**President Xis Great Chinese Soccer Dream - The New York Times**

QINGYUAN, China ” The 48 soccer fields of the vast Evergrande Football School in south China seem barely enough for its 2, 800 students. Against a backdrop of school spires that seem modeled on Hogwarts, the young athletes swarm onto the fields nearly every day, kicking, dribbling and passing in the hope of soccer glory and riches. œSoccer will be my career after I grow up, Wang Kai, a gangly who has studied at the boarding school for over three years, said after a morning session under the supervision of a Spanish coach. œI want to be the Chinese Cristiano Ronaldo, he said, referring to the Portuguese superstar. Grooming the next Ronaldo or Messi has become a national project in China, where the countrys No. 1 fan, President Xi Jinping, is bent on transforming the country into a great soccer power. It is a moonshot for China, whose teams have ranked poor to middling in recent international competition. But the effort has already unleashed a surge of spending and support for the game that has stunned fans and players around the world. In the last two weeks, the main Chinese league has plucked foreign stars from Europe and South America with contracts reported to be worth as much as $40 million a year, the highest pay for any soccer player in the world. A Chinese club offered the real Ronaldo $105 million a year, but he declined, his agent said last week. These giddying sums are shaking the landscape of pro soccer. Antonio Conte, the manager of Englands fabled Chelsea team, denounced the Chinese spending spree last month as a œdanger for all teams in the world. The drive to match Chinas economic ascent with success on the soccer field has become emblematic of Mr. Xis ambition to transform China into a great and confident power. œMy biggest hope for Chinese soccer is that its teams become among the worlds best, he announced in 2015. In the last two years, the government has poured the kind of concentrated effort into soccer that it has previously devoted to winning Olympic medals in individual sports like diving and gymnastics. It has promised to clean up and reorganize professional soccer and build a new generation of players by creating tens of thousands of soccer fields and adding soccer programs in tens of thousands of schools. The aim is to establish a flow of top players eventually capable of winning the coveted mens World Cup and returning the womens team to its former glory. That effort has emboldened Chinese clubs to spend lavishly. As well as paying tens of millions for foreign players, Chinese team owners have spent hundreds of millions of dollars buying into European clubs, hoping to tap their coaching and marketing expertise. œCurrent spending has created massive expectations, said Simon Chadwick, a professor of sports enterprise at the University of Salford in Britain. œSpending big on players is also about acquiring heroes and icons. But if soccer distills Mr. Xis national ambitions, it also illustrates how his plans could falter, as they have in other arenas, in a muddle of rushed and distorted enforcement, especially at the local level. There has been resistance by parents, worried about their children taking precious time away from academics, as well as fear that splurging on foreign stars diverts money and attention from fostering homegrown talent. The pitfalls in fixing soccer, it turns out, are a bit like those in fixing the economy a desire for quick, flashy success is putting goals at risk. Peoples Daily, the main newspaper of the Communist Party, warned last month of a œbubble of reckless spending in Chinese professional soccer that could burst and badly damage the sport. Too many investors had feverish expectations, while some clubs, officials and schools were only going through the motions of developing young players, the newspaper said. œOne of the biggest problems is said Cameron Wilson, a Scottish resident of Shanghai who edits Wild East Football, a website that follows the sport in China. œThere are these great plans and ideas. But when it gets down to the level in the provinces, its like people doing their own thing. Chinas passionate soccer fans would be thrilled to have competitive national teams instead of the lackluster ones they have now. The national mens team recently placed 83rd in FIFA rankings, just ahead of the Faroe Islands, a remote outcrop of Denmark with fewer than 50, 000 inhabitants, and it is unlikely to win a spot in the 2018 World Cup. The womens team ” the pride of Chinese soccer in past decades ” has stumbled. It was for the Womens World Cup in 1999 but slipped to 13th in the latest rankings. œThe national team is a joke, said Xu Yun, 16, who had come to Workers Stadium in Beijing to watch his favorite Beijing team clobber a listless opponent from Henan Province. œI think it will need decades to get it right. Its not just a question of spending money, its attitude. For years, the domestic professional game was riddled with corruption, brazen even by Chinas standards. Since revelations grew into a national scandal in 2009, the worst cheating has been cleaned up. œIt still exists, Mr. Wilson said. œJust not so blatantly. For Xi, soccer has been a passion since childhood. His trips abroad have included photographs with David Beckham and other soccer celebrities. In Ireland in 2012, he famously had an enthusiastic but seemingly rusty go at kicking a ball. In September, he revisited his old school in Beijing, where he learned to kick and became a fan of the game, according to memoirs of his former teacher. œLook how healthy I am, Mr. Xi told young soccer players at the school. œI laid the basis for that through sports when I was young. Private investors have piled into professional soccer, encouraged by Xis backing for the game and apparently eager to curry favor with his government. In the main pro trading season last year, the 16 Chinese Super League teams spent about $300 million hiring away promising foreign players, outstripping player spending by the English Premier League by nearly $120 million, according to FIFA TMS, a player transfer data company. Prices in 2017 are likely to go even higher. But Mr. Xis focus is on the long game and the next generation of players. His plan calls for 50, 000 schools to have a strong emphasis on soccer by 2025, a leap from 5, 000 in 2015. The number of soccer fields across the country will grow to over 70, 000 by the end of 2020, from under 11, 000. By then, the plan says, 50 million Chinese, including 30 million students, will regularly play soccer. œNow principals at every school are paying quite a bit more attention to soccer, said Dai Wei, the athletic director at r. Xis old school, the Bayi School. œThat was unthinkable before. Yet there is deep cultural resistance, even at Bayi. Some parents discourage their children from committing time to sports, Mr. Dai said, because they have so much homework and face stiff competition on academic exams. While China has excelled at individual sports that demand intense discipline from an early age, the country has not done as well at fostering group sports, where skills like teamwork and improvisation count as much as personal virtuosity. The privately run Evergrande school, the worlds biggest soccer boarding school, says its formula of intense training combined with a solid education could show the way for developing young players. œAs more soccer schools are built, therell be more and more kids playing, and the stars will multiply, too, said Liu Jiangnan, the principal of the school, which opened in 2012. œId guess that in seven or eight years, half the members of the Chinese national squad will come from this school. Drawn by such hopes, parents pay up to about $8, 700 a year to send children here, where 24 Spanish coaches oversee training. Students spend 90 minutes a day on drills and also play on weekends. Promising players get scholarships, and children from poorer families get discounts, school officials said. But even here, the children come to the game later than their European and South American counterparts, and they often lack solid grounding in teamwork and tactics, said Sergio Zarco Diaz, a Spanish coach. œThe kids are getting better, year by year, he said hopefully. But the Evergrande approach is too expensive to be widely copied. Some schools, facing a shortage of coaches and space for fields, have devised their own drills, like soccer gymnastics, in which children stand in lines tossing a ball up, down and around. It may impress visiting officials, but it is scant preparation for the free flow of the game, said Zhang Lu, a widely respected soccer commentator. œChinese soccer has failed before through rushing for instant success, Mr. Zhang said in an interview in Beijing, recalling previous failed efforts to build up the game in the 1980s and 1990s. œThe problem is that everyones thinking is still deeply set in traditional ideas. Everyone thinks soccer is just about getting results, competition, training, creating stars. Mr. Zhang has instead been encouraging schools to focus on fun and broad participation. That approach gives more children a break from the monotony of the classroom and will eventually bring out more future champions than an elitist, approach, he argues. Some schools are trying his way. On a recent afternoon, the smog that often covers Beijing lifted and the children of Caoqiao Elementary School rushed onto the fields, shouting and squealing with delight. œThis morning soccer had been canceled because of the smog, said the principal, Lin Yanling. œBut at midday I notified the kids that it was back on, and they all went crazy with relief.

**Chris Buckley**

**2017**