

Multiple Values, Current Situation and Promotion Path of the Integrated Development of Characteristic Tourism Industry of the Chinese Professional Football League

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Abstract: By using literature review, data statistics, logical analysis and field investigation, this paper studies the multiple values, current dilemmas and promotion paths of the integrated development of the Chinese Professional Football League and characteristic tourism. The integration can accelerate the inheritance of football culture, enhance league influence, upgrade the tourism industry, increase club income, and boost the local economy. At present, the main problems include insufficient policy implementation, single tourism products, imperfect operation mechanisms, backward stadium facilities and intelligent services, as well as an inadequate safety guarantee system. Accordingly, this paper puts forward targeted paths: issuing special policies based on local conditions, introducing professional cultural tourism enterprises, enriching tourism products, improving intelligent facilities, and strengthening whole-process safety supervision, so as to provide a reference for the high-quality integration of the football league and the tourism industry.

Keywords: Chinese professional football league; Sports + tourism; Characteristic tourism industry; Industrial integrated development

Online publication: April 26, 2026

1. Introduction

With the release of the 14th Five-Year Plan for Tourism Development and Guiding Opinions on Promoting All-for-one Sports Tourism, sports tourism has become a new growth engine in the tourism market ^[1]. Sports provide core resources for tourism, while tourism expands the consumption space for sports. After 30 years of professionalization, the Chinese Professional Football League has formed a complete three-level system and a stable audience foundation. The integrated development of the league and characteristic tourism will produce important social and economic benefits, and promote the reform of Chinese football, urban image building and industrial transformation.

2. Multiple values of integrated development

2.1. Promoting the communication and inheritance of football culture

As the birthplace of modern football, Britain has Visit Football, an online travel firm specializing in football-themed trips for Chinese tourists. After watching live matches, visitors can tour stadiums and learn about their history. Such arrangements arouse tourists' affection for football and facilitate the popularization and inheritance of British football culture. As the birthplace of ancient football, China can take the league as the core to develop innovative sports tourism projects. Stadiums, cultural museums, club souvenirs and players' spiritual images can be turned into characteristic cultural resources. Through watching matches, visiting football museums and experiencing stadium culture, tourists can enhance their sense of identity and promote the spread and inheritance of Chinese football culture.

2.2. Enhancing the influence and popularity of the league

The Chinese Professional Football League consists of the Chinese Super League, China League One, and China League Two. In the 2024 season, 52 clubs participated officially. In recent years, attendance has increased rapidly, and many matches have set new attendance records. Between the 2004 and 2019 seasons, the highest single-match attendance figure stood at 46,001 for Guangzhou Evergrande's home fixture in the 2018 season. In the first round of the 2024 Chinese Super League, Chengdu Rongcheng versus Qingdao Hainiu drew 40,088 spectators, setting a new club record. The second round saw 48,397 fans attend Shandong Taishan against Beijing Guoan, while Zhejiang's match attracted 32,087 attendees, also a club high. The integration with tourism can transform on-site audiences into media influence and social attention, improve the brand awareness of the league, and help the long-term and healthy development of professional football.

2.3. Promoting high-quality development of the tourism industry

The IP of the football league enriches tourism forms and scenarios. Fan culture, pre-match ceremonies, city cultural activities and football-themed experience projects expand the tourism product system. The integration helps the tourism industry transform from traditional sightseeing to an immersive experience, improve service quality and comprehensive competitiveness, and realize high-quality development.

2.4. Increasing club income and driving local economic growth

Match-day income and peripheral consumption are important revenue sources for top European clubs. However, most Chinese professional football clubs face the problems of high cost and a single-income structure. The integration of football and tourism can drive the consumption of catering, accommodation, transportation and shopping. The case of Rongjiang Village Super League shows that sports-tourism integration can greatly increase tourists and tourism revenue, and promote regional economic upgrading ^[2].

3. Current situation review

3.1. Policies are issued continuously, but implementation is insufficient

National and local governments have issued a series of supportive policies for sports tourism integration, and some regions have launched preferential measures such as ticket discounts and scenic spot concessions. However, the implementation of targeted policies is slow, cross-departmental coordination is insufficient, and the policy effect is limited, resulting in the failure to fully release industrial dividends.

3.2. Diversified operating institutions with imperfect mechanisms

Currently, due to differences in revenue, development history, and policy attention from local governments where they are located, the operation institutions for the integrated development of the Chinese Professional Football League

and characteristic tourism industry are diversified. Some clubs, such as Shandong Taishan and Meizhou Hakka, have cooperated with cultural tourism groups, which improves resource integration efficiency. Nevertheless, in most regions, sports departments, tourism authorities and clubs operate separately with unclear responsibilities^[3]. The lack of a unified coordination mechanism reduces operational efficiency and restricts the scale development of football tourism.

3.3. Single tourism products and lack of special official platforms

British football tourism has formed a mature system with customized services, summer camps and stadium experience projects supported by special official websites and operators. In China, football tourism products are relatively simple, mainly focusing on match watching and peripheral tours. There is no special official website for football tourism, and the promotion channels are scattered, which is not conducive to market development. Changsha Sports Industry Association has launched the Global Star Football Travel Season, a sports tourism program designed for amateur teams. It has formed a continuous and integrated consumption chain that provides one-stop services covering catering, accommodation, transportation and travel.

3.4. Inadequate stadium facilities and intelligent services

Only half of the Chinese Super League home stadiums can accommodate more than 50,000 people. Some old stadiums have outdated facilities and a poor experience. Official fan stores and cultural museums are rare in domestic clubs, while they are standard in European leagues^[4]. Zhejiang Professional Football Club, which returned to its traditional home ground at Huanglong Sports Center Stadium, boasts an open stadium with upper and lower LED rings, anchor-laid lawns identical to those of top European clubs, pre-match opening shows, light shows, and giant screens in the north and south towers. Drinks and hot meals are provided during matches, creating an immersive atmosphere and the best possible experience for fans. However, some stadiums such as Zhengzhou Hanghai Sports Center, home to Henan Team, are outdated and poorly equipped due to long-term use, which significantly reduces the on-site viewing experience. In terms of ticketing, crowd guidance, on-site interaction, and digital services, the intelligence level of Chinese leagues needs to be improved urgently.

3.5. Weak safety awareness and an imperfect safety guarantee system

On match days of the Chinese Professional Football League, large crowds gather, and home stadiums face various potential safety hazards. Traffic, accommodation, and catering services in host cities are under heavy pressure. First of all, visitors should have safety awareness and first-aid skills to respond to emergencies. Field investigations show that most visitors lack relevant safety knowledge and have weak safety awareness. Therefore, government departments and operators of football-themed tourism projects should repeatedly remind and guide visitors to enhance safety prevention awareness through on-site broadcasts, TV announcements, official WeChat accounts, and other channels. Large crowds gather on match days, with high potential safety risks. Most tourists lack safety awareness and emergency ability. The whole-process safety management system, including pre-match inspection, on-site control, and post-match summary, is not perfect. The supervision standards are inconsistent, and the safety risks in transportation, fire control, catering and crowd gathering are prominent.

4. Promotion paths

4.1. Formulating targeted policies based on local conditions

Regions with rich football resources, such as Shandong and Guangdong, should combine football museums, football towns, youth training bases, and local culture to design special tourism routes and issue implementable supporting policies^[5]. In the 2024 season, Shandong Province had 8 professional football clubs in the Chinese Professional Football League, ranking first in China and boasting a strong football atmosphere. Zibo, Shandong, as the birthplace of ancient football, enjoys

a profound football culture. The Chinese Football Museum and surrounding football towns are located in Linzi, Zibo. There are football parks in Qingdao, Rizhao, and other cities, and the Shandong Luneng Football School in Weifang. The Shandong Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, Sports Bureau and other relevant departments can issue macro guidance policies to give full play to the favorable football environment in Shandong. Based on local conditions, local governments can implement featured policies that combine professional matches with tourism programs such as Mount Tai tours, youth training football school visits and football museum tours. All regions should highlight local characteristics and take a differentiated development path to build unique football tourism brands.

4.2. Introducing professional enterprises to realize precise marketing

Professional cultural tourism groups should be encouraged to participate in the operation of football tourism. The government should support cross-regional and cross-industry cooperation, cultivate compound talents, develop high-quality routes according to fan needs, and carry out precise marketing. Professional operation can improve product added value and promote the formation of influential football tourism IP. To expand the influence of themed tourism around the Chinese Professional Football League, efforts should be made to promote the trans-regional, cross-industrial and cross-ownership merger and restructuring of competitive sports tourism enterprises, and to foster cross-border industrial groups and alliances. We support well-known national brands such as Emei Tourism Co., Ltd. in cooperating with Chinese professional football clubs. Meanwhile, the operation mode of tourism institutions should be optimized, and the training of professional talents should be emphasized through theoretical study, on-the-job training and field observation to accumulate practical experience continuously.

4.3. Enriching product supply and building special promotion platforms

Drawing lessons from the Village Super League, regional culture and ethnic characteristics should be integrated into football tourism. Clubs can develop match watching, stadium visits, training experience, football summer camps and customized travel services. Special football tourism sections should be set up on official websites to release information and provide booking services, expanding promotion channels.

The characteristic tourism industry of the Chinese Professional Football League has developed distinctive sports tourism products and high-quality routes, incorporating iconic tourist destinations with long event history and strong ethnic characteristics, such as the Village Super League in Rongjiang County, Guizhou Province. Visitors can enjoy traditional cultural performances with regional and ethnic features, including the Grand Song of the Dong, Lusheng Dance of the Miao, and Baiwang Wooden Drum.

By making full use of long-established professional football clubs, the industry has built team culture halls and launched integrated programs such as “match watching + team culture hall visit + training observation”. Customized travel packages for teenagers and adults are also available to keep up with consumer demand, expand consumption formats, and improve visitor satisfaction and loyalty.

The construction of football tourism modules on official websites of municipal culture and tourism authorities, the Chinese Football Association, and professional sports tourism operators should be accelerated. These modules can provide profiles of professional clubs, introduce featured tourism products and premium routes, and regularly release match news and player interviews. Such efforts will broaden promotion channels and stimulate public consumption.

4.4. Improving infrastructure and enhancing intelligent experience

Stadiums should speed up the construction of fan shops, cultural exhibition halls and public fitness areas. Digital ticketing, face recognition, digital twin evacuation and real-time playback technology should be applied to improve service efficiency and audience experience. Practices such as Manchester United’s metaverse stadium and the Bundesliga’s intelligent interaction system can be used for reference to enhance immersion.

Cooperation with technology enterprises and universities should be strengthened to advance the innovation system

of the characteristic tourism of the Chinese Professional Football League, realize intelligent upgrading, and improve the on-site experience and sense of immersion. Digital ticketing and facial recognition can be applied to reduce the risk of counterfeit tickets. Digital twin technology can be used to design the optimal audience evacuation routes and formulate emergency plans. Manchester United of the Premier League has built a virtual home stadium with metaverse technology, where fans can buy tickets, jerseys and other goods in virtual stores. The German Bundesliga has cooperated with Sky Deutschland and Vodafone to launch a mobile application that provides instant replays, multi-camera views and real-time augmented reality graphics, overlaying statistics and data-driven visualizations onto live action. These measures enhance fan interaction, participation and overall service quality.

4.5. Strengthening normalized safety supervision

A whole-process safety management system should be established with the cooperation of sports, public security, traffic and cultural tourism departments. The Chinese Football Association shall improve the access standards for professional football leagues and strictly enforce stadium safety approval. The General Administration of Sport of China and local sports authorities at or above the county level shall strengthen coordination over safety management for matches and tourist sites, including venue facilities, surrounding environment, urban operations, fan control, order maintenance and public opinion guidance. Local sports departments and public security organs shall carry out routine supervision and increase security investment on match days. A safety information release platform should be built to remind tourists of risks. Illegal business acts such as cheating consumers should be severely punished to create a safe, standardized and orderly market environment for football tourism.

5. Conclusion

The integrated development of the Chinese Professional Football League and characteristic tourism is an inevitable trend of industrial integration. At present, the industry is in the initial stage with prominent problems in policy, operation, products, facilities and safety. Through local-oriented policy design, professional operation, diversified products, intelligent technology and complete safety guarantee, the integration will develop rapidly. It will help enhance the influence of Chinese football, improve urban brands and promote the high-quality development of sports and tourism industries. Relevant government departments have successively issued targeted policy documents, yet their implementation needs to be further followed up on. Professional football clubs have begun to participate in the operation of the league's characteristic tourism industry through capital injection from cultural and tourism groups. By giving full play to their operational advantages in the cultural tourism industry, these clubs can achieve precise marketing. Meanwhile, traditional clubs leverage their strengths to enrich the content of characteristic tourism products and provide personalized services. The development of special official websites, intelligent services and safety guarantee systems will be further promoted to improve service quality and build a high-quality characteristic tourism brand for the Chinese Professional Football League.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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