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Chinese football clubs go on global shopping spree

Charles Clover in Beijing



Big spenders: Chinese teams have splurged on players such as Ramires, bought for a Chinese Super League record €28m

Chinese soccer clubs have had their biggest-spending winter ever, poaching talent from the world's richest leagues with big-money transfers as they buy into Xi Jinping's dream for the country to become a heavyweight in world football.

Chinese clubs are responsible for three of the four biggest deals in the winter transfer window, the midseason period when clubs can bid for each other's players that closed on Monday night in most leagues.

The booming transfer market in China comes amid an influx of money into the Chinese game, driven by tycoons seeking political favours but also by genuine optimism about the prospects for football in the country as it seeks to develop sports.

Several top Latin American and European players signed with Chinese clubs. In January Chelsea's Brazilian midfielder Ramires went to Jiangsu Suning for a Chinese Super League record €28m, Hebei China Fortune bought Ivorian striker Gervinho from

AS Roma for €18m and Shanghai Shenhua swooped on Inter Milan's Colombian international Fredy Guarin for €13m, according to figures published by Transfermarkt.

"These guys are big, big names," said Mark Dreyer, founder of the Chinasportsinsider.com blog. "Everyone is trying to impress each other and outdo all the other clubs with big signings. It's all because of the influx of money."

China's Super League is reckoned by analysts to be the best in Asia but it is still far behind the best in Europe. "Chinese owners have to pay more, and they know that," said Mr Dreyer. China is also a destination for past-their-prime top players to cash in on fame, similar to the US where Pelé and David Beckham went to spend their pre-retirement years.

"It's not unusual to see this in China because of the amount of TV money that has entered the China Super League" said Peter Schloss, CEO of CastleHill Partners, a sports merchant bank in Beijing.

China's wealthiest continue to respond to political signals to invest in football. China's President Xi Jinping is an avid football fan and has frequently said that one of his goals as leader is to help the China qualify for the World Cup — and eventually even host it. The national side qualified for the 2002 tournament hosted by Japan and South Korea but it lost all three matches, failing to score a goal.

"My greatest hope for Chinese football is that Chinese teams can become one of the best in the world," Mr Xi said last year. "That football can play an important role in strengthening peoples' physique and inspiring a relentless fighting spirit."

Last year Li Ruigang, the billionaire head of China Media Capital, outbid state broadcaster CCTV to pay Rmb8bn (\$1.2bn) for the television rights to China's Super League for the next five years. This was a hefty premium on previous years, when the going rate was about Rmb50m a year.

However, Chinese players and managers question the lavishing of big money on imported talent. Cai Wei, manager of Guo'ao Yue Ye, an amateur football club in Beijing, said it arguably does not help improve the game in China, and may even hinder it.

"Sure, the money is theirs to spend but they are throwing the money to the foreigners, the foreign clubs," said Mr Cai. "It will do Chinese football minimal good — the foreign players take up the best positions on the field, and the Chinese players don't get the practice they need, so they really gain nothing."

Recent history suggests not all big-name moves end well — in 2012 former Chelsea stars Nicolas Anelka and Didier Drogba both went to play for Shanghai Shenhua for considerable sums but left after just one season amid reports that they were not paid the salaries promised them.

Additional reporting by Ma Fangjing

