



# Impact of Key Factors on the Sports Migration of Elite Volleyball Players in China

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## ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine the key factors that influence the sports migration of Chinese elite volleyball players and to evaluate which factors have effectively attracted or restricted their mobility. A semi-structured interview was conducted to analyze the pathway of 11 Chinese elite volleyball players, with different categories including personal, political, economic, and cultural dimensions. The results indicated that the national sports system, athlete registration regulations, salary, and coach recommendations have significantly influenced the mobility of Chinese elite volleyball players.

**Keywords:** Sports migration; Athlete career; Volleyball; China; Influencing factor

## INTRODUCTION

Sports migration represents a phenomenon when athletes move between countries and continents[1]. This phenomenon is a common characteristic of contemporary sports that cannot be ignored [2,3]. Based on previous studies, athletic development is significantly influenced by their mobility [4,5], which is crucial for the competitive performance of national sports teams [6-8] and economic growth[9]. The area of sports migration is studied by economists, historians, and political scientists and is also relevant to experts from various disciplines, such as sociologists and geographers. [2,10-12]. The multidimensionality and complexity of the migration phenomenon can provide academia with valuable research materials that contribute to theoretical development in sports sociology and economics.

According to a literature review, the first book on sports migration was published by J. Maguire in 1994[13]. Since then, academics have acquired valuable research discoveries in this field [14,15]. These studies can be primarily divided into two categories: theoretical and empirical research. The typical focus of theoretical research on these categories is developing a conceptual framework and theoretical model for athletic migration. For instance, athletes are involved in six-dimensional divisions of migration: settler, mercenary, ambitionist, exile, expelled, and nomadic cosmopolitan [16]. The three-dimensional regional division includes intercontinental, intracontinental, and domestic [17,18] and a temporary and permanent two-dimensional partition method [19]. Theoretical models including the push-pull theory [20], the regional environment theory [10], the globalization theory [13,16,21], and the network theory model [22,23] provide a more comprehensive basis for understanding sports migration. Empirical studies have performed specific analyses on sports migrants from different countries, focusing on various types of sports. However, recent studies have focused on football [1,11,24-26]. Few studies have addressed the sports migration of volleyball players [27,28]. Furthermore, existing research has primarily focused on Western countries in Europe, South America, and Africa[9,29,30]. Research on athletes from Eastern cultural backgrounds, particularly those from China, is relatively limited. The growth and development of China's elite athletes and their athletic mobility experiences are not well understood[31,32]. This suggests that future research must broaden the scope and perform in-depth analyses of athletic migration in other regions relevant to additional sports to enhance the comprehension of the growth and development surroundings of China's elite athletes, as well as their experiences of athletic mobility.

Volleyball was introduced to China in 1905 and has since become a popular sport among many Chinese people. China began promoting six-a-side volleyball in the 1950s while reaching the world's leading level in the 1980s [33]. Particularly, the Chinese

women's volleyball team obtained five consecutive world championships from 1981 to 1986. This achievement symbolized the Chinese national spirit, substantially inspiring Chinese pride, self-esteem, and self-confidence and exceeding the scope of sports competitions [34,35]. Competitions at the national level in volleyball in China encompass championships for various age groups, the National Games volleyball competitions (conducted every four years), student divisions at all levels, and various regional competitions. Importantly, China, like other volleyball world superpowers including Brazil, Italy, Russia, and Turkey, shows the world's top volleyball league, i.e., China Volleyball League (CVL) [36-39]. Presently, this league contains 29 clubs (15 women) and 579 players (298 women) [40]. According to the FIVB players' database, there are 874 Chinese volleyball players [41]. However, the precise number of athletes actively participating in competitive volleyball in China is much higher. Furthermore, the Chinese Volleyball Super League's popularity continues to increase rapidly. Statistical data suggested that the total number of on-site observers reached 596,000 during the 2016-2017 season, and online viewership crossed 100 million views [42]. Over 180 million online viewers viewed the Chinese Women's Volleyball Super League during the 2023-2024 season, with the corresponding topic on Weibo having more than 500 million reads [43]. Although volleyball is a sport with a strong social foundation in China but, there is limited current research on the labor migration of Chinese volleyball players.

Data indicates a substantial rise in the number of athletes migrating, a phenomenon that has attracted significant interest [16]. The 1995 Bosman Act verdict notably resulted in a substantial increase in player migration inside the European Union [44]. Maguire suggests this phenomenon is a historical continuation of previous migration patterns [45]. Conversely, Taylor indicates that athletic migration manifests complex relationships between countries with significant social, cultural, and historical origins [46]. Moreover, political, economic, geographical, and personal factors also impact athletic migration [14,25]. For example, athletes frequently evaluate their migration options depending on their income and compensation [47]. Further, athletic migration decisions may be influenced by personal achievements and career development opportunities [48,49]. Career investment is intricately associated with migration and mobility [4].

However, athletes are susceptible to many challenges during migration, such as changes in familial attributes, personal identity, linguistic proficiency, and dietary patterns [50,51]. Thus, sports labor migration is a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon [52]. In a study of athletic migration, Stambulova et al. underscored that researchers must comprehensively understand the root causes and various factors, particularly those related to different cultural backgrounds [53]. However, the abovementioned studies were carried out within a Western cultural framework and predominantly used football as an example. In East Asian countries, the phenomenon of sports migration may vary, particularly among those with different sports governance models [54,55]. To address this research gap, the present study aimed to identify and analyze the factors impacting the mobility of elite volleyball players in China.

## VOLLEYBALL LABOR MIGRATION AND ITS ROLE IN CHINA

Globally, volleyball has been highly popularized and developed in many countries due to the FIVB's implementation of reform measures. This has led to the establishment of professional volleyball leagues in many regions. This establishment includes forming relevant regulations such as the "Sports Regulations" and the "2019-2020 International Transfer Procedures" [56]. These regulations clarify the national team competition period, professional league season, volleyball player information, market regulations, and intermediary service standards. As a result, the volleyball player labor market has increasingly internationalized. The data suggests that the number of individuals involved in international transfers has increased from over 800 in 1998 [57] to 4,891 by 2019. The transfer process involved volleyball associations from 134 countries [58]. Similar to football migration, the leading destination for volleyball players to migrate is Europe, which has become the "economic center" of the world of volleyball [59]. During the 2019/2020 season, most players who were transferred (4,309, representing 88.1% overall) were approved by European leagues. The countries with the most players who immigrated were France (695 players), Germany (491 players), and the United Kingdom (329 players). Compared to football, the United States is the main country where volleyball players move, with 505 players, followed by Brazil, with 424 players [58]. This could be attributed to the absence of a professional volleyball league in the United States, indicating that cultural variables influence the movement patterns of players [59]. The country with the largest number of volleyball players immigrants in Asia during the 2019/2020 season was Iran (25 players), followed by China (23 players) and Japan (18 players). However, the number of Chinese players overseas reached a record high in the same season. Among them, ten players migrated within the mainland, and 13 migrated intercontinental to Europe [58].

Further studies are required to investigate the factors that contribute to the successful migration of Chinese volleyball athletes. To capture these factors more effectively, this study interviewed many Chinese volleyball athletes who moved abroad. A comprehensive qualitative approach was mainly used to identify the factors that influence the mobility of volleyball players in China.

## METHODS

This study used a semi-structured qualitative interview method, which is the prominent approach in qualitative research [60,61]. The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions designed based on the literature on sports migration [52] and methodological sources of qualitative interviews [62]. The interview protocol was conducted in line with a standardized format, in which each participant was asked the same questions in the same manner. The order of questions may differ based on the flow of the conversation, and probes were employed to elaborate and clarify specific issues. The goal was to enable athletes to effortlessly recall and express their mobility experiences, thereby allowing the interviews to delve into acquiring information and

establishing a rapport. This study has received ethical approval from the research ethics committee of the university to which the first author is affiliated, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### Participants

Exemplary cases were selected to ensure the acquisition of high-quality data [63]. Inclusion criteria were set as follows: a) International contests or CVL participation by elite athletes b) Previous experience in playing for abroad clubs. To preserve anonymity, participants have been designated with a numerical identifier.

Table 1 provides precise information and detailed data about the participants. It provides a comprehensive overview of the participants' gender, identity, transfer experience, and other relevant information, enabling researchers and readers to understand of their fundamental situations.

**Table 1.** Interview participants and their related demographic data

No.	Interview no.	Gender	Active player	National team	Clubs abroad	National Association
P1	1	M	N	Y	1	Germany
P2	4	M	Y	Y	1	Japan
P3	5	F	Y	Y	2	Poland, Türkiye
P4	6	F	N	Y	1	Italy
P5	7	F	N	Y	2	Italy, Japan
P6	8	F	Y	Y	1	Thailand
P7	10	F	Y	Y	2	Serbia, Türkiye
P8	3	F	Y	N	1	Serbia
P9	11	F	Y	N	1	Serbia
P10	9	F	Y	Y	2	Türkiye, Italy
P11	2	M	Y	Y	2	France, Japan

### Data Production

The interview script's structure was consistent with the recommendations of the Rojo research team from Brazil [52] and the esteemed British Academic Professor Maguire [13]. This framework comprised: a) Political dimension, including regulations, eligibility criteria, and processes for access and registration set by governments and sports associations; b) Cultural dimension, including the historical ranking of organizations, the level of competitions participated in, the language, and the geographical location; c) Economic dimension, including wage differences and macroeconomic variations; d) Personal dimension, such as family factors and personal career aspirations. Personal dimensions, including family issues and individual career objectives. The script was prepared to consider the attributes and categories relevant to the interviewees' responses. The interview was conducted to promote a more comfortable and friendly environment by requesting the respondents provide some preliminary information regarding their club experience and motivations for migration. The interviews were preceded by a comprehensive explanation of the research objectives and confidentiality rules, whether they were conducted post-competition or during the interviewees' leisure time. Data was captured with the participants' consent, and the interviews were fully recorded to ensure their integrity. The interviews, typically conducted in hotel lobbies or coffee shops, lasted an average of 36 min. The interview period was from January 16, 2024, to May 21, 2024. Participants were given two opportunities to revise their contributions to enhance the credibility of the interview content [64]: the first was promptly following the interview, and the second was after receiving the interview transcript. However, none of the 11 participants elected to carry out any modifications.

### Data Analysis

Qualitative data was analyzed using the specific coding software NVivo™, which allowed researchers to code the collected data into various "nodes" [65] using an inductive approach [66]. To ensure the internal reliability of the study, this process was managed by two independent external coders who were familiar with the method. Initially, the same content was coded independently by each coder. A theoretical saturation test and a consistency analysis were then carried out on the node content of both coders. Discrepancies were reviewed and re-coded [67] until a consistency of over 90% was obtained. Last, the coded nodes were arranged in various categories and attributes.

## Results and Discussion

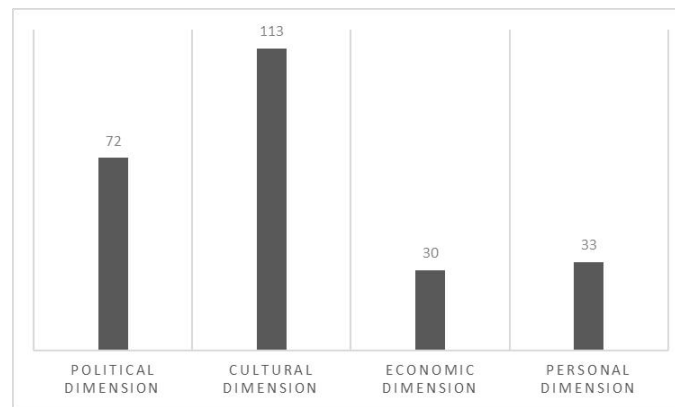


Figure 1. Coding nodes frequency grouped by category

After the interview texts were coded, approximately 248 nodes were identified, then grouped into 9 attributes related to the study's objective and categorized (Fig 1).

It has been confirmed that some categories have limited relevance to the interviewees, resulting in a low frequency of reference points for the overall study and a lack of clear information. Following the responses of the interviewees, some attributes have emerged inductively: “power struggles” (as a part of the political category) and “national sports system” (as a part of the cultural category).

It is evident that the cultural dimensions have the highest frequency of nodes. However, considering the uniformity of the interviewees and the association with previous studies, the three categories with less frequencies, namely, the political, personal, and economic dimensions - continue to provide significant perspectives.

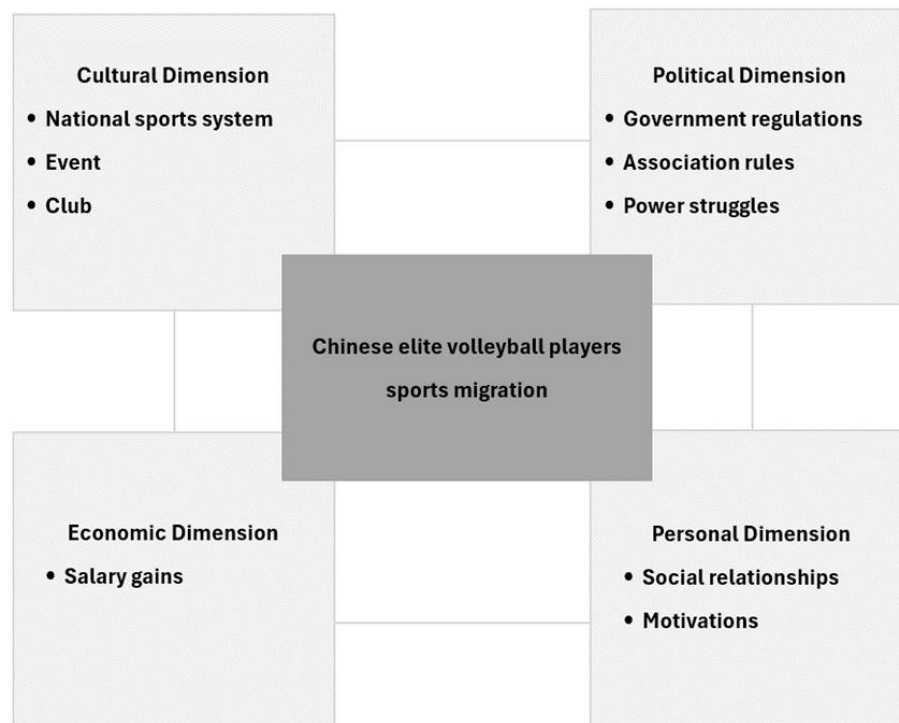


Figure 2. Dimensions affecting sports migration of elite volleyball players in China

### Cultural dimension

The cultural dimension promotes a more comprehensive understanding of the immigration process [52]. Crossan suggests that the migration patterns of athletes are determined by the international status of the sport and the country sending or receiving them [68], as per the perspective of the athletes' national federation. China is a country with a traditional advantage in volleyball. In the latest world rankings released by the International Volleyball Federation, the women's team is temporarily ranked 5th, and the men's team is ranked 26nd [69], which provides possibilities for the mobility of Chinese volleyball players. In fact, acquiring this competitive advantage is closely associated with the centralized administration of China's sports system [33,70]. However, this system's efficiency issues substantially impacted the immigration of Chinese volleyball players [54].



All the interviewees shared common perspectives: the government's investment plays a crucial role in the advancement of the athletes, resulting in a situation where they are not considered free agents. Instead, they have personnel contracts with local governments, which means they are under their management. Athletes' immigration is also influenced by the event from the perspective of their host country. For example, the Turkish Volleyball Super League and the Italian Serie A are prominent in globalization [71]. The predominant cultural trend in contemporary volleyball is immigrating to European leagues. Data indicates that in the 2019-2020 season, 88.1% of the world's volleyball immigrant players went to the European region. The players are excited about the opportunity to immigrate to Europe, which is closely related to high-level competitions like the European Champions League. Interviewee P7, who moved to Poland, is a great example:

The European volleyball event is filled with top players globally. They can grow and progress more rapidly by training and competing with these strong opponents. There, I have the chance to compete against top-tier teams(P7).

Club, like events, is an integral part of the volleyball culture of immigration destination countries. Mourao's research suggests that clubs with a higher number of championship titles and a favorable classification in the previous season were more likely to receive transfers[72]. Chinese volleyball athletes also demonstrate this tendency to migrate. Interviewees expressed that highly competitive, top-ranking societies are more appealing, as stated by P8:

Highly ranked clubs have a rich heritage and good overall conditions, and joining them can benefit one's improvement. Moreover, the remuneration is likely to be quite high(P8).

### **Political dimension**

Eligibility criteria, registration processes, and association laws profoundly influence sports migration [73]. In China, the former has slightly restricted player movement. Due to political factors, China has been absent from eight editions of the Summer Olympics since the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. To address the absence of high-level comprehensive athletic events, China initiated the National Games of the People's Republic of China in 1959, collectively known as the National Games.

Teams representing various provinces and cities participate in the National Games, and the General Administration of Sports (GAS) has formulated the Athlete Eligibility and Registration Management Measures to protect the interests of local areas [33]. This measure serves as the basis for participation in the National Games and the sole basis for participating in events hosted by the Chinese Volleyball Association, such as the National Volleyball Championship and the CVL. According to article 20, when the athlete representative qualification agreement expires, the registration unit will prioritize registering the athlete [74]. Even in China, players whose contracts have expired are subject to restrictions imposed by their original local teams. The response from interviewee P11 provides evidence supporting this claim:

We have a contract (Athlete Representative Qualification Agreement) with the provincial team. This prevents us from moving, even if the contract expires. Under normal circumstances, we retire after our contract expires. If you have not retired by the expiration date, the team will register you for another two years(P11).

Moreover, according to the FIVB Sports Regulations, the receiving club should pay the Federation of Origin Solidarity Fee and administrative fee for player international transfer to the FIVB[56]. However, two National Federations can agree to exempt the Federation of Origin Solidarity Fee. The determination of the fee amount or exemption and its impact on player mobility is influenced by the FIVB regulations and the rights of the Chinese Volleyball Association (CVA).

The sports migration of Chinese volleyball players is associated with a complex political economy located within a series of power struggles in the Chinese sports system [75]. The mission of the Olympics and the National Games is indeed crucial to the CVA and local government [35]. Particularly during the Olympic or National Games years, athletes frequently refrain from engaging in international transfers, leading to some migration periodicity[76]. The example of P10 demonstrates this point:

If I were given the opportunity, I would choose to play abroad, but the Tokyo Olympics are next year, and national interests are above all else. In the Tianjin club, there are several teammates and coaches from the national team. Training together with them will help us become more skilled at cooperating(P10).

### **Economic dimension**

Salary increases are a critical factor in the migration of players [52]. In the economic dimension, the imbalanced income differences between regions determine whether athletes decide to migrate. This perspective is rooted in classical economic theory, i.e., migration behavior will stop when a wage difference disappears [51]. The domestic yearly income of elite volleyball players in China is between 40,000 to 50,000 US dollars. Moreover, moving to high-quality divisions abroad, such as Turkey and Italy, can substantially increase yearly income. For example, Zhu Ting's annual salary reached 1.1 million euros when she relocated to the Italian Scandicci Club [36]. The athletes interviewed in this study expressed a comparable perspective. For instance:

Top players, or outstanding players, are primarily concerned about salary first. If it is lower or unsatisfied, there will be no talk of mobility(P4).

### **Personal dimension**

The coaches play a crucial role in influencing the sports migration of Chinese volleyball players and shaping their social relationships. Based on our interviews, it has been found that most players have effectively transitioned with the guidance of their coaches. This may correspond to the closed growth pathway observed in Chinese athletes [77]. These athletes start training in professional teams at 14 and have limited social interactions outside their families, coaches, and teammates. Coaches typically play a key "gatekeeper" role in athletes' growth and career development. For example, interviewees P3 and P5 recalled their transfer experiences saying:

I expressed my willingness to go out to play with my coach. The coach helped me contact overseas clubs, and then I went

out(P3).

I was on the national team then. I got there through the agent introduced to me by Lang Ping and the official channel of the FIVB(P5).

The motivations for migration among Chinese volleyball players are career development and cultural experience. This is consistent with the findings of Lenartowicz and Ciok's survey on the motivation to continue their professional careers [49]. In contrast to Suh and Kim's study on immigration motivation for American volleyball players, there are some known differences. Suh and Kim identified four key factors: career extension, financial compensation, cultural experience, and coach/player recommendations [27]. The migratory motivation of Chinese volleyball players certainly comprises financial compensation and coach recommendations, as evidenced by the athletes' explicit statements on higher salaries and coach suggestions, as previously mentioned.

During the interview process, some interviewees mentioned that an athlete's career span is limited (P6, P9), and several athletes expressed their migration motivation as that desire to experience professional leagues, for example:

I have said before that I want to experience the life, training, and playing style of a professional athlete. Wakif Bank provided me with this platform and enabled me to experience it(P10).

## CONCLUSION

The research outcomes concluded that (a) the National sports system is a significant factor in the international competitive advantage that Chinese athletes obtain from migration. The federation's event and club culture are positive factors that attract sports migration. (b) Regarding the political dimension, the government's eligibility and registration regulations restrict players' mobility, and the sports migration of Chinese volleyball players is affected by the Olympic and National Games cycles. (c) Increases in salaries are perceived as a critical factor in the decision to migrate by participants, and they are also one of the main causes of migration. (d) Coach guidance plays a significant role in the immigration process of Chinese volleyball players. It is considered an integral part of the main content influencing player migration motivations, including cultural experience and career development.

Generally, this research also emphasizes the impact of the national sports system and regulations on athlete immigration. It adds to the existing model of sports migration analysis and provides a reference for comparing migration patterns among players from different cultures and regions. In terms of practical significance, it was expected that the result of this research could provide guidance for sports managers in the field of volleyball. I hope government departments can improve the athlete registration and management system to enhance players' mobility and career choice rights. The current study's limited sample size may not accurately represent the general migration situation of Chinese volleyball players. Despite its mention of the topic, the study does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of policies on athlete immigration. To enhance the representativeness of the research findings, it is recommended for future studies to consider increasing the sample size. It would be beneficial to investigate the specific impact of different policies on athletes' migration decisions and career development.

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