

Youth Football Development Pathways in China and Japan: A Comparative Analysis of Club-Centered and Multi-Pathway Models

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Abstract: *This study compares youth football development pathways in China and Japan, focusing on how young players are identified, trained, and promoted into elite and professional football. Using a qualitative comparative approach, it analyzes official football association materials, youth competition results, national youth team rosters, and publicly available player background information. The study distinguishes between two levels of player pathways: formative background and final professional gateway. This distinction is particularly important because players may receive early training in schools, sports schools, football schools, social and private youth training organizations, but enter professional football through a different final route. The findings show that China has developed diversified participation pathways through professional club academies, sports schools, football schools, social/private youth training organizations, and school football. However, elite player production and professional entry remain strongly club-centered. A sample of 129 Chinese players from five high-market-value Chinese Super League clubs shows that almost all entered senior professional football through professional club systems, even though their earlier formative backgrounds were more diverse. Japan, by contrast, combines strong professional academy-based early identification with continuing high school and university pathways into professional football. The study argues that pathway connectivity, rather than pathway diversity alone, is crucial for sustainable youth football development.*

Keywords: *China; Japan; Youth Football Development; Development Pathways; Professional Club academies; School Football; Comparative Analysis*

1. Introduction

Youth football development is central to both elite player production and grassroots participation. China and Japan provide a meaningful case for comparison because both countries introduced professional football reforms in the early 1990s but have since followed different developmental trajectories. Japan has established a relatively stable player development system and has become one of Asia's leading football nations, whereas China has continued to face difficulties in transforming youth participation into stable elite output.

Previous studies have examined Chinese and Japanese football from perspectives such as youth training systems, school football, professional club academies, football governance, and grassroots participation. However, less attention has been paid to the specific pathways through which young players move from early training to elite competition and professional football. A simple distinction between "club football" and "school football" may fail to capture the complexity of player development, because players often move between different organizations at different stages of their careers.

This study therefore compares youth football development pathways in China and Japan. It asks two main questions: first, what kinds of pathways are available for young players in the two countries; and second, how do these pathways differ in their ability to connect youth participation with elite and professional football? Rather than evaluating one national model as superior to another, the study seeks to clarify how pathway structure and pathway connectivity shape the development and promotion of young football players.

The following sections introduce the methodology, compare the Chinese and Japanese pathway structures, and discuss their main differences.

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to examine youth football development pathways in China and Japan. It does not conduct a statistical causal analysis, but uses publicly available data to identify development tendencies and compare how different pathways operate in the two countries.

The data come from four main types of sources: policy documents and football association materials; competition records from youth tournaments such as the China Youth Football League and the Takamado JFA U-18 Premier League; national youth team and senior national team rosters; and publicly available player background information, including Transfermarkt data, club information, domestic media reports, and player profiles.

To avoid oversimplifying player development trajectories, this study distinguishes between two levels of player pathways. The first is formative background, which refers to the major training environment before a player entered the professional system, such as school football, sports schools, social/private youth training organizations, football schools, or professional club academies. The second is final professional gateway, which refers to the last major route through which a player entered professional football, such as a professional club youth team, reserve team, first-team registration, high school team, or university team. This distinction is especially important because players may receive early training in one type of organization but enter professional football through another.

The player background data are selected samples rather than complete national datasets. The Chinese sample includes 129 Chinese players from five high-market-value Chinese Super League clubs: Shanghai Shenhua, Shanghai Port, Zhejiang, Shenzhen Xinpengcheng, and Shandong Taishan. The Japanese sample includes 148 Japanese players from five high-market-value J1 League clubs, together with recent national youth team and senior national team data. Because player biographies are not always complete, the classifications should be understood as indicating broad tendencies rather than exact nationwide proportions.

2. Youth Football Development Pathways in China and Japan

Development pathways play a fundamental role in shaping the long-term cultivation of football players. They establish the routes through which players are identified, trained, selected, and promoted throughout different stages of their development. They also define the relationships among schools, professional clubs, football associations, sports schools, and social/private youth training organizations, thereby influencing both the accessibility and effectiveness of youth football programs.

A well-connected youth development structure provides multiple routes for player development and allows players to continue progressing even when they move between different organizations. Conversely, an overly centralized or narrowly connected pathway structure may limit developmental flexibility and make it difficult for non-club pathways to produce elite players independently. Consequently, pathway structure and pathway connectivity constitute important analytical perspectives for comparing youth football systems in China and Japan.

2.1 Youth Football Development Pathways in China

Since the Hongshankou Conference in 1993, China's football system has undergone a gradual transition from a centrally planned model toward a more market-oriented structure. Professional clubs were encouraged to establish youth academies and football schools, while private organizations were allowed to participate in youth training. As a result, China's youth football system gradually evolved into a diversified development structure consisting of professional club academies, club-affiliated football schools, sports schools, social/private youth training organizations, and school football programs. Since 2009, a series of national policies promoting the integration of sports and education has further strengthened the role of school football and encouraged closer cooperation between educational organizations and the sports system.^[1]

Although sports-education integration has broadened participation opportunities, the competitive hierarchy among these pathways remains highly uneven. Professional club academies and club-affiliated football schools continue to occupy the dominant position in elite player development because they generally possess stronger coaching resources, more systematic training programs, better competition opportunities, and clearer routes into professional football. By contrast, school football programs primarily emphasize broad participation and educational objectives, while sports schools and social/private youth training organizations often need to connect with professional clubs before players can enter the elite or professional stage.^[2]

The China Youth Football League (CYFL), established in 2022, provides an effective platform for evaluating the relative performance of different youth development pathways. Unlike many youth competitions that restrict participation to specific categories of teams, the CYFL allows professional club academies, sports schools, football schools, school teams, and social/private youth training organizations to compete within the same competition system under identical regulations. Consequently, the tournament offers a valuable opportunity to compare the effectiveness of different development pathways under equivalent competitive conditions.

Results from the first four editions of the men's U13, U15, U17, and U19 competitions demonstrate the continued dominance of professional club academies. Among the sixteen championship titles awarded between 2022 and 2025, thirteen were won by professional club academies or football schools affiliated with professional clubs. The remaining titles were won by only one sports school team and two school teams. Notably, all U15 and U19 championships were secured by professional club academies, with Shandong Taishan FC winning four consecutive titles in both age categories. These results indicate that, despite the growing diversity of participating organizations, professional clubs remain the most successful pathway for cultivating elite youth players.

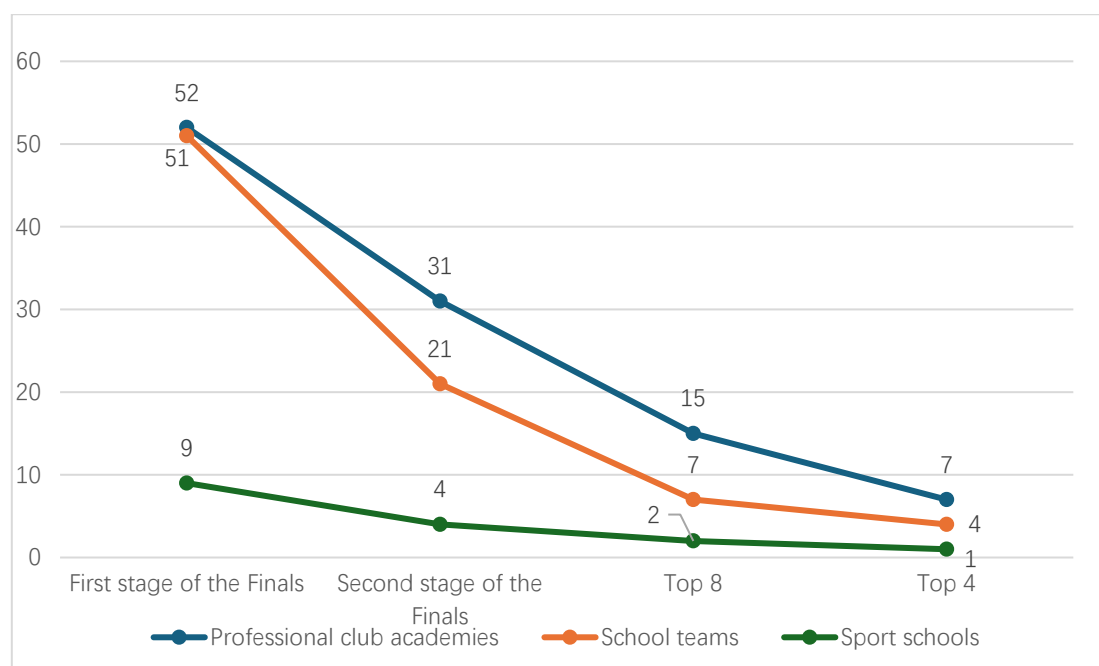


Figure 1. Changes in Team Composition during the 2025 Fourth China Youth Football League Finals

Figure 1 covers the U13, U15, and U17 categories. Although professional club academies and school teams entered the first stage in almost equal numbers, school teams declined more rapidly as the competition progressed. The U19 category is discussed separately because it was composed entirely of professional club youth teams.

Further evidence can be observed from the competition structure of the 2025 Fourth China Youth Football League Finals. As shown in Figure 1, professional club academies and school teams entered the U13, U15, and U17 finals in almost equal numbers at the first stage, but school teams declined more rapidly as the competition progressed. This pattern suggests that school football has become increasingly visible at the participation level, while professional club academies continue to demonstrate a stronger capacity to reach the later stages of elite youth competition. Sports schools remained a relatively small category throughout the same process. The U19 category further reinforces this tendency, as it was composed entirely of professional club youth teams. This indicates that the late youth stage functions as an important dividing line in China's pathway structure: players who remain in professional club youth systems are closer to senior professional football, whereas players who enter university football may continue playing while obtaining educational credentials, but usually face a less direct route to top-level professional leagues.^[3]

A similar pattern can also be identified in China's national youth teams. Of the 20 players selected for the 2025 EAFF U-15 Men's Championship, 17 were developed through professional club academies or social/private youth training organizations, compared with only 2 from school football and 1 from sports schools. Likewise, the squad that finished as runners-up at the 2026 AFC U-17 Asian Cup included

18 players from professional club academies or social/private youth training organizations, 4 from school football, and 1 from a sports school. Similar proportions were observed in the 2026 CFA Team China International Youth Competitions, where players developed within professional club systems accounted for the overwhelming majority of the U19 national team, with 19 from professional club academies or social/private youth training organizations and 4 from school football. These findings suggest that although multiple development pathways now coexist within China's youth football system, elite player production continues to rely predominantly on professional club academies.^{[4][5]}

This club-centered tendency can also be observed at the senior national team level. Taking China's 23-man squad for the final qualifying match of the 2026 FIFA World Cup cycle as an example, 16 players had formative backgrounds in professional club academies or club-affiliated football schools, while two came from social/private youth training organizations, 2 from sports schools, and 3 from school or campus football. This distribution suggests that campus football and sports schools are not completely absent from the development backgrounds of senior national team players. However, the largest proportion of players still came from professional club academies, football schools, or other specialized football training environments. More importantly, even players with school, sports school, or social/private youth training organization backgrounds generally needed to pass through professional club systems before reaching senior professional football and the national team. Therefore, the senior national team sample further supports the view that China's player development pathway is diversified at the formative level but remains strongly club-centered at the professional gateway level.

Table 1. Formative Backgrounds and Final Professional Gateways of Chinese Players in Selected CSL Clubs.

Formative background before entering professional club systems	Number of players	Percentage	Final professional gateway
Football schools / youth training systems	59	45.7%	Mostly professional club youth or reserve teams
social/private youth training organizations	17	13.2%	
Sports schools	12	9.3%	
School / campus football	41	31.8%	
Total	129	100.0%	Almost all entered senior professional football through club-based systems

Note: The sample includes 129 Chinese players from the five Chinese Super League clubs with the highest squad market values in the current season: Shanghai Shenhua, Shanghai Port, Zhejiang FC, Shenzhen Peng City, and Shandong Taishan. Player backgrounds were manually coded based on Transfermarkt, club information, domestic media reports, school or academy profiles, and other publicly available sources. Because some early training histories are incomplete or inconsistently reported, the classifications should be understood as approximate indicators of broad tendencies rather than exact nationwide proportions.

The selected CSL club sample in Table 1 further shows why it is necessary to distinguish between formative background and final professional gateway in the Chinese context. Among the 129 Chinese players analyzed, formative backgrounds were relatively diverse: 59 players had backgrounds in football schools or youth training systems, 17 in social/private youth training organizations, 12 in sports schools, and 41 in school or campus football. However, almost all of these players eventually entered senior professional football through professional club youth teams, reserve teams, or other club-based systems. This means that school football, sports schools, and social/private youth training organizations may contribute to early player development, but they rarely function as independent gateways into top-level professional football. Instead, they usually need to be connected to professional clubs before players can reach the senior professional stage.

Therefore, the CSL player sample supports the main argument of this section: China's youth football development is diversified at the formative level, but remains strongly club-centered at the professional gateway level.

Overall, China's youth football pathways have become considerably more diversified following the implementation of sports-education integration policies and the expansion of national youth competitions. Nevertheless, this diversification has so far primarily expanded participation opportunities rather than fundamentally reshaping elite player development. This may also be related to the relatively short history

of the China Youth Football League, which has been held for only a few years and has not yet fully translated the expansion of school football into stronger final professional gateways. As the competition system becomes more mature, it remains possible that more players from high school or university football will be able to enter top-level professional football through more direct routes. At present, however, professional club academies and club-affiliated football schools remain the core organizations responsible for producing high-level youth players and providing access to professional football. The central issue is therefore not whether multiple pathways exist, but whether non-club pathways can become sufficiently connected and competitive to function as viable routes into elite and professional football.

2.2 Youth Football Development Pathways in Japan

Japan's youth football development is characterized by a relatively mature and diversified pathway structure. Rather than relying on a single dominant route, the Japanese system is composed of multiple interconnected organizations, including the Japan Football Association (JFA), J.League club academies, school football programs, university football, regional football associations, and local community clubs.^[6] These organizations perform different but complementary functions in the process of player development. Professional club academies provide systematic elite training and direct access to professional clubs; schools and universities combine football training with formal education; regional associations and community clubs broaden participation and support talent identification at the local level; and the JFA coordinates competitions, coaching development, and national-level player development programs.

In the following analysis, however, the main focus is on the relationship between professional club academies and school- or university-based pathways, because these routes are most directly related to elite player development and entry into professional football.

This development structure allows Japanese youth players to move through different routes during their development. Some players progress directly from J.League academies to professional football, while others enter professional clubs through high school or university football. In some cases, players who have previously trained within club academies later continue their development in high school or university teams before returning to the professional game. This should not be understood simply as a detour for academic credentials. Rather, the ability of school and university football to maintain players at a sufficiently competitive level and later return them to professional clubs indicates that school-based and university-based football remain meaningful components of Japan's elite development structure.

School football occupies a particularly important position within this structure.^[7] Historically, football in Japan spread widely through schools, and high school football has long maintained strong social visibility and competitive prestige. Competitions such as the All Japan High School Soccer Tournament have contributed to the formation of a distinctive school football culture. First held in 1917, the tournament has developed into a long-established national event, with the 104th edition held in the 2025-2026 season.^[8] Its long history and nationwide visibility show that high school football in Japan has functioned not merely as extracurricular activity, but as a socially recognized and competitive development pathway. University football further extends this pathway by offering late-developing players additional time to improve physically, technically, and tactically before entering professional football.

The integration of school teams and professional club academies can also be observed in Japan's elite youth competition system. The Takamado JFA U-18 Premier League represents the highest level of U-18 football in Japan. It includes both J.League youth teams and high school football teams, which compete in the same league structure under the same rules. The league is divided into East and West divisions and operates through a home-and-away format, while promotion and relegation connect the Premier League with regional Prince Leagues. The significance of this structure lies not only in the composition of the Premier League itself, but also in its connection with the regional Prince Leagues. Through promotion and relegation, high school teams, J.League youth teams, and other regional youth teams can move between regional and national levels of competition. This vertical structure helps maintain the continuity of school football within Japan's elite youth development system, rather than separating school teams from professional academy competition.

The continued presence of high school teams in the Takamado JFA U-18 Premier League demonstrates that school football remains competitive at the highest youth level. In the 2026 season, both the East and West divisions each consisted of 12 teams, including 7 J.League academy teams and 5 high school teams. In addition, Ozu High School's victory over Yokohama FC Youth in the 2024 final shows

that school teams are still capable of competing successfully against professional club academies at the national elite level. These facts suggest that Japan's school football system remains an active elite pathway rather than merely a grassroots participation platform.^[9]

Player background data further supports this interpretation. In this study, the final professional gateway refers to the final major route through which a player entered professional football. This classification does not necessarily capture the player's entire developmental history, since many Japanese players move between club academies, schools, and universities during their youth careers. However, it is useful for identifying whether school and university football can function as direct gateways into professional football.

At the youth national team level, professional club academies remain highly influential. In Japan's squad for the 2026 AFC U-17 Asian Cup, 18 players came from professional club youth systems, compared with 5 from high school teams. Similarly, in the 2025 AFC U-20 Asian Cup qualification squad, the numbers were 17 and 6, respectively; and in the 2025 EAFF U-15 Championship squad, 18 players came from professional club youth systems, compared with 2 from school-based teams. These figures suggest that J.League academies and professional youth teams play an important role in early elite identification and youth national team selection. However, this evidence should be distinguished from final professional gateway data, because youth national team players have not necessarily entered senior professional football. Taken together, the Japanese evidence suggests a stage-specific pathway structure: professional club academies are especially important for early elite selection, while high school and university football continue to function as important gateways at later stages.^{[10][11][12]}

Table 2. Final Professional Gateways in Selected Japanese Football Samples

Sample / Team	Club academy or professional youth system	High school / university pathway	Main implication
Selected five J1 League clubs, 148 Japanese players	66, 44.6%	82, 55.4%	School and university football remain major gateways into professional football
Japan senior national team, 2026 World Cup squad, 23 players	11, 47.8%	12, 52.2%	Multiple pathways remain relevant at the highest level

Note: Player pathways were manually coded based on Transfermarkt, club profiles, J.League-related information, media reports, and other publicly available player biographies. The classification refers to the final major route through which players entered professional or senior elite football. Because some players moved between club academies, high schools, and universities during their youth careers, the data should be interpreted as approximate pathway classifications rather than complete developmental histories.

In Table 2, based on a sample of 148 Japanese players from five high-market-value J1 League clubs in the 2026 season - namely Kashima Antlers, Kawasaki Frontale, Sanfrecce Hiroshima, Kashiwa Reysol, and Vissel Kobe - 66 players entered professional football through professional club academies as their final professional gateway, while 82 players entered through high school or university football. Although this sample does not cover the entire J.League, it indicates that school and university football continue to function as major gateways into professional football. This finding is particularly important because it shows that school-based football in Japan is not limited to broad participation or educational development; it also contributes directly to the production of professional players.

A closer examination of this J1 League sample further reveals an important pattern of player mobility. Among the 148 Japanese players analyzed, 23 had previously belonged to professional club youth teams during their high school years, but later entered university football before returning to the J.League after graduation. This group accounts for approximately 15.5% of the total sample and about 28.0% of the players whose final developmental gateway was high school or university football. This pattern shows that university football in Japan does not merely function as an alternative route for players outside the professional academy system. Rather, it can also serve as a continuing developmental environment for players who have already received training in professional club academies but do not enter the professional game immediately after high school age.

This phenomenon is significant because it demonstrates the connectivity between club academies and university football in Japan. Players who leave professional youth teams are not necessarily excluded from the elite development pathway. By competing in university football, they can continue to develop

physically, technically, and tactically, while remaining visible to professional clubs. Their later return to the J.League suggests that Japanese university football maintains a sufficiently competitive level and is recognized by professional clubs as a credible recruitment pathway. Therefore, the Japanese development model should not be understood as a simple division between academy-based and school-based routes, but as a flexible pathway structure in which players may move between club academies, universities, and professional football.

A similar pattern can be observed at the senior national team level. In Japan's 23-man squad for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 11 players had professional club academies as their final professional gateway, while 12 players entered elite professional football through high school or university football. This distribution suggests that school and university pathways remain relevant even at the highest level of Japanese football. The significance of this finding is not that school football alone develops more elite players than club academies, but rather that multiple development pathways continue to coexist and remain effective.

2.3 Comparative Discussion: Club-Centered and Multi-Pathway Development Models

Table 3. Comparative Summary of Youth Football Development Pathways in China and Japan.

Evidence level	China	Japan	Comparative implication
Youth competitions	CYFL shows school participation at younger ages, but professional club teams dominate later stages; U19 is composed entirely of professional youth teams	Takamado JFA U-18 Premier League includes both J.League academies and high school teams	Japan maintains stronger school-club continuity at the late youth stage
Youth national team selection	U-level teams are mainly drawn from professional club academies, football schools, and specialized training systems	U-level teams are also mainly academy-based	Both countries rely heavily on club academies or professional youth systems for early elite identification
Senior national team	Formative backgrounds are diverse, but final professional gateways are mostly club-based	Professional academy and high school/university gateways both remain visible	Japan's school/university pathways are more directly connected to elite football
Professional club sample	129 CSL players show diverse formative backgrounds but almost all pass through club systems before entering senior professional football	148 J1 players include a large number who entered through high school or university football	China is more club-centered at the professional gateway level; Japan shows a more visible multi-pathway gateway structure

The comparison in Table 3 shows that both China and Japan have developed multiple youth football pathways, but these pathways differ in their functions, levels of connectivity, and relationship to professional football. In China, professional club academies, football schools, sports schools, social/private youth training organizations, and school football all participate in youth player development. However, the evidence from the CYFL, youth and senior national team rosters, and the selected CSL player sample suggests that this diversity is stronger at the levels of participation and formative background than at the level of professional entry. Non-club pathways may contribute to early player development, but players usually need to enter professional club youth teams, reserve teams, or club-based registration systems before reaching senior professional football.

Japan presents a different pattern. J.League academies remain highly important for early elite identification and youth national team selection, but high school and university football also function as recognized gateways into professional football. The Takamado JFA U-18 Premier League places high school teams and J.League youth teams within the same elite competition structure, while the J1 League and senior national team samples show that players can still reach professional and elite football through school and university pathways. The movement of some players from club academies to university

football and then back to the J.League further indicates that Japanese pathways are not isolated from one another, but connected through player mobility, competition systems, and professional recruitment.

The key distinction between the two countries therefore lies not simply in the number of available pathways, but in whether these pathways can remain connected to elite and professional football. China can be described as diversified at the formative and participation levels but club-centered at the professional gateway level. Japan, by contrast, represents a more coordinated multi-pathway model in which club academies, high schools, and universities perform different but complementary functions. This comparison suggests that pathway diversity alone does not guarantee effective youth development; what matters more is pathway connectivity, especially whether non-club pathways can provide continuous and credible routes toward professional football.

3. Conclusion

This study has compared youth football development pathways in China and Japan, with particular attention to the relationship between formative backgrounds and final professional gateways. The findings suggest that China and Japan both possess diversified youth football organizations, but the functions and connectivity of these pathways differ. China has expanded participation through school football, sports schools, social/private youth training organizations, and professional club academies. However, elite player production and professional entry remain strongly centered on professional club systems. Japan, by contrast, combines academy-based early elite identification with high school and university pathways that can continue to function as direct gateways into professional football.

By distinguishing formative background from final professional gateway, this study shows why the existence of multiple youth football organizations does not necessarily mean that all pathways can function as effective routes into professional football. The comparison indicates that pathway connectivity is more important than pathway diversity alone. For China, the key challenge is not simply to increase the number of youth football participants or organizations, but to improve the continuity between different pathways and professional football. For Japan, the coexistence of club academies, school football, and university football provides a more flexible structure in which players can develop through different routes at different stages.

Because the player background data are based on selected samples and publicly available information, the findings should be interpreted as broad tendencies rather than exact national proportions. Future research could expand the player sample, examine more clubs and regions, and incorporate interviews with players, coaches, and administrators to further clarify how youth development pathways operate in practice.

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