

Analysis of Reasons for China's Defeat to South Korea in the 2023 AFC World Cup Qualifiers Second Round Group Stage

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Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the technical, tactical, and psychological factors contributing to the Chinese Men's National Football Team's (CMNFT) 0-3 defeat against South Korea during the 2023 AFC World Cup Qualifiers Second Round Group Stage. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach—including video observation, comparative statistical analysis, and literature review—the research examines critical performance metrics (passing accuracy, possession rate, shot efficiency, defensive actions) and contextualizes them within broader systemic challenges facing Chinese football. Key findings reveal significant disparities in attacking efficiency (China: 0 goals/5 shots; South Korea: 3 goals/18 shots) and ball retention (possession: 35% vs. 65%). Defensive vulnerabilities were pronounced, with China conceding two goals from set pieces and exhibiting structural weaknesses in zonal marking. Tactically, China's rigid 3-4-3 formation struggled against South Korea's adaptive 4-2-3-1 system, which effectively neutralized midfield transitions and exploited wide channels. Psychologically, historical performance deficits (3 wins in 46 years) and cultural factors (Confucian influence on competitive aggression) further inhibited China's effectiveness. The study concludes that bridging the competitive gap requires multifaceted interventions: (1) intensifying technical training under pressure, (2) tactical innovation beyond reactive systems, (3) enhancing set-piece defense, and (4) fostering psychological resilience through exposure to high-stakes matches. These insights offer actionable pathways for CMNFT's strategic development and contribute to scholarly discourse on Asian football competitiveness.

Keywords

Technical and tactical performance, China-South Korea football match, Offensive organization efficiency, Defensive vulnerabilities, Development strategies for Chinese men's football.

1. Introduction

Football is the world's number one sport, renowned for its intense physicality, tactical complexity, and large number of participants. Football competition encompasses various physical attributes including strength, speed, endurance, coordination, flexibility, and agility, making its matches immensely popular worldwide. The performance of the Chinese Men's National Football Team (CMNFT) in successive FIFA World Cup qualification campaigns indicates that since the "Golden Generation" of 1985, the development of Chinese men's football has encountered significant difficulties.

Considering the severe challenges facing Chinese football development and the gap between the CMNFT and foreign national teams, it is imperative to conduct comprehensive and in-depth research on the performance of the CMNFT at this stage. In recent years, China has hosted numerous large-scale football leagues, such as the Chinese Football Association Super League (CSL), China League One, and China League Two, representing the highest level of domestic football. However, despite these numerous top-tier leagues, China has struggled to produce teams capable of establishing themselves in Asian football, leading to significant difficulties for the CMNFT.

Therefore, this paper will analyze the factors contributing to the CMNFT's 0-3 defeat against South Korea in the second round of the 2023 AFC World Cup Qualifiers Second Round Group Stage (often referred to as the "36-team stage"). The focus will be on technical and tactical performance, and corresponding countermeasures will be proposed. The aim is to provide references for the progress and improvement of the CMNFT, serving as a starting point for further research on the performance of Chinese men's football to propose additional strategies. Consequently, the innovation of this paper lies in refining and deepening the analysis of reasons for the CMNFT's defeats against foreign opponents, enhancing both the depth and breadth of the research question. The conclusions also contain relevant innovations.

2. Research Object and Methods

2.1. Research Object

This paper takes the match performance of China and South Korea in the 2023 AFC World Cup Qualifiers Second Round Group Stage as its research object.

2.2. Research Methods

2.2.1. Literature Review Method

Using keywords such as "World Cup Qualifiers," "Chinese Men's Football," and "Football Match Performance Analysis," relevant articles, journals, and documents were searched on resource platforms like CNKI, Wanfang Data, and the official website of the Ministry of Education. The collected literature was organized, classified, and analyzed to fully understand domestic and international research on the technical and tactical characteristics of Chinese football, match characteristics, current research status, and development trends. This process laid the theoretical foundation and provided valuable insights for this study.

2.2.2. Comparative Analysis Method

As this paper primarily investigates the reasons for China's defeat against South Korea in the AFC World Cup Qualifiers Second Round Group Stage and proposes countermeasures, data analysis focuses primarily on the CMNFT while incorporating South Korean data for comparison. This approach clearly highlights the reasons for the CMNFT's loss.

2.2.3. Video Observation Method

The majority of data sources for this paper were obtained through video observation statistics. By repeatedly watching slow-motion and replay footage of the 2023 World Cup Qualifier match between China and South Korea, statistics for the technical and tactical performance indicators relevant to this study were recorded. By observing the match process and actual situations, a detailed understanding of both teams' performances during the game was achieved^[1].

3. Research Results and Analysis

3.1. Data Comparative Analysis

3.1.1. Analysis of Players' Individual Technique

Table 1: Composition of Chinese Men's National Team Players - 2023 World Cup Qualifiers

No.	Player	Age	Height(cm)	Weight(kg)	Position
1	Xie Pengfei	30	179	74	FW
2	Wu Lei	32	176	68	FW
3	Tan Long	35	185	80	FW
4	Wei Shihao	28	178	65	FW
5	Zhang Yuning	26	186	84	FW
6	Chen Pu	26	178	69	FW
7	Liu Binbin	30	177	66	FW
8	Xie Weijun	26	190	79	FW
9	Wu Xi	34	180	75	MF
10	Wang Shangyuan	30	185	70	MF
11	Dai Weijun	24	177	75	MF
12	Li Ke	30	171	70	MF
13	Gao Tianyi	25	185	81	MF
14	Liu Yang	28	184	75	DF
15	Zhu Chenjie	23	185	84	DF
16	Jiang Shenglong	22	193	87	DF
17	Zhang Linpeng	34	185	80	DF
18	Xu Haofeng	24	182	73	DF
19	Wu Shaocong	23	192	80	DF
20	Li Lei	31	183	66	DF
21	Yan Junling	32	191	83	GK
22	Wang Dalei	34	185	75	GK
23	Liu Dianzuo	33	190	81	GK

Table 2: Composition of South Korean Men's National Team Players - 2023 World Cup Qualifiers

No.	Player	Age	Height(cm)	Weight(kg)	Position
1	Sun Xingmin	31	183	78	FW
2	Cao Guicheng	25	188	82	FW
3	Huang Xican	27	177	77	FW
4	Huang Yizhu	31	185	82	FW
5	Wen Xuanmin	31	170	66	FW
6	Wu Xiankui	22	185	83	FW
7	Li Gangren	22	173	68	MF
8	Huang Renfan	27	178	71	MF
9	Piao Rongyu	30	186	80	MF
10	Li Zaicheng	31	181	74	MF
11	Zheng Youying	24	179	70	MF

12	Piao Zhenyi	28	186	80	MF
13	Li Chunmin	29	178	70	MF
14	Li Jidi	32	175	72	DF
15	Zheng Shengxuan	29	188	74	DF
16	Jin Wenzai	27	190	86	DF
17	Jin Taihuan	34	179	71	DF
18	Xue Yingyou	25	180	72	DF
19	Jin Yingquan	33	185	78	DF
20	Jin Zhenzhu	31	177	69	DF
21	Jin Chenggui	33	187	78	GK
22	Song Fangen	26	194	88	GK
23	Zhao Xianyou	32	189	73	GK

From two tables, the average age of the CMNFT players is 28.7 years, and the average age of the South Korean team is also 28.7 years. Generally, a player's prime age begins around 19 and gradually ends around 28, with the peak performance typically between 24-26 years old. During this 24-26 period, players have accumulated significant professional experience, their physical conditioning reaches its peak through training, and their technical skills and tactical awareness develop substantially. The CMNFT had 11 players within this prime age range, while South Korea had 10. This comparison shows that the CMNFT had a similar average age and a comparable number of players in their prime years to South Korea.

3.1.2. Shots Attempted and Shots on Target

Table 3: China - Shots Attempted and Shots on Target

Player	Shots Attempted	Shots on Target
Tan Long	3	0
Dai Weijun	1	0
Zhang Yunign	1	0

Table 4: South Korea - Shots Attempted and Shots on Target

Player	Shots Attempted	Shots on Target
Sun Xingmin	5	4
Li Gangren	3	1
Huang Renfan	3	0
Zheng Shengxuan	2	1
Huang Xican	1	1
Cao Guicheng	2	0
Piao Rongyu	1	0
Li Jidi	1	1

Scoring goals is the decisive factor in football. Data from Table XX shows that in this match, the CMNFT attempted a total of 5 shots, with 0 shots on target. South Korea attempted 18 shots, with 8 on target. Among the Chinese players, Tan Long and Zhang Yuning (forward players) attempted 4 shots combined, and Dai Weijun (midfielder) attempted 1 shot. For South Korea, Son Heung-min, Cho Gue-sung, and Hwang Hee-chan (forwards) attempted 8 shots combined; Lee Kang-in, Park Yong-woo, and Hwang In-beom (midfielders) attempted 7 shots combined;

Jeong Seung-hyun and Lee Ki-je (defenders) attempted 3 shots combined. It is evident that only forward players participated in shooting for China, while players from all three areas (forward, midfield, defense) participated for South Korea. The more players involved in shooting, the higher the probability of scoring. The CMNFT failed to mobilize all members to participate in shooting, resulting in inferior goal-scoring ability compared to South Korea.

3.1.3. Possession Rate and Passing Accuracy

Table 5: China - Touches, Passes, Passing Accuracy

Player	Touches	Passes Attempted	Passing Accuracy (%)
Tan Long	8	3	100
Wu Lei	22	18	61.1
Wei Shihao	18	9	77.8
Zhang Yuning	11	7	57.1
Chen Pu	9	7	42.9
Liu Binbin	50	31	87.1
Wu Xi	21	14	78.6
Wang Shangyuan	37	32	75
Dai Weijun	21	16	75
Li Ke	18	13	61.5
Gao Tianyi	10	5	60
Liu Yang	45	34	79.4
Zhu Chenjie	59	47	91.5
Jiang Shenglong	54	43	86.1
Zhang Linpeng	77	59	83.1
Yan Junling	33	20	70

Table 6: South Korea - Touches, Passes, Passing Accuracy

Player	Touches	Passes Attempted	Passing Accuracy (%)
Sun Xingmin	74	54	85.2
Huang Xican	65	46	91.3
Cao Kuicheng	25	16	81.3
Huang Yizhu	6	4	75
Li Gangren	65	45	80
Huang Renfan	83	72	90.3
Piao Rongyu	79	71	97.3
Li Zaicheng	14	13	84.6
Zheng Youying	13	11	100
Piao Zhenyi	9	6	100
Li Jidi	71	56	85.7
Zheng Shengxuan	103	97	87.6
Jin Wenzai	112	107	96.3
Jin Taihuan	55	42	92.9
Xue Yingyou	23	18	94.4
Jin Chenggui	15	12	58.3

In this match, the CMNFT's possession rate was 35%, while South Korea's was 65%.

Data from Table XX shows that the total number of touches for the CMNFT was 493, compared to South Korea's 814 touches. For China, forwards had 118 touches, midfielders had 107 touches, and defenders/goalkeeper had 268 touches. For South Korea, forwards had 170 touches, midfielders had 265 touches, and defenders/goalkeeper had 379 touches. The possession rate indicates that the CMNFT's ball control level was lower than South Korea's. Video analysis revealed that South Korean players demonstrated high coordination in short passing combinations and maintained good passing accuracy. This indicates superior ball control skills and solid fundamentals among South Korean players. The CMNFT struggled to control the ball effectively in their defensive third and lacked cohesive team play.

3.1.4. Fouls Committed and Cards Received

Table 7: China - Fouls Committed and Cards Received

Player	Fouls Committed	Cards Received (Y/R)
Tan Long	1	0
Wu Lei	1	0
Wei Shihao	0	0
Zhang Yuning	0	0
Chen Pu	1	0
Liu Binbin	1	0
Wu Xi	1	0
Wang Shangyuan	2	0
Dai Weijun	1	0
Li Ke	1	1
Gao Tianyi	3	0
Liu Yang	0	0
Zhu Chenjie	3	1
Jiang Shenglong	2	1
Zhang Linpeng	2	0
Yan Junling	0	0

Table 8: Korean - Fouls Committed and Cards Received

Player	Fouls Committed	Cards Received (Y/R)
Sun Xingmin	0	0
Huang Xican	2	0
Cao Kuicheng	1	0
Huang Yizhu	0	0
Li GangRen	1	0
Huang Renfan	2	0
Piao Rongyu	3	1
Li Zaicheng	0	0
Zheng Youying	0	0
Piao Zhenyi	0	0
Li Jidi	2	0
Zheng Shengxuan	2	0
Jin Wenzai	1	1

Jin Taihuan	0	0
Xue Yingyou	0	0
Jin Chenggui	0	0

Data from the tables show that the CMNFT committed a total of 19 fouls, while South Korea committed 14 fouls. The CMNFT received 3 yellow cards, compared to South Korea's 2 yellow cards. On one hand, this indicates aggressive defending by the CMNFT, but on the other hand, it also suggests problems in their defensive approach. Yellow cards typically result from stopping a promising attack or committing a reckless foul. The high number of yellow cards for the CMNFT was detrimental against South Korea and highlights an area requiring defensive improvement^[2].

3.2. Attacking Efficiency Analysis

Attacking efficiency can be calculated as the ratio of goals scored to shots attempted in a match. A team with strong attacking ability scores more goals from the same number of shots, indicating higher efficiency. The formula is: $\text{Attacking Efficiency} = \text{Goals Scored} / \text{Shots Attempted}$. Calculating attacking efficiency reveals a team's attacking capability level in a given match. In this match, China's attacking efficiency was $0/5 = 0$. South Korea's attacking efficiency was $3/18 \approx 0.17$.

3.2.1. Problems in China's Attacking Organization

I. Passing Errors and Causes

Video analysis revealed that in this match, only 5 CMNFT players had a passing accuracy above 80%, compared to 14 South Korean players. This clearly shows a significant deficiency in the CMNFT's passing level. The CMNFT made numerous passing errors, mainly involving back passes in their own defensive third, long balls from defense to attack, short passes in midfield and attacking areas, and combination play in the final third. These errors disrupted the team's attacking organization and prevented the creation of effective scoring threats.

Analysis of the error causes points to the following:

A clear gap exists between the CMNFT and South Korea in passing technique. Errors occurred in pass weight, direction, and timing, indicating a need for improvement in fundamental skills and technical level. Facing a strong opponent like South Korea likely induced pressure, leading to nervousness and anxiety among CMNFT players. This mental instability affected performance, contributing to passing errors. Problems existed in implementing the game plan. This could stem from suboptimal tactical arrangements by the coach or players failing to fully understand and execute the tactical instructions, leading to errors in both attack and defense. The CMNFT players showed signs of poor physical conditioning, possibly due to inadequate training levels or insufficient pre-match preparation. Fatigue impacts performance, leading to passing mistakes.

II. Stagnant Attacking Combinations

In football, back passes typically aim to create better opportunities for subsequent attacks. However, in this match, when midfield or defensive players received passes despite having multiple options (passing to wide players, runners in behind, or switching play), they frequently chose backward recycling. Continuous circulation in the defensive third with minimal progression to attacking areas indicates the Chinese team's low attacking intent and primary reliance on defensive transitions.

3.2.2. South Korea's Defensive Strategy

I. Targeted Pressing

South Korea employed a 4-2-3-1 formation, comprising a defensive unit of four defenders, two central midfielders (double pivot), three attacking midfielders, and one forward. The double pivot's role flexibility provided strong support for the attacking trio, combining with the forward to create sustained pressure. The fullbacks also advanced to join attacks, with defensive responsibilities shifting to center-backs and the double pivot. This formation offers strong defensive stability, with five midfielders ensuring dominance in central areas to reduce defensive pressure. The back four effectively covered defensive zones while supporting wide areas. The double pivot formed a protective barrier ahead of the defense and effectively marked China's #10 playmaker.

II. Rapid Counterattacks

This formation typically prioritized defensive organization, using midfield and defensive coordination to stifle opposition attacks while exploiting quick transitions (e.g., rapid dribbling breakthroughs after receiving long balls). This strategy requires excellent physical conditioning and swift ball circulation to avoid passive positioning. Central midfielders Park Yong-woo (79 touches, 71 passes, 69 accurate) and Hwang In-beom (83 touches, 72 passes, 65 accurate) demonstrated exceptional organizational awareness, consistently identifying defensive vulnerabilities to maintain pressure. With only one forward regularly pressing high, the remaining four attackers dropped near the center circle to maintain defensive solidity. However, opponents exploiting this gap could create significant pressure, necessitating vigilance against sudden attacks and precise game management.

3.3. Defensive Vulnerabilities Analysis

3.3.1. China's Defensive Frailties

I. Man-Marking Breakdowns

Man-marking assigns each defender a specific opponent for direct duels, aiming to regain possession and restrict space. Variations include strict, flexible, and zonal man-marking. China implemented flexible man-marking in midfield, allowing defenders to switch marks during positional rotations. However, failures in communication after losing markers and inadequate defensive cover led to numerous errors.

II. Zonal Defense Vulnerabilities

Zonal defense allocates specific areas to players who hold positions without tight marking. This passive approach creates vulnerabilities when multiple attackers enter a zone and facilitates opposition passing. China's 3-4-3 formation featured three forwards who failed to track back promptly. Players like Dai Weijun, Liu Yang, and Li Ke struggled in their defensive zones and failed to cover teammates' areas, resulting in frequent exploitation of wide channels by South Korea.

3.3.2. Korea's High Shot Conversion

I. Finishing Technique and Selection

Shooting techniques include instep drive, inside-foot curl, inside-foot shot, side-foot finish, outside-foot shot, lob, chip, toe poke, backheel, and header – producing varied trajectories (straight, diagonal, curved, ground, aerial, rebound). Technique selection depends on the ball's delivery (dribbling, cross, layoff, aerial ball, etc.), with different choices yielding distinct outcomes.

Son Heung-min's penalty (1-0, 11') used an inside-foot shot – striking the ball's center with power and speed – making it difficult for the goalkeeper to react. South Korea's next two goals (Son, 45'+1'; Jung Seung-hyun, 87') came from headers off set pieces. Headers are the primary technique for aerial balls; players redirect crosses or corners with minimal contact. With sufficient elevation and momentum, players can powerfully "crash" headers home. At 45', despite China packing the box with 10 defenders against 6 attackers, Son's intelligent near-post

run and header exploited space. Choosing to control and turn would likely have prevented the goal. Both scorers demonstrated highly effective technique selection.

II. Chinese Goalkeeping Errors

China conceded three goals: one penalty and two set-piece headers. Goalkeeper Yan Junling misjudged the penalty's direction (0-1). The subsequent headers revealed inadequate training in aerial command and poor positioning for set-piece situations.

3.4. Tactical Analysis

3.4.1. China's Strategic Limitations

I. Predictable Attacking Approach

China used a 3-4-3 formation with flat midfield. The midfield comprised two defensive midfielders (Wu Xi, Wang Shangyuan) and two wide midfielders (Liu Binbin, Liu Yang). Wu Xi focused on defensive duties, forming a back four with the three center-backs during attacks. Wang Shangyuan's role emphasized attacking organization and linking play. However, China underutilized Wang as an attacking pivot, predominantly deploying him in wide 2v1 combinations that South Korean defenders consistently neutralized. No effective alternative attacking strategies emerged.

II. Ineffective Counterattacking

In the 3-4-3, defenders Zhang Linpeng, Jiang Shenglong, and Zhu Chenjie formed the backline, while Wu Lei, Tan Long, and Wei Shihao led the attack. The defense employed zonal marking. Midfielders were expected to regain possession and initiate counters, but they rarely dispossessed opponents. The few successful transitions via long balls weren't capitalized on by forwards. At 41', Wu Xi won possession, Liu Binbin found Tan Long, but his shot missed. China managed only 5 shots (0 on target), demonstrating poor execution even when counterattacking opportunities arose.

3.4.2. Korea's Tactical Superiority

I. Adaptive Formation Adjustments

South Korea demonstrated clear superiority in game management: tight midfield control dictated tempo, while efficient counterattacking maximized their strengths. A key adjustment saw defensive midfielder Park Yong-woo ("ball-winner") replace the more attack-minded Lee Jae-sung. Park excels in defensive interventions and organizing play, while Lee is a speedy, technical forward adept at breaking lines but less defensively robust. This substitution reinforced South Korea's control and defensive stability. This flexibility – adapting tactics to exploit opponents – proved a major advantage, highlighting effective strategic execution.

II. Exploiting Chinese Weaknesses

South Korea's victory stemmed from exploiting China's frailties:

Attacking Prowess: Elite attackers like Son Heung-min (12 goals in 20 EPL apps 2023/24) provided clinical finishing and creativity.

Midfield Control: Dominance in central areas stifled China's buildup and enabled sustained pressure.

Tactical Adaptability: Adjustments specifically targeted Chinese vulnerabilities, effectively neutralizing their offense.

3.5. Psychological Analysis

3.5.1. China's Psychological Pressure

I. Poor Historical Record

The South Korea national team (founded 1928) has qualified for 11 World Cups. The China national team (founded 1924, joined FIFA 1931) participated in 12 Asian Cups but never reached the World Cup.

Since their first meeting in 1978, China holds a dismal record against South Korea in 35 internationals: 3 wins, 14 draws, 18 losses (8.6% win rate). Notable exceptions were a 3-0 win (2010 EAFF Cup) ending a 32-year winless streak and a 1-0 victory (2017 World Cup Qualifiers). Only 3 wins in 46 years illustrate immense psychological pressure and ingrained apprehension.

II. Deep-Rooted Confucian Influence

Confucianism, founded by Confucius in ancient Lu State, profoundly influenced Chinese and global civilization over millennia[3]. Its emphasis on "harmony is most precious" reflects China's historical pursuit of peace and stability. While valuable culturally, this "harmony-first" ethos may hinder the competitive aggression required in football. Players prioritizing avoidance of conflict over contesting possession, or feigning injury ("simulation"), struggle against determined opponents. Furthermore, Confucianism's traditionalism fosters tactical conservatism, inhibiting innovation and bold play – areas requiring improvement.

3.5.2. Korea's Psychological Edge

Recent achievements (2002 World Cup semifinals, 2010 World Cup R16) instill confidence against international opponents. A strong coaching staff provides expert tactical guidance and player development. The competitive K-League attracts top talent, continuously elevating players' technical and tactical levels. International success fuels national pride and public passion, motivating players to perform with determination. Strong team cohesion fosters mutual support and collective effort, enhancing confidence against strong opposition. Experience in high-pressure matches allows players to draw on past successes. A fierce desire to win and bring glory to the nation drives relentless effort.

4. Conclusions & Recommendations

4.1. Conclusions

The 0-3 defeat highlights China's clear gap against South Korea. However, players demonstrated commendable spirit and fighting attitude, showcasing the team's resilience. The primary issues lie in technical disparity and set-piece defending. While denying South Korea clear chances from open play, conceding from set pieces proved decisive. Detailed analysis of individual players' characteristics and tactics is needed to enhance the team's overall strength.

4.2. Recommendations

- (1) Improve passing quality under pressure, utilizing progressive passes to disrupt defensive structures and create scoring chances[1];
- (2) Prioritize intensive individual technical training to build a solid foundation before advanced tactical work;
- (3) Enhance defensive drills under high-intensity conditions – solid defense provides stability when technical progress is gradual;
- (4) Increase exposure to high-level international opponents beyond the Chinese Super League's intensity;
- (5) Foster tactical innovation, dismantle rigid systems, and develop promising youth talent;
- (6) Cultivate a winning mentality, ignite competitive spirit, and play with pride for national honor.

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