WEP Warwick Evans Publishing

International Journal of Global Economics and Management

ISSN: 3005-9690 (Print), ISSN: 3005-8090 (Online)
Volume 10, Number 9, Year 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62051/ijgem.v10n9.01



How the "National Ball" Builds Bridges: Mechanisms and Practical Paths of Table Tennis in Promoting Sports Culture Identity among Hengqin–Macao Youth

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ABSTRACT

Through literature review, case analysis and logical analysis, this paper examines the mechanisms and practical paths through which table tennis promotes sports culture identity among youth in the Guangdong–Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin ("Qin'ao" for short). It is argued that table tennis, as China's "national ball", possesses three attributes—mass participation, national cultural symbolism, and the historical narrative of "Ping-Pong Diplomacy"—and is able to translate abstract national identity into embodied, everyday practice through four channels: ritual cohesion, embodied empathy, memory evocation, and network extension. A multi-level exchange architecture has now taken shape between Hengqin and Macao, encompassing the "Qin'ao Cup" youth series (1,191 participants in 2025, of whom Macao players accounted for 71.5%), the "Rong Guotuan Cup" youth exchange tournament, and the Guangdong–Macao youth training camp, all supported by steadily improving institutional supply. Nevertheless, shortcomings remain in the normalization of exchanges, the depth of cultural empowerment, and the absence of assessment systems. Accordingly, this paper proposes a "national ball culture practice system" composed of a regularized league, branded camps, and digital communities, together with an integrated path that coordinates tournaments, training, culture and industry, thereby providing theoretical support and policy references for deepening youth integration between Hengqin and Macao.

KEYWORDS

Sports culture; Table tennis; Youth; Cultural identity; Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area

1. INTRODUCTION

General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that "we should build more platforms and ladders for the development of young people from Hong Kong and Macao", and has explicitly called for "promoting extensive contact, comprehensive exchange and in-depth integration among young people of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, so as to strengthen their affinity toward the motherland". The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China further calls for "enhancing the influence of the dissemination of Chinese civilization". As a "universal language" that transcends institutional differences and linguistic barriers, sport provides a uniquely flexible channel for implementing these strategic requirements. The *Outline for Building a Leading Sporting Nation* positions "strengthening sports exchanges with Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan" as a key element in serving the cause of "one country, two systems" [1]; the *Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area* proposes building a Bay Area of humanities

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and health [2]; and the *Overall Plan for the Construction of the Guangdong–Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin*, issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council in September 2021, identifies the integration of livelihoods and the return of hearts as the deep-level goal of the Cooperation Zone [3]. In November 2025, following the successful conclusion of the 15th National Games—co-hosted for the first time by Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao—the General Administration of Sport of China and the three governments signed the *Agreement on Strengthening Sports Cooperation and Promoting Integrated Development*, which specifies resource sharing, venue sharing, event co-hosting, talent co-cultivation and culture co-construction, injecting fresh institutional momentum into regional sports integration [4].

Among all sports, table tennis possesses irreplaceable "identity resources". It is hailed as the "national ball" and marks the starting point of New China's rise in world sport; "Ping-Pong Diplomacy" remains a classic case of sport participating in the construction of inter-state relations; and Rong Guotuan's cry of "How many times can one fight in a lifetime" (*rensheng neng you ji hui bo*) has crystallized into a landmark symbol of Chinese sportsmanship. Zhuhai, as Rong Guotuan's hometown, enjoys the geographical advantage of Qin'ao integration, and table tennis has deep mass foundations on both sides of the border—the two governments have already designated table tennis as a priority sport for jointly building a cross-border league. Taking table tennis as the entry point to examine the generation mechanisms and cultivation paths of youth sports culture identity responds both to national strategy and to the applied need of "doing a big article through a small incision".

Existing scholarship provides a solid foundation for this study. Internationally, sport is regarded as a core arena for constructing and performing nation-state identity: Anderson argues that rituals and symbolic systems can consolidate an "imagined community", and sporting events are precisely important devices for manufacturing such collective imagination [5]; Nye classifies sport as a vital source of national soft power [6]; Murray systematically expounds the theory and practice of "sports diplomacy" [7]. Domestic scholars have likewise carried out multi-dimensional inquiries: some studies start from Lingnan sports culture and propose cultivating Chinese cultural identity among Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao youth through dragon boat, lion dance and martial arts [8]; some focus on traditional ethnic sports and have developed and validated a cultural identity scale for youth in the region [9]; some demonstrate the role of the 15th National Games in promoting national identity among Bay Area residents [10]; others systematically elaborate the triple logic, practical advantages and promotion paths of youth sports exchanges in enhancing Chinese cultural identity [11, 12], and the generative logic and cultivation paths of national identity among Hong Kong and Macao youth have also attracted scholarly attention [13]. As for the general mechanisms of sports culture identity, rich findings have accumulated from the perspectives of "embodied presence", "interaction ritual chains" and "community consciousness" [14-16].

Overall, existing research displays three features: first, macro-level reasoning predominates while micro-level mechanisms remain a "black box"; second, traditional ethnic sports serve as the main carriers, with little systematic examination of the "national ball" itself; third, policy proposals mostly remain at the level of activity organization, lacking replicable, sustainable and assessable path systems. Moreover, studies specifically focusing on Qin'ao—the smallest cooperation unit of "one country, two systems"—are virtually absent. This paper therefore takes table tennis as its analytical object, elaborates its identity-generating mechanisms, and proposes systematic practical paths grounded in the real landscape of Qin'ao youth table tennis exchanges.

2. MECHANISMS THROUGH WHICH TABLE TENNIS PROMOTES YOUTH SPORTS CULTURE IDENTITY

Cultural identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging to, and value affirmation of, a particular cultural group, and its formation follows the progressive logic of "cognition–emotion–behavior" [17]. Sport can become a unique arena for identity construction because it simultaneously provides three

conditions rarely available elsewhere: first, embodied presence—sports participation takes the body as its medium, so that rules, rituals and competition are transformed into lived experience through personal involvement; second, emotional resonance—the intense emotions generated by winning, losing and cooperating readily condense into stable affective memories; third, symbol sharing—symbolic systems such as team uniforms, national anthems and mascots shape the boundary perception of "us". The value core of identity cultivation is further provided by the fighting, united and patriotic qualities embedded in the Chinese sports spirit [18]. On top of these general conditions, table tennis possesses three sport-specific advantages.

First, table tennis is a condensed symbol of "national memory". Rong Guotuan won New China's first world championship in 1959; the Chinese team rose to the pinnacle of world table tennis in the early 1960s; and "Ping-Pong Diplomacy" helped unfreeze Sino–American relations [19]. These historical events have elevated table tennis beyond the competitive sphere into a concrete carrier of national image and pride. When Qin'ao youth swing their paddles at Rong Guotuan Middle School in Zhuhai, they participate not merely in a technical contest but in a bodily dialogue with the spirit of "How many times can one fight in a lifetime"—a corporeal confirmation of a shared historical narrative.

Second, table tennis is a low-barrier "sport for all" with natural conditions for deep intermingling. It places modest demands on venues, equipment, physique, gender and age, and enjoys broad campus and community foundations in both Zhuhai and Macao. The low barrier means high participation and high sustainability, allowing identity cultivation to escape the limitation of "one-off activities" and to embed itself in the rhythm of daily life.

Third, with simple rules and controllable confrontation, table tennis is an ideal medium for cross-cultural "contact". Allport's contact hypothesis holds that equal status, common goals and cooperative action are the preconditions under which intergroup contact reduces prejudice and enhances identification [20]. Doubles and mixed doubles inherently require cooperation; team events inherently shape collective honor; and same-court competition inherently creates equal communicative contexts—features highly consistent with the conditions stipulated by the contact hypothesis. In other words, a table tennis exchange activity is itself a carefully designed "contact device", providing a structured path for Qin'ao youth to move from "knowing each other" to "identifying with each other".

Based on the above, the mechanism by which table tennis promotes sports culture identity among Qin'ao youth can be summarized into four channels. The first is the ritual cohesion channel: ceremonial elements such as opening ceremonies, award presentations, unified uniforms and event symbols incorporate individuals into a shared symbolic order and stimulate a sense of belonging to the community category of "Chinese sport". The second is the embodied empathy channel: bodily interaction and shared victory and defeat in joint training and competition enable youth on both sides to achieve "emotional resonance" through "physical connection", dissolving the psychological distance created by institutional differences. The third is the memory evocation channel: cultural landmarks such as Rong Guotuan's hometown, together with the historical narrative of the national ball, connect competitive practice with national memory, enabling the intergenerational transmission of cultural identity. The fourth is the network extension channel: partnerships, coaching communities and online communities derived from tournaments and camps extend fleeting event contacts into sustained social relations, allowing identity to be continuously reproduced through relational maintenance. The four channels are interlocked, constituting a complete chain of "cognitive initiation–affective reinforcement–relational consolidation"—the mechanistic core of how table tennis promotes sports culture identity.

3. THE REALISTIC FOUNDATION OF QIN'AO YOUTH TABLE TENNIS EXCHANGES

In recent years, youth table tennis exchanges between Hengqin and Macao have progressed from scattered activities to a multi-level, institutionalized stage, forming a carrier spectrum of "official tournaments–brand exchange tournaments–training camps–community friendly matches". This pattern benefits from cross-domain collaboration between the Livelihood Affairs Bureau of the Cooperation Zone and Macao's Sports Bureau and Education and Youth Development Bureau under the "joint consultation, joint construction, joint administration and shared benefits" system, and is also rooted in the deep mass foundation of table tennis on both sides. Macao's *Youth Policy (2021–2030)* lists "inheriting the spirit of loving the motherland and Macao and strengthening national sentiment" as the primary direction of youth work, and advocates cultivating youth's persistent exercise habits, thereby providing a policy interface for sports exchanges [21].

First, the official comprehensive youth tournament system has taken initial shape. Since 2023, the Livelihood Affairs Bureau of the Cooperation Zone, together with Macao's Sports Bureau and Education and Youth Development Bureau, has jointly organized the annual "Qin'ao Cup" youth series, covering martial arts routines, rope skipping, badminton, table tennis and swimming. In 2025, the event attracted 1,191 youth registrants, of whom 852 came from Macao, accounting for over 70%. This signals both the strong enthusiasm of Macao youth for cross-border exchanges and the genuine appeal of the Cooperation Zone platform to Macao families. With age-group settings balancing competitiveness and mass participation, the "Qin'ao Cup" has become a signature platform for Qin'ao youth sports exchanges.

Second, branded exchange tournaments have formed a normalized cooperation mechanism. The "Rong Guotuan Cup" youth table tennis exchange tournament across the Strait and among Guangdong, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan has been held for three consecutive editions. In 2026, the third edition gathered about 300 young players, with table tennis organizations from Zhuhai, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan jointly signing a friendly cooperation agreement, marking an upgrade from "event fellowship" to "systematic cooperation", and pioneered a "sports + sci-tech study tour" model that took participating teams to the Zhuhai Space Center. The Zhuhai–Hong Kong–Macao "Huangyang Xuezibei Cup" youth friendly tournament covers all primary-school age groups, with 64 young players from the three places competing in 2026. The "Level UP Qin'ao Table Tennis Friendly Match", held at Hou Kong Middle School's Hengqin campus (a school for Macao children), attracted nearly 500 participants, including young players, sports enthusiasts and residents from both sides.

Third, training camps and champion resources have elevated the educational value of exchanges. In 2026, the Guangdong–Macao training camp of the Greater Bay Area Youth Sports Exchange Camp was held in Zhuhai and Macao, focusing on badminton and table tennis. Yang Wei, Olympic champion in badminton, personally coached the camp, while the table tennis program was led by Wu Guanghui, head coach of the Rong Guotuan Table Tennis Training Base. Nearly one hundred youth from Guangdong and Macao trained and competed together, supplemented by cultural visits. The combination of champion narratives and professional coaching has significantly enhanced the emotional density and value-guiding function of exchange activities.

Fourth, institutional supply and venue conditions continue to improve. Zhuhai and Macao have signed the *Zhuhai–Macao Sports Cooperation Framework Agreement*, which explicitly explores establishing a Zhuhai–Macao league in sports with high mass popularity, such as badminton and table tennis; Macao residents enjoy equal access to Zhuhai's public sports services. Hengqin Sports Park is equipped with multiple table tennis courts, and schools for Macao children, such as the Hengqin campus of Hou Kong Middle School, have become new venues for Qin'ao sports exchanges. In 2025, the four-party *Agreement on Strengthening Sports Cooperation and Promoting Integrated Development* further identified youth sports exchanges as a priority for Bay Area sports integration.

Nevertheless, practical shortcomings remain. First, exchange activities lack a stable annual calendar and points system, showing a "festival-oriented" tendency; second, activities center on competition, with historical education and cultural experience occupying a low proportion, leaving the cultural function of "educating through sport" underdeveloped; third, there is no unified identity assessment tool or effect evaluation mechanism; fourth, exchange activities are dominated by public institutions, with insufficient deep participation of schools, clubs and families.

4. PRACTICAL PATHS FOR PROMOTING QIN'AO YOUTH SPORTS CULTURE IDENTITY THROUGH TABLE TENNIS

Grounded in the above mechanisms and realities, this paper proposes a path design centered on a "national ball culture practice system", whose overall approach is to use normalized exchanges to solve the problem of "contact frequency", cultural empowerment to solve the problem of "identity depth", digital communities to solve the problem of "relationship continuity", and collaborative governance to solve the problem of "support effectiveness".

First, build the three-in-one carrier of "regularized league + branded camps + digital communities". At the league level, relying on the Zhuhai–Macao framework agreement and the four-party agreement, the sports departments, table tennis associations and education departments of the two sides should jointly establish the "Qin'ao Youth Table Tennis League", with age-based groups, station-based points and an annual grand final, integrating the existing "Qin'ao Cup", "Rong Guotuan Cup" and "Huangyang Xuezibei Cup" into a unified calendar. A "home-and-away plus rotating hosting" mechanism should enable youth from both sides to alternate as hosts, deepening mutual understanding through two-way experience. At the camp level, a branded "National Ball Culture Study Camp" should be created, integrating skill training with national ball history education, Rong Guotuan spirit study and Bay Area cultural visits, with institutionalized champion lectures and champion sparring sessions. At the community level, an online Qin'ao youth table tennis community should be built, offering "cloud training", "cloud competition" and mutual recognition of skill grades, thereby extending offline contacts into sustained online interaction.

Second, implement the four-in-one coordinated path of "tournaments–training–culture–industry". In the tournament dimension, optimize event formats by introducing mixed doubles and cross-region teams to strengthen the contact conditions of "common goals and common identity". In the training dimension, promote the mutual appointment and co-training of coaches from both sides and co-build a joint youth talent development mechanism. In the cultural dimension, develop "national ball culture" themed courses and readers, build study-tour bases at the Rong Guotuan Table Tennis Training Base and Rong Guotuan Middle School, and transform the spiritual pedigree of "How many times can one fight in a lifetime" into teachable educational resources. In the industrial dimension, develop table tennis-themed tourism and cultural-creative products, combining exchange tournaments with the construction of Hengqin as an international leisure tourism island, so as to form a virtuous cycle of "attracting visitors through events, promoting tourism through culture and sustaining events through tourism".

Third, construct a progressive "cognition–emotion–behavior" cultivation sequence. According to the progressive logic of identity generation, exchange activities should be stratified by school stage: at the primary stage, focusing on fun participation and etiquette education, aiming to make children "love the national ball"; at the secondary stage, focusing on competitive confrontation and team collaboration, aiming to make students "understand the national ball"; at the university stage, focusing on event organization, volunteer service and cultural communication, aiming to make students "narrate the national ball". Meanwhile, the application and localized revision of the *Cultural Identity Scale for Youth in Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao* should be promoted, with pre- and post-tests and annual tracking to shift identity cultivation from experience-based judgment to evidence-based management.

Fourth, improve the collaborative governance mechanism of "government guidance, schools as key actors, social participation and market operation". At the government level, incorporate Qin'ao youth table tennis exchanges into the annual youth work plans of Zhuhai and the Cooperation Zone, and establish a special exchange fund. At the school level, expand the coverage of table tennis exchanges between sister schools, and promote two-way opening of physical education, after-school services and school team development. At the social level, cultivate a Qin'ao table tennis association alliance and support Macao associations in co-building branded events with mainland counterparts. At the market level, introduce event operation agencies and sponsorship resources, and explore a sustainable model combining public welfare and marketization. Through pilot initiatives under the four-party agreement framework, replicable and promotable "Qin'ao experience" should be formed as a model for youth sports exchanges elsewhere in the Greater Bay Area.

5. CONCLUSION

"Sport builds the stage; youth build the bridge." The value of table tennis for the sports culture identity of Qin'ao youth lies not merely in its being a shared pastime at the table, but in its constituting a complete identity-generating apparatus: the historical narrative of the national ball provides meaning, its low-barrier participation provides a demographic base, its cooperative formats provide contact conditions, and normalized mechanisms provide temporal depth [22, 23]. Operating this apparatus well requires moving beyond the mindset of "organizing events" toward the consciousness of "building systems". The mechanism analysis and path design proposed in this paper attempt to answer, at the theoretical level, the question of "how sport builds bridges", and to provide operable policy references for relevant work in Hengqin and Macao. Future research may deepen along the directions of scale-based measurement, intervention experiments and cross-sport comparison, so as to further consolidate the empirical foundation of the important proposition of "promoting cultural identity among Hong Kong and Macao youth through sport".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Zhuhai 2025 Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning Project (2025GJ159)

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