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Performance Characteristics and Effectiveness of Passing and Possession by the Chinese Men's National Football Team in the Asian Cup

Haohao Sun

School of Sports Science, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou, Fujian 350000, China

Abstract

This study uses the literature method, the video observation method, the mathematical method, the mathematical statistics method and the logic analysis method, The results show that the Chinese defenders' ball control and pass times are in the most three lines; China's front midfielders and back midfielders have poor ball control ability, More possession in the side and midfield, High efficiency of short transmission; The Chinese winger has stronger ball control ability and passing ability; The Chinese team's guard pass and control efficiency is low; China's midfield and forwards have the ability to send threatening balls, But the final goal conversion rate was very low, Make the following suggestions: More use of the ground ball to control the pace of the game. In the training, we should improve the ability of continuous passing and dealing with the ball quickly, and improve the accuracy of passing in the ball under the condition of high confrontation. We should mainly control the ball, advance step by step, strengthen the control of the ball right in the midfield, and gradually form our own passing style. Do not be too conservative, to have the courage to try the efficient but not commonly used technical methods, increase the breakthrough and speed training, to make the pass more efficient. This can provide suggestions for the development of all levels of football in China.

Keywords

Chinese men's national football team; Transmission and control; Performance characteristics; Benefit transformation.

1. Introduction

Football is universally recognized as the world's most influential sport, and its value has been well-documented. Currently, the performance of the Chinese Men's National Football Team (CMNFT) in international competitions receives significant attention, yet the outcomes have been unsatisfactory. In the document "Several Measures on Further Promoting Football Reform and Development" issued by the Chinese Football Association, the third key section—"Strengthening National Team Construction and Management"—explicitly outlines objectives. These include actively developing a technical and tactical style with Chinese characteristics, defining short-, medium-, and long-term goals for major international tournaments across all national team levels, and striving for the men's national team to reach first-class standards in Asia. However, observations from international football matches reveal that the CMNFT's performances are still plagued by issues such as frequent errors in passing and receiving, and a reluctance to maintain possession. The deficiencies in passing and possession ability are particularly detrimental to the team's technical and tactical effectiveness. Consequently, enhancing these capabilities is of critical importance.

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2. Results and Analysis

2.1. Performance Characteristics of Passing and Possession

2.1.1. Defenders' Possession Time, Pass Frequency, and Success Rate

The Chinese team currently lacks depth in the defender position. This is evident as Zhang Linpeng remained the primary choice at right-back during the recent World Cup Qualifiers and Asian Cup, a role he has held for nearly a decade, indicating a persistent lack of emerging players in this position. However, at center-back, 23-year-olds Zhu Chenjie and Jiang Shenglong are emerging as promising talents. They delivered an excellent performance in the opening match of the World Cup Qualifiers. Furthermore, during the Asian Cup, leveraging their robust defensive capabilities, they helped the team keep clean sheets against Tajikistan and Lebanon and conceded only one goal against the stronger Qatari team. This suggests that despite the limited personnel, the capabilities of the new defensive players are considerable.

Table 1. Statistics on Possession and Passing for Defenders

	Center-Backs	Full-Backs	Total
Average Possession Time	10′32 ± 0:23″	12′24 ± 0:16	22′56 ± 0:32
Proportion of Team's Total Possession Time (%)	23.7	28.2	51.9
Number of Passes	436	323	759
Proportion of Team's Total Passes (%)	37.3	27.6	64.9
Successful Passes	376	262	638
Passing Success Rate (%)	86.2	81.1	84.1
Short Passes	298	279	577
Long Passes	138	44	182
Long Passes as % of Position's Total Passes	31.7	13.6	24.0
Successful Long Passes	38	8	46
Long Pass Success Rate (%)	27.5	18.2	25.3

As presented in Table 1, during the three group stage matches of the Asian Cup, the defenders of the Chinese team averaged 22 minutes and 56 seconds of possession, accounting for 51.9% of the team's total possession time. This indicates a disproportionately long possession time for defenders. Specifically, center-backs held possession for 10 minutes and 32 seconds (23.7%), while fullbacks averaged 12 minutes and 24 seconds (28.2%), suggesting that fullbacks controlled the ball for longer durations within the defensive unit. Video analysis reveals that against an opponent's high press, the Chinese team frequently distributed the ball to the fullbacks for possession retention or transitional play. Zhang Linpeng, in particular, was often tasked with ball control and progressive distribution. Conversely, the center-backs demonstrated limited technical ability under pressure, frequently struggling to make effective passes when pressed by opponents. Consequently, defenders tended to release the ball early when space was available, rather than waiting for pressure to intensify. This tendency is further reflected in the pass counts. The defensive line completed 759 passes, constituting 64.9% of the team's total. Center-backs contributed 436 passes (37.3%), compared to 323 passes (27.6%) from fullbacks. The high number of passes by center-backs, often under minimal pressure, contrasts with their poorer ball retention capability, implying that fullbacks were more frequently involved in constructive play. Regarding passing accuracy, defenders successfully completed 638 of their 759 passes (84.1%), a success rate significantly higher than the team's average. This can be attributed to generally facing less pressure in deeper areas, allowing for higher pass accuracy. However, this also necessitates heightened concentration, as any lost

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possession in these zones can lead directly to conceding scoring opportunities. The pass success rate for center-backs was 86.2%, higher than the 81.1% for fullbacks, primarily because center-backs passed under less pressure, whereas fullbacks attempted more progressive, and therefore riskier, passes. The defenders attempted a total of 182 long passes, representing 24.0% of all passes made by the defensive unit. Center-backs attempted 138 long passes (31.7% of their total), while fullbacks attempted 44 (13.6% of their total). This pattern suggests a tactical preference for center-backs to launch direct long passes towards the forwards. In contrast, video evidence shows that long passes from fullbacks were predominantly crosses from the byline or 45-degree angles. The success rate for long passes was 27.5% for center-backs, considerably higher than the 18.2% for fullbacks. This indicates that uncontested long passes from center-backs were relatively more effective, whereas crosses from fullbacks faced greater defensive resistance, resulting in lower efficiency. In summary, defenders recorded the highest possession time and pass frequency among the three lines. Center-backs made more passes, while fullbacks registered longer possession times.

2.1.2. Possession Time, Pass Frequency, and Success Rate of Midfielders

The Chinese team's midfield displayed even less proficiency compared to the defenders, which likely explains the tactical reliance on direct long passes from the defense towards the forwards. Within the midfield, Wang Shangyuan served as the primary defensive anchor. In contrast, Dai Weijun and Xie Pengfei, operating in more advanced roles, failed to deliver notable offensive contributions. Furthermore, the naturalized player Li Ke failed to make a significant impact in recent matches. Consequently, the midfield unit lacked the overall robustness and attacking threat observed in other Asian teams. Video analysis corroborates these shortcomings, revealing poor ball retention capabilities and a deficient ability to execute penetrative forward passes. In most instances, midfielders opted for safer backward passes to maintain possession, highlighting a lack of confidence and creativity in advancing the play.

Table 2. Statistics on Ball Possession and Passing by Midfielders

	Central Midfielders	Wide Midfielders	Total
Average Possession Time	4′23″±11″	11′36″±20″	15′59″±13″
Team Total (%)	9.7	26.1	35.9
Number of Passes	103	222	325
Team Total (%)	8.8	19.0	27.8
Successful Passes	44	151	195
Pass Success Rate (%)	42.7	68.0	60.0
Short Passes	92	157	249
Long Passes	11	65	76
Proportion of Long Passes (%)	10.7	29.3	23.4
Successful Long Passes	2	11	13
Long Pass Success Rate (%)	18.2	16.9	17.1

As presented in Table 2, the midfield players of the Chinese team averaged only 15 minutes and 59 seconds of possession time during the three Asian Cup matches, accounting for 35.9% of the team's total possession. Central midfielders (including attacking and defensive midfielders) accounted for merely 4 minutes and 23 seconds (9.7%) of this time. This minimal possession time indicates a severe lack of ball-carrying and progression ability among these positional players; their first instinct upon receiving the ball was often to pass backwards or they would lose possession. In contrast, wide midfielders recorded a higher average possession time of 11 minutes and 36 seconds (26.1%), identifying them as the primary ball-handlers in midfield.

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However, video footage reveals that their attempts at dribbling and ball progression were frequently intercepted or disrupted by opponents, resulting in very low efficiency. In terms of passing, the midfield unit attempted a total of 325 passes (27.8% of the team's total), with wide midfielders contributing more (19.0%) than central midfielders. Regarding pass success rate, wide midfielders also held a clear advantage at 68.0%, compared to a notably low 42.7% for central midfielders. Analyzing long passes specifically, wide midfielders attempted 65 (29.3% of their total passes), completing 11 successfully (16.9% success rate). Central midfielders attempted 11 long passes, completing only two (18.2% success rate). Consequently, although wide midfielders attempted more long passes, their success rate in this category was marginally lower than that of central midfielders. Therefore, it can be concluded that while central midfielders (attacking and defensive) exhibited poor ball control ability, their long-passing efficiency was relatively higher. Conversely, wide midfielders possessed more possession time and demonstrated higher efficiency in short passing.

2.1.3. Possession Time, Pass Frequency, and Success Rate of Forwards

During the recent Asian Cup and World Cup Qualifiers, the primary forwards for the Chinese team remained Wu Lei and the more prominent left winger, Wei Shihao, who was responsible for creating a significant portion of the team's attacking opportunities. Due to a decline in pace and technical prowess, Wu Lei primarily operated as a player relying on off-the-ball movement to stretch opposing defensive lines and act as a poacher. Zhang Yuning also received several appearances, fulfilling a role as a target man and aerial threat. The naturalized players Ai Kesen and Fei Nanduo were seldom utilized and had minimal playing time.

Table 3. Passing and Possession Statistics for Forwards

	Center Forward	Winger	Total
Average Possession Time	1′22″±6″	4′11″±11″	5′33″±5″
Proportion (%)	2.8	9.5	12.3
Number of Passes	21	65	86
Proportion (%)	1.8	5.6	7.4
Successful Passes	6	22	28
Pass Success Rate (%)	28.6	33.8	32.6
Short Passes	19	49	68
Long Passes	2	16	18
Long Passes (%)	9.5	24.6	20.9
Successful Long Passes	0	3	3
Long Pass Success Rate (%)	0.0	18.8	16.7

As presented in Table 3, the possession time for forwards was notably low. The center forward averaged only 1 minute and 22 seconds (2.8% of total team possession), while wingers averaged 4 minutes and 11 seconds (9.5%). Collectively, forwards accounted for merely 5 minutes and 33 seconds of possession, representing only 12.3% of the team's total. This indicates a significant weakness in maintaining possession in the attacking third. Video analysis corroborates this, showing that midfielders seldom progressed the ball effectively into advanced areas, and long passes from defenders were frequently intercepted by the opposition. Consequently, the ball spent very little time in China's attacking half. Within the limited attacking possession, Wei Shihao was a prominent contributor. His ability to dribble and penetrate defenses notably increased the possession time for the winger position compared to the center forward.

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In terms of passing, wingers attempted 65 passes (5.6% of the team's total), compared to only 21 by center forwards. Center forwards often opted to lay the ball off immediately upon receipt, resulting in a lower success rate (28.6%) compared to wingers (33.8%), whose success rate was also largely buoyed by Wei Shihao's contributions. Regarding long passes, the center forward role inherently offered few opportunities for such actions. In contrast, crosses delivered by wingers after beating their defender on the flank are categorized as long passes. Thus, wingers attempted 16 long passes (24.6% of their total passes), significantly more than the center forwards' two attempts (9.5%). The wingers' long pass success rate of 18.8% was also relatively notable. In conclusion, among the Chinese team's forwards, the wingers demonstrated superior ball control and passing capabilities.

2.2. Contribution of Passing and Possession by Player Position to Team Effectiveness

2.2.1. Contribution of Defenders' Passing and Possession to Overall Team Performance

Table 4. Effectiveness of Passing and Possession by Defenders

	Central Defender	Full-back	Total
Number of Passes	436	323	759
Key Passes	2	4	6
Key Pass Rate (%)	0.5	1.2	0.8
Passes Leading to Threats	0	1	1
Threatening Pass Rate (%)	0.0	0.3	0.1
Passes Leading to Shots	0	1	1
Shot Assist Rate (%)	0.0	0.3	0.1
Assists	0	0	0
Assist Rate (%)	0.0	0.0	0.0

As presented in Table 4, of the 759 passes made by Chinese defenders, only six were key passes, resulting in a key pass rate of 0.8%. Full-backs accounted for four of these key passes (a rate of 1.2%), underscoring their greater role in progressing the ball compared to central defenders, who contributed only two key passes, both via long balls. Video analysis confirms that full-backs were capable of playing through passes after advancing into forward positions, demonstrating a superior ability to create chances relative to central defenders. Regarding the generation of direct threats, only a single pass from a full-back led to a clear scoring opportunity (a threat rate of 0.3%). This solitary threatening pass resulted in a shot (a shot conversion rate of 0.3 % from all defender passes) that failed to yield a goal. Consequently, it is evident that the Chinese defenders possessed a very limited capacity to generate threatening attacks through their passing and possession.

2.2.2. Contribution of Midfielder Passing and Possession to Overall Team Performance

As presented in Table 5, central midfielders (including attacking and defensive midfielders) made 7 key passes from 103 total passes, resulting in a key pass rate of 6.8%. Video analysis reveals that Wang Shangyuan demonstrated the capability to deliver forward-threatening passes, often executing through balls after regaining possession in the defensive third. In contrast, Dai Weijun exhibited strong off-the-ball movement and dribbling ability; however, his passing technique was less refined, making his intentions easier for opposing defenders to read and intercept. Wide midfielders contributed 4 key passes, with a key pass rate of 1.8%. Overall, midfielders generated a significantly higher number of key passes compared to defenders. This can be attributed to their generally superior technical skills and closer proximity to the opponent's goal, which increases the likelihood of creating scoring opportunities. Regarding

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threat generation, two of the key passes from central midfielders led to dangerous situations (threat rate: 1.9%), whereas only one key pass from wide midfielders did so (threat rate: 0.5%). In terms of shot creation, one pass from each midfield position resulted in a shot, indicating low efficiency. In conclusion, while central midfielders (attacking and defensive) demonstrated a stronger capacity to deliver threatening passes, the ultimate efficiency in converting these opportunities into goals was low across all midfield positions.

Table 5. Effectiveness of Passing and Possession by Midfield Players

	Central Midfield	Wide Midfield	Total
Passes	103	222	325
Key Passes	7	4	11
Key Pass Rate (%)	6.8	1.8	3.4
Passes Leading to Threats	2	1	3
Threatening Pass Rate (%)	1.9	0.5	0.9
Passes Leading to Shots	1	1	2
Shot Assist Rate (%)	1.0	0.5	0.6
Assists	0	0	0
Assist Rate (%)	0.0	0.0	0.0

2.2.3. Benefits of Forwards' Passing and Possession Performance On Overall Team Performance

Table 6. Effectiveness of Forward Players in Passing and Possession

	Center Forward	Winger	Total
Passes	21	65	86
Key Passes	2	4	6
Key Pass Rate (%)	9.5	6.2	7.0
Passes Leading to Threats	2	3	5
Threatening Pass Rate (%)	9.5	4.6	5.8
Passes Leading to Shots	2	2	4
Shot Assist Rate (%)	9.5	3.1	4.7
Assists	0	0	0
Assist Rate (%)	0.0	0.0	0.0

As presented in Table 6, the forwards of the Chinese team made a total of 86 passes, of which 6 were key passes, resulting in a key pass rate of 7.0%. This rate was higher than that of both the midfielders and defenders. Specifically, center forwards made 2 key passes from their 21 total passes (9.5%), while wingers made 4 key passes from 65 attempts (6.2%). This indicates that although center forwards attempted fewer passes, a higher proportion of their successful forward passes were decisive. In contrast, passes completed by wingers, often situated farther from the opponent's goal, were less frequently categorized as key passes.

Both key passes from center forwards led to scoring threats, representing a threat creation rate of 9.5%. Video analysis reveals that Zhang Yuning frequently attempted to turn and deliver through balls immediately upon receiving possession. While many of these attempts were intercepted by defenders or collected by the goalkeeper, the two that succeeded as key passes effectively created threats. Wingers generated threats from three of their passes (a 4.6% threat rate).

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The two threatening passes from center forwards both resulted in shots on goal, but neither culminated in a score. Similarly, two of the three threatening passes from wingers led to shots, which also failed to convert into goals. This analysis demonstrates that while the Chinese midfielders and forwards possessed the capability to create scoring opportunities through threatening passes, the ultimate conversion of these chances into goals was exceptionally low. This inefficiency in the final third was a principal reason for the team's failure to score throughout the entire tournament and its subsequent elimination at the group stage.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

3.1. Conclusions

Chinese defenders recorded the highest possession time and passing frequency among the three lines (defense, midfield, attack). Specifically, central defenders made more passes, while full-backs had longer possession time. Among midfielders, attacking and defensive midfielders demonstrated poor ball control ability, although their long-pass efficiency was relatively higher. In contrast, wide midfielders registered more possession time and exhibited higher short-pass efficiency.

Among the forwards, wingers displayed stronger ball control and passing abilities. Conversely, the defenders demonstrated a very low capacity to translate their possession and passing into creating threatening offensive opportunities.

Among the Chinese midfielders, attacking and defensive midfielders showed a greater ability to deliver key passes. However, the efficiency in converting these chances into goals was remarkably low, which was a primary factor contributing to the team's failure to score throughout the tournament and their subsequent elimination in the group stage.

3.2. Recommendations

The team should leverage its technical agility by prioritizing a possession-based style centered on ground passes and coordinated movement. Training should focus on: Enhancing continuous passing and rapid ball handling. Implementing scenario-based drills to improve passing accuracy under high-pressure conditions. The overarching tactical approach should emphasize controlled buildup play, progressively strengthening dominance in midfield to cultivate a distinct passing identity.

Offensively: Defenders should advance strategically based on the game context to compress the opponent's defensive space and increase opportunities for creating chances. During corner kicks, central defenders should aggressively move into the opponent's penalty area to utilize their height advantage and create scoring threats. Defensively: Employ aggressive pressing and intelligent positioning to disrupt the opponent's midfield build-up play. Particular attention must be paid to neutralizing flank attacks. When defending against passes into the penalty area, defenders must accurately anticipate the ball's trajectory and maintain correct defensive positioning.

Center-forwards and wingers need to demonstrate greater confidence in taking shots and work on improving their technical and tactical consistency. This includes enhancing their ability to pass and shoot effectively under pressure to better capitalize on chances created by midfielders. The team should adopt a more proactive and distinct tactical identity, encouraging the use of effective, even if less familiar, techniques to enhance overall offensive unpredictability and efficiency.

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