

## Original Research

# Plus-sport: The impact of a cross-cultural soccer coaching exchange

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## Abstract

Developing and Improving Synergies in Chinese and United States Soccer (DISCUSS), was a two-way coaching exchange program that took place in 2010-2011. The goal of the program was to increase cultural understanding between the representatives of each country, in addition to exchanging soccer coaching information. The purpose of this study was to comprehensively evaluate the DISCUSS program. Specifically, the investigation centered on the participant's cultural awareness and understanding of the U.S. through sport for development and peace (SDP) programming. The following themes emerged from the data with respect to the cultural awareness and understanding of the coaching exchange participants: (1) a changed impression of Americans and American society, (2) a changed view of American's interest in soccer, and finally, (3) a perspective that sport and coaching were reflective of culture. Overall, the findings provide further support for SDP and sport diplomacy as worthwhile endeavors in promoting cultural understanding.

## Introduction

Cultural awareness is “a process of becoming appreciative of and sensitive to the values, beliefs, lifestyles, practices and problem-solving of cultures.” (1, p371) For many, it is a lifelong process in which every experience moves us closer to or further away from being culturally aware. In a world where interacting with people from other cultures and diverse backgrounds is ever increasing, those who are most culturally aware seem to have the greatest likelihood of success. (2-4) As individuals and organizations have come to this realization, many are seeking focused and directed opportunities to gain exposure to other cultures in an effort

to become more culturally aware. As a result, study abroad experiences and international exchanges are becoming more common and widely available.

However, not all international experiences result in increased cultural awareness. Whether because of a language barrier, culture shock, or other issues acclimating to a new culture, certain platforms seem to be more successful than others at bridging the cultural divide. Sport seems to be one of the ‘universal languages’ that allows people of different cultures to come together and learn about one another. Major League Baseball Hall-of-Famer Cal Ripken Jr., one of the U.S. Department of State's sports ambassadors, stated, “sport in general has the ability to communicate to all people similar to what music does...it kind of goes across all lines and can resonate with people to have fun and open up dialogues.” (5, p14)

In 2006, the U.S. Department of State commenced its Sport Envoy Program, which has since seen much success. Through its Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' (ECA) Sports United program, grant funding is provided annually to projects that seek to promote cultural understanding between the United States and other selected countries through sport. (6) One such project, Developing and Improving Synergies in Chinese and United States Soccer (DISCUSS), was a two-way coaching exchange program. In the summer of 2010, 12 Chinese soccer coaches and administrators came to Richmond, Virginia, for a two-week intensive training program that focused on coaching education and management of sport. In the summer of 2011, six coaches and administrators from the United States went to Shanghai, China, to institute a similar program to 50 coaches. The goal of the program was to increase cultural understanding between the representatives of each country,

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[www.jsfd.org](http://www.jsfd.org)

in addition to exchanging soccer coaching information.

The current study focuses on assessing the outcomes of the DISCUSS program, with specific focus on the Chinese participants. Before delving into the specifics of this study, it is important to understand what previous researchers have found in regard to the outcomes of international exchanges. The DISCUSS program was a unique blend of several components connecting it to three distinct areas of research. International exchanges were examined in regard to study abroad opportunities within higher education, government directed sport diplomacy, and sport for development (SFD) initiatives.

## Review of literature

### *Study abroad*

Within education spheres, many have embraced the idea of improving cultural understanding and competence by utilizing study abroad opportunities. "Educational institutions are strongly encouraged to provide opportunities for students to participate in exchange programs to broaden their perspective." (7, p877) In the 2009-10 academic year, over 270,000 U.S. students studied abroad, with over half of those taking part in short-term (eight weeks or less) programs. (8) Faculty and students alike recognize the importance of study abroad experiences in increasing cultural competency and related capacities. (9-10)

Features of study abroad in higher education include spending time in another culture in order to develop or improve foreign language skills, gaining academic credentials, increasing knowledge of another country, and improving global understanding. (11) Studies have found that students who study abroad have greater intercultural communication skills, (12) stronger intercultural proficiency, and are more open to cultural diversity than those who complete their full degree on-campus. (13)

For the most part, the results of research on study abroad opportunities are positive. However, each field of study is different, as is the study abroad experience associated with each. The research conducted in the area of sport-related study abroad opportunities is essentially non-existent, even though there are many programs offering these experiences. Regardless, the current study is similar to research on other study abroad programs in that it assesses a short-term, in-country residency program that sought to increase knowledge in a particular subject while learning about another culture. At the same time, the results of the DISCUSS program can be aligned with research conducted

in the fields of sport diplomacy and SFD as outlined in the following sections.

### *Sport diplomacy*

The idea behind sporting diplomacy in the U.S began in April 1971 when the American Table Tennis team was invited to China to play a series of matches. 'Ping Pong Diplomacy,' as it became known, was the first time that a group of American's had been invited to China since the Communist takeover in 1949. The Chinese Premier at the time, Chou En-lai, said, "never before in history has sport been used so effectively as a tool of international diplomacy." (14, p4) The trip opened the doors for President Nixon to travel to China the next year, which was the first time a U.S. President had visited the former Communist country. (5)

In 2006, under President George W. Bush, the U. S. Department of State extended the idea of sport diplomacy by creating the U.S.'s first public diplomacy envoy program and naming figure skater Michelle Kwan and baseball legend Cal Ripken Jr. as its representatives. (5) This program is now carried out by the ECA within the U.S. Department of State. The ECA's stated mission is to "increase mutual understanding of the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange," (6) by using sport as a major vehicle.

One of the reasons why sport works in these situations is because it is considered 'neutral' ground. While academia, politics, art and science are used as other exchange platforms, sport is considered a lower-risk testing ground for improving cultural relations, and generally receives more media coverage, giving it a broader audience (15). While historically sport diplomacy has been seen as an avenue for political advancement, this has been changing as countries become more globalised and accepting of differences, and sport diplomacy efforts have been able to transition into more universal goals and outcomes. "If the playing field can provide a stage for political grievance and conflict, certainly it can also facilitate cooperation and understanding. Sports are now free from the tensions and limitations of the Cold War, allowing them to play a new, positive role in international politics" (15, p65).

### *Sport for development*

Based on this philosophy, SFD has developed into its own field and continues to gain momentum by using sport as a

tool to achieve personal and social development and peace objectives (16-17). SFD efforts include, but are not limited to: public health issues, socialization of youth, social inclusion of the disadvantaged, economic development, and fostering intercultural exchange (18).

The field of SFD has blossomed as organizations throughout the world have found increasing value in sport, partly as a result of “the recognition that the orthodox policies of ‘development’ have failed to deliver their objectives” (19, p1). There is a belief among some academics and practitioners that sport can be a successful change agent that supports traditional development efforts. However, debate exists as to the effectiveness of individual programs because there is still limited research and evidence in this area (17, 20-21).

Program evaluation from several SFD initiatives has seen some modest positive results. Projects such as the Street Socceros (Australia), Football for Peace (UK), and the Asian German Sports Exchange Program (Sri Lanka) have had a positive impact on their participants. However, the researchers of these programs caution against the idea that sport is the ‘magic bullet’. In assessing the Street Socceros program, Sherry (22) notes, “Although sport participation alone cannot account for these beneficial outcomes, this study demonstrates the role that sport programs can play in the re-engagement of marginalized people within the broader community.” (p59) Sudgen, (23) who worked closely with the Football for Peace program, cautions that in order for these programs to see success, they must be “locally grounded, thought out, and professionally managed.” Even then they make only “a modest contribution to wider efforts to promote conflict resolution and peaceful co-existence.” (p221) Schulenkorf, (24) who worked with the Asian German Sports Exchange Program, calls sport a ‘starting point’ that must be integrated into larger social agendas in order to see success. (p273)

Clearly, these authors see the value in sport as a social change agent, but stress the need for the programming to be well directed and focused in order for the change to be felt. There is also a need for continued program evaluation in the field of SFD to determine what is most effective in this type of programming.

### **Purpose for the study**

Guided by Intergroup Contact Theory, (25) the purpose of this study was to objectively explore the impact of the DISCUSS program on the 12 Chinese coaches and administrators that participated in Phase 1 of the program. Specifically, the study investigated how the Chinese

participants’ experiences in the U.S. and interactions with Americans impacted their impression of the U.S. and of Americans. Furthermore, the study examined the influence of soccer and programming related to coaching soccer as a catalyst for cultural awareness and understanding. An ancillary goal of the study was to bridge the gap between the areas of study abroad, sport diplomacy and SFD, and contribute to the body of knowledge associated with each. In addition, this investigation aimed to provide objective evidence and justification for the continuation of future SFD efforts as prescribed by researchers Brunelli and Parisi (17) and Levermore and Beacom. (19) The following research questions were developed to help guide the analysis:

1. How did the Chinese participants’ impressions of the U.S./Americans change as a result of the short term exchange program?
2. In what ways did the role of soccer and programming related to soccer coaching influence the cultural awareness and understanding of participants?

### **Theoretical framework**

To ensure that this study had a sound theoretical base, the authors utilized Intergroup Contact Theory as a starting point. Originally proposed in Allport’s *Nature of Prejudice*, (25) at its simplest, it is the idea that interaction between people of different groups should increase the relationships and understanding between them. Allport (25) theorized that in order for optimal results to stem from the intergroup contact, four conditions must exist: equal status within the situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities. Researchers across numerous fields of study have utilized Allport’s theory when bringing together people of different groups, addressing differences in race, culture, religion, age, sexual orientation, and health, among others. Though his theory continues to be extensively cited today, many have revisited the list of conditions noting that there are many others that could apply, given individual situations. Most notably, Pettigrew has reconsidered the theory and its applicability through the changing decades. (26-28) After extensive research on Intergroup Contact Theory and its applicability, Pettigrew concluded that a fifth condition should be added for optimal results, “the contact situation must provide the participants with the opportunity to become friends.” (28, p76) The analysis of the DISCUSS program has utilized Intergroup Contact Theory, including Pettigrew’s fifth ‘friendship’ element.

## Methods

### *Sample, methodological approach, and data*

The DISCUSS program had many participants, including coaches, administrators, educators, youth players, volunteers and home stay families. This study, however, focused solely on the Chinese participants (n=12) that travelled to the U.S. in July 2010, who also participated in the second phase of the program, which took place in Shanghai, China in July 2011. The group consisted of two full-time youth soccer administrators, eight youth soccer coaches, and two who were classified as both a coach and administrator. Six of the participants were female and six were male. The average age was 44 and ranged from 33 to 58. Each participant was married, and only two had a good command of the English language (self-reported). Coaching experience among the participants ranged from three to over 30 years, and playing experience ranged from elite professional (including national teams) to no competitive playing experience. See Table 1 for a complete listing of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to prevent participant identification.

**Table 1 – Phase 1 Coaches and Administrators**

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Position
Chung	M	55	Administrator
Mingmei	F	37	Administrator/Coach
Wen	M	44	Administrator/Coach
Quon	M	33	Administrator
Yu	M	45	Coach
Jun	F	41	Coach
Shen	M	58	Coach
Tao	F	43	Coach
Lien	F	41	Coach
Li	M	53	Coach
Hua	F	44	Coach
Heng	F	39	Coach

Responding to a growing concern in SFD evaluation that participants are often excluded from the analysis, the researchers employed a type of participatory methodology in analyzing the data. A participatory methodology is believed to provide better depth and holistic understanding. (29) The primary source of data collection came from in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, and Davidson (30) stated, “Interviews aim to elicit participants’ views of their lives as portrayed in their stories, and so to gain access to their experiences, feelings and social worlds.” (p727) An interview protocol was used

to provide structure to the interviews. Each interview loosely followed a six to ten question interview guide and ranged from 15 to 30 minutes in duration.

To properly measure the subjective reality of the participants in a way that is meaningful for the participants themselves, the theory of interpretivism was used as a guide in developing interview questions, leading discussions, and observing interactions. (31-32) Each participant has a unique experience with distinct attitudes, emotions, and preconceived notions. It was the researchers’ goal to extract the distinctiveness of each individual’s reality and relate it to the existing theoretical framework and additional concepts present in the literature. Similar approaches have centered on cultural perceptions of information and communication technology, (33) decision making of tourists (34) and student perceptions of alienation. (35) Ultimately, utilizing interpretivism to examine the cultural perceptions of the coaching participants will provide the most objective method to understanding subjective qualities of an individual. (36)

The interview questions were asked in English and translated simultaneously by an interpreter into Chinese. The participants’ responses were then translated back into English. Each participant was interviewed once and the same interpreter was present for each interview. Two of the participants did not use an interpreter, as they were proficient in English. The interviews took place on the second to last day of Phase 1’s two-week exchange. In addition to interviews, data came from discussions and direct observation of the Phase 1 participants. Furthermore, two paper surveys were conducted: one administered six weeks before programming began; and the other, six months after programming concluded. The same company translated both surveys before and after administration.

The survey instruments included a combination of scaled and open-ended questions. The pre-program survey included eight items, three of which were semantic differential scaled questions. The post-program survey contained 11 items, including the same-scaled questions and additional questions about programming and outcomes. Both surveys are available in the Appendix. The surveys served several purposes in addition to evaluation. The data that was gathered also assisted in program planning, provided a needs-assessment, drove curriculum, and assured proper staffing. As with any program experience, direct observations and informal discussions between participants and administrators were important aspects of the research process. These data were collected from all administrators



involved in the study by the primary investigator via formal narratives at the end of the program and through informal group interviews.

#### *Data analysis and trustworthiness*

The semi-structured interview recordings were first transcribed verbatim. It is important to note that the presence of an interpreter in the interview session eliminated the need for interview translation post-interview. In addition, it allowed the interviewers to ask for clarification when the interpretation was not clear. Three independent researchers coded and analyzed the transcripts. As prescribed by Glesne, (37) the data coding procedure utilized analytic codes, categorization, and theme searching. First, the transcribed responses were systematically read and grouped. Recurring words, phrases, and ways of thinking within each group were then identified and labeled as coding categories. Related codes were then synthesized into broader codes. For organizational purposes, hand-written and computer-assisted methods (Microsoft Word) were employed during coding. Lastly, themes were constructed from the relationships amongst codes that were analyzed.

By adopting participatory methodology, the researchers utilized method and researcher triangulation by questioning the same group of subjects in multiple ways, utilizing various methods of data collection, and enlisting a multi-member research team in the process. (38, 30) Additionally, credibility and dependability was addressed through member checking and audio-recording the interviews. Extensive notes were also kept describing the data collection process, categorization, and how decisions were made. To enhance the transferability of the study, rich and thick descriptions were provided so that “the readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation.” (39, p211)

The participatory methodology helped to address another concern of this examination: the potential for cultural bias among the study’s participants in responding to interview questions. Often termed as administration bias by qualitative methodologists, (40) this threat to trustworthiness includes the violation of proper communication modes and the disregard for cultural norms. With regard to the current sample of participants, the contemporary culture of interpersonal Chinese communication is well known for its politeness regardless of true feelings. (41) In addition, the sample was provided a rare opportunity for professional development and travel,

which could have made the participants reticent to be critical. Thus, receiving objective feedback from the participants that included cultural offenses and/or programmatic miscues was a known challenge for the researchers. The participatory methodology was one step to combat this issue. The research team also attempted a concerted effort to illicit objective feedback throughout the research process including interviews and observations.

#### **Researcher’s stance**

Of the three-member research team, two were administrators of the cross-cultural coaching program, and were therefore responsible for programming, logistics, and curriculum. According to Merriam, (39) it is imperative that the researcher attempt to remove, or at least become aware of, prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions regarding the experience under investigation. Therefore, throughout this study the research team attempted to separately document personal experiences and feelings from the experiences being studied. For instance, neutrality during the interview process and data analysis was vital, yet the administrators/researchers obviously wanted the program to be impactful and successful. Thus, a distinct effort to remain objective was made during reporting and dissemination. Despite this goal, this bias could be a limitation of our findings and a weakness of how SFD programs are evaluated in general.

#### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a short-term coaching exchange between the U.S. and China (DISCUSS). Specifically, the investigation centered on the participants’ cultural awareness and understanding of the U.S. through SFD programming. The following themes emerged from the data with respect to the cultural awareness and understanding of the coaching exchange participants: (1) a changed impression of Americans and American society, (2) a changed view of Americans’ interest in soccer, and finally, (3) a perspective that sport and coaching were reflective of culture.

##### *Changed impression of Americans and American society*

The first theme explored in this study centered on how the participants’ experiences with the cross-cultural exchange changed their impression of Americans and American society. According to many of the participants, previous impressions of the U.S. were formed negatively through the media. For instance, Wen acknowledged, “my previous impression of the U.S. all derived from the movie images.

That's [a] very standard image...after I've been here and after my personal contact I realized that American society is a very stable society, not fighting going on and all the violence going on." This sentiment was echoed by a number of participants. Li stated:

*This is my first visit to the U.S. and prior, I have visited other countries, different places, and my impression, my knowledge of the U.S., was all from the media—newspapers, TV, movies. And now I personally come to this country and I know it is quite different from my impression before through the media.*

When probed by the interviewer for an explanation, Li answered: *"This is a very peaceful, stable society, and people have lots of freedom...I find that Americans are very lawful people, they follow the law, you know, do things in an orderly way"*. One participant, Shen, suggested that the U.S.'s media representation was probably a poor barometer to judge all Americans. He said,

*"The problem is we watch too much movies and news and celebrity and always they are married seven times but it's not so much...[Americans] are married. They are very responsible to their family and to their children."*

For most of the participants, the two-week program was their first time in the U.S. and they were quick to complement the culture, as a whole. The following are examples of some participants' comments:

- *"My first trip to this beautiful country; I am very impressed: civil construction of a combination of tradition and futurism; conscientiousness to work and friendliness and warmth to guests."*
- *"A great country with great contribution to human progress; great, civilized, friendly, kind and wise people; education and investment in large amounts to teenagers and attention to education and future."*
- *"I know America better after this trip. It is an open, advanced, and democratic country. They, including the young, are confident about everything."*
- *"Before I came here my impression of Americans was very—Americans were very arrogant. But I come over here and I find all the American people they are very friendly. They are eager to help other people, they are very helpful. And they're warm; they are very committed focused, contentious."*

One of the sub-themes that emerged from the overwhelming positive comments was the perception of the U.S. as a free society. Several statements were made, formally and informally, about the limitless opportunities provided to Americans, especially the youth. In addition, the participants acknowledged the importance of free speech.

Another sub-theme included the notion that U.S. society was more law abiding than initially perceived. Once again, this may stem from the media-driven pre-trip impression of the U.S., but participants were impressed with the society's orderly infrastructure and the overall respect offered to each other. In regard to the participants' impression of the U.S. and Americans, the pre-post survey result differences changed from a mean of 7.842 (SD=1.231) on a 10 point semantic differential (1—Extremely Negative; 10—Extremely Positive) to 9.412 (SD=.795).

Another sub-theme that emerged from the data was the participants' changed perspective of the American lifestyle, in particular the lifestyle of the American family. In an effort to provide a comprehensive intercultural experience and to keep expenses down, the Phase 1 participants stayed with host families while in Richmond. The host families were solicited through a youth soccer program located in the Western suburbs of the Mid-Atlantic city. Of the five families who volunteered, each had a child or grandchild that played for the soccer club. Each had at least two Chinese coaches staying with them, with two families hosting three coaches each.

Despite pre-trip anxiousness and apprehensiveness, the participants were complimentary about their experience with their host families. It is the researchers' contention that the greatest transformation of cultural understanding took place in the host families' home. For instance, Wen stated:

*When we got to Washington D.C. and Richmond and we found out we were going to stay with host family, we were very concerned because as you know the Chinese...never want to break or inconvenience anyone ever, so we were quite worried, but the arrangement with the host families were so hospitable...all of our worries and concerns all disappeared.*

Quon added, *"I think it helps us to know more about the American society and also help the host family to know more about the Chinese society."* He went on to mention why staying with a host family was preferred to staying in a hotel: *"If I stay in a hotel, I cannot learn so much because*

*when you stay in a hotel, it's just like a tourist group, like go outside and after dinner, go back home, watch TV and chat with colleagues."*

Similarly, Chung acknowledged:

*From this format of staying with host family, we get an overall comprehensive understanding of American society family people. Because we interact with the host family during breakfast time, dinner time, after dinner, we talk with them. We learn about how Americans live. And this something we never could have uptake if we stayed at hotel. Yu added, "When you asked me to stay at [the host family's] house, there was a strong impact on me. Why I say this? We are able to spend every moment in their living environment with them. That's had a strong impact."*

The research team reinforced this finding through direct observation. Initially, body language and informal comments made indicated the level of apprehensiveness about staying with host families in a culture with which they were unfamiliar. As the days progressed, there was much more excitement about going home at night to see their host families and find out what they had planned for the evening's activities.

Two of the Chinese coaches cooked a traditional dinner for their host family one evening, and by the final closing ceremony, the Chinese participants were spending the majority of their time with their host families, rather than with each other. There was a complete shift from the beginning of the program to the end, and it was very clear to see that they were much more comfortable in the American society that they had come to know through their host families than what they anticipated going into the experience.

Due to language differences of most of the participants, communication issues occurred during the stay. However, the participants acknowledged that as the relationship grew, communication became easier and more frequent. In a few cases, the host families learned or practiced the Chinese language in advance to help communication.

In addition, several participants noted the host families' concerted effort and enthusiasm in trying to communicate.

The last sub-theme that emerged involved the level of parental support provided by American parents. Tao, for instance, was really impressed by the strong relationship between American parents and children. She stated, *"the*

*way they educate, interact with their children...they are very open, and motivate them, and they pay attention to the children's interest."* Mingmei, one of the participants who had been to the U.S. previously, acknowledged a similar sub-theme and a change in perspective:

*I've been coming here since 1991, but I've only had a couple of previous opportunities to stay with host families so not too often. So to understand American family life is quite different than what I understand previously. Especially the parents they pay attention to their children's education and their life. I thought before that parents just want to make sure their children are happy leading a happy free life. But, now I know they really pay attention to their academic their school. They have a plan and they are conscientious about how their children develop and they want to help them reach that goal...Now I know [American parents] really pay attention to their academics and their children's overall development...physically, spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, and socially...in all.*

#### *Changed view of American's interest in soccer*

Another theme that emerged among the participants was a changed view of Americans' interests in soccer, which was communicated in various ways. It became clear that the Chinese participants' view of American soccer was based upon what they see of U.S. soccer on the world stage, namely, the men's and women's national teams. Noting that the U.S. men's national team is not highly competitive with other countries around the world, led most of the delegates to believe that there would not be a high level of participation or enthusiasm for soccer in the United States. One participant, Quon, provided perspective on why he (and others) were surprised by the level of enthusiasm for soccer in the United States:

*I didn't expect to see how kids here love soccer because American soccer is not like European [soccer where] they are at the top of the world, especially men's soccer. But I see the children here show great enthusiasm in soccer when they practice. That amazed me. That really is shocking. I didn't expect that.*

The recognition that Americans are quite passionate about soccer was seen among different groups. The Chinese delegates specifically commented on the level of involvement and support among the kids, coaches, and parents. One coach, Jun, made a comparison of the U.S. children to children in China, stating:

*I was deeply touched by how committed the young kids under such hot sun, the heat, they gave their all, they run fast, they participated in that. I was so touched by seeing that, because in China, we couldn't get our children to do that, under that condition. I will definitely share this, what I learned, that I will tell my students that you will have to learn from American kids, this aspect.*

Another coach, Yu, noted, *"I was struck deeply at how popular the sport was among the young people."* The participants continued to use words such as 'shocking,' 'surprised' and 'impressed' to express their feelings on how dedicated and excited people in the United States are about soccer.

The researchers also saw this theme emerge through direct observation. The Chinese participants were eager for opportunities to attend training sessions and see the hard work, enthusiasm, and dedication exhibited by the kids. Two different times some of the coaches asked if they could attend extra training sessions, one of which was a 'free play' night where the soccer fields are open to the kids, but no coaching takes place and no formal practices are held. The kids are free to come out and play at their own disposal. Four of the Chinese participants attended 'free play' and experienced great joy at seeing these kids come out to a voluntary evening of soccer in which there was no formal instruction. The coaches commented on how surprised they were by this and how unlikely it would be to get Chinese kids to attend a similar event. In regards to soccer coaches in the United States, it seemed that the level of dedication and the serious attitude toward coaching created the biggest impression among the Chinese delegation. Comments such as *"what shocks me the most in this training course is the professional dedication of Americans, especially the coach,"* and *"the U.S. is not powerful in football, but the coaches are much more dedicated in football training than the Chinese coaches I have seen,"* indicate not only the change in perception, but also the perspective from which the Chinese coaches come. In addition to the dedication of coaches, there was also recognition for the serious attitude in how each coach approached the training sessions and games.

As part of the change in the overall view of Americans' interest in soccer, the group also mentioned the involvement and dedication of soccer parents. It became clear to participants that in contrast to parents in China who want their children to focus exclusively on their education, parents in the U.S support their children in all of their interests. Mingmei communicated this by saying: *"If American students want to play football, their parents*

*will accompany them. On the contrary, Chinese parents put study as a priority."* Others echoed this feeling, noting the strong levels of 'enthusiasm' and 'support' that U.S parents show their children in relation to soccer. To summarize many similar views, Shen said, *"I'm impressed the players at the young age are so totally focused on the field and how much support and enthusiasm from the parents they gave to the players."*

### *Sport and coaching reflective of culture*

As the overarching goal of the exchange was to gain increased cultural understanding, researchers were pleased to see that a major thematic finding was how sport and coaching is reflective of culture. Though sport is often used as a 'carrot' to bring people together and set the stage for deeper levels of learning to occur, in this situation, the learning was actually accomplished through the sport itself. As the U.S. and China are culturally and historically different in many ways, it was clear to see some of these differences played out on the soccer field. Therefore, sport and coaching became reflective of culture, and will be addressed in regard to three sub-themes: 1) the pressure of academics; 2) flexibility and guided discovery; and 3) communication differences.

### *Pressure of academics*

Although both China and the U.S. claim to put a very strong emphasis on their education system, the results of this research clearly indicate that in China, nothing else can come before education in the life of a child. In the U.S., while education is extremely important, parents also see a need for children to have other interests and be involved in activities outside of school. Yu communicated this difference in the following way:

*The government in the U.S., you create a lot of opportunities for the youth, young people to have the time, to have the opportunity to participate in these sports, these activities, is not like in China. The young students are under strong pressure to do well in the academic field. Even when the children in China have the free time, the parents would not usually encourage the children to participate in the organized extracurricular outdoor activities. Instead, they will arrange all kinds of academia and cultural related activities. The children are under great pressure.*

Many of the coaches expressed their concern about putting so much academic pressure on the children in China, stating that they see value in what they observed in America, where



parents are supportive of their children's other interests as well. Shen expressed this best:

*I know my players really envy the American players...the reason is they express such a natural, lively, happy [life]; but I told my players that the importance is not only focus on academic in China...parents in school only emphasize academic achievement, but I told them that it's important to have both. But now I came to the U.S. and I witnessed that is true.*

Though the coaches had obviously put much thought into this issue of academic pressure, it seems as though their experience in the United States and throughout the exchange program reinforced their feelings of the need to find better balance in the lives of their youth.

They also seemed to gain a better understanding of how the U.S. utilizes sport as an educational tool, which is used to develop lifelong characteristics and traits that will transcend soccer, in addition to merely teaching the sport. Participants made comments such as, *"The coaches should try not to blindly require students to follow them, but to guide students with patience and let them find and solve the problems in learning. This will benefit them for life,"* (Shen) and:

*Before I came here, as in China, our goal was single minded - we just focus on the competition and to win the game. But now from the courses, the field I learned, I realized there are a lot more important aspects in the sports. We can learn from the sport (Li).*

**Flexibility and guided discovery:** One topic that was consistently mentioned by Chinese participants was the concept of 'guided discovery.' Guided discovery is a process of teaching and coaching by asking meaningful questions. Empowering coaches want their athletes to be capable of solving the problems that the game/competition presents. Therefore, the athletes must have the opportunity to practice problem solving (decision making). This must be accomplished in the training and game environment. Toward this end, coaches must be skilled in the art of asking meaningful questions. (42) U.S. soccer, using Kidman as a key resource, (42) has integrated guided discovery into all coaching licensing courses.

This concept was foreign to the Chinese coaches, but they seemed very interested in learning more. When asked what was most valuable to them from a training perspective, Lien stated, *"We were talking about the technical skills, the exploratory, discovery."* Tao communicated it in this

way, *"One thing is how you teach how you train the children how to think with their own brain."* This idea is in contrast to how Chinese children are taught on the soccer field. During the Chinese residency portion of the program, researchers observed the coaches working with their players, and it was a much more rigid training situation where the coaches told the players where to go on the field and where they should have been when a play went wrong, rather than helping the child figure out how he or she could have done something different.

Along with guided discovery, the Chinese delegates viewed the U.S. style of training as more flexible in general. *"The fundamental training program is very similar with what we do in China; however, the methods are quite different. You are much more flexible over here,"* noted Heng. Yu worded it in another way, *"This is probably different in America because in America the coaches like to give the young players more space for them to be more creative, imaginative, decision making...But that's a good point too. It's different."* This observed flexibility indicates a difference not only on the soccer field, but culturally as well. Americans have much more freedom and are encouraged to question decisions and contribute to solutions, rather than just accepting a response without an explanation. In contrast, in China, society is much more rigid, government regulated, and based on a history of respect. They show this respect to their coaches by accepting instruction without question, rather than engaging in guided discovery-based techniques. Through soccer, one was able to see cultural practices being depicted on the field.

### *Communication differences*

Taking the idea of guided discovery and flexibility even further; the ways of communicating and type of relationships between the coaches and players was also reflective of American and Chinese culture. The Chinese participants observed that the U.S. coaches utilized a much more participatory style of communication with their players. They encouraged players to be involved and were very open to two-way communication.

Lein commented:

*You use different kinds of options, different methods to achieve to help the players to use their creativity. You don't just use verbal instruction; you actually use different methods to teach the players. I personally, in the past, just use verbal instructions to tell them. But now I learn there is a different way of teaching that.*

Mingmei communicated the same idea in the following way, *“I think what I learned here is the teaching methods, how you inspire the students. How we [Chinese coaches] teach is that they don’t use their own [mind]; we just tell and they accept.”*

This again reinforces a cultural difference in how we interact with our youth in the U.S. versus China; in the U.S. we have much more open lines of communication, allowing for two-way conversations. In China, conversations between adults and children are much more one-sided, with the child doing the majority of the listening.

Again, this cultural difference was depicted through the type of relationships that are generated between players and coaches. Heng stated:

*The relationship between coaches and players is in great harmony. You are coordinated very well. You are not like in China. In China it is very clear, “I’m coach; you are student.” Here it is like a friendship but also like you are the parents treating the youngsters. The interpersonal relationship over here...people can talk freely and do not have to worry about constraints or worry about something you cannot say. And the environment is so much better over here.*

When discussing these observations with the Chinese coaches, it was clear that the difference in communication between players and coaches in China was based on the idea of ‘respect.’ It is considered disrespectful for a child to question an adult, and as a result, there is less of a participatory system, which can be seen on the soccer field. The interesting thing to note is that although the Chinese coaches are entrenched in a different culture and background, they were very open to the idea of challenging their players more, implementing guided discovery, and converting to more open lines of communication. The researchers were not able to determine whether this openness to change shows a changing society in general, or whether the coaches who elected to participate in this exchange program are inherently more open to other ideas and ways of doing things.

## Discussion

A change in cultural awareness or understanding cannot occur on its own. It requires not only self-awareness about one’s own personal biases and prejudices, (1) but also exposure to opportunities for change. The DISCUSS program provided that opportunity, allowing coaches and

administrators from China and the U.S to interact with each other and immerse themselves in another culture through a short term coaching program. The environment created through the DISCUSS program met most of the criteria set forth in Allport’s intergroup contact theory, (26) in addition to the fifth element introduced by Pettigrew. (28)

As DISCUSS was created specifically for the purpose of increasing cultural understanding between the U.S and China, organizers were able to create an environment that would be optimal for creating relationships and increasing understanding. Members participating in the program shared common goals and intergroup cooperation, had strong support from authorities (local and national governing bodies), and were in situations where friendships could develop. Of all criteria set forth by Allport, (26) the only one that was not fully present at all times was equal status within the situation. While administrators tried to create a situation that allowed for equal status, there were times when the Chinese participants deferred to their American counterparts, possibly because the American group took the lead in organizing and carrying out the program. However, ultimately, intergroup contact theory helped guide the design of this program, allowing for an ideal environment from which both cultures could learn and change.

As with most SFD programs, the goal of DISCUSS was change. But change can come in many forms: changes in perspective, behavior, decision making, or in understanding. The DISCUSS program’s ultimate goal was to elicit change in cultural understanding and as the results of this study show, that goal was accomplished. A discussion of themes one to three (a changed impression of Americans and American society, a changed view of American’s interest in soccer, and a perspective that sport and coaching were reflective of culture) will demonstrate this program’s value in reaching its goals.

### *An American enculturation?*

Generally, cultural understanding is a time-intensive process that may require several cross-cultural experiences. Moreover, according to McMurray, as cited by Penman and Ellis, (43) being culturally sensitive does not mean simply “tolerating differences between groups of people,” but rather “being able to assess elements within the behavior patterns or social roles of a culture that make it special.” (p3) This does not occur instantaneously when subjected to a new culture. Thus, the short-term nature (13 days) of phase 1 was a concern for the program [www.jsfd.org](http://www.jsfd.org)

administrators. Would there be enough time for the participants to experience a significant intercultural experience?

To address this potential issue, we placed participants with host families and built in two days of free time (no programming) so that participants could interact with their host families over a weekend's activities. The outcome of the host family experience was overwhelmingly positive, and as detailed in theme one of the findings, it constitutes one of the most impactful aspects of the exchange. In searching for meaning within these findings, we returned to the study-abroad literature to find how our findings related. In 2005, Langley and Breese utilized Spradley's (44) enculturation model to examine the impact of out-of-class experiences of students studying in Ireland. Enculturation is the natural process of learning a culture, (44) and study-abroad programs, in particular, "often foster further learning about a culture and move on to encourage an understanding of that culture, the end product of effective enculturation." (45, p314) Overall, the researchers suggest the most impactful experiences occurred in individuals that lived and studied with their host culture, and encouraged study-abroad administrators to ensure culturally-immersed interactions. Additionally, interactive short-term abroad experiences were important factors in developing creative thinking in students (46) and fostering socialization. (47) As demonstrated in the current study, the American media is omnipresent in its ability to establish perceptions of our culture. The current study's results may suggest the cultural contrast experienced through an exchange program, regardless of length, may provide a more accurate enculturation of American society as opposed to what is provided through the media. Further research in this area is recommended.

### *Diplomats of soccer*

From the standpoint of the agency who funded the DISCUSS project (U.S. Department of State), this program was a sport diplomacy initiative. Though its reach extended beyond that and resulted in many learning outcomes, the results of the project provide significant justification for sport diplomacy as a tool. Most notably, seeing that sport and coaching were reflective of culture (theme three) demonstrates sport's power as a cross-cultural teaching tool, perhaps even more so than previously thought.

Sport diplomacy came into existence because of the perceived 'neutrality' of sport, with politicians viewing it as a testing ground for improving cultural relations, in

which sport was the vehicle that brought multiple countries to the table. (15) The results of this study indicate that sport might be more than just the 'carrot' to get different parties to the table. At its most simple, sport brings different people together, but as demonstrated by theme three, this project's results indicate much more than that. Simply by being present and observing or interacting with sport in another country, one can see and learn much about that society's culture. The relationships between coaches and players, the communication that occurs, and even the style of play depicted on the field can teach participants as much, if not more, about a country's society, than a more formal setting might. This research indicates that sport can serve as an even greater social tool in educating others on cultural understanding and awareness. It further reinforces the value of 'plus-sport' initiatives where development is the primary objective, and sport is used as a tool to support or achieve that. (48)

The results of this study gives weight to sport having a wider social role, and is good news for the SFD community. As so many SFD programs are externally funded, the realization that they can accomplish much more than the inherent value of the sport themselves is crucial justification for their existence. This is exemplified by the results of themes two and three in this study, which reflect the change and growth in cultural understanding between the U.S. and China.

One question that remains unanswered that the researchers suggest warrants further study is how willing and open participants are to change. The results of the current study indicate that a large amount of change occurred in the Chinese participants' cultural understanding of the U.S. Some of their comments indicate how willing they were to try different ways of teaching sport, educating children, and changing their ways of thinking. However, this begs the question as to whether those who choose to participate in an exchange program are inherently more open to new ways of thinking and changing, or whether the results are completely due to the program itself. Based on the design of this study, the researchers are unable to determine which was the case, but suggest that future assessments of similar SFD programs attempt to include ways of assessing this.

### *SFD evaluation implications*

As mentioned earlier the field of SFD is young and growing, and like anything else, will encounter some growing pains. One area in particular that is in need of further development is program evaluation, as it relates to advancing knowledge in the field. In other words, a great

deal of focus is placed on program implementation and funding source fulfillment as SFD programs are very often driven by external funding; as a result, theoretical exploration is often overlooked. According to Coatler, as summarized by Lyras and Welty Peachy, (18) “the lack of a theoretical framework undergirding sport interventions hampers effective monitoring and evaluation...we should strive to advance theory to understand the conditions, structures and processes which can promote social change through sport.” (p2)

In response to this suggestion, the current study built in theory-driven, empirical research from the beginning. In addition, several data sources and methods of observation were identified and analyzed in preparation for the DISCUSS program so as to provide objective outcomes that not only met the funding source’s goals, but aimed to generate new knowledge for the field of SFD.

For the most part, this process was successful as it was an on-going process from the moment the proposal was generated, and it created a wealth of data to analyze. However, limitations still existed. For instance, while objectivity on behalf of the investigators was a distinct focus of the research group, objectivity of the participants a challenge.

As mentioned in the methods section, the Chinese participants were overly positive, and it took a concerted effort to elicit constructive criticism – so much that it felt as if the researchers were asking leading questions in the interview process. It was surmised that this was possibly the function of a couple variables including a Chinese culture that does not insult anyone who provides a gift or service, or perhaps it was the impact of providing a cost-free international trip and high-level coaching education. Reciprocity research suggests individuals receiving gifted products and services are hesitant to criticize the providers. (49-50) Regardless, cultural awareness of the evaluation process was an area that was overlooked, and future SFD programs should keep this outcome in mind when developing objective measures.

## Conclusion

Organizing a two-way exchange program between countries with vastly different cultures is a large undertaking, and one that should only be entered into with clear goals in mind. The overarching goal of the DISCUSS program was to improve cultural understanding between people of China and the U.S, and while we knew that there were some immediate benefits to the program, it was not until this research was completed that we were able to say that

our main goal was achieved. Clearly, improvements in cultural understanding occurred among the Chinese participants. While certain aspects of the program such as utilizing sport and host family residency helped to accelerate the learning process, other factors like researcher bias and participants who were hesitant to give negative feedback, left room for improvement. However, these are the realities and bumps in the road that come with conducting research in any emerging or expanding field, such as SFD. Overall, the findings highlighted in this study provide further support for SFD and sport diplomacy as worthwhile endeavors in promoting cultural understanding.

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## Appendix I

### *Pre-Departure Questionnaire I*

1. How qualified do you feel you are at coaching youth soccer?  
(1 = not at all qualified, 10 = extremely qualified)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. How qualified do you feel you are at coaching girls soccer?  
(1 = not at all qualified, 10 = extremely qualified)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. What are your greatest strengths as a youth soccer coach?

4. What areas do you feel you need to improve upon in coaching youth soccer?

5. If you were involved in a coaches training program, what type of things would you want to be included in the program?

6. How long have you been coaching youth soccer?

7. Please rank your overall impression of the United States and American's in general.  
(1 = extremely negative impression and 10 = extremely positive impression)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. What factors is your impression of the United States and American's based upon?

## Appendix II

### *Post Trip Questionnaire #1 6-month follow up*

1. How have you changed as a coach as a result of the DISCUSS program? Please elaborate.

2. What aspects of the program have you found most useful since returning to China and working with your team or other coaches? Please give specific examples.

3. Reflecting back on the DISCUSS program, which topics have you utilized since returning to China? Please circle all that apply:

- Communicating with players and parents
- Managing your team
- Differences in coaching boys and girls
- Youth clubs and structure
- Teaching more than just soccer (life skills, etc.)
- Sport psychology
- Girls health issues
- Tournaments and event planning
- Methods of coaching (Principles of play)

**Appendix II** *Cont.*

- Passing, receiving and dribbling
- Coaching small sided games
- Dynamic warm-up and technical warm-up
- Age-specific training
- Principles of attack in small groups
- Building from the back
- Attacking in the final ½ of the field
- Principles of defending individual to small groups
- Defensive movements
- Attack vs. defense

4. What would you rank as the top 3 most valuable topics in terms of usefulness to you and your team or coaches? Why?

5. Are there any topics that you wish we had covered, or covered in more detail? Please explain.

6. In what ways do you feel that your players have benefitted from your participation in the DISCUSS program? Please give examples.

7. Overall, how valuable do you feel your participation in the DISCUSS program was? (1 = not at all valuable; 10 = extremely valuable)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. Reflecting on your visit to the United States as part of the DISCUSS program, how would you characterize your views of Americans and the United States now?

9. What 3 words would you use to best describe your impression of the United States and Americans?

10. Please rank your overall impression of the United States and American's in general. (1 = extremely negative impression; 10 = extremely positive impression)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11. Have you had any opportunities to share your experiences in the United States with others in China since returning home? If so, please describe what you shared and the reaction of those you shared it with.