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# Becoming a Chinese football fan: an examination of the influence of national and local identities on the development of Chinese football fandom

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## ABSTRACT

The article explores how national and local identities influence Chinese football fandom. Previous research has failed to provide detailed analysis about how these two social identities influence the process of fans' self-identification. This study uses fans of Henan Jianye Football Club and Shenzhen Football Club because they can typically represent native and internal immigrant fans in China as examples to fill the knowledge gap. By combining the experiences of these two fan groups, the article reveals that international games and the feeling of supporting the nation can strengthen the influence of national identity on fandom for the national football team. It also reveals that fans' recognition of their teams' local symbolic status stimulates local identity in developing native fans' support for local football clubs. Although internal immigrant fans do not share their local identities, their desire to acquire local affiliation also allows local identity to affect their fandom.

## Introduction

Previous research points out that the development of fandom for the Chinese national football team and for local football clubs is associated with the Chinese people's desire to celebrate both national and local identities.<sup>1</sup> Although the Chinese people's fondness for football teams was developed for overseas teams initially because of their occasional International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) Men's World Cup encounter in 1978, supporting their national football team remained when the team began attending the World Cup in 1982. In terms of the fandom for local football clubs, the desire to celebrate local identity helps fans ignore their weak connection with the teams and cheer in the stadium when the Chinese professional football leagues began in 1994. Hence, celebrating national and local identities is the root of the Chinese football fandom development.

Nevertheless, previous research only indicates the duration of fans' interaction with their football teams as the leading factor in developing Chinese football fandom,<sup>2</sup> so whether national and local identities also have an impact on the process of football fandom development is unknown. In addition, Chinese football fans of the domestic teams also include immigrant fans who support local football clubs in their immediate places. For example, fans of Shanghai SIPG Football Club mainly consist of immigrants because they recognize the club as the authenticity of Shanghai spirit – the diversity.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, understanding the fandom of these immigrant football fans supplements

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the research on how local identity influences the development of fandom for local football clubs. Moreover, the previous research suggests that the research on the development of Chinese football fandom requires a more diverse data set, this research investigates fans of Henan Jianye Football Club (HJFC) and Shenzhen Football Club (SFC) to address the research question: 'How do people's national and regional identities influence the development of Chinese football fandom?'

This study draws upon theories of national and local identities and works on fandom development, especially in the Chinese context. The methodology is interpretivist in order to present the experiences of Chinese local and immigrant football fans, and the study employs a comparative case study approach. The theoretical foundations and research design are discussed in the following sections. After that, the article presents the findings followed by analytical discussions to examine how national and regional identities shape the process of Chinese football fans' self-identification through football. The paper begins with an examination of the influence of national identity on football fandom by combining the experiences of local and immigrant Chinese football fans. With specific reference to these fans' differing place attachments, the article discusses and compares how local identity influences native and immigrant football fans to develop fandom for local clubs.

### **The development of national and local identities in China**

National and local identities comprise people's social or collective identities which contribute to 'the totality of a person's individuality plus the idiosyncratic things' that make a person unique.<sup>4</sup> People can acquire a more accurate understanding of themselves through this kind of identity because it encourages them to evaluate their relationships with others in their unique spatial and temporal contexts. Local and national identities are developed in local and national communities respectively. Initially, the local community refers to a geographical area while the nation is an anthropological community.<sup>5</sup> Yet, national and local communities in most cases have the same geographical significance because of the construction of a nation-state where people use a geographical border to measure their nation.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the process of people's identity-building in these two communities may be overlapped.

Among the Chinese people, nation is a unified and broader community including their local ones.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the Chinese people's understanding of their local identity is longer than their national one because of the longer history of diversification in China.<sup>8</sup> Compared with the territory of the People's Republic of China (PRC), only the Yuan dynasty from 1301 to 1351 and the Qing dynasty from 1776 to 1844 could be the unified periods in the Chinese history.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the process of the Chinese people's national identity building was after 1840 when the Chinese nationalist thinking began.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the Chinese people's interaction with their local communities may be longer, and the development of people's local identities is earlier.

Most local communities start with a group of people who use specific geographical conditions to satisfy their biological needs, such as safety.<sup>11</sup> Alongside the daily practice based on their geographical environments, people develop specific lifestyles that are distinct from others. Consequently, places become social communities involving specific ethnic, cultural and religious spheres. The developed local identity naturally helps people to identify themselves and their fellows in the same cultural and geographical scale.<sup>12</sup> Usually, birth information directly helps individuals acquire local identity. Length of residence can also be another factor in individuals' local identities secured because of the duration of living in a specific place gaining experience of a local lifestyle.<sup>13</sup> In addition, these factors are affected by individuals' relationships with other members and by their status as having homes in their local places, so the development of local identity relies on an individual's satisfaction in terms of 'biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs' in a specific local community.<sup>14</sup>

Chinese people's engagement with local identity has been strongly associated with a long diversification history which has made solidarity the unique feature of Chinese local identity. During this history, kingdoms and regimes built up fortresses to claim their independent authority

rooted in different geographical areas, thereby limiting population mobility and underpinning people's long-term interaction with their fixed ethnic communities.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the lifestyles of China have remained diverse, and Chinese people's local identities can be easily identified. Moreover, a particular lifestyle – for example, over-reliance on agriculture – enhances the solidarity of local identity.<sup>16</sup> Because this has enabled the Chinese people to be self-reliant for four millennia, it is difficult for people to abandon those lifestyles developed from their farming lands and home places, even though many of them choose to migrate: 'wherever people from those agricultural regions migrated, they took with them their tradition of making a living from the soil'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the Chinese concept of freedom is obtained by people if they familiarize themselves with their local community: 'In a society characterised by this level of familiarity, we achieve a level of freedom whereby we can do whatever we please without fear of violating the norms of the society'.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, most Chinese people have a strong connection to their places and secure local identities.

In terms of national identity construction, shared ethnic background is often an essential condition for people to organize their national communities. According to Smith,<sup>19</sup> people's wishes to be members of their nation are associated with the fact that their nation can help them find 'cultural fulfilment, rootedness, security and fraternity'. Nevertheless, a shared political desire is arguably a more important factor in encouraging people to construct their nations.<sup>20</sup> For example, people from different ethnic backgrounds took part in the French and American Revolutions to assert their shared national identities. Thus, 'ethnicity, language and the like' are indications of collective belonging but not any 'fundamental sense' of the nation.<sup>21</sup> Instead, people's desire to manage a political community equally and independently leads to a process of nation-building. National identity is then developed along with a consciousness of citizenship that has given people 'a stake in the country and thereby made the state to some extent "our own"'.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, civic consciousness is a consequence of modernity and modern societies in which print technology emerged. Because of widespread literacy and universal education, the concept of the nation is an 'imagined political community' where people distinguish themselves by an acknowledged knowledge of rather than familiarity with all members of the community.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, the existence of national identity is associated with whether people acknowledge their civic consciousness and membership in a specific national community.

The nation has two meanings in the Chinese context.<sup>24</sup> It can either be the 'Guo Jia' (国家), a state with a geographical and political border, or the 'Min Zu' (民族), a unified community including all ethnic groups. For this reason, the Chinese nation-building process combined ethnic and political factors. The idea of the Chinese nation emerged when the Qing dynasty failed in most of its wars against Western imperialism from the 1840s.<sup>25</sup> Because it was developed to encourage more people to participate in resisting invasion, its main political purpose was to offer people the legitimacy to develop and own a Chinese nation-state equally while declining the Qing dynasty's authority. Moreover, the concept also generated the ethnic meaning that promoted the Chinese nation-state as a unified community of all ethnic groups, so that people's affinities with other ethnic communities could be increased to enhance the strength of the resistance to Western imperialism.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, unification and solidarity are critical themes in the process of Chinese national identity building.

However, most Chinese people's engagement with their national identity was not fully developed by the time when the first Chinese nation-state, the Republic of China (ROC), was established in 1912. Instead, this happened after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.<sup>27</sup> Constant war during the history of the ROC, including the Warlord Era (1916–1928), the First Chinese Civil War (1927–1937) and the Second Civil War (1945–1949), only allowed the elite Chinese intellectual class to understand the concept of nation and engage with their national identity. This issue was related to a 'dual phenomena' principle that required universal education to make the populace understand the importance of the nation from an intellectual perspective and participate in the process of nation-building.<sup>28</sup> Because civic and moral education – a compulsory

course in schools to promote the authority of the Chinese Community Party and the importance of a secure Chinese nation – was only developed following the establishment of the PRC, Chinese nation-building could only then be completed.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, national identity is a relatively new social and imagined identity amongst the Chinese people.

Because affinity to a community has been essential for individuals to survive in the history of human evolution, people have inevitably developed a sense of belonging to their national and local communities while simultaneously developing their national and local identities.<sup>30</sup> In turn, such emotional attachments lay down the foundation of their solidarity for their national and local communities. A typical example is that people engage with ideologies, nationalism and regionalism, to highlight the significance of their national and local communities and empower these communities.<sup>31</sup> Because of Western imperialism, the Chinese nationalists' thoughts were influenced by social Darwinism which acknowledged eternal conflicts between ethnic groups and defined Western invasion as a threat to all Chinese people's survival.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, such an idea has been employed in civic and moral education in the PRC.<sup>33</sup> While encouraging people to empower the nation, Chinese nationalism also makes them sensitive to any challenges from outside. The long-term agricultural lifestyle and local interaction helped the Chinese people develop a social pattern – 'a differential mode of association' (差序格局) to prioritize the local community over individuals.<sup>34</sup> In this pattern, people could acquire power if they fulfilled obligations to their community to the extent that thinking highly of their local communities made common sense to Chinese people.

### The development of Chinese football fandom

Football fandom, as portrayed by Galeano,<sup>35</sup> is a deep emotional attachment developed by fans to their teams: 'Once a week, the fan flees his house and goes to the stadium . . . where he can see his angels in the flesh doing battle with the demons of the day'. Hence, such a fandom means that the team is irreplaceable to a fan, while the fan supports that team with passion, love and loyalty. Compared with the football fandom in Europe and South America, Chinese football fandom only really emerged from the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> However, from the start, such fandom was associated with people's national and local identities. The following discussion reviews how Chinese people develop their football fan identification while also acknowledging their teams' national and regional affinities.

MacClancy<sup>37</sup> suggests that football is a 'marker of one's already established social identity', indicating that football always connects with external factors. Common evidence is that football teams are usually named after particular geographical or cultural communities.<sup>38</sup> Recognizing that their teams are community representatives, fans support these teams, in large part, to celebrate local or national identities. In turn, fandom itself is strengthened if fans have strong national and local attachments.<sup>39</sup> In this respect, football fandom reflects people's attitudes towards their social communities.

International sports competitions are a 'vehicle' to remind people of and strengthen their national identities because they offer them a clear boundary by which to identify 'their nation' as opposed to those of 'others'.<sup>40</sup> Rituals, such as waving flags and singing anthems, are factors that highlight differences between nations during the international competition. Consequently, people acknowledge national teams and athletes as channels for expressing their national pride: 'It is true that sports fans of any nation will delight in the sporting success of their compatriots'.<sup>41</sup> In addition, Sugden and Tomlinson<sup>42</sup> suggest that 'sport in general and football in particular have proven to be significant theatres for the expression of national identity'. In other words, compared with other sports, football can easily stimulate people's emotional attachment to their nations and allow them to express their collective national consciousness and values.

Chinese people's fan identification with the national football team can be traced back to the 1980s when the Chinese national football team began its World Cup journey, and nationalism was the primary factor. Zhixing Rong (荣志行) hugely contributed to the Chinese national team during the 1982 FIFA World Cup qualification, for example with the victory in the key game against

Kuwait which was then the most powerful Asian football team.<sup>43</sup> Regarding China's relatively underdeveloped industries and technologies at that time, the Chinese people believed that Rong's performance offered great national confidence. A nationwide idolization of Zhixing Rong – 'Zhixing Style' (志行风格) – was promoted throughout the country. Another example of how fandom for the national team is associated with nationalism was Event 5.19 – the first and largest fan riot in the history of Chinese football.<sup>44</sup> On the 19th of May 1985, China lost to Hong Kong in a key qualifying game for the 1986 World Cup Finals, a result which ended that national team's World Cup journey. In response, fans damaged a large number of properties to vent their great disappointment. Chinese football fans' support for the national football team is derived from their recognition that the team can be a vehicle for empowering the nation. After the riot, more than 100 people were arrested. In addition, this riot was a catalyst for the beginning of studies of Chinese football fans. Although these studies focus primarily on hooliganism,<sup>45</sup> how national identity affected the development of fandom for the Chinese national football team remained largely unexplored.

In terms of domestic football games, Ben Porat<sup>46</sup> suggests that 'ethnicity is part and parcel of football', indicating the deep connection between the fandom for local football clubs and people's emotional attachment to their local communities. In most European and South American countries, fandom is developed mainly through family inheritance.<sup>47</sup> That is, most fans acknowledge local football clubs as theirs because their forebears had a close relationship with those football clubs as founders, players, and supporters. The resultant fandom is characterized by a strong sense of ownership so that fans believe that they have the right to participate in clubs' development and control. Furthermore, a local football club's symbolic status is enhanced by seasonal fixtures between clubs that are named after places. Because clubs 'are announced each week of the football season' and their performances 'are broadcast to the nation and beyond',<sup>48</sup> seasonal games help fans recognize local football clubs' representative status while becoming contests between places. Along with the process of fandom development, fans' recognition of their teams' local symbolic status, therefore, is also passed down through the generations.

However, Jiang and Bairner<sup>49</sup> suggest that most Chinese football fans were initially 'only consumers of football entertainment', indicating that family inheritance is less important to the development of Chinese football fandom. Most Chinese football audiences could not claim a fan identity until 1994 when the Chinese professional football leagues were established, even though Chinese domestic football games have been played since 1951 – two years after the establishment of the PRC. From the 1950s to the 1990s, the main purpose of Chinese domestic football games was to develop the national football team's competitive capability, so tournaments based in major cities were used for organizing games.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, regular broadcasting of domestic football games began the establishment of professional leagues. Before that, China Central Television, the main national broadcaster of sports, had mainly focused on the games involving the national football team.<sup>51</sup> As a result, most Chinese football fans did not have any strong connection to their local teams when the professional football leagues were established.

Because this period did not allow fans to recognize the fandom for a particular team as their norm, it would be unusual to acknowledge the influence of family as a critical factor in Chinese football fans' recognition of their teams' local symbolic status. Instead, as suggested by Crawford,<sup>52</sup> fandom development as a fluid pattern transforming consumers into passionate fans is a more appropriate way of describing the development of fandom for Chinese football clubs. In this case, local football clubs' competitive capabilities and efficient communication are important for maintaining this required interaction and developing the fandom.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, such fandom development is caused by people's desire to celebrate civic identities in their cities and places.<sup>54</sup> Because most clubs are 'named after the cities and regions where they are located',<sup>55</sup> fans acknowledge these teams as local representatives. After a long-term interaction with their local teams, fans' local identity is also a key factor in maintaining loyalty to their teams.<sup>56</sup> However, a limitation of fandom development remains the fans' absence from organizing their local football clubs. Thus, two other

factors, teams' competitive capability and memories of watching games, are critical for maintaining the fans' interactions with their teams.<sup>57</sup> Yet, whether people's local identity also contributes to the development of fandom during the Chinese football fans' interaction with their teams is largely unknown to date, not least as regards how this process affects immigrant fans.

## Research design

To answer the research question, 'How do Chinese football fans' national/local identities influence Chinese people to develop fandom for national and local football teams?', the research employed qualitative methods to investigate Chinese football fans' own understanding of their fandom. Furthermore, this research used a case study approach that explores in-depth data related to the research phenomenon through data from a restricted sample to conduct the investigation,<sup>58</sup> and it focused on fans of the Henan Jianye Football Club and Shenzhen Football Club. The investigation involved 582 participants. All the initial investigations were conducted in Chinese, with thematic analysis and interpretation being completed in English.

An essential factor is that SFC and HJFC were established and started to play league games at the same time as the beginning of the Chinese professional leagues in 1994.<sup>59</sup> In this respect, fans of these two football clubs share the same long interaction with their teams. Moreover, because the duration of these fans' interactions with their clubs is the same length as the history of Chinese football clubs, knowledge about these fans can reflect all Chinese fans' perspectives on their national football team and on local football clubs. The more important specific factor is the different development of the two regions in which these clubs are based, which leads people to have different attitudes towards their immediate place of residence.

Henan province is one of the birthplaces of Chinese civilization.<sup>60</sup> Compared with economically powerful areas, Henan's relatively weak financial influence has resulted in it becoming a major location for labour export, so its population mainly consists of native people with relatively few immigrants.<sup>61</sup> Henan people's long-term interaction with their local community has given them a strong local identity. By contrast, Shenzhen city in Guangdong province emerged in 1979 because of the opening-up policy.<sup>62</sup> As a Special Economic Zone, it is one of China's global cities with strong global financial and economic power.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, the population mainly consists of immigrants from other Chinese regions and other countries, and Shenzhen residents do not have the same strong place attachment as people in other regions. The fandom of these two groups of fans can reflect, therefore, native and immigrant football fans' attitudes towards their teams respectively. Based on a 'nested study',<sup>64</sup> the present study seeks to comprehensively understand Chinese football fandom by comparing and integrating data obtained from fans of the two clubs.

The researchers recruited participants by posting information on the football clubs' official social media, such as Weibo and WeChat, and, in addition, criteria-based and snowball sampling were applied to identify appropriate participants.<sup>65</sup> With predetermined criteria, criteria-based sampling helps the researchers to recruit participants who have a 'particular feature, attribute or characteristic', or have a 'specific experience' to attain an in-depth knowledge of the research phenomenon.<sup>66</sup> In terms of fandom for local teams, few Chinese football fans can meet the level of 'supporters', having developed their fandom via family or community inherited loyalty. In addition, free TV broadcasting has been an essential vehicle for Chinese people to enjoy football games since the establishment of the Chinese professional football leagues in 1994.<sup>67</sup> The sample criteria thus drew upon Song and Lu's typology of Chinese football audiences that identifies real Chinese football fans as spectators who regularly watch their teams' games in the stadium or on television.<sup>68</sup> The selected participants were required to meet the following criteria, 1) they have regularly watched games of the national football team on TV or live for years and identify themselves as fans of the national team; and 2) they have regularly watched their local football clubs' games on TV or live for years and identify themselves as fans of either SFC or HJFC. Overall, 22 participants (see Table to find

participant information) were recruited through the criteria-based sampling framework and took part in individual interviews and focus groups.

After welcoming participants to introduce their fandom experience, the questions asked in individual interviews were about how Chinese national and local identities affected the development of football fandom for their national and local football teams, including 'Do you agree that the Chinese national/local football team is a national/local symbol? And why?' and 'Does its symbolic status have any influence on the development of your fandom for the national/local team? And why?' Focus groups were sequentially organized to expand upon and examine the data collected in the interviews.<sup>69</sup> Participants discussed their attitudes towards national and local football teams through topics 'whether they regard their national/local football teams as a national/local symbol' and 'how their sense of belonging to their national/local community has affected the development of fandom for their national/local football teams'.

However, such a sampling method ignores participants who might also provide crucial evidence of the research phenomenon.<sup>70</sup> For example, Chinese football fans who are not members of supporter organizations or followers of official social media sites may also develop strong fandom for their national and local teams. Moreover, the typology of Chinese football audiences remains inaccurate in distinguishing the core fans of Chinese football clubs from other members of the general public. However, the validity of data can be strengthened by combining data collected from other sampling strategies and employing the cross-validation strategy.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, a snowball sampling framework that allows recruited participants to introduce more qualified people to join investigations was also employed. In total, 560 participants were invited through the snowball sampling method. To allow the researchers to interact with such a large population and collect valuable qualitative data, the investigation of these participants took the form of open-ended surveys.<sup>72</sup> The questions asked in this survey were about participants' attitudes towards their national/local communities and their national/local football teams, including 'Do you agree that your national/local football team is playing for your national/local communities in international competitions/professional leagues? Could you explain the reasons?', 'Do you consider your national/local football teams as symbols of your national/local community? Could you explain the reasons?', and 'Do you agree that you support your national/local football teams because of your sense of belonging to your national/local communities? Could you explain the reasons?'.

This number of participants may challenge reaching saturation, thereby making the study lie outside the norms of qualitative research which is designed to interpret the meaning of research reality rather than offer a general understanding. Thus, the sample size is usually smaller than those used for quantitative studies.<sup>73</sup> However, the sample for this study was unlikely to meet a level of saturation because new 'properties and dimensions' of data can be explored all the time.<sup>74</sup> Hence, qualitative research needs to avoid the presumed norm of pursuing only small sample sizes. Because of the relatively indistinct sampling criteria and the cross-validation strategy, this research's large sample size was inevitable.

The researchers employed thematic analysis as the analysis tool, focusing on interpreting themes from data by summarizing key features.<sup>75</sup> It thus can be helpful for researchers to organize a large dataset, which was the essential requirement of this study. Moreover, it can be used to identify 'similarities and differences' across the dataset while analysing the data.<sup>76</sup> Hence, this strategy not only connected and compared the data collected from fans of HJFC and SFC but also examined the valid data. By following the steps for conducting thematic analysis, the researchers generated coded themes to assess how the national/local identities have influenced the development of Chinese football fandom (see Graphs 1 and 2). The themes also guided the subsequent discussion section.

### **Becoming fans of the Chinese national football team**

The question explored in this section is how national identity affects the development of fandom for the Chinese national football team. Based on Focus groups, participant 6 (fan of the HJFC),



supporting the national team is the result of education: ‘we are educated to put the nation to the top’. Such an idea reflects the civic and moral education introduced by the PRC as this is the main channel to promote the concept of a nation among the Chinese people.<sup>77</sup> To help people develop their national identity, the content describes the Chinese nation as the highest political community that includes different local communities and deserves people’s highest respect. Consequently, football fans with an educated civic consciousness naturally regard support for the national team as an obligation: ‘I watch every game of the national team. It is very important to me . . . If I miss one game, I will feel regretful’ (Interview\_participant 1, fan of HJFC). This universal education in schools, therefore, guarantees that Chinese national identity affects the development of fandom for the national football team. This article now considers two factors – watching the national football team’s games and immersing oneself in an atmosphere of nationalism – to explain in more detail how national identity developed through education affects fandom development.

### **International competitions**

While watching games featuring the Chinese men’s national football team, the fact that Chinese national identity is influencing fandom is straightforwardly revealed. The influence of national identity is promoted by the common and essential principle set by the international games – all teams are supposed to be named after specific national communities: ‘Yes, I believe that [the Chinese national football team] is the national representative because this team is bearing the name of China’ (Survey\_participant 375, fan of the SFC). In other words, previous studies’ suggestion that football teams bearing the names of particular nations are the national agents can also be applied to the Chinese context.<sup>78</sup> Bearing the name of China allows fans to link the team to their national community, so national identity provides a basis for affecting fans’ support for the team.

This basis is further strengthened by the design of international competitions. For example, ‘the [national] flag [being] on their [players’] chests’ is a typical virtual symbol helping audiences to define ‘the Chinese national team is their national representative’ (Survey\_participant 87, fan of the HJFC). The national flag is a common symbol used at international sports events to distinguish national representatives, and this naturally reminds audiences of the clear boundary between them and others.<sup>79</sup> Because international football games also provide spaces for Chinese fans to celebrate their national identity, fans are given legitimacy for their support of the team. For example, the idea that the records of their national football team in international competitions are associated with the national interest was expressed: ‘I agree that the national team is playing for the Chinese pride because football is a peaceful war among nations’ (Survey\_participant 544, fan of the SFC).

However, the team’s long-term poor performances cannot meet the demands of nationalism to empower the nation by eliminating challenges from outside China.<sup>80</sup> Influenced by civic and moral education, people are not supposed to allow football to have the same status as Chinese gold medal sports, such as badminton and table tennis. The role of national identity in fandom for the national football team might appear to be the only motivation that encourages people to have an interest in football. Yet, Chinese people’s football-watching experience is also a critical factor in maintaining national identity’s impact on fandom development:

My family got our first television in the early 1980s. At that moment, family-using televisions are very rare . . . occasionally, we could see reports or live broadcasts of the national football team on TV, so I began watching the competitions related to the national team. You know, football programmes at that time could be the best entertainment attracting all people. (Interview\_participant 2, fan of the HJFC)

In the 1980s, when the Chinese national football team started its FIFA World Cups journey, enjoying television programmes was the major entertainment for families because of the rarity of family televisions and other entertainment tools.<sup>81</sup> As a result, watching football on TV helped people develop a special emotion towards the sport.

National identity has continued to exert its influence on football fandom, even though the national team's capability is weak. Furthermore, the Report on the Sixth Five-Year Plan in 1982, the guideline for national development, identified all television programmes as channels for promoting national solidarity.<sup>82</sup> In other words, the Chinese football fans who experienced that media coverage were supposed to develop a strong affinity with the national football team, further consolidating the influence of their national identity on their fandom.

Combining the Chinese people's special emotion towards football, another critical factor – the national team's occasional successes – makes the team a promising one in terms of meeting the target of nationalist education. For example, qualifying for the 2002 World Cup Finals allowed many people to become fans of the team for the first time:

Although I was preparing for my high-school entrance examination, the entire nation paid full attention to this team . . . After all, this was the first time for the Chinese national team to play in the finals. I also liked football as the whole nation was concerned about the game. (Interview\_participant 5, fan of the SFC)

That lone appearance in the FIFA World Cup made up for the team's previous failures since 1982, so this was a milestone in Chinese football history. Moreover, Chinese people's special emotion for football has exaggerated this achievement as a significant success for the national team: 'I remember, at that time, our teachers even turned on the TV in class to let us watch the World Cup' (Interview\_participant 5, Shenzhen). This participant's story demonstrates how highly Chinese people regard the success of the national football team given that Chinese middle school teachers who usually require students to focus completely on sessions related to the High School Entrance Examinations to lay down the foundation for their future careers.<sup>83</sup> Similar to the 'Zhixing Style', this achievement is also acknowledged as the national football team's success in meeting the demands of nationalism – seeking evidence to prove the Chinese people's capability to survive in the world. Hence, football is similar to other successful Chinese sports associated with China's reputation: '[The national team] is not good, but if it can win more in international competition, then it can improve the good reputation of China. (Survey\_participant 155, fan of the HJFC). The national team's sole World Cup appearance undeniably strengthened people's sense of national belonging and attracted more fans.

### ***The atmosphere of prioritising the national community***

Because universal civic and moral education defines the Chinese nation as the highest political community, the atmosphere of worshipping the nation is also established along with the development of the Chinese national identity.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, this atmosphere is a macro factor allowing national identity to affect fandom for the Chinese national football team, even though it is indirectly related to the team.

This atmosphere has two dimensions. The first one is Chinese society and its system, including the physical education (PE) system. Most Chinese football fans develop their fondness for football through playing experience organized in PE classes: 'In fact, initially, [the first contact] was the result of the football classes at primary school' (Interview\_participant 2, Henan). This situation was caused by the promulgation of the Compulsory Education Law in 1986,<sup>85</sup> which designated the PE class as a compulsory school session. Moreover, people are immersed in the atmosphere of thinking highly of national sports teams, if they attend PE classes:

I do care about [students'] talents, skills and football intelligence, and I do observe them carefully to seek who can be excellent seeds. Then I will intentionally teach them some special skills on football pitches . . . I know that it is not easy for them to be selected to play for the national team, but you will feel proud of yourself that you do give some good players to this nation. (Focus groups, participant 6, Henan)

Prioritizing the national interest is attached to the Chinese PE system.<sup>86</sup> In the 1950s when the world was influenced by the Cold War (1947–1991), PE classes were used by the government to

guarantee the supply of troops. Since the success of Ping-pong Diplomacy in the 1970s, especially after the declaration of the Chinese football policy in 2015, the PE system has been the foundation of the talent pool for national teams with the idea that sport is a critical channel to honour the nation and deliver national soft power. Therefore, football fans who experienced PE classes naturally allowed national identity to affect their support for the national team: ‘I am a football fan because I love playing football . . . From my deep heart, there was a dream that I hoped one day I could play for the national team’ (Focus groups, participant 1, fan of the HJFC).

The second dimension of the atmosphere of worshipping the nation is developed by the people themselves. For example, the intensity of fandom for the national team can increase if an individual fan is surrounded by other fanatical fans of the team:

[In 2018], one of the [national team’s] matches for qualifying for the World Cup Finals took place in Malacca. It was a game between Syria and China, and I brought around 20 football fans from my supporters’ organisation to Malaysia to watch the game and support the team . . . we also went to the Chinese players’ hotel to wait for them [came back from the game]. Almost 3 hours later, they finally arrived, and that was so nice! (Interview\_participant 6, fan of the SFC)

Fan identity usually guides individual fans to accompany their fan group and behave in particular ways in specific circumstances.<sup>87</sup> When the collective identity developed by fandom is linked with people’s national identity, the group behaviour will express the beliefs and values generated by people’s national attachment. Because of the promotion of civic and moral education, the Chinese nation-state is also an imagined community wherein people identify their fellow members by examining their civic consciousness.<sup>88</sup> As a result, people inevitably acquire an interest in the national football team and develop their fandom especially if they are in a circumstance where other people recognize supporting the national football team as the correct way to express their national identity:

In fact, most people who become fans of the Chinese national football team are driven by their sense of nation . . . I believe that any Chinese guy, more or less, will pay attention to the national team because all Chinese people care about it. When it was game day, they might not know who played that game, but they did care about the final result. (Focus groups, participant 8, fan of HJFC)

Therefore, while interacting directly with other fans of the national team, individuals’ devotion to the nation is often strengthened. Consequently, these people’s national identity is triggered, which leads them to develop their fandom.

### **Becoming fans of Chinese local football clubs**

The section examines how Chinese people’s local identities influence their support for football clubs. The discussion is divided into two main parts to present how native fans (fans of HJFC) and immigrant fans (fans of SFC) are influenced by local identity respectively.

Previous research demonstrates that native fans’ strong place attachment is a major factor motivating them to develop their fandom for local teams.<sup>89</sup> In other words, place of birth information and/or lengthy experience of living in the home places are the foundations for local identity to affect the fandom because they develop people’s strong place attachment: ‘I was born here and grow up here, so Henan is where my soul belongs’ (Survey\_participant 23, fan of the HJFC). Hence, the Chinese situation is similar to other cultural contexts in which people’s place attachment is also associated with their close relationships with their local communities.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, Chinese native fans’ place attachment can be boosted if their home places are famous in particular fields. For example, because Henan is widely recognized as the birthplace of Han culture, that of China’s dominant ethnic group, Henan people feel ‘so proud of being Henan people’ (Survey\_participant 54, fan of HJFC). Hence, the strength of Chinese local identity is associated with a good reputation recognized by people from other places.

On the contrary, immigrant fans cannot share the same strong local identity as native fans initially because of certain obstacles, including ‘high living expenses’ (Survey\_participant 300, fan of the SFC) and having ‘no house’ (Survey\_participant 303, fan of the SFC). That is, people’s weak relationship with their immediate local community is unlikely to generate a strong local identity.<sup>91</sup> However, acquiring the local identity is a desire that encourages migrants to remain:

In fact, Shenzhen is an immigrant city, and I can say that 99% of its population are immigrants from other regions of China and other countries . . . they really hope to find a symbol to let them share a sense of belonging to this city so that they can feel the city as home. (Interview\_participant 5, Shenzhen)

In this respect, these people’s desire to become locals may also mean that local identity can affect their fandom for local football clubs. However, such a local identity cannot allow these immigrants to acquire the same solid place attachment as these native people. For example, Interview\_participant 5 (Shenzhen) still identifies ‘Huangshi City in Hubei province’ as his hometown even though he ‘came to Shenzhen with [his] family’ and ‘grew up in Shenzhen’ many years previously. It seems that the local identity associated with people’s original home is more authentic in terms of generating an irreplaceable place attachment, and such a phenomenon even influences second-generation immigrants. Focus\_groups\_participant 14 (fan of the SFC) suggests that her parents’ home place, Guilin City in Guangxi province, is also her home place, even though she was in fact born in Shenzhen. Therefore, these immigrants’ perspectives suggest that ‘home’ in a Chinese context mainly refers to where they or their parents were born and lived for a long time.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, the influence of these immigrant fans’ local identity on their support for local football clubs is different from native fans’.

Therefore, the next section starts with a discussion of how local identity affects native fans’ support for their local football clubs through the recognition of the local football club as a hometown team and the atmosphere created by local passionate members. It goes on to explain how local identity influences immigrant football fans’ fandom for a local football club by way of their desire to acquire a place attachment related to football.

### ***Native fans: the recognition of the local elements of football clubs***

Recognizing the local football club as a local symbol triggers Chinese native fans’ local identity to influence their fandom. For example, Focus\_groups\_participant 5 (fan of the HJFC) attaches a ‘sense of region or family’ to their support for the local football club while claiming that ‘the club is a part of Henan’. The fact that ‘the club is bearing the name of Henan’ is the critical factor leading native fans to recognize their team’s local representative status (Survey\_participant 213, fan of the HJFC). Hence, similar to how the Chinese national football team links with national affinity – bearing the name of a particular place can help a Chinese local football club to achieve the status of a local brand.<sup>93</sup>

However, Chinese people did not encounter these professional local football clubs until the 1990s when home-and-away fixtures were employed in Chinese domestic football for the first time.<sup>94</sup> In other words, fans’ recognition of a club that bears the name of their local community as their local representative faced certain obstacles. For example, the passion of HJFC fans gradually cooled after the first season because of the team’s weak competitive capability:

The Jianye Club gradually became a property of Henan in maybe one or two years after the first season . . . The club was relegated in 1995, and it constantly failed to qualify for the top league between 1996 and 1997. It is hard for the Henan people to have the sense of belonging quickly’. (Interview\_participant 1, Henan)

The weak connection between Chinese football fans and football clubs requires teams to develop their competitive capability to satisfy fans’ desire to celebrate their local identity so that the interaction between fans and local football clubs that develops the fandom can be sustained.<sup>95</sup>

Therefore, it was unusual for Chinese native fans to recognize immediately any local football club as a local symbol.

Native fans' recognition of their teams' local symbolic status is strengthened by other native fans: 'I just believe that [the HJFC] was developed by myself and by our Henan people. In fact, people around you all share the same idea, so we treat it as one part of ourselves' (Focus\_groups\_participant 2, Henan). Once the collective identity produced by football fandom is associated with people's local identity, an atmosphere of celebrating local identity is generated during the fandom expression.<sup>96</sup> Immersed in such an atmosphere, individual fans' belief that their local football clubs are representing their local communities is developed and strengthened. Yet, it also seems that individual fans may stop recognizing their team's local symbolic status if the influence of the fan community declines: 'Compare the sense of home, the beginning of our support may be related to a desire to release some pressure' (Interview\_participant 1, Henan).

The seasonal games help individual fans to maintain their recognition of these teams' local symbolic status: 'it is the only team in Henan playing in the Chinese Super League' (Focus\_groups\_participant 2, Henan). Similar to other cultural conditions, the seasonal games that announce the football clubs bearing the name of places each week throughout the nation can also affect Chinese native fans to embrace the idea that their teams represent their local communities.<sup>97</sup> Although native fans' initial recognition may be restricted to the realm of football, their acknowledgement is expanded to the world beyond football if it is confirmed by people from other regions: 'Yes, it is our representative. when I communicate with my friends from other provinces, they usually call the Jianye team "your team"'. (Survey\_participant 58, fan of the HJFC). The local football club's regular league games promote the team as a local symbol to people in other parts of China. Alongside the interaction with people from other places, local fans' appreciation of their clubs as local symbols can also be strengthened.

In addition, fans also acknowledge the football club's local affinity by examining its history. For example, the HJFC's local symbolic status is also associated with the team's connection to the Henan provincial football team prior to 1994: 'Thinking about the predecessor of HJFC, it was the Henan provincial football team, right? . . . most players of the Henan team were directly registered in this team' (Focus\_groups\_participant 4, fan of the HJFC). At the beginning of the Chinese professional football league, local sports bureaus' remained the controlling power of most local football clubs, so professional clubs directly acquired the resources of the previous local representative teams.<sup>98</sup> Although most Chinese football fans had few interactions with these previous local representative teams, this historical connection supported fans' recognition. However, such authenticity can be damaged if there is a change in the team's ownership. Because of the close relationship between the Chinese Football Association and the Chinese government, the football league's main income is from the changes in ownership and players' transfer.<sup>99</sup> The change in ownership precipitated by financial difficulties eventually removed reminders of previous owners, including the team's names, symbols and colours. Hence, it is almost impossible for fans to continue to acknowledge the team's connection to its incarnations. By contrast, the team's authenticity as a local representative can be maintained if the club has never changed hands: 'The Jianye Club is our local symbol because it is now the only team that never changes its club name and ownership' (Focus\_groups\_participant 4, Henan).

### ***Immigrant fans: the channel by which to acquire place attachment***

Although immigrant fans do not originally have a local identity in their new places of residence, their desire to acquire membership in the local community can allow local identity to affect their fandom for local football clubs: '[Shenzhen] is an absolute place for immigrants, and we also hope to find a sense of belonging to this city and feel at home. Thus, football became a good channel to let us have a sense of belonging' (Interview\_participant 5, Shenzhen). The reason why migrants seek a way to develop their sense of belonging to their immediate places is to acquire greater freedom, so

they need to familiarize themselves with the common concerns developed by local residents, such as hobbies, customs or lifestyles in the local community.<sup>100</sup>

Immigrant fans' interaction with a local football club is the result of their recognition that the team is a local representative according to local residents, and this recognition is also affected by the seasonal domestic games that promote local football clubs as local representatives: 'Shenzhen just has one [football club] in the professional league' (Interview\_participant 5, Shenzhen). Because they cannot share the same familiarity with the local community as native fans, the effect of seasonal games can be more easily accepted by immigrant fans: 'After all, it is named after Shenzhen' (Survey\_participant 350, fan of the SFC). Therefore, the influence of seasonal games allows immigrant fans' desired place attachment to affect their fandom.

Immigrants' growing memories of local interaction are essential factors for them to acquire local identity as these can develop immigrants' relationships with their immediate places. Memories, real and inherited, also maintain immigrant fans' interaction with the local football club: 'The more stories of SFC I know, the more positive energy I could feel from this city . . . Maybe this feeling is also about how I seek for my own sense of belonging to this city' (Interview\_participant 6, Shenzhen). While watching the local football club's games, fans are also interacting with their immediate places. As a result, fans' interaction with their teams is one of the key social practices in their immediate place, and watching games can strengthen fans' familiarity with the local community and helps to develop their place attachment. In turn, the memory of local practice is also an important factor in developing the fandom for Chinese domestic teams.<sup>101</sup> For example, when all members of an immigrant family become fans of a local football club, conversations about games strengthen their feeling that 'we are in our real home place', making the club 'one of the family topics' (Focus\_groups\_participant 13, fan of the SFC).

## Conclusion

This study provides insights into how national and local identities have influenced the development of Chinese football fandom, which is a window through which to observe Chinese people's attitudes towards their national and local communities. Moreover, it offers a comprehensive idea of how local identity affects the fandom for Chinese domestic football teams by investigating Chinese local and immigrant fans separately. Hence, it is a detailed supplement to previous research and further contributes to the foundations upon which studies of Chinese football fans' self-identification can be developed.<sup>102</sup>

The basis for people's national identity to affect the fandom for the Chinese national football team is the civic and moral education that encourages the Chinese people to develop their national identity.<sup>103</sup> Once Chinese football fans recognize the men's national team's representative status, their national identity can be triggered and developed into fandom for the national football team. While reducing the negative effect of national teams' long-term weak performances on people's desire to celebrate their national identity, the Chinese people's special emotion towards football generated by their experience of watching football maintains national identity's influence in the process of fan identification. Furthermore, because civic and moral education also prioritizes the national community over local communities, the atmosphere of worshipping the nation is developed. Consequently, Chinese people think highly of the national interest, strengthening their national identity's effect on their fandom for the national football team.

Birth information and long-term local living experiences in their local communities also help many Chinese people develop solid local identities which are strengthened if people's home place has a good reputation. Because strong place attachment leads native people to overstate the significance of local characteristics, they develop a fandom for their local football club if they recognize the team's local symbolic status. Yet, fans' recognition is negatively affected by their lack of connection to their local football clubs at the beginning of the Chinese professional football leagues.<sup>104</sup> The atmosphere of celebrating local identity generated by other local people addresses

this problem, and seasonal games that announce football clubs as local representatives every week guarantee fans' recognition, especially if people from other places also acknowledge their status. The clubs' authenticity as successors of earlier local teams that belonged to the local sport bureaus before 1994 is another supportive resource.

Immigrant fans do not have the same secure local identity as native fans. However, their desire to acquire local membership allows local identity to affect the development of their fandom for local football clubs. To attain freedom in a new environment, they regard the support for a local football club as a common basis upon which local residents can interact. This idea is affected by the seasonal football games that promote local football clubs as local representatives.<sup>105</sup> Without having familiarized themselves with the local community, they are easily influenced by the effect of seasonal games in promoting local football clubs as local representatives. The interaction with the local football clubs is one part of immigrant fans' growing set of local interactions, which develops their familiarity with their immediate place and place attachment. In turn, the resultant emotional attachment also helps these fans to develop their fandom.

By interpreting the experiences of fans of HJFC and SFC, this discussion of native and immigrant fans reflects a more general experience found in other parts of China. Because Chinese football fandom is relatively new compared with that in Europe and South America, this study can contribute to existing knowledge about the progression of national and local football teams' fan identification in other countries and thereby fill a knowledge gap. Furthermore, the relatively large sample size surpasses previous research into the specific conditions that distinguish loyal Chinese football club fans from the general public. In this respect, the extent to which the teams' competitive capacities influence the transition from the general public into to loyal fans is valuable to examine. Moreover, two further discussions about how national and local identities affect Chinese football fandom are also highlighted: how Chinese football fans' national and local identities influence their attitudes towards other local football teams and how their national and local identities influence their evaluation of their fandom for their national and local football teams. For now, however, the findings of the study can be widely applicable in research aimed at understanding Chinese football fandom.

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