
On The GreatWall

5 Minute Chinese

How China Watches the World Cup Without a Team



PandaWu: Hello, this is 5 Minute Chinese from On The GreatWall. I'm PandaWu.

Emma: And I'm Emma.

Emma: Okay, this is strange. World Cup talk is everywhere in China right now, but China is not even playing. How can the excitement still be this strong?

PandaWu: Because Chinese fans don't need a national team to enjoy the World Cup. They build their own tournament around platforms, favorite players, friends, food, and 看球.

Emma: Wait, you just dropped a Chinese phrase mid-sentence. Save it, I want that one later.

PandaWu: You'll get it. China's national team has only reached the World Cup once, back in 2002, and it missed 2026 too. Why China is not in the World Cup is a whole other story. But China still has an enormous World Cup audience.

Emma: So where do they actually watch?

PandaWu: Mostly on their phones. And the surprise this year is Xiaohongshu.

Emma: Xiaohongshu? The lifestyle app with skincare and travel posts?

PandaWu: For this World Cup, it became one of the official streaming platforms in China. You can watch matches, replays, and highlights there.

Emma: So the app I use for restaurant tips and travel posts is now showing live football?

PandaWu: Exactly. And that is what makes it interesting.

Emma: Okay, that I get. I'd rather watch with someone yelling in the comments than a quiet studio.

PandaWu: Douyin, Weibo, and Bilibili run their own versions too, but Xiaohongshu World Cup streaming still surprised everyone, a lifestyle app hosting the match.

Emma: If there's no home team to scream for, who do people pick?

PandaWu: Whoever they like. Without one compulsory national team, Chinese fans often adopt a player, a country, or even a new team for one match.

Emma: So it's like borrowing a team for the summer.

PandaWu: Pretty much. Haaland fans in China follow his every move, and Chinese fans support Haaland in big numbers. Messi and Ronaldo have long fan armies too. Messi or Ronaldo fans could fill stadiums on their own.

Emma: Didn't Haaland just turn up in a Chinese ad recently?

PandaWu: He did. Remember Haaland's Chinese herbal tea ad? The point is, the fandom was already here before the ads.

Emma: So it's not one star for everyone.

PandaWu: Some fans stick with one player for the whole tournament. Others choose a different team from match to match.

Emma: One thing I keep forgetting. The 2026 World Cup is in North America. What time is it even in China?

PandaWu: At some very inconvenient hours. The games are in the US, Canada, and Mexico, so Chinese fans get a mix of late-night and early-morning matches. Some kick off after midnight, others at a brutal six in the morning.

Emma: So people set alarms to watch football before work?

PandaWu: All the time. Watching football in China means an alarm, a phone in bed, or friends in a bar with a cold beer. The food is half the experience. Beer, crayfish, barbecue, and late-night delivery. A World Cup match can easily turn into a second dinner. In Guangzhou, that late-night meal is often a dai pai dong night market, woks blazing under the streetlights while the match plays on a TV above the stall.

Emma: And then the next morning.

PandaWu: Coffee. Lots of it. Chinese football viewing parties run late, and the office pays for it the next day.

Emma: So the real MVP is whoever brings the coffee.

Emma: Okay, you promised me that phrase from the start.

PandaWu: I did. Here it is.

PandaWu: 看球

Emma: 看球

PandaWu: 看 means to watch or look. 球 literally means ball. So 看球 means watching a ball game, especially football or basketball. During the World Cup, it almost always means watching football.

Emma: So when you said fans build the tournament around 看球, you meant around the simple act of watching.

PandaWu: Exactly. And a very Chinese sentence with it.

PandaWu: 我凌晨三点起来看球。

PandaWu: That means I got up at three in the morning to watch the match. Only possible during a World Cup.

Emma: So the big misunderstanding is that no team means no fans?

PandaWu: Yes. One missing team does not mean missing fans. China football culture is alive even when the national team stays home. World Cup viewing in China stays loud, social, and full.

Emma: Right, you can love the sport and still not have a team there.

PandaWu: Exactly. And China has its own grassroots World Cup, village tournaments that pull huge crowds. So even without a 2026 team, World Cup in China keeps humming, and Chinese football fans keep cheering.

Emma: Loud, social, and full. I like that.

PandaWu: Right. China may not have a team at this World Cup, but it definitely has an audience. That's how China watches the World Cup.

Emma: Once again, our five minutes are up, but if you'd like to hear more authentic stories about Chinese food, history and culture, you can head to our topic page on our website, onthegreatwall.com. See you again soon. But for now, it's goodbye.

Useful Examples

看球

Kàn qiú

watching a ball game, especially football

我凌晨三点起来看球。

Wǒ língchén sān diǎn qǐlái kàn qiú.

I got up at three in the morning to watch the match.