

《Soccer gets big boost in China》

China and FIFA on Wednesday vowed to deepen cooperation, as President Xi Jinping stressed the goal of gradually raising the level of Chinese soccer.

Xi and FIFA chief Gianni Infantino made the remarks during their meeting at the Great Hall of the People.

"We are aware of the fact that FIFA is paying more attention to the development of football in China these days, and I do believe that China's cooperation with FIFA in the future enjoys brighter prospects," Xi said.

The president said making China a sporting power is an important part of the country's development goals, according to a news release issued after the meeting.

The Chinese government attaches great importance to the development of soccer and has given strong and sustained support, he said.

However, the popularity and competitive level of Chinese soccer still lags far behind that of strong powers in the sport, Xi said.

The essence of soccer lies not only in competition, but, more importantly, in enhancing people's health and cultivating people's patriotism, collectivism and the spirit of indomitable struggle, the president said.

He said that in recent years, China has been concentrating on an overall plan for soccer reform and development, and has firmly pushed ahead with reforms.

The efforts include cultivating soccer culture throughout society, deepening soccer management system reform, establishing a professional and effective management system in accordance with the rules of the sport's global development and China's national situation, vigorously developing youth soccer, improving infrastructure such as venues and strengthening international exchanges.

The efforts aim to "gradually raise the level of China's football sport through solid and continuous work over a long time and have the positive football culture become positive energy in Chinese people's pursuit of the Chinese Dream", Xi said.

He said China will support FIFA's efforts and expects to contribute to global soccer development.

"It is a great pleasure to meet you, because we are meeting a real football fan, so we can speak about football," Infantino told Xi at the start of their meeting.

"There is nothing better than speaking about football. Maybe playing football, but speaking about football is always

fantastic," Infantino said. He added that as people who are excited about and passionate over the game, they can "start a new era for football, not only in China" but in the whole world.

Xi, who developed an interest in soccer during his childhood, has become known as a big fan of the sport.

Infantino said FIFA speaks highly of the Chinese government's efforts to promote soccer. He said China carries a lot of weight and is a priority in FIFA's development strategy.

Developing soccer will not only benefit sports careers, but will be a healthy factor for Chinese society, according to a professor at Shanghai University of Sport who declined to be named.

Zhang Qing, CEO of Key-Solution Sports Consulting, said China has a large and passionate contingent interested in the sport and a government that is using its strength to develop soccer.

"These are two super good conditions for football's development, and apparently FIFA is fully aware of that. Besides, this is a huge market that cannot be neglected," he said. Zhang added that he expects FIFA to come up with concrete measures to cooperate with China and help raise China's level in the sport.

Zhou Jin and Sun Xiaochen contributed to this story.

