stadium. As the season developed I was a proud participant in a 30,000 strong Mexican wave cheering our team on to be league champions for the first time since 1963. The Mexican waves always had to leapfrog the VIP seating of course and this was a source of great amusement to the crowd. The VIP's pretended not to notice anything was happening. More difficult for the authorities to deal with was the Shanghai fan who ran to the centre circle to punch the Beijing goalscorer of a last minute equaliser in the big derby game of the season. [In England it's the players who occasionally thump the supporters]. This incident was not reported in the local newspaper and I wonder where the offender is now.

The expected climax to the season did not turn out as planned. A train journey to Nanjing with 10,000 fellow Shanghai supporters for the final of the China Cup resulted in an unexpected defeat for Shanghai, 0-2 to Shandong FC. The police and army were out in force for that game, well drilled but clearly nervous. They had water cannon ready for action but apart from the usual water bottle missiles landing and splashing around their feet there were no particular incidents.

After the game, with no return train ticket to Shanghai and the bleak prospect of a night at Nanjing railway station I began to doubt for the first time the wisdom of being a Shanghai supporter.

However, fortune, or to be precise 'The Great Helmsman', smiled upon us. My Shanghainese friends negotiated seats on a bus through an acquaintance they met coming out of the stadium. This demonstrates the positive value of 'contacts' in China where personal relationships can solve every problem. 'The Great Helmsman' [ie. Chairman Mao] smiled benignly upon us from his photograph, attached proudly to the rear view mirror, all the way back to Shanghai.

En route we decided to buy season tickets for the following season. The advantage of season tickets was not having to buy a ticket from a tout for each game at upto five times face value. Five times for me at least because I was a rich foreigner. Locals paid less. The touts in Shanghai were already upto world class standard even if the football still had some way to go

One final celebration of that season – my friend obtained, through contacts of course, the actual shirt worn by the star striker of the Shanghai team and presented it to me when I left China to live in Singapore.[He had to pay US\$10 to persuade him to part with it]. It may not be as valuable or famous as a Beckham shirt but it means more to me and the extra \$10 for the player probably meant something in those days!

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