

# Current Popularity of Baseball in China and Its Future Development Value

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**Abstract.** Although baseball is a very popular sport worldwide, compared with basketball, football and table tennis, it is still a very niche sport in China. Although baseball does not have a very wide audience in China at present, it has still achieved certain success in international exchanges and is gradually attracting attention. This research investigated the current situation of baseball in China (including the participation rate of baseball in China, media exposure and policy support, etc.). This research aims to assess the potential economic value of baseball in China, including event operation, copyright sales, equipment manufacturing, training markets, derivative product development, etc., to attract commercial capital and activate the industrial chain. This article will conduct an analysis by using both primary and secondary data. Although the participation rate of baseball in China is relatively low at present, it enjoys a high level of loyalty. With the support of policies, its media exposure is gradually increasing. However, the development of baseball in China still faces many problems, including the lack of venues and facilities, the threshold brought by the distribution rules, and the lack of well-known local stars.

**Keywords:** Baseball; development; sport.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background and Research Topic

Baseball is a mainstream sport in many countries, it stands as a quintessential example of a sport with profound cultural and commercial significance in regions like North America, East Asia (Japan, Korea), and Latin America. There are some organisms such as the United States (MLB), Japan (NPB), and South Korea (KBO), all of which have vast commercial ecosystems and profound cultural integration. However, the development of baseball in China is different from that in these countries. Introduced by American and Japanese missionaries and immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, baseball's history in China is longer than commonly perceived but has been punctuated by long periods of dormancy, particularly during the mid-20th century due to political and social upheaval [1]. The promotion of baseball did not reach a small peak until 2002 when the China Baseball League (CBL) was established.

### 1.2. Research Objectives and Significance

The main purpose of this study is to assess the current situation of baseball in China and evaluate its future development value. Analyze and examine the population participating in baseball in China, media exposure, and commercial development trends. This way, it can effectively fill an academic and commercial cognitive gap in China's sports industry. It can also help understand the potential value of baseball, assist institutions in formulating strategies, promote the all-round development of students, and fully support the country's "15th Five-Year Plan" for sports.

### 1.3. Research Methods and Framework

There are two main methods used in the article. The first one is secondary data, because the researcher cannot post the questionnaire and collect data in experiments directly and effectively. Therefore, it is chosen to collect, organize and analyze the existing public data and literature from academic websites, sports news and related journals. The second is case studies. Conducting research on a single piece of data based on secondary data makes the argument more convincing. For instance,

analyzing the successful case of the Japanese high school baseball system (Koshien) and how it integrates into the educational and cultural systems, etc.

This article will combine existing literature and data to analyze the current situation of baseball in China, the challenges and obstacles in the development of baseball in China, as well as future development strategies.

## **2. The Current Situation of Baseball in China**

### **2.1. The Current situation of the Chinese Professional Baseball League**

The China Baseball League (CBL) has experienced several lockdowns before. Finally, in 2019, the China Baseball Association (CBA) established a new Baseball event - the China National Baseball League (CNBL) to replace the original CBL. In the early days of the league's establishment, only four teams participated, namely Beijing Tigers, Tianjin Lions, Jiangsu Huge Horses and Guangdong Leopards. The CNBL is currently small in scale and has a limited number of teams. Until the start of the league in April 2024, there will only be 9 teams participating, mainly concentrated in some major cities.

### **2.2. A Comparison of the Development Scales of Youth Baseball and College Basketball**

In recent years, in response to the national strategy of integrating sports and education, and to comprehensively strengthen sports education for teenagers, many provinces and cities have begun to vigorously develop youth baseball, and various national and local leagues have emerged one after another. In 2024, the number of registered youth baseball schools in China was three times that of 2018, although the exact number is unknown; only 16 high schools and 30 junior high schools participated in the national championship in 2024 [2]. In contrast, it is guided by the Science and Education Department of the General Administration of Sport of China and the Chinese Basketball Association. The 7th Sport College Basketball Association (SCBA) 2024, hosted by the National Sports Training and Competition League and Shandong Sport University (National Basketball College), features nearly 1,200 participants from 63 men's and women's basketball teams representing 45 institutions of higher learning in 29 provinces across the country (Data from: General Administration of Sport of China).

### **2.3. Media Coverage and Commercialization**

In January 2025, Major League Baseball (MLB) officially announced that Fan Zhendong, the Olympic champion of table tennis, has become the MLB China Champion Honor Ambassador. This is another pioneering move by MLB in cross-industry promotion in the Chinese market. By leveraging Fan Zhendong's extensive influence and positive image in the sports world, it aims to further bridge the gap with Chinese fans and enhance the influence of baseball in China [3]. Around June 2025, CCTV will also start broadcasting the games of the CNBL, bringing baseball further into the public eye. In addition to traditional TV, digital platforms also offer other approaches. Streaming services and social media platforms such as Weibo, TikTok and Bilibili all feature highlights of MLB and NPB, attracting a niche but dedicated fan community. The official Weibo account of MLB in the United States actively attracts followers, posting highlights of the games, features of the players and behind-the-scenes content. However, compared with NBA and FIFA stars, baseball stars do not have as much appeal in China. They can only attract a small but highly loyal fan base. The commercialization level of the CNBL is relatively low, with limited sponsorship and advertising revenue. The operating funds of teams and the league mainly rely on government and corporate support. Therefore, most teams can only sell related products through retail.

## **2.4. Institutional Support**

In Chinese sport system, institutional support is one of the most important factors, particularly from the state, is often a decisive factor in a sport's success. The official governing body, the China Baseball Softball Association (CBSA), operates under the auspices of the General Administration of Sport of China (GASC).

The extent of China's support for baseball is usually related to the performance of the national team on the international stage, especially at the Olympics, so it is unstable. When baseball became an Olympic event (until 2008 and resumed in 2020), it received more concentrated resources. Its removal led to a period of reduced investment. Its recovery has once again enhanced its visibility within the sports bureaucracy.

Since the establishment of the Baseball Development Center (MLB DC) in 2007, MLB has sent many coaches and technicians to China to participate in youth training programs. Since 2009, youth training centers have been established in Wuxi, Changzhou and Nanjing, emphasizing both baseball skills and educational development. The achievements include 34 people being selected for the national team, 83 people receiving university scholarships, and 7 people signing with MLB clubs [4].

## **3. Challenges and Obstacles in the Development of baseball in China**

If baseball wants to develop in China, it must overcome many problems, including but not limited to cultural and social factors as well as the lack of infrastructure and funds.

### **3.1. Cultural and Social Factors**

China's sports policy in the 1950s was greatly influenced by the Soviet Union. It established a government-led "national system" and promoted mass sports and competitive sports simultaneously. After a period of stagnation during the Cultural Revolution, the political value of sports was rediscovered through the "Ping-Pong Diplomacy" in the 1970s. After returning to the International Olympic Committee in 1979, Olympic MEDALS were set as the core goal. The economic reform in the 1990s promoted the transformation of the sports system. However, since 1986, the reform has always been centered on the Olympic strategy. The government has concentrated resources to control the cultivation of advantageous projects through the "Olympic Glory Program", forming a unique management model led by the government and assisted by the market. This system has profoundly influenced the development of all sports, including baseball, and continues to this day [5]. It is precisely the lack of this cultural foundation that makes it difficult for baseball to evoke emotional resonance like basketball and table tennis, thereby increasing the difficulty of the development of this sport in China.

Secondly, the rules of baseball are a bit more complex compared to other ball games. For instance, for those who have never watched or are not familiar with football or basketball, they know that a score is made when the ball flies into the basket or the goal. However, for baseball, only the home run scoring mode can be directly understood by the audience. This is also a very important reason why baseball has developed in China for a long time but remains a niche sport.

### **3.2. The Lack of Infrastructure and Funds**

At present, the infrastructure for baseball in China is still relatively weak. This is not only reflected in rural and rural areas where baseball fields are scarce and facilities are simple, but also in some big cities where the number of complete baseball clubs is very small. This has brought certain difficulties to the popularization and development of baseball in China.

The common problems existing in China's sports consumption policies in terms of infrastructure also seriously restrict the development of sports like baseball, which have high requirements for venues and low popularity.

There are many community sports facilities in China that do not meet the standards, especially in old urban areas and rural regions. Sports venues in the western regions, third - and fourth-tier cities

and rural areas lag far behind those in the eastern regions and urban centers ("Towns are far better than rural areas, and second-tier cities are far better than third - and fourth-tier cities "). Indoor sports venues are particularly scarce, with only 8.5% accounting for indoor sports venues in rural areas.

The renovation of old factories, warehouses and other facilities for sports (such as baseball fields) requires a change in land nature (from industrial land M1 to sports commercial land C3). The approval process is complex, time-consuming and costly, which has led to the stagnation of many projects [6].

Although the policy requires that the coverage rate of new community sports facilities reach 100%, the lack of effective supervision and acceptance mechanisms has led to inadequate implementation.

The cost of equipment - bats, gloves, helmets, catcher gear and uniforms - is much higher than that of basketball (basically only one ball and one basket) or football (one ball and a temporary goal). This cost barrier makes many families unable to afford this sport, especially when compared with more affordable alternatives. The funds for sports management are also very limited. Administrative Centre for Handball, the expenditure budget for Baseball and Softball under General Administration of Sport of China in 2024 is 97.4973 million yuan. Compared with those more popular sports associations, the budget of the CBSA pales in comparison. (E.g., The total budget for the financial investment in Chinese football - player salaries, foreign player salaries, coaching team salaries, amortization of transfer fees, youth training investment, venues and training facilities, etc. - is approximately 457.9 million yuan.) (Data from: General Administration of Sport of China). This limits its ability to organize national championships, train coaches, referees and managers, as well as carry out effective promotional activities.

## **4. Future Development Strategies**

### **4.1. Expand its Projects (School & Amateur Leagues) and Learn from other Countries for Cooperation**

First, if baseball wants to achieve long-term development in China, it should not only focus on short-term income but also set its goals further ahead.

The development plan can be based on schools: incorporating baseball into the school system. This might require collaboration among the CBSA, MLB and the Ministry of Education to develop curriculum-friendly introductory courses, prioritize the promotion of the sport, sell basic equipment at low prices (such as sponge bats and rubber, sponge balls for beginners), and provide basic baseball training and teaching for physical education teachers. Establish inter-school leagues at the primary and secondary school levels to create a structured competitive path and cultivate a community atmosphere and awareness around this sport from an early age.

On this basis, regional teams were added. Taking the MLBDC of Jiangsu teams as an example, the operation experience of MLB was adopted. Entertainment elements such as beer sales, barbecue areas, and post-game fireworks were tried in the stadium to enhance the audience experience. Meanwhile, the Beijing team invited the general manager, coach and management consultant of the independent league from Japan to try the "Japanese-style" club operation [5]. Under the current policies, baseball as a sport can serve as a breakthrough for single enrollment and further education. Promoting this model to more cities can not only increase the popularity of baseball and stimulate people's desire to learn but also provide better educational opportunities for some students. China should actively learn from and adapt to the strategies of other countries where baseball has taken root. High school baseball games in Japan are a great development goal. Japan has developed baseball into a national cultural and competitive activity, which provides a model for how to integrate this sport into youth culture.

### **4.2. Expand and Commercialize the League and Attract Investment**

To successfully commercialize baseball, CNBL needs a sustainable business model. This might involve signing several popular players to the existing baseball league, improving the quality of the

game through high-salary professional players (including targeted signings), attracting more people to watch, and most importantly, enhancing the experience of fans in the stadium to make the game more suitable for family and entertainment. Or it could offer broadcasting rights on multiple platforms with the aim of opening the mass market, allowing fans to watch the games anytime and anywhere among consumers who are restricted by time or geographical factors [7]. In order to attract investment, the league and teams need to be creative enough. This requires the league to seek sponsorship from companies associated with countries that love baseball (for example, Japanese or American companies in China), or to seek domestic brands associated with a sport that has a positive, healthy and strategic image (for example, local sports brands or pharmaceutical companies).

In addition, digital promotion methods can also be utilized. To demonstrate sufficient potential value and market to attract investors, the most cost-effective and efficient approach in today's era is the digital channel. For instance, MLB.TV is a successful digital promotion and sales product. It directly sells the viewing rights of competitions to global fans through digital channels, breaking the traditional mindset of the audience (the restrictions that competitions must be held on-site or on TV broadcasts) [8].

### **4.3. How to Improve the Conflict between Learning and Sports Development**

Under China's education system, it is very difficult for many families to find a balance between physical education and study.

The most direct and common problem in this conflict is absence from classes. In the high school education system, students in physical education colleges spend a lot of time training and thus often miss classes. Secondly, there is the issue of physical and mental exhaustion. Students who practice sports have to endure both physical and mental exhaustion during their daily training. On this basis, when they attempt to complete their study tasks, they will find that their energy cannot be sufficient to finish them [9].

The strategy of Elite Sport Programs (ESP) may work in China, where students and parents are in great need of sports coordinators, who can give objective advice to families that are wavering between sports and studies [10]. It is also possible to handle some complicated related affairs with these families.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study analyzed the significance of baseball in China and its future development value. Baseball has growth and development potential in China. The participation of teenagers is gradually expanding. The cooperation between MLB and China has achieved a certain degree of success, and there have also been breakthroughs in TV coverage compared to before. All these can prove it.

However, the development of baseball in China also faces considerable challenges. Due to its late development time, the fact that its rules are more difficult to understand compared to other sports, the lack of cultural resonance, the shortage of infrastructure and funds, as well as the incomplete business system, all these are the problems that baseball needs to overcome to develop in China at present.

Research suggests that the development of baseball in China needs to start from the grassroots level (schools) and requires a long-term plan to be implemented. And it needs an opportunity to expand its popularity, as well as its commercial feasibility and entertainment value, with the establishment of a stable market as the prerequisite for development.

The limitation of this study lies in its reliance on secondary data. As an article mainly based on secondary data, the analysis is limited by the existing data or materials and lacks accurate data on the specific target group. Although there is information from coaches or administrators, there are still considerable limitations.

In this study, I remain optimistic about the development of baseball in China. Regarding its current progress, I remember that the work is basically done and there are still many possibilities for

future development. In the future, further media promotion is still needed to help baseball expand its influence and shake off the label of "niche". In addition, more investment should be made in various baseball-related institutions and further cooperation should be carried out with the education system. Ultimately, baseball integrates into daily life, making it more than just a hobby for a few people.

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