

# A Systematic Review of the Role of Sports Diplomacy in Enhancing International Cultural Integration: Case of China International Relations

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to clarify the role of sports diplomacy in boosting international cultural integration from the perspective of international relations. The researcher used a systematic review approach—adopting repeatable analytical methods to collect and analyze data from past studies and related cases—and selected secondary sources covering both China and other countries to ensure a comprehensive understanding of sports diplomacy and its impact on cultural integration. Results showed that sports diplomacy can enhance international cultural relations via cultural interactions, management policies, and other means, but most sampled sources noted it is often used for self-serving political gains. Thus, the study concludes that the perception and application of sports diplomacy need to be adjusted to better promote cultural integration.

**Keywords:** Sports diplomacy, culture integration, cultural interactions, international relations

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and significance of sports diplomacy

Sports, has been considered to be a cultural diplomacy tool. As described by Murray, sports diplomacy is considered to be “the exploitation, specialization, and reification of a familiar element of state-qua-state interaction”. Diplomacy, on the other hand, is considered to be the conduct of relations that is experienced between sovereign states in cognition of the status of world politics, undertaken by agents deploying peaceful means<sup>[1]</sup>. Diplomacy and sports is noted to have increasingly become compatible in a world where aspects such as globalization are now a norm. With the various contexts of interactions, and also points of conflict, it makes sense to have a means of engaging between countries that would facilitate the development of good relationships that allow conducive interaction between states/nations.

In the contemporary context, sports diplomacy is considered in the context of action by the governments involving employment of sports persons with the intention of using them to amplify diplomatic messages<sup>[2, 3]</sup>. This is evidenced by past research that suggests that more and more institutions are engaging in sports diplomacy. There are different reasons for this form of engagement. Notably, the sports people and sports are at an advantaged position to amplify the diplomacy state of a nation<sup>[4]</sup>. A practical example of the same is China which is noted to have grown its linkage with the international community through sports diplomacy undertaken through international sports<sup>[5]</sup>. One example is the ping-pong games that facilitated the interaction between China and the United States a situation that further led to its invitation to the United

Nations Security Council after Richard Nixon visited the country in 1972<sup>[1]</sup>.

## **1.2 Objectives of the study**

The objective of this study is to undertake a review of cultural interactions between china and other countries, mainly in the context as influenced by sporting activity. The researcher will focus on past research studies undertaken in the context of sports diplomacy. The countries of interest are mainly China. However, for the sake of developing deeper understanding, cases of other countries are likely to be mentioned for comparison purposes as well. With the findings of the study, the researcher will be in position to determine how effective the sports diplomacy has, considering the current and historical impact, as well as offer recommendations on possible ways that this can be improved upon. The improved status would enhance international cultural integration for China.

## **1.3 Structure of the paper**

The structure of the paper starts with the introduction part that introduces the reader to the context and factors surrounding the research subject. Then there is the literature review section where the researcher reviews past research noting areas that are covered and where there is missing information and areas that need further research. This will help establish what is currently in the know by various researches, and areas that would need further insight. The methodology section follows, detailing the systematic review methodology deployed by the researcher. This is followed by the collection and collation of information from the selected sources, an analysis of the information, discussion and conclusion on the same. The sources used in the study are listed at the end of the paper.

## **2.Literature Review**

### **2.1 Historical context of sports diplomacy**

Historically, there has been an increase in scholarly focus on sports diplomacy. In Postlethwaite, Jenkin, and Sherry<sup>[6]</sup>, the authors noted an increase in the focus on sports diplomacy in various studies in relations to the fields of sports, international relations, and history. The authors analyze literature on sports diplomacy dating from year 2000 up to year 2020. They noted a progressive increase in attention on the same from around 2006 up to 2019. This was after a decline in number of studies from 2000 to 2003. The study determined that there was an overall increase in the inclination towards studying sports diplomacy. All through the different studies, it is noted that there are various theories that were associated with the sports diplomacy concept. These include the realist international theory, national branding and public diplomacy, lens of grassroots diplomacy, social and cultural capital, place branding, nation branding, and social capital and critical theory, among others<sup>[6]</sup>. The researcher proposes that sports diplomacy be considered in a more nuanced way. They recommend the undertaking of humanities and historical approaches. More importantly, they appreciate the vastness of findings that sports diplomacy is actually being practiced globally through the sampled sources were noted to mainly focus on areas such as North America, Asia and Europe.

In another study by Mabillard<sup>[7]</sup>, the researcher details a timeline of sports diplomacy since the 1800s to around 2011. They list sporting activities undertaken all through that period. These include the Athens Olympic in 1896, where the Olympic Truce was revived due to sports diplomacy<sup>[7]</sup>. Then there is the period between 1947 – 1980 during which the Ice hockey diplomacy was undertaken. Mabillard notes that there was track and field diplomacy that was experienced between the superpowers. Although this took place, flaws and the extent of influence in sports diplomacy were experienced by the team. Particularly, there was the Cuba crisis that was experienced a few months later which was actually not halted by the sporting activity.

After the ping-pong experience, there was another event involving the massive boycott of the Olympic games. As noted by Murray<sup>[1]</sup>, it is likely for sports to be used to reflect soft power by states. It is noted that states get to use sporting activities to boost their nationalism and also enhance their image. They can as well get to use sports to depict other disapproval of policies developed by other states<sup>[8]</sup>. In order to show disapproval, it is common to have states boycott major sporting events such as the Olympics Games. Between years 1976 – 1984 there was a major boycott carried out on Olympic Games. Again, the boycott was connected to the Cold War. At the time, sports were being used to lay blame on other persons. From a practical context, it is notable from past research that these boycotts did in deed have impact on international relations. For example, after the Cold War, there was a total of 62 states that boycotted travelling to the USSR<sup>[9]</sup>. When it was time to attend the Los Angeles Games, 14 Communist countries boycotted the event<sup>[10]</sup>. As for the Montreal Games, 1976, 26 African states boycotted the event<sup>[11]</sup>. The reason for the boycott was due to visits to the region of South Africa by New Zealand, an action that angered African states due to the issue of apartheid that was being experienced in South Africa at the time<sup>[11-13]</sup>.

There are some other sports diplomacy events that are noted in literature past the 1900s. An overview of these events include the 1992 experience of the destruction of the Berlin Wall, end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. These three major events led to the introduction of new members the Olympic games<sup>[14]</sup>. These joining countries were able to do so due to the attained experience of halving done away with oppressive international and local political relationships. Around 1988, there was some political diplomacy that was experienced at the time whereby the U.S. wrestling team travelled to Iran<sup>[15]</sup>. This was a unique experience that led to the development of the relationship between Iran and the U.S. especially considering that the two had conflicted over the 444 day long hostage crisis that had taken place between 1979 - 1981<sup>[16]</sup>.

## 2.2 Previous studies on sports diplomacy and cultural integration

It is notable that there are not particular studies that focus directly on the subject of sports diplomacy and cultural integration. This is the reason for the need to carry out this study. Nonetheless, there are some which mention sports and culture and sports as cultural diplomacy. In Mabillard and Jádi<sup>[17]</sup>, the researcher considered sports as cultural diplomacy. In their text, they noted that there was increased emphasis on

utilizing sports for diplomatic purposes such as witnessed being conducted by the United States department of State. On the other hand, there is Dubinsky <sup>[18]</sup> who determined that sports diplomacy is connected to soft power and this is connected to culture. They suggested in their study that through sports, countries were able to detail their soft power influenced how they related with other countries. The influence of sports on culture is further detailed by Murray <sup>[1]</sup> who indicated that the latter transcends culture suggesting that it leads to the creation of opportunities for the change and manipulation of culture in favor of the sporting giant.

The few literature reviewed here suggest there is a connection between sports diplomacy and culture, though not directly with cultural integration. As defined by Algan et al. <sup>[19]</sup> cultural integration is defined as a situation where there is the adoption of the essence of a culture by the people of another culture. This study is designed to facilitate the determination of the role of sports diplomacy in cultural integration.

### 3.Methodology

The researcher sought to utilize a systematic review methodology. As explained by Nunn and Chang <sup>[20]</sup>, a systematic review is one where there is repeatable analytical methods that are used to collect secondary data which is then used for analysis. Research questions used in the study can either be narrow or broad. These are used to facilitate the evidence synthesis as determined by the systematic review. The data that is collected and reviewed has to be directly related to the systematic review question <sup>[20]</sup>. To further explain this methodology, it is considered vital to determine the difference between it and meta-analysis methodology as they closely resemble. As detailed by Charrois <sup>[21]</sup>, there is a perception that the methodology can be interchanged with meta-analysis which is a wrong one. The systematic review allows for the collation of data already available on a subject matter with a direct question <sup>[22]</sup>. On the other hand, a meta-analysis involves statistical methods that are applied in the collation of data acquired from primary studies.

The systematic review is supposed to be based on a specific review strategy as conceptualized by different scholars such as Newman and Gough <sup>[23]</sup>. In their study, they proposed the researcher to follow a review process as recommended below (see Figure 1).

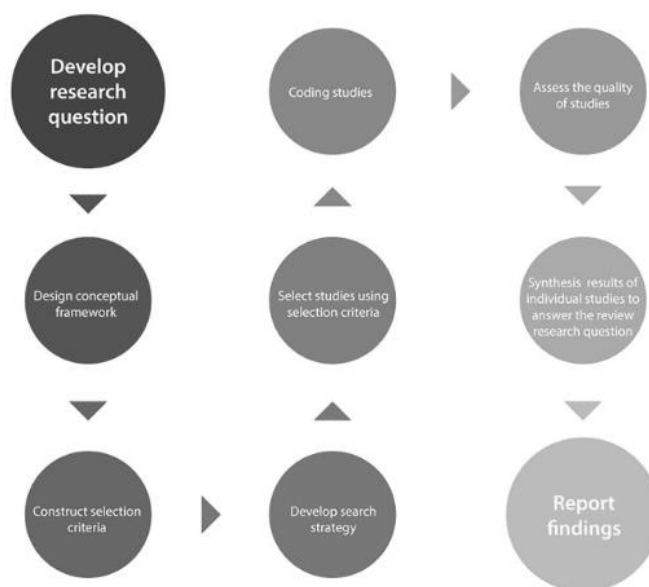


Fig. 1 The Systematic Review Process (Source: Newman & Gough )<sup>[23]</sup>

### 3.1 Develop research questions

The research question for the review process is one expected to offer direction on the structure of the review, and decisions needed to be made <sup>[24, 25]</sup>. The latter might include the kind of studies that need to be included in the study. It also gives direction on how to assess the sources and where to get them. It is likely to include several assumptions in the question.

### 3.2 Design conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is an infrastructure that sets standards to a study noting the research question and giving direction on how best to respond to the question<sup>[26]</sup>. Through the conceptual framework, the researcher gets assistance to develop awareness as well as understanding on the phenomena that they are scrutinizing <sup>[27]</sup>. The framework could include a hypothesis being studied. As far as this study goes, it is hypothesized that through the undertaking of sports diplomacy, China is able to enhance its relations with other cultures integrating its own cultures into the others whilst still gaining some aspects of other cultures and integrating these into its own culture. The hypothesized end result is a situation where each of the cultures that it is engaging with are influenced, and so is its own. This means there are aspects of other cultures likely to be present in the Chinese culture.

### 3.3 Construct a selection criteria

It is prerequisite to make a decision on which is the best research articles to include in the review. These decisions are guided using the selection criteria. As described by Hiebl <sup>[28]</sup>, the selection criteria facilitate a systematic and transparent way of accomplishing this. Through the creation of a selection criteria, restrictions on the review are included <sup>[29]</sup>. Some of the selection criteria would include the study participants. As far as this study goes, the researcher seeks to involve the following selection criteria:

Sources –

- Studies from different sources on cases of interaction between China and other countries culturally through sports diplomacy
- Case studies on sports diplomacy
- Peer-reviewed sources
- Either primary or secondary sources
- A variety of sports activity is allowed

### 3.4 Search Strategy

The next stage is the search strategy which in this case includes the determination of the search engines to utilize and elimination of duplicates<sup>[30]</sup>. The design of the search strategy is influenced by the extent that the researcher seeks to get exhaustive in acquiring sources. There are aspects such as publication bias to consider<sup>[31]</sup>. The search strategy involves the determination of the kind of sources to search for, and where to search<sup>[31]</sup>. Multiple bibliographic databases are recommended for a more diverse study. These depend with the availability of the sources and extent of the study. In the cases where the reviews engaged in terms of seeking to determine the impact of extents of effectiveness, then there is a possibility that bias will be present. When it comes to publication, there is a possibility of bias being present in contexts where there are negative ideas or where the findings are hard to find. As such, scholars such as Chow and Eckholm<sup>[31]</sup>note that studies with smaller or negative effects are not easy to come by.

It is within this search strategy that the details of the sources to be studied are analyzed. There is a list of search source types that is expected with examples of the same given by Tchangelov and Stilwell<sup>[32]</sup> to include the World Wide Web/Internet (CNKI, Web of Science, Google Scholar, etc.), Bibliographic databases, hand searching of specialist journals or books, citation checking and contacts with experts. An exhaustive search would involve the utilization of a variety of databases.

### 3.5 Selection Strategy

The next critical stage is that which involves the selection of the studies that have been sampled. As explained by do Prado Leite, de Moraes and de Castro<sup>[33]</sup>, those studies that are identified as potential sources should be subjected to a checking process to further select those that are more plausible and remove the irrelevant ones. Mainly, it is recommended that the titles and the abstract be taken through an initial selection process<sup>[34]</sup>. This should then be followed by the full text checking towards the end of the screening process<sup>[34]</sup>. The need to undertake this process is because the process of accessing studies is highly unreliable as it avails irrelevant studies not related to the search conducted on the bibliographic and other databases.

### 3.6 Code the studies

The next stage will involve the coding of the studies. This stage involves the systematic recording of the information concerning the studies information that will be applied when answering the research question. Information that can be recorded in this case includes characteristics of the study, contexts, participants, challenges among other important factors deemed necessary to provide a plausible and reliable response to the research question.

The following is what is described in the coding:

- Details of the study - this facilitates the mapping of how the study was carried out
- How the research was undertaken – this allows the researcher to assess the quality of the research, as well as its relevance in connection to this study’s review question
- Results and findings of the study – these are synthesized by the researcher to reach a plausible conclusion on the review question.

## **4.Study Systemic Review**

### **4.1 Develop research questions**

The proposed research question for this study is; what is the role played by sports diplomacy in enhancing international culture integration between China and other countries?

### **4.2 Design conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework informing this study is founded upon a hypothesis, that as past research indicates sports diplomacy to have been used to further improve international relations, the same is expected in the contemporary context, more so with regards to China and its international interactions. It is also hypothesized that based on its sports diplomacy, China is likely to develop positive interactions with other nations, and consider some of their cultural perspectives in its sporting activity to enhance the outcome of the sports diplomacy.

It is also hypothesized that there are certain sports diplomacy resources that are required for sports diplomacy to be undertaken. These are listed to be sports human capital, sports producers, and sports events. Also, the researcher hypothesizes that the outcomes of sports diplomacy include mutual understanding, cross-cultural communications and trust building three factors that lead to conducive cross-cultural international communication, social-cultural development, and an overall international cultural integration.

The conceptual framework, determines that based on the theory of international relations, explaining the context of relationships when people engaging in sporting activity meet with each other. Particularly, it is discussed by Murray<sup>[2]</sup> that when such meet physically such as in the international setting as focused upon in this study, they tend to represent the interests of the nations where they originate. At the same, they engage in a peaceful environment though competitive as guided by a strategic plan. At the same time, they actively pursue victory in the sporting activity that they engage in. (see Figure 2)

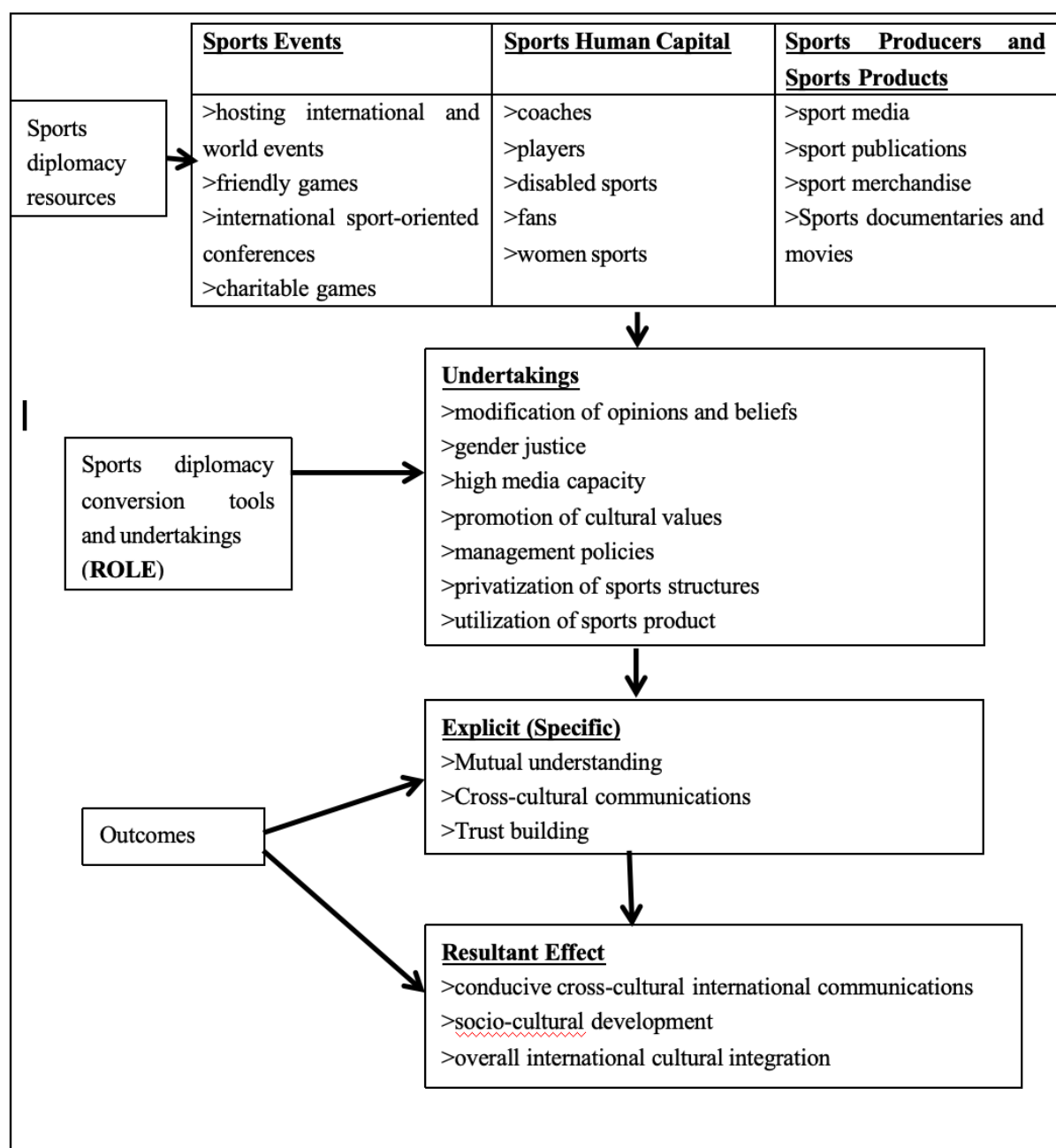


Fig. 2 Recommended Systematic Review Conceptual Framework (Source: Original)

#### 4.3 Construct a selection criteria

The researcher proposed to consider studies that not only focus on China and its international relations, but also other countries to help create deeper awareness on the subject. Also, the researcher seeks to mainly include studies that are connected to sporting activity/diplomacy. Sources that speak on international relations, though related to cultural integration but based on factors other than sporting activity and related diplomacy will be excluded from the study. Nonetheless, the sources also ought to be sourced from legitimate sources/databases and the reliability and authenticity of the source confirmed before consideration into the study.



#### 4.4 Search Strategy

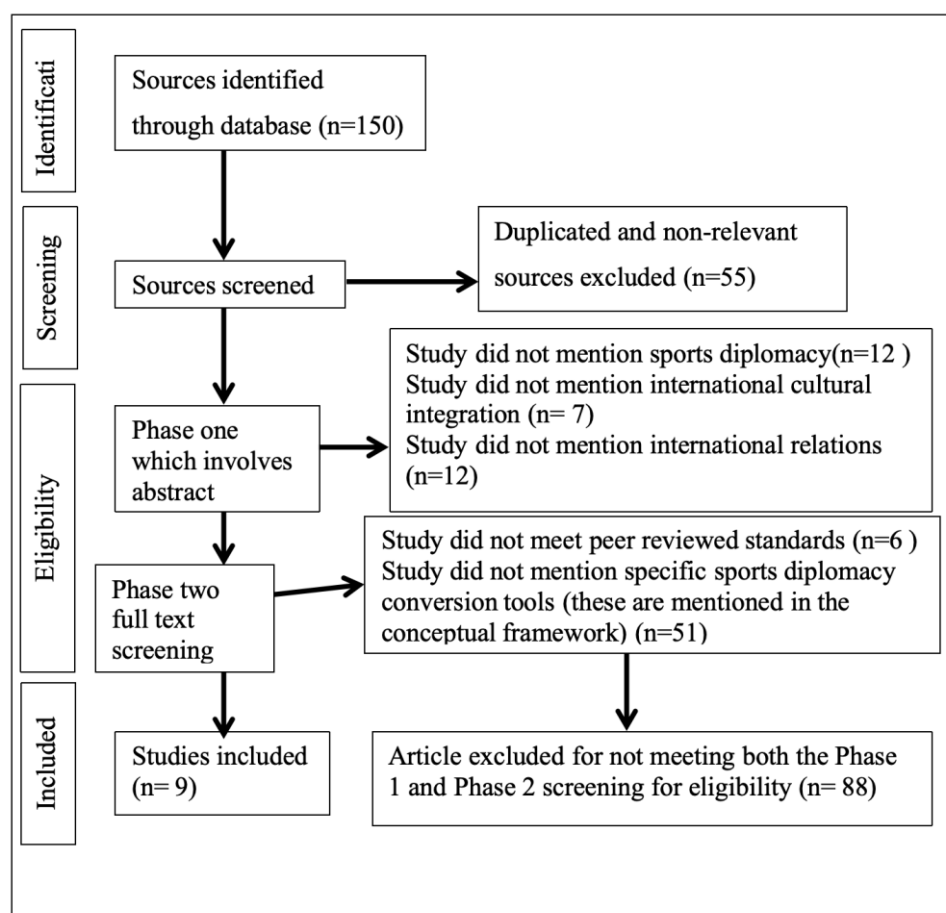
The search strategy included the use of search terms that will be used to search in bibliographic databases. Such databases are those that index their records making it easier to access specific topics as the indexing is done based on the keywords associated with the text<sup>[35]</sup>. A comprehensive search was also conducted from which the researcher then narrowed down to specific terms that were likely to yield better results. The results here are considered in the context of the systematic review research question informing the study. The following terms were used in conducting the searches:

Terms used in the searches were as follows:

(“sports diplomacy”) (“sports diplomacy”) (“Role of Sports Diplomacy”) (“Role of Sports Diplomacy”) (“International Cultural Integration”) (“International Cultural Integration”) (“International Cultural Integration and sports diplomacy”) (“International Cultural Integration and sports diplomacy”) (“Influence of sports diplomacy on International Cultural Integration and sports diplomacy”) (“Influence of sports diplomacy on International Cultural Integration and sports diplomacy”) (“Influence of sports diplomacy”) (“Influence of sports diplomacy on cultural relations”) (“Influence of sports on international cultural relations”) (“impact of sports diplomacy on international cultural relations”) (“China International relations”) (“China international sports diplomacy”) (“China international sports diplomacy”) (“China international sports diplomacy and cultural relations”) (“China international sports diplomacy and its influence on cultural relations”) (“Influence of China international sports diplomacy on cultural integration”)

#### 4.5 Study Selection

The study selection process is recommended to involve several steps that will help the researcher get the best sources for the study. It starts with the general identification of different sources acquired after conducting searches using the key words. It is important to note that the researcher sought to acquire the best sources and the main aspect of indication whether the sources were related to the research question was in the context of the topic. As such, the researcher firstly considered the topic, before considering whether to include the resource in the initial stage of the selection process. Although there are software that can assist with the selection process, the researcher sought to carry out the process manually to engage more with the studies.



**Fig. 3 Research Sources Selection Process Flowchart (Source: Original)**

#### 4.6 Code the studies and assessment of quality

Here is the coding for the most relevant studies included (Table 1)

**Table 1 Relevant studies included**

Author	Topic	Quality assessment	Study findings
Jinghui <sup>[36]</sup>	Sports Diplomacy of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era: Opportunities and Challenge	Good quality	China engages in sports diplomacy with the main intention of accomplishing its political and diplomatic goals. China might not have common interest with foreign countries, but it seeks to promote inter-state relations.
Wen <sup>[37]</sup>	Sports Diplomacy and International Relations of China	High quality	Sports diplomacy has facilitated international exchanges improving upon China's diplomatic relations. Cultural integration is also experienced.

Rofe <sup>[38]</sup>	Sport and diplomacy	Medium quality	There was long-term political success of the 1960 delegation visits which aided in the cultivation of Sino-African relations. China deployed significant media coverage of the sporting event to suggest the improved relations, and positive national image.
Murray & Pigman <sup>[5]</sup>	Mapping the relationship between international sport and diplomacy	Good quality	Sports diplomacy can be used either positively or negatively. Positively by deploying a diplomatic message, or negatively such as in the abduction and murder of Israeli athletes by Black September.
Lu <sup>[39]</sup>	Sport, militarism and diplomacy: training bodies for China (1960–1966).	High quality	China engaged sports to help solve its military situations with India and the Soviet. Chinese sports policy and practice was designed to encourage better cultural relations with the foes.
Dousti, Saboonchi & Shariati Feizabadi <sup>[40]</sup>	Sport behind public diplomacy; Functional components of sports diplomacy in Iran	High quality	That sports diplomacy can be used to relay soft power as in the context of Iran after it had engaged in the nuclear deal.
Ciembroniewicz <sup>[41]</sup>	in the promotion of China's culture and image	High quality	The sports diplomacy as undertaken in the context of the promotion of martial arts by China is a tool to relay the Chinese culture
Zhang et al. <sup>[42]</sup>	The Realistic Appeal and Value Prospect of China's Launch of Sports Public Diplomatic Envoys	High quality	China uses sports diplomats to facilitate the easing of international relations.
Leite Junior, & Rodrigues <sup>[43]</sup>	Belt, road and ball: Football as a Chinese soft power and public diplomacy tool	High quality	China uses sports diplomacy as a tool to introduce itself to the international community for economic purposes.

## 5. Results Synthesis

Wen<sup>[37]</sup> is the author who comes closest to responding to the research question in this study. In their findings, they noted that China, apart from utilizing sports to enhance international exchanges, uses it to

encourage international community to not only visit the country, but also makes effort to include some of their cultural aspects in its sporting activity to enhance intercultural relations. The other sources also present various contexts of sports diplomacy detailing how they have been utilized efficiently by the country as well as other countries.

There are some noted examples of sports diplomacy that have been mentioned in the studies. An example is the case of the ping-pong diplomacy also mentioned by Murray <sup>[1]</sup> in their study on sports diplomacy. The event took place in 1971 in the context of the Cold War, during which there was the visiting of China by the then United States ping-pong squad who toured China for several days <sup>[1]</sup>. After the tour, the then U.S. president toured the region. This was an example of how China handles sports diplomacy.

Despite the noted high dependence on sports diplomacy, there is also notable selfish intentions behind the diplomatic activities. Majority of the studies, apart from one, mainly focused on the aspect of culture. It is apparent that sports diplomacy is mainly utilized in a political, social, and economic context. For instance, Murray and Pigman<sup>[5]</sup> and Dousti, Saboonchi and Shariati Feizabadi<sup>[40]</sup> among others in the selected final group of sources suggest that sports diplomacy is mainly used to gain political millage. On a negative context, there are some who have sought to use sports diplomacy negatively to make their political statements.

## **6.Conclusion**

### **6.1 Summary of finding**

Overall, there are certain factors that are seemingly missing from the studies on sports diplomacy and its influence on cultural integration. Mainly, cultural integration involves persons that are willing to relate with one another and make effort to integrate their culture to facilitate better interaction. Considering how sports diplomacy has been used in the past by different countries and in different contexts, it is not mainly used for integration rather for selfish reasons. Theory needs to be formulated on the phenomena, in relation to the international relations theory. More so, there is a definite need to enhance international relations, through the sporting activities.

### **6.2 Future prospects for sports diplomacy**

It is recommended that sports diplomacy be utilized to enhance cultural integration. It is a plausible tool based on the extent that countries interact for the sake of sporting activities whereas they do not engage in other fronts. Sports diplomacy should be controlled not to be utilized to make negative political statements. This could be accomplished through the development of policy that guides the field.

### **6.3 Challenges**

Since the researcher sought to undertake a manual process when selecting the studies, it proved to be time consuming to them and thus required more cost. Also, it created a situation where there was a possibility of human error when conducting the search and selection process. The error would have occurred in terms of the researcher missing out on a study that would have provided much insight and

information. To try and reduce the influence or probability of this error occurring, the researcher sought the assistance of another researcher during the selection stage. The other important challenge that was experienced is in the context of the scope of the study considering the expectations of the publishers who have a limit on the number of words that are suitable for a journal article. The researcher noted the possibility for further research and analysis of the sampled studies noting the likelihood that there were certain variables that were not considered in past research, such as personality, and other individual demographics, noting that such factors were likely to also influence the human interaction. Nonetheless, it is plausible to note this study considered the issue of cultural integration from a national context, in terms of the influencers being connected to the state to a significant extent.

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