



The Paradox of Sustainable Development in the Japanese Football Ecosystem: A Critical Analysis of the Glocalization Towards the Influence of Europeanization as a Cultural Imperialism

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Abstract. This study aims to examine the nature of football-related interactions between Germany, England, and Japan. Business interests, politics, and cultural exchanges can occur exceptionally rapidly through the sport of football. Europe remains the epicenter of global football to this day. Although Latin American giants continue to assert dominance, Europe is the central hub for football development worldwide. European football culture has influenced Japan across multiple dimensions, from internal club management to the expansion of football fandom within society. This qualitative research utilizes cultural imperialism theory by Armand Mattelart and is based on Antonio Gramsci's main work, Cultural Hegemony. Japan structured its football development by adopting the European system, with a particular emphasis on England and Germany. The strong influence of European football culture is apparent, as it is regarded as the ideal model for progress due to its accomplishments, dominance, and sophisticated methodologies.

This phenomenon represents a form of cultural imperialism that has influenced Japanese football's evolution, structural development, and transformation into a dominant force within the Asian football landscape. Grounded in historical causality and sociological perspectives, this article critically examines the process of glocalization between European and Japanese football, shedding light on the formation of new dimensions within this dynamic relationship.

Keywords: Football, Cultural Imperialism, Glocalization.

1 Introduction

Japanese football originated through European influence, having been introduced in 1873 by the British Royal Navy under the leadership of Lieutenant-Commander Archibald L. Douglas, who familiarized local cadets with the sport (Embassy of Japan in the UK, 2013). The Japanese Football Association (JFA, 1974) claimed that the event was the official introduction of football to the Japanese community. Just a year later, the government under Meiji's era instructed every school and university to adopt sports, including football, as their mandatory extracurricular activities (Whitfeld, 2021).

This phenomenon is believed as a form of cultural imperialism (Guttmann & Thompson, 2004). Unfortunately, football did not gain much attention from Japanese people at first. In contrast, the Japanese were more interested in baseball due to its closer connection to their daily lives, traditions, and religions (Sakaue & Thompson, 2001). Those aspects were the reasons why baseball advanced more than football in the modernization of sports in Japan. On the other hand, the Japanese government in the modern era is concerned that athletes cannot survive in baseball, as the clubs are owned by a private company (Embassy of Japan in the UK, 2013).

Nowadays, football is becoming an emerging sport in Japan. It was emulated by the 2002 World Cup, which was held in Japan and South Korea. JFA believed that with the World Cup, they could gain more public attention on football and compete popularity of baseball (Buttler, 2006). That makes sense because, when comparing attendance between 1993 and the start of 2001, the J.League demonstrates significant growth

in the number of attendances, with 29,649,817 spectators watching 2,106 matches in the stadium, which means the average number was 14,079 per match (Horne & Bleakley, 2006).

Within the complex process, Japan surged as the new force in football. Japan's football national team has now secured a spot in the Top 15 of the FIFA World Men's Ranking (FIFA, 2025). Their position is even better if we compare it with the United States, one of their old allies. Japan also proved itself to be the most successful team in Asia, as evidenced by its ranking and trophies in various tournaments and competitions.

Despite its notable advancements in football, Japan continues to be positioned by many scholars within a peripheral framework, often regarded as a marginal player in the global football hierarchy (Kuper & Szymanski, 2018). This persistent categorization reflects enduring Eurocentric narratives that undermine Japan's achievements, both within Asia and increasingly on the world stage. Moreover, Japan remains entangled in structures of cultural imperialism, as evidenced by recurring expressions of Western dominance in public and institutional discourses. Why has Japan ultimately become trapped within such a conceptual framework? Could this reflect the inherent difficulty for an object to extricate itself from the grip of cultural imperialism? In what ways has Japan become further entangled in, or even subsumed by, the logic of cultural imperialism?

2 Methods and Framework

This study will use a qualitative interpretative method within two theories that will be applied: Armand Mattelart's concept of Cultural Imperialism and Antonio Gramsci's main work, Cultural Hegemony. Mattelart explained that cultural imperialism can change the identity of the nation through reality transformation in every aspect, but starts from the economy and political way (1976). In the case of this study, the process begins with the economy also political matters, until the Japanese see the opportunity to adopt some cultures of England and Germany for their interest. Slowly, England and Germany manifested their values of football, which influenced the behavior of the Japanese towards sports.

Gramsci's main work about Cultural Hegemony will also be used in this study to understand how England and Germany infiltrated the civil society in Japan and made a new superstructure in football. Gramsci (1971) argued that the influence from outside can start from corporatism or economic matters, and political interest.

The researcher will play an important role in interpreting and reflecting on the research data. This research uses the deductive approach to strengthen the result (Cresswell, 2018). Interviews with some ex-players have been conducted to give various dimensions of this phenomenon. Their testimonies are needed to explore how the two theories are implemented in a real event. The analysis of Japanese players' performance with their clubs and national teams will also be examined through seasonal graphs to identify patterns of success in this case.

3 Literature Review

We need to understand how European culture can infiltrate Japanese ideology in football. Historically, education played the most important role in the cultural imperialism of football in Japan (Whitfield, 2022). Through this medium, cultural erosion happened in Japan (Mattelart, 1976). The process is relatively easier because there is a certain age for the development stages in football, especially if we talk about Japan's Way (Edwards, 2017).

In the modern era, education is not standing alone but with technology. Within technology, the process of cultural imperialism is accelerated because of its agility, variety, high speed of information, and practicality. People cannot avoid the effects of cultural assimilation and internationalization (Mattelart & Siegelau, 1980), especially in football, which is becoming the new tool of diplomacy.

As Japan realized its lack of football knowledge since the Meiji era, JFA transformed its system and adopted some details from European football, especially from Germany. However, they didn't make the system very similar to the European system, combining the local values, science, and goals. This setup could have happened because of Japan's government's political strategy since the 1960s. The 1964 Olympics in Tokyo and the Osaka Expo 1970 helped Japan give a new impression to the West; they were back and had grown as new forces in the economy (Tamari, 2017). Furthermore, Japan needs to be more agile in forming national branding.

Football has become a key avenue for Japan to build its national branding, particularly because Europeans have long regarded Japan as part of the peripheral world of football (Kuper & Szymanski, 2022). Nowadays, however, more than 100 Japanese players have pursued professional careers in Europe, with some even becoming central figures in their respective clubs. The country has localized its football ideology in the cultural imperialism dimension (Robertson, 1995), using it for its biggest goal to be the world champion by 2050.

4 Results

4.1 Europe Has a Special Persona for Japanese Football

Sports, especially football, are strongly tied to Western culture. Its definition, industrially, always emphasizes Western dominance because of its benchmark of regulations (Kummel, 2013). For football, European teams are too powerful to match because of their technology, innovation in game structure, tactics, and even regulations. In the case of Japan, technological development, competition structures, youth development, and even conceptualizations of the game itself continue to draw heavily from European values and frameworks.

Japan uses an agent to change its youth development. It started in the 1960s when Diettmir Cramer was hired by JFA. The main target for Cramer was the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, and his biggest success was when Japan surprised Argentina with a 3-2 win. Far from that, Cramer built a complex system for Japan in youth development and amateur level (Petrov, 2013), mirroring Germany's tiered complex system. Cramer also

acknowledged becoming an initiator for the J.League competition structure (J.League 2023). Regarding his achievement, Cramer stands as the sole European figure to be recognized in the JFA Hall of Fame and holds the status as Father of Japanese Football, underscoring his enduring symbolic status within the narrative of Japan's football development (JFA).

To avoid the negative aspects of being a copycat of Germany, in the modern era, Japan developed its philosophy, *Japan's Way*. This project reflects Japan's awareness of its shortcomings in football. It serves as a blueprint for Japanese football, designed with the specific goal of improving its quality. The term was officially declared by the Japan Football Association in 2005 and began to be introduced in all Technical Committee meetings a year later (JFA, 2022).

This blueprint has a noble mission for Japan. The big goal is for Japan to go through to the World Cup Final and be the champion in 2050. Japan's Way has a metaphor, combining the strength and seafaring skills of their ancestors navigating the open seas with the use of a compass. The word "compass" is mandatory for Japan's Way to navigate its football development, not only following the trends. "Navigate" is the word that can describe how Japan's Way builds itself for Japanese football goods. They are not only focusing on the national team, but also on the process of creating great footballers and sustainable talent for the long term. Besides Germany, Japan has six other nations that have become its models, like Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Italy, France, England, and Belgium. You have to take note, four of them are European, making Japan look very closely at copying the models of their development.

Masanaga Kageyama, JFA Technical Director (2024), said Japan is creating its path in every dimension, starting from grassroots, youth development, coaching, and national competitions. All of them must be aligned with Japan’s Way. JFA believed that the synergy among all stakeholders can enrich football development in Japan. While the football trend is changing rapidly, Japan sticks to its philosophy, but it can also be dynamic in anticipating global development in contemporary football.

We can see the evidence in the figure below, where Japan has a similar development phase to that of other European nations, which have been its models. For the simplest one, let’s compare how Japan's youth development system compares with Germany and England.

Japan	Germany	England
U-8 (Starts): Focus on basic techniques like passing, dribbling, etc. Based on the Fun Football concept.	U-8 (Basic Area): Focus on basic techniques like passing, dribbling, etc. Based on the Fun Football concept.	U-8 to U-11 (Foundation phase): Giving the freedom to explore and experiment, create positivity, and also creativity on the field.
U-12 (Growth): Improving their basic skills and technique.	U-12 to U-15 (Build-up Area): Improve the basic area.	U-12 to U-16 (Development phase): Enhancing basic skills, with other guidance to maturity

Focus on the development of the attitude and desire to win.	Enhancing their attitude and desire to win.	within their psychological transitions.
U-13 to U-17 (Challenge): Acquire football knowledge with a fun competition concept.	U-16 onward (Performance Area): Transition period to prepare the players for the elite football system. In the last four years, youth football began with U-16 in the competition pyramid.	U-17 to U-23 (Professional development phase): Players in this stage are tied to The Elite Player Performance Plan, a long-term strategy to develop more and better homegrown players, represent the club, the Premier League, and the whole football ecosystem in England.
U-17 Above (Youth Elite): Enhancing their skills to adapt to professional needs.	Transition Area: Change from youth to professional football, in terms of second team U-21 or U-23 in the game operations.	Professional stage: The players become full-time professional players after the clubs give them their first contract.

Fig.1: Comparison of Youth Development Programs between Japan, Germany, and England Football (Japan's Way, 2022; DFL, 2024; FA, 2022)

Based on Figure 1, we can see the similarities between Japanese, German, and English Football in the youth development area. All of them are making the U-8 level the earliest stages for the kids to know about football, manifest their interest, and develop their character. There is no complex curriculum at this stage, while the Fun Football concept is the main focus.

If we look deeper, the youth development structure between Japan and Germany has more similarities than England. Yet, Japan modified its structure when inserting the U-12 phase as Growth Stages, while Germany uses U-12 to U-15 as the Build Up Stages. This policy is becoming evidence that Japan's Way asserts the German Football value, and modifies it according to the local situations.

For the specific matters, Japanese and English have a similar system in the individual development plan. When English Football has an Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), Japanese Football has an Individual Development Plan (IDP). Both systems agree that if all young players have uniqueness, their path and a different approach psychologically, even technically (Japan's Way 2022 & Premier League 2016). That's why Japanese and English Football involve the education aspect in the players' individual development.

In the professional area, J.League asserted some values from the Bundesliga in professional matters. The structure of the pyramid competition in Japan is copied from Germany. Not only because of Cramer's influence, but J.League, as the operator of competition, asserts the value of the Bundesliga within the club licensing system (J.League). This

adoption has a noble purpose, making every club in Japan more sustainable in its operations in every aspect, including developing its young players.

Level	J.League Japan	Bundesliga Germany
Top Tier	J1 League with 20 clubs participating	Bundesliga with 18 clubs participating
Second Tier	J2 League with 20 clubs participating	2. Bundesliga with 18 clubs participating
Third Tier	J3 League with 20 clubs participating	3. Bundesliga with 18 clubs participating
Semi Pro	Japan Football League	Regionalliga
Re-regional/Amateur	Regional Leagues, Prefectural	Oberliga, etc

Fig.2: Similarity between Japanese and German Football Pyramid Competition (Japan's Way, 2022; DFL, 2024)

It started when Saburo Kawabuchi, Chairman of J.League in 1993, had an experience when he was still a football player back in the 1960s. When prepared for the Tokyo Olympics in Duisburg, West Germany, he was impressed by the club’s management, facilities, curriculum, and how football can attract the community to get involved actively in the game. Based on that experience, he, along with other J.League officials, eventually began developing a competition system modeled after the Bundesliga (Okubo, 2007).

Even so, the difference between German and Japanese clubs is in the ownership patterns. While the Bundesliga applies the system 50+1 shareholder regulation to avoid capitalist dominance because fans have their

votes to control club activities (Bundesliga, 2023), the J.League does not have it (J.Club Management Guide, 2024). Even some clubs are tied to a certain corporation, such as Nagoya Grampus, Kashima Antlers, and Yokohama F Marinos, allowing them to freely gain revenue and profit from their activities (Okubo, 2007).

Shohei Matsunaga, a former Japanese professional football player who played with Bundesliga outfit Schalke II 04, admitted Japan has a special bond with German football because it has learnt a lot from them and asserted its values of football to develop the system in the amateur and professional competitions, grassroots level, and even in federation management.

We learned from Germany in the past and assert their value. Also, a lot of Japanese players are building their careers there. (Matsunaga, personal interview, 2025).

European values on the development system are not only implemented in men's football, but also in women's, futsal, and para-football players. This method can drive Japan into consistency to produce their best talent, helping them fulfil the target to be World Champions in 2050, as Japan's Way mentioned. This phenomenon is becoming the real implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17, Multistakeholder partnerships. The adoption of European values was not undertaken solely by the Japan Football Association (JFA); rather, it was facilitated through partnerships with various entities, such as the German Football Federation (DFB), the English Football Association (FA), and even Bundesliga clubs like Bayern Munich.

The collaboration between JFA and DFB explores more opportunity to expand the potential in Japanese football, because the memorandum of understanding (MoU) aims to facilitate cooperation in match operations and competition modes, exchange of management or administration staff, marketing, IT and digitalization, Corporate Social Responsibility and fan engagement, football museums, friendly matches of national teams, coach education, talent promotion, also futsal and beach soccer (JFA, 2022).

Meanwhile, the collaboration with Bayern Munich has focused on player development, particularly at the youth level. The Bayern Campus program has been utilized by the JFA to support the development of talented young Japanese players in enhancing their technical skills and overall football proficiency (FC Bayern, 2022). The JFA seeks the expertise of the DFB and Bayern Munich in football development. Conversely, coaches from the DFB and Bayern Munich gain valuable experience by working with Asian players, whose characteristics differ from those of European or South American talents.

JFA not only builds the collaboration with the Bundesliga, Premier League, DFB, and FA, but also with FIFA. As the most powerful football organization in the world, FIFA has a responsibility to support its members, including the JFA, in developing their football through the FIFA Forward Program. This program gives every single member an aid package, including fresh money, infrastructure, development programs, and assistance from a FIFA expert. Japan has been getting some advantages from this program since 2016 (FIFA, 2025). They are using the program

to build the youth level competition, U-12, U-15, U-18, also the Empress's Cup JFA Japan Women's Football Championship (FIFA, 2022).

Not only JFA-to-European Federation collaboration, but also club-to-club partnership, helps Japanese football to develop its grassroots and professional level. Certain clubs in Japan are building a collaboration with European clubs, such as Sanfreece Hiroshima with FC Koeln (Germany), Yokohama F Marinos with Manchester City (England), and Vissel Kobe with Aston Villa (England). Their partnership form quite variously, in terms of different purposes, vision, and mission.

In 2021, Japan can produce 25 professional players who are contracted by J.League clubs and 32 others promoted to the national youth teams at every level. Those competitions are evolving year by year and promoting new talent constantly. Takefusa Kubo is one of the best talents who were promoted via the U-18 competition, which is called the Prince Takamado Trophy JFA U-18 Premier League. Currently, Japan has promoted one of the most promising central defenders in Asia, Kota Takai. He just signed the contract with Tottenham Hotspur and made a transfer record as the most expensive player from the J.League to a Premier League club, with a 5 million pounds sterling deal.

4.2 Behind the Shadow

Japan is doing the glocalization process (Robertson, 1995) when integrating and translating European values into its local football community. On the contrary, they are still trapped in European cultural imperialism. We can see the evidence in their local club, the Urawa Red Diamonds. They utilized the nicknames of Manchester United, The Red

Devils, and claimed themselves as “Japanese Manchester United”, regarding their jersey colours, and hired European players and managers at the beginning of the J.League (Satoshi, 2006).

In this era, some clubs build special bonds with European clubs. Yokohama F Marinos is not only building an ordinary partnership with Manchester City, but also becoming their sister club after joining to City Football Group (Manchester City, 2014). After that, Yokohama F Marinos needs to adapt their management, development system until the jersey’s colour represents the City Football Group Identity, which is blue. Also, JFA itself building a collaboration with Bayern Munich, the giant Bundesliga outfit. Their collaboration just renewed in 2021, giving the bold dimension of German football influence in Japan.

JFA also invited some English referees to lead their J.League matches, partnering with the locals. This method is used by JFA to give a medium for the refreshment and innovation in officiating matches from European style (JFA, 2023). Also, Brighton and Hove Albion winger Kaoru Mitoma thinks that playing in the Premier League is a dream for every player in Japan because “not many Japanese can go through to the Premier League” (Premier League, 2024).

I interviewed two legendary players, Bastian Schweinsteiger and Luis Nani, to gain their perspective on European football dominance in the world, including Japan. Both of them played in the Premier League and the Bundesliga, which are among the Big 5 Giant Competitions in Europe. Also, in those competitions, several Japanese players were hired by some clubs. On that occasion, they agreed that Europe is still becoming central to football (Schweinsteiger and Nani, personal interview,

2025). Not only for the invention of the rules, game tactics, system, or technology, but also the quality of competitions is becoming a key factor in providing entertainment for the supporters or fans.

Their opinion is based on the level of competition in the Premier League and Bundesliga. For them, playing at that level is a dream for every player in the world. For instance, Premier League and Bundesliga clubs are steadily participating in the UEFA Champions League, which is the melting pot for the best European clubs and the greatest players in the world (Schweinsteiger, personal interview, 2025). The greatest means we are just talking about the player who has the best quality and the highest market value. Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, and now even Mohamed Salah, Kylian Mbappe, Jude Bellingham, etc, have been playing in this competition. With this ecosystem, the Champions League offers a luxurious experience to all the players in the world.

Playing in the Champions League was something special. We always made jokes about the Champions League, starting from music, results, games, etc. You grew up in this environment, and it made you believe and dream about this. One day, we can play in these stages and lift the trophy. I did it once, and it was a great feeling, like I flew out to the other planet. You can play with the best player in the world. Only the best player and the best team can win this competition. I was lucky can be a part of the Champions League. (Nani, personal interview, 2025)

The football-sphere of the Champions League not only attracts European or South American players, as two giants of regional football, but also Asian players. Korean, Iraqi, Japanese, and even Indonesian players,

dreaming of playing in Europe. Matsunaga (2025) admitted that European football has its own persona to attract all players around the world and believes the allure of European competition is quite hard to resist. As a Japanese, Matsunaga admitted Japan still has to work harder to develop its football to match European dominance in every aspect.

Within this opinion, no wonder there are many Japanese players pursuing their careers in Europe. Among 103 Japanese players are those building their careers in Europe in the 2024/25 season (Nikkei, 2024). This number is increased by 50 percent if we compare it to the 2019/20 season. Soccerway (2025) said that the most favorite Japanese player in Europe right now is Germany, with 43 players. But, if we look closely at the number of Japanese players who are playing at the Bundesliga level, just eight players can manage that, while seven other players pursue their careers at the second and even third tier. How about the rest? They are playing in the regional and even amateur competitions.

Countries	Total	Top Flight	Second Tier	Third Tier	Below or Amateur
England	18	6	8	1	3
Germany	43	8	2	5	28
Italy	1	1	0	0	0
Spain	22	2	6	12	2
France	7	5	0	0	2

Fig.3: The distribution of Japanese players across the Big Five European leagues (Soccerway, as per May 1, 2025)

This phenomenon also happened in the Premier League and LaLiga. Just six Japanese players can play in the Premier League, and Kaoru Mitoma is the highest profile figure because he is taking a spot in the starting eleven regularly. Meanwhile, in LaLiga, only two Japanese players, Takuma Asano (Mallorca) and Takefusa Kubo (Real Sociedad), feature regularly every week.

The growing presence of Japanese players in European leagues is a positive indication of football's globalization, offering valuable opportunities to observe and understand the developmental frameworks underpinning their footballing success. But it's not easy because competition in German football is notably intense, necessitating not only superior physical strength but also a high degree of cognitive and tactical acumen to secure regular playing time (Matsunaga, 2025).

Not only are the minimum numbers of Japanese players who play regularly every week, but the salaries they receive, still lower than the others. Mitoma earns only 80 thousand pounds sterling per week or 4.16 million a year, making him the third-highest-paid player at Brighton (Capology, 2025), despite his consistent performance throughout the 2024/25 season, during which he made over 30 appearances, scored 10 goals, and provided four assists. Wataru Endo, the Japanese national football team captain, received less than Mitoma, just 50 thousand pounds sterling per week or 2.6 million a year.

Compared with the salary of Andres Iniesta when he played for Visel Kobe in the J.League, both of them are none. In the 2025 season, Iniesta received 27.9 million euros a year (FootyStats). For that reason,

Iniesta was the highest-paid player in the J.League, with Yuya Osako ranking just behind him. It's reasonable because, as we know, Iniesta is a high-profile European player who won the World Cup in 2010 with Spain, collected nine LaLiga trophies, and four Champions League titles when he played for Barcelona. However, the salary gap between Osako and Iniesta was substantial, reaching 25.4 million euros a year. Behind Osako, there is Nagoya Grampus striker Kasper Junker, from Denmark. He received 1.4 million euros annually. As a result, two European players ranked among the top three highest-paid players in the J.League for the 2024/25 season.

Japanese players, similar to their African counterparts, generally receive below-average salaries despite consistent on-field performances. European clubs, particularly those in England, tend to offer higher wages to South American players from countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. These nations are regarded as traditional football powerhouses, a status reflected in their international credibility, well-established infrastructure, and more advanced scouting systems and youth development programs (Farnell et al., 2024).

4.3 Tools of Marketing

Football is no longer a second choice for the Japanese and is now believed to be as popular as baseball. This phenomenon began in 1998, when Japan qualified for the World Cup for the first time through the qualification round, triggering euphoria in every community (Matsunaga, personal interview, 2025). The atmosphere was even bigger four

years later, when Japan became the host and collaborated with South Korea. It was the first time Asian countries held the World Cup, also the first time co-hosted (FIFA+, 2022), starting a new chapter in football in the globalization era.

During that period, European clubs started to search for talent from Japan. They believed that Japanese players could increase their commercial value, also gaining more fans from Asia (Okubo, 2007). At first, a lot of European clubs struggled to derive performance-related benefits from Japanese players. This was largely due to physical differences between Japanese players and their European counterparts (Matsunaga, 2025), language barriers, and the misalignment of the Asian international calendar with the European football schedule (Okubo, 2007).

However, Hidetoshi Nakata changed the narrative. His transfer to Perugia in 1998 marked a turning point for Japanese players in Europe. Commercially, Nakata significantly boosted the club's profile. Perugia reportedly sold 100,000 jerseys bearing his name and number in Japan. In addition, the value of Japanese television broadcasting rights for Serie A rose from 5 million pounds sterling to 12 million pounds sterling (Greig, 2007). From a performance standpoint, Nakata quickly adapted to the European game and played a key role in helping Perugia avoid relegation. His subsequent move to AS Roma in 2000 proved equally impactful, as he contributed to the team's success in winning the Scudetto.

Moreover, Japanese players have increasingly become viable options for both mid-tier and top-tier European clubs seeking to enhance team

performance, owing to their undeniable quality and competitiveness within their characters.

Nowadays, we can see the phenomenon from Mitoma. As the most entertaining and promising Japanese player, Mitoma can spread positivity with his sophisticated approach to football. He combines science with football to develop his skills, comparing the style of dribbling of some players to his own, and writes about it in his thesis, titled "Research on Information Processing of the Attacking Side in 1v1 Football Situations," while studying at the University of Tsukuba (Sky Sports, 2023). As a result, he achieved an impressive record. He established himself as one of the standout dribblers, ranking third for the most completed dribbles in the 2022/23 Premier League season, averaging 2.7 dribbles per match (Premier League, 2023).

Work ethic is also one of the defining strengths of Japanese players competing in Europe. Wataru Endo, Liverpool's midfielder, serves as a prime example of the high work ethic demonstrated by Japanese footballers on the European stage. Throughout three seasons at Anfield, Endo has captured the attention of Liverpool fans with his impressive statistics. In 1,980 minutes of play, he has won 138 duels on the field, including 34 aerial battles. Endo has also recorded 69 tackles, 26 interceptions, and three blocks. Notably, he has shown exceptional discipline, receiving no red cards and only ten yellow cards during this period (Premier League, 2025).

While both of them have positive impacts on their team's performance, the European clubs are still looking for advantages to expand the market. They are gaining more fans from Japan by recruiting players,

building a partnership with Japanese brands, and doing some friendly matches with the local clubs for commercial purposes. The friendly matches are the most effective way to spread the European persona to Japanese fans. Real evidence happened at Nissan Stadium, while Yokohama F Marinos faced Liverpool FC, on 30 July 2025. Exactly, 67,032 fans attended this game, marking a new record for a football match held by the J.League (J.League, 2025).

At that time, we can see half of the stadium was red because Japanese fans were using the Reds jersey instead of the Yokohama F Marinos jersey. The ambience wasn't similar to Anfield, because the Japanese fans used their own way to support Liverpool. But cleverly, Liverpool used some gestures to entertain their Japanese fans, like giving the armband to Endo, while Virgil van Dijk came off to the bench. Before the match started, Endo also walked around the stadium, gave his waves to the supporters, and raised the atmosphere in the stadium.

It's fairly enough when we talked about the Liverpool effect in Japan, regarding Endo's presence and their status as a global brand. But Brighton and Hove Albion's case, when they did the tour in 2024 to Japan, became another evidence. There was a syndrome at that time, as the BBC called it, Mitoma Mania (2024). While Brighton visited Japan at the end of July 2024, fans got heated. Attendees, the majority of whom are wearing a 22 jersey named Mitoma, flocked to Brighton's pop-up store in Kamo Soccer Store Harajuku, Tokyo, during the Asia tour because Mitoma was there to fulfil his duty at the meet and greet session (Brighton and Hove Albion, 2024). Also, the training session generated strong fan engagement, with 3,000 tickets being sold out (BBC, 2024).

Brighton and Hove Albion is not as big as Liverpool, because they're just a mediocre club. Their visit to Japan was very important because they needed more attention from fans outside England. Because of Mitoma, Brighton and Hove Albion management chose Japan, which is still an open market for them (Barber, 2024).

Moreover, Bundesliga clubs have done it before the Premier League. They're using the MoU with JFA and the Japanese clubs to expand their market. Bayern Munich not only shares its football knowledge, but also wants to expand its market. They're already open the football school in Tsuneishi in April 2016 within the Bayern Campus program, which has several purposes. They need the Japanese market because of the uniqueness, and the football culture still needs to develop because its popularity still has to compete with baseball.

5 Discussion

Football cannot avoid the effects of globalization. This phenomenon reshapes football in every aspect, not only economically, but also politically and culturally. Because football is entangled with the European system, each country outside the region must deliver its value, including Japan.

Glocalization is believed to be a moderate way to accommodate the globalization effect. However, Robertson (1995) noted that the biggest challenge in the glocalization concept is how to deliver our ideas and assert ourselves in choosing between a local-to-global or a global-to-local approach. And, originally, the glocalization is based on the Japanese norm, *dochakuka* (Tulloch, 1991).

Based on some evidence I found, Japan is still trapped in the European system. Moreover, the J.League will adopt the European competition calendar for its domestic structure. This adjustment aims to facilitate the call-up of Japanese players to the national team during international breaks, thereby eliminating the difficulties previously caused by the discrepancy between UEFA's and the AFC's competition calendars.

This is why it is necessary to critically examine the impact of adopting a system developed in Europe on local interests. Financial Post article in 2011, which was titled "Glocalization rules the World", reflecting how glocalization works in real life. By examining marketing content from several international brands, such as Coca-Cola, which has been localized through cultural adaptation, this article demonstrates that the acknowledgment of local values is fundamental to consumer engagement and the diffusion of influence. This process reflects the dynamics of globalization, where global strategies are reconfigured to resonate with local cultural contexts.

In the Japanese football case, they are copying, asserting, and implementing European values into their system. At the same time, the European giants are trying to infiltrate, spreading their influence, developing their brands, and expanding their market.

When considering a more realistic perspective, larger brands are more likely to attract public attention. In particular, European giants that have established partnerships with the JFA and local clubs tend to hold greater prestige and a more favorable image, largely due to their long historical legacy. These European giants may thus be categorized as

dominant forces within the framework of cultural imperialism, while Japan occupies a subordinate position. Admittedly, such a claim might appear tendentious, yet it reflects the reality shaped by the historical arrogance and legitimacy conferred through accumulated achievements. As Mattelart (1980) suggests with the notion of *deus ex machina*, this form of power becomes exceedingly difficult for the subordinate class to resist. Consequently, the weaker side is consistently disadvantaged, requiring extraordinary efforts to overturn the imbalance on the field.

Japan attempted to introduce its norms in local football, including Souji and Reigi. Those values are the norm daily in Japan, where souji is the cleaning culture and reigi is a gratitude gesture to everyone who helps or assists them. With these two values, Japanese football elements gain so much respect. Souji and Reigi's implementation became viral during the World Cup 2022, Qatar. Mainstream media, until the netizens on social media talked about their positive gesture, and gave special credit to them (BBC, 2022).

Up to the present, Japanese football has only earned respect on the global stage. Nevertheless, no scholar has decisively challenged the dominant conceptualization of Japan as occupying a peripheral position within the global football hierarchy. Rather, the prevailing discourse has been limited to the belief that Japan possesses the potential to become a World Cup champion, owing to its accelerated progress in narrowing the performance gap with established powers, although the timeframe for such a breakthrough remains indeterminate (Kuper & Szymanski, 2018).

I attended a workshop on the Laws of the Game in Jakarta, where David Elleray, the Technical Director of IFAB, served as the keynote

speaker. Elleray explicitly emphasized that football is a universal game. However, he also underlined that to gain a proper understanding of football, one must first acquire proficiency in the English language (2025). This statement illustrates the paradox of universality in football, while the game is framed as a shared global practice, access to its authoritative knowledge remains mediated through linguistic hegemony.

The elevation of English as the sole or primary medium of football's institutional knowledge not only privileges certain actors but also reproduces asymmetrical power relations, reinforcing the cultural dominance of Anglophone traditions. Within this context, the notion of universality becomes contested, as it is conditioned by the capacity of local actors to navigate linguistic barriers and engage with a discourse that is inherently shaped by Eurocentric and Anglocentric norms. Thus, football's claim to universality must be understood as embedded in broader structures of cultural imperialism, where language operates as a subtle yet powerful mechanism of exclusion and hierarchy.

Reflecting on Jose Mourinho's statement (2020) that statistics on the pitch mean little compared to the actual number of goals and scoring opportunities, it follows that Japan must not only create goals but also secure trophies at higher levels of competition. While Japan has already established dominance within Asia, the World Cup trophy remains elusive. Throughout the history of the tournament, no Asian nation has ever achieved this feat. Japan's ambition is to lift the World Cup by 2050 and thereby become the first Asian country to win the most prestigious prize in global football. Should this aspiration be realized, it could significantly enhance Japan's voice in international football governance and

discourse, enabling it to challenge European dominance and reshape the balance of influence in the global football hierarchy.

At present, Japan faces challenges in terms of player regeneration. With the phenomenon of declining birth rates, the number of mixed-heritage or naturalized players, commonly referred to as *haafu*, has been increasing, thereby introducing a greater degree of multiculturalism within the national team squad (Orlowitz, 2025). Coach Hajime Moriyasu has expressed no objection to this development, emphasizing instead the importance of representing the banner of the Samurai Blue. Nevertheless, critical questions remain regarding whether the emergence of *haafu* players can be sustained in the long term, and how Japan might address its declining birth rate to secure a more stable pipeline of local talent.

6 Conclusion

Football has long been embedded in European traditions. Drawing on Mattelart's concept of *deus ex machina*, it remains difficult for Japan to detach itself from European influence, given the deep historical legacy and prolonged dominance that Europe has exercised over the sport. Indeed, football was developed, institutionalized, and regulated by European nations for centuries, whereas Japan only began to seriously invest in its football development in the early 1990s.

Consciously, Japan has absorbed European values in multiple ways as part of its football development strategy, particularly in order to ensure the sustainable production of new talent. Nevertheless, Japan must also recognize the necessity of constructing its own ecosystem and fostering

innovation, so that the glocalization of football can be fully realized in alignment with its broader vision of becoming World Cup champions by 2050.

This study situates itself within a critical analysis of secondary sources, articles, books, and interviews that examine Japanese football from the perspective of its peripheral status. Future research is expected to expand on this foundation by employing quantitative methods to investigate on-field developments more comprehensively, thereby offering deeper insights into Japan's trajectory within the global football hierarchy.

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