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**CULTURAL PRACTICES AND SOCIAL FORMATIONS IN A
REFORMING SOCIETY: THE TRANSNATIONAL FANDOM OF
EUROPEAN FOOTBALL IN CHINA**

Yuan Gong
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Cultural Practices and Social Formations in a Reforming Society: The Transnational
Fandom of European Football in China

A Dissertation Presented

by

YUAN GONG

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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By

YUAN GONG

Approved as to style and content by:

Emily West, Chair

Anne Ciecko, Member

Jarice Hanson, Member

Amy Schalet, Member

Mari Castaneda, Chair
Department of Communication

ABSTRACT

CULTURAL PRACTICES AND SOCIAL FORMATIONS IN A REFORMING
SOCIETY: THE TRANSNATIONAL FANDOM OF EUROPEAN FOOTBALL IN
CHINA

SEMPTEMBER 2018

YUAN GONG, B.A., FUDAN UNIVERSITY

M.A., OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Emily West

This dissertation explores the Chinese fandom of European male football and its relation to the formation of the Chinese urban middle class. I use online and offline ethnography, critical discourse analysis and textual analysis to examine the socio-cultural roots, technological conditions, and political implications of Chinese fans' transmedia practices. My findings are twofold. First, I argue for the articulation between the European football fan identity and the subject of urban middle class emerging from the post-Maoist social restructuring. This articulation is reflected from these fans' active reading of the European football text and their access to European football as conditioned by social positions. Second, in the examination of fans' appropriation of digital media in televised spectatorship, community building, and online deliberations, I analyze the individualistic nature of these fans' collectivity enabled by digital fan practices and how this individualistic virtual collectivity has limitations in terms of further power struggles and political actions. I conclude that localized digital technologies facilitating European football fans' virtual collectivity around and progressive interpretation of a transnational text are themselves part of China's state project of authoritarian digital capitalism that articulates neoliberal individualism and authoritarianism through technological revolution.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This project explores the transnational practices of the European football fandom in China. These fans are keen audiences and supporters of the clubs and players from the so-called “big five” leagues under the Union of European Football Association (UEFA), which include the English Premier League, the Italian Serie A, the Spanish La Liga, the German Bundesliga, and the French League 1. Since the opening-up of the Chinese entertainment and sport market in the 1980s, European professional male football has been widely broadcast and marketed through local media, ranking among the most popular leisure media products for Chinese audience to watch, consume, and fantasize about. CCTV, China’s major state television channel, started to broadcast Italian Serie A as early as 1988 and currently covers the whole seasons of four out of five top leagues (Serie A, La Liga, Bundesliga, and League 1) as well as the European Champions League. Meanwhile the English Premier League, which was introduced to China at its very beginning in 1992, is routinely broadcast on various regional channels on a weekly basis. The country has seen the growth of a considerable fan base of European football clubs from the continuous coverage of these competitions over the last 20 years. Although no official statistics exist (and perhaps can ever be produced) regarding the total number of European football fans in China, many signs offer evidence for the almost unbelievable size of this transnational audience. For example, the cumulative number of viewers of the 2011-12 English Premier League through television broadcasting, IPTV and Internet reached 330 million in mainland China and Macao (Lee, 2013). Along the same lines,

Manchester United, the club with most Premiership titles so far, claims that it has 108 million Chinese supporters based on a worldwide survey conducted by the research company Kantar in 2013 (Prior, 2013).

On the other hand, social media offer additional data in support of the Chinese mania with European football. A study by the Mailman consulting group in 2012 found 15.6 million football fans across 14 teams' official accounts on Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo, two of China's major social media platforms. FC Barcelona tops the 14 teams in research with a total number of 2 million followers on the two sites (Mailman Group, 2012). Besides the quantitative numbers, European football clubs' increasing emphasis on the Chinese market is also a strategic reaction to the sport's huge popularity there. Since 2010, seven of the top 10 clubs on UEFA's 2013-14 rankings have visited China to play preseason games, along with other famous teams such as AC Milan and Paris Saint-Germain. From 2009 to 2014, three of the five Italian Super Cup games were played in Beijing. The famous Derby della Madonnina between AC Milan and Inter Milan, the first competition held in 2009 attracted nearly 80,000 Chinese fans for both sides to the Olympic stadium known as the Bird's Nest, generating a total box office of 10 million euros.

These examples of the Chinese mania for European football certainly speak to the universal charm of 'the beautiful game' as the world's No. 1 sport. With rich symbolic meanings and worldwide popularity, football is a crucial lens through which modern societies and cultures can be examined. Yet the popularity of European football in contemporary China still holds its peculiar research merits in that the rise of fandom in the past 20 years coincides with a critical historical conjuncture during which both

European football and China are experiencing fundamental changes in economic, ideological and technological arrangements. On one hand, never before has European football been so actively saturated in the capitalist logic of commercialization, corporatization, mediatization, and de-regulation for the achievement of its global expansion. Many famous clubs that used to be owned by local families or regional business are now being controlled by capital flowing from North America and the Middle East as part of larger transnational corporations. The 1995 Bosman ruling, which allows football players in the European Union to freely transfer to another club and prohibits quotas of foreign players in domestic leagues, has deregulated the movement of labor in the European football markets. The broadcasting rights of the professional leagues are negotiated on a more global level, which, together with the development of digital technologies, help European football to reach an unprecedentedly worldwide audience.

On the other hand, during the same period, China witnessed the deepening of its ‘open-up’ reform that has brought not only economic growth and social stratification but also ideological and cultural clashes between the traditional and the modern, the communist and the capitalist, and the local and the global. In contrast to its previous isolation, China started to stand at the forefront of the globalization process, paradoxically embracing both economic neoliberalism and political authoritarianism. Since the new millennium (2000), the Chinese government has initiated another round of economic and social transformation from the focus on labor-concentrated manufacturing sector to the technology-oriented service sector with the goal of achieving sustainable economic development. In particular, the industry of new technology and digital media has been rising in China under tremendous governmental support and market needs.

Meanwhile, for the first time, sports in this country are not merely used as ideological instruments by the government to promote patriotism and socialist values. Instead, professional sports have become accepted among the public as industries in the free market that produce leisure commodities for ordinary audiences to consume. Ironically, Chinese football has not progressed as rapidly as the country's economy, technology and many other sports. Although the professional leagues have been developed for more than 20 years with tremendous financial investment, Chinese football continues to present poor performance on the international stage with the national team positioning only the 96th on the FIFA world ranking (FIFA, 2015).

All these background stories trigger my interests in the unique experiences of Chinese fans of European football in the special global and local contexts. Why do they choose to like something that is physically and culturally remote from them and that their own country is notoriously bad at? What are the economic and social roots of these fans' consumption of European football? What kinds of practices are they mainly engaged in as overseas fans? How can they connect with their beloved clubs or players who are distant with the increasing prevalence of new technology in China? Unfortunately, this particular case of transnational football fandom has never been thoroughly investigated by either fan studies that originated from media and audience research with an emphasis on text-reader relations, or sociology of sports which largely measures the individual and environmental factors for fan motivation and identification. With an aim to bridge the gap in the existing literature and its lack of attention to non-western contexts, I am curious what European football means to its Chinese fans, what Chinese fans do with the sport, and how these fans' specific tastes and practices inform about their identities, beliefs and

social positions. In a broader sense, the exploration of how these fans make sense of European football will provide clues to understand some key notions and values in the contemporary Chinese culture in an era filled with state reform, neoliberal globalization and digital revolution. I am certainly interested in looking at how these specific contextual factors influence and structure Chinese football fans' cultural experiences. But I am even more eager to find out how these fans' ideas, tastes and actions are not merely produced by the global structural trends but are actively in dialogue with, or even reshaping them on the local and individual levels.

1.2 Research Significance/Research Questions

In my dissertation, I aim to contribute to some important theoretical and practical questions in communication studies. First, I conceptualize Chinese fans of European football as a transnational audience who consumes the globally disseminated content produced by the football mediated economy. This approach helps reveal the complex relations between football and fans as texts and readers that have not been fully explored in traditional sports studies. It also leads to a reconsideration of the 'active audience' concept in the context of globalized media production and consumption. Second, I explore these fans along different views in one of the main theoretical debate in fan studies, revealing whether and how their fan choices and practices signify cultural and political empowerment or economic and social reproduction. Third, I examine the ways in which new communication technologies play a role in enabling distinct forms of practices and actions and reshaping the transnational fandom. This focus casts light on the ways in which new media might be a force for equality, connectivity, empowerment, and democracy in the historically transitional China.

I propose three sets of research questions to be explored in my dissertation. First, how do Chinese fans' readings of European football's symbolic and social meanings inform about their identities, social positions, and conceptions of class, gender, race, etc.? How can these meanings be related to the economic, political, and cultural contexts in contemporary China? Second, how are transnational fan practices integrated into their local experiences of life and work in a society undergoing economic and ideological transformation? How do these practices reflect and/or counter China's involvement in globalization? Third, how do media, especially new technologies, play a role in forming and maintaining this transnational fandom in a digital age?

1.3 Conceptual Framework: From “Incorporation/Resistance” to “Poststructuralist Turn”

In this section, I map the conceptual framework that guides my project. In order to articulate what has informed my choice of research focus and questions, I focus on the theoretical shift in fan studies from the ‘incorporation/resistance’ paradigm to the poststructuralist approach to seeing fandom as part of everyday life. I then argue for the poststructuralist approach as the primary framework for my examination of Chinese fans of European football, with an account of why some legacies of the traditional approach are still relevant and valuable for the current study.

1.3.1 The Classical Model

The area of fan studies has developed based on a wide range of theoretical approaches from audience research to sociology of consumption, and is integral to a more general academic inquiry about cultural practices, identity and social power. Classical fan studies (e.g. Fiske, 1989, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Bacon-Smith, 1991; Radway, 1984)

explored fans in a so-called “incorporation/resistance” paradigm (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998) to conceptualize their practices in relation to structure and agency, seeing fandom as either a response or an outcome out of social reproduction. Nicely tied to audience research’s general concerns on power and resistance, these studies of fandom were largely inspired by the works on active audience research by cultural studies and particularly Stuart Hall’s (1980) “Encoding/Decoding” model, which proposed that socially structured audience could produce “preferred”, “negotiated” or “oppositional” readings of popular cultural texts based on their gender, class or racial positions. They also borrowed De Certeau’s (1984) theory of practices in everyday life to understand fans’ consumption as entirely different kind of production that appropriated/poached on something not of their own. As a result, researchers focused on fans’ active engagement with popular cultural texts to evade dominant ideologies and structures. In an attempt to challenge the mainstream negative image of fans as part of a passive, manipulated and undifferentiated mass, early research in fandom tended to use a defensive rhetoric to redeem fan activities and practices which had been coded pathological as creative, thoughtful, productive (Gray, Harrington & Sandvoss, 2007). Fiske (1989) argued that fans made numerous new texts out of the original cultural resources---the walls of their bedrooms, the way they dressed, with their hairstyles, and makeup and their gossip---to participate actively and productively in the social circulation of meaning. This productivity “does not accept cultural power as one-way, top-down, but as a democratic power that is open to all who have the competence (and discrimination) to participate in it” (Fiske, 1989, pp. 148). Therefore, as Fiske describes fandom, the experience was seen as a site for cultural taste of subordinated formation of the people, disadvantaged and

disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race. As Fiske (1989) pointed out, “such popular creativity is typical of subordinated groups who “ave no, or limited, access to the means of producing cultural resources and whose creativity therefore necessarily lies in the arts of making do with what they have” (p. 151).

The “incorporation/resistance” paradigm of fan studies is embedded in some key assumptions about power, identity and practices. First, as Crawford (2004) pointed out, this paradigm relied on a “zero-sum” approach to social power, where power “is seen as a linear force (usually top-down) that is the possession of individuals or agencies” (p. 27). Second, it tended to categorize fans into unified groups based on class, gender, race, and/or nationality, thus taking more interest in interpretive, productive fan communities with shared, sometimes organized, cultural experiences. In turn, fans were usually perceived to have stable social identities and conditions preexisting their interpretations and practices, which, according to many scholars, even served as determinant factors for different cultural responses. Finally, the incorporation and resistance dichotomy inevitably presumed different fan experiences and cultural consumption in general into two contrasting categories---passive, conforming, powerless, inauthentic consumers versus active, subversive, empowered and authentic actors. The emphasis on the issue of ‘authenticity’ is especially apparent in sport fan studies, with the codes of authenticity directly linked to the resistant or at least productive nature of fan practices.

1.3.1.1 Incorporation and Resistance of Sport Fans

Many studies in sport fandom also conceptualized fans along the ‘incorporation/resistance’ dichotomy in their investigation of sport supporters’ symbolic reading and cultural consumption. The literature on English football (football) fans has

focused on their various conforming or opposing responses to the commercialization of the sport since early 1990s. Football supporters, mostly working-class males, were considered to have achieved a form of ‘fan democratization’ (Brown, 1998) through their resistant productivity to the rising corporate forces in professional football whose interests lay more in attracting middle class consumers than in sustaining the ‘people’s game’ (Taylor, 1995; Crawford, 2004). In the British context, researchers have discovered football fans’ involvement in such practices as fanzine production (Haynes, 1993), supporter groups (King, 1997) and collective protests (Nash, 2001), which forms resistance to football’s adoption of consumerism, entertainment, and commercialization, visible primarily in stadium redevelopment, shifting crowd demography, massive rises in ticket prices and redefinition of match-day experiences.

The ‘incorporation/resistance’ paradigm offers some significant theoretical insights for me to understand Chinese football fans’ motivation, pleasures, and experiences not merely as personal and psychological traits but as in constant interaction with the broader social power and structures. Its emphasis on fans’ activeness and struggle encourages me to draw both theoretical and practical links between football fandom and possible political struggles in China. Although the romanticization of fans’ political potentials has been widely criticized, my project is still socially and politically significant with an underlying aim to find any possible hope for social changes in Chinese people’s leisure practices such as football fandom. In my opinion, for a society like China that is still deeply embedded with different forms of inequality and repression, academic research must have political ambition. Classical fan studies require that my project should focus on the various forms of responses Chinese fans are likely to produce

in their consumption of European professional football. The comprehensive discussion of a wide range of fan responses and practices in previous literature guides me to look at Chinese football fans' experience on both ideological and practical levels.

However, in recent years, the dominant discourse of power and resistance in fandom research has received considerable critique from both outside (of academic) and within, and more and more scholars have begun to challenge the fundamental assumptions underlying the inquiry of the 'incorporation/resistance' of fans. Coinciding with the poststructuralist turn in both audience research and sociology of consumption, a new wave of fan studies emerged at the turn of the 21st century, revising and extending the classic theoretical model of fandom to offer new definitions about fans, identity formation, and power structures. In the next section, I will outline some crucial propositions by the poststructuralist approach to fandom and discuss how this paradigm will be used as the overarching framework for my dissertation.

1.3.2 Poststructuralist Turn of Fan Studies

In their summary of the trajectory of fan studies as an independent yet interdisciplinary area, Gray, Harrington and Sandvoss (2007) argued that the contemporary fan studies (what they called as the third wave) have shifted their attention to the integration of fandom to the everyday life in late modernity. As they pointed out,

On the macro level, contemporary research (like its predecessors) on fans acknowledges that fans' readings, tastes and practices are tied to wider social structures, yet extends the conceptual focus beyond questions of hegemony and class to the overarching social, cultural, and economic transformations of our time, including the dialectic between the global and the local and the rise of spectacle

and performance in fan consumption (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998) (Gray et al., 2007, p. 8).

The authors believed fan studies should look beyond fans' conforming or resistant engagement with their objects to reveal "the deep-seated symbiosis between the cultural practice and perspective of being a fan and industrial modernity at large" (p. 9). Instead of being only an object of study in and for itself, fandom should be investigated as part of the fabric of everyday lives and help capture fundamental insights into modern societies embedded in global capitalism. Apparently the 'incorporation/resistance' paradigm seems insufficient to fully account for the role of fandom in our contemporary lifeworlds---it can no longer be simply seen as autonomous activities accepting or opposing social structures out there but indeed a taken-for-granted aspect of modern communication and consumption.

This new trend in fan studies came hand in hand with, or perhaps was even influenced by, the theoretical and methodological shifts of audience research from reception analysis to ethnographic studies of media consumption (Alasuutari, 1999; Bird, 2003; Couldry, 2011). In addition to capturing the resistant/contradictory moments in interpretations and responses, audience research in recent years has critiqued the isolated analysis of audience's textual engagement and in turn become more interested in "what it means, or what it is like to live in a media-saturated world" (Ang, 1996). Alasuutari (1999), for example, named this emergent line of research a "third generation" of reception studies, which built on the models represented by the classic active audience approach but moved in broader directions to "get a grasp on our contemporary media culture" (p. 6). Seeing the inquiry of text-based responses inadequate in understanding

the ‘kaleidoscopic’ quality of our media culture, Bird (2003) advocated an ethnographic exploration of the connections between media/audience and the larger culture in the study of “society, family and community” (p. 4). Similarly, Couldry (2011) proposed “the practice approach to look at a wide range of practices in which media consumption and media-related talk are embedded” (p. 216).

It is important to note that this new generation of audience research and fan studies is guided by several poststructuralist critiques of those modernist assumptions taken by the ‘incorporation/resistant’ paradigm. First, power is no longer conceptualized solely as an unequal distribution among different classes in the society. Instead, as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) argued, power is in constant flux, forming complex and multiplicit relations revolving around class, gender, age and ethnic differences. As a result, it is difficult to find powerful agents or certain stable hegemonic meanings to which fans can conform or oppose, as the “incorporation/resistance” paradigm has asserted. The poststructuralist perspective then focuses on how power is operated through individuals in contemporary late-capitalist societies. Therefore, social resistance, while it still occurs, tends to be “more isolated and short-lived, and usually based upon improving specific consumer interests, rather than radically undermining social power relations” (Crawford, 2004, p. 50).

Second, many scholars have questioned the collective and unified nature of fans with certain preexisting group identity (e.g. Ang, 1991; Ang & Hermes, 1996; Madianou, 2011). Ang (1991) proposed the mutual constitution of identity and audience, stating that media consumption should be conceptualized as an ever-proliferating set of heterogeneous and dispersed intersecting positional subjects. In another article, Ang and

Hermes (1996) reflected on the constructed nature of certain categories and identities themselves which flattened the experiences of diverse social and cultural groups under an imagined community. The notion of identity as constituent and unstable has caused researchers to shift emphasis away from fan communities to ‘diffused’ audiences (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998) or individual fans’ engagements with texts and relationship to the fannish object (Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005). Meanwhile the focus on communities and tightly networked fans is found to have failed to “conceptualize important aspects of the relationship between the modern self, identity and popular culture” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 6). The exploration of fans on the more individual and private level has thus encouraged scholars to bring Giddens’ (1991) discussion on self-reflexivity into the area. For Giddens, this new sense of reflexivity extends itself into our conception of who we are, whereby the self becomes a reflexive project.

Finally, the poststructuralist approach complicates the dual typology of fans based on subjective codes of authenticity. Rather than categorize fan practices simply to the dichotomy of good/authentic/resistant and bad/inauthentic/passive, Abercrombie and Longhurst proposed a “spectacle/performance” paradigm that explains different levels of audience and fan engagement. Similarly, Bird (2003) noted the uncertain and high variability of fan encounters with media in different situations, stressing that fans’ activeness depends on whether media messages resonate with their personal or cultural experience. On the other hand, scholars such as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), Jenkins (2006) and Busse and Gray (2011) all pointed out that the original definition of fan resistance is itself theoretically problematic. Since it often confuses the form of activeness and productivity with actual political and ideological resistance, this definition

is considered to have both 1) romanticized those who can create cultural discourse and artifacts and 2) overlooked the less productive and visible fans such as lurkers. For example, Jenkins (2006) addressed the ways in which convergence culture caused similarities in mainstream and subcultural discourses in terms of practices and behaviors and in turn created new types of fans who were actively engaged in the industry-sponsored spaces and practices.

These theoretical shifts have inspired me to explore Chinese fandom of European football not merely as forces of conformity or resistance but more in terms of its varieties, subtleties and dynamics as important part of these fans' lived experiences in the contemporary social world. There will definitely exist in this fandom the so-called 'contradictory' moments worthy of analysis when Chinese fans obtain empowerment or negotiate resistance, but my main goal is beyond simply capturing any such particular, isolated moments and theorizing Chinese fans' interactions with the dominant European football culture. My project aims to explain the active fan engagements with international football texts as deeply embedded within the complex social and cultural contexts in China where social power operates in more dispersed, discursive and heterogeneous manner. Moreover, I do not limit my lens to the conventional fans who organize themselves as unified communities and/or claim an explicit and fixed commitment to certain club or player. Seeing fandom as integral to individuals' daily life, I pay as much attention to fans' personal and self-reflexive interpretations and conduct as well as their engagements in collective activities organized by local fan associations. By studying Chinese football fans on both the collective and individual levels, I am interested in finding how their fan experiences are involved in the constitution of their identities,

values and social positions as self-reflexive members of a late modern society with particular local arrangements of history, economy, and ideology.

Yet by taking the poststructuralist approach to fan studies I will in no way completely ignore the legacy of the “incorporation/resistance” paradigm. Acknowledging the oversimplification of the structure/agency dichotomy and the fluidity of power and identity does not mean that we ought to reject any possibility of fan resistance or negotiation. Rather the key question for the new generation of fan studies turns to be whether and how power struggle still exists with new forms in the increasingly fragmented world. In my study, I want to identify the distinct patterns of subversions by Chinese football fans that speak specifically to the poststructuralist operation of social power. Recent fan research seems to have placed more weight on fans’ consumption and production of material and cultural artifacts while overlooking the significance of their basic textual interpretations of the meanings of their fannish objects, which in my opinion, may hold considerable creativity, activeness, and resistance on the symbolic level. I believe that how fans think/understand cultural texts is equally important as what they do and produce. Chinese football fans’ semiotic productivity---that is, their meaning-making practice---also needs to be analyzed in relation to the broader ideological and cultural context.

1.3.2.1 Sport and Football Fandom as Everyday Life

In this section, I will review some key works on sport and football fandom from the poststructuralist perspective. These studies converge on the approach to exploring sport fandom as an everyday experience for the self-reflexive individuals in the late capitalist modernity. Many of these researchers articulated the influence of the rise of

consumer society on the practices and identities of sport fans. After summarizing the merits of each study, I will discuss two crucial issues the previous literature has largely overlooked, to which my project intends to make additional contributions.

In “Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport and Culture”, Crawford (2004) made specific arguments for adopting the post-structuralist approach to study fandom. Drawing on Abercrombie and Longhurst’s (1998) critiques of the “incorporation/resistance” paradigm, Crawford suggested that “rather than relying on reductive dichotomies which tend to be based upon highly subjective codes of authenticity, the literature on sport fans needs to shift towards an understanding of how sport is located and experienced in everyday life and social interactions” (p. 34). Especially he questioned the dualities between real/resistant fans and inauthentic/passive consumers and urged us to locate any consideration of fan culture within the wider context of consumer culture. Seeing consumer culture as part of the material culture, Crawford (2004) further argued that sport, comprised of both consumer goods and media representation, forms principal cultural texts and resources upon which fans become performers and develop their identities. Sport fans’ position in a fan community is thus contingent and dynamic, and fans can be best described as pursuing a moral career trajectory during which they change their location in the fandom as a result of life course changes.

Crabble (2008) applied poststructuralist theorization to specifically illustrate community in the context of English football fans presence for the 2006 FIFA World Cup. Drawing on Maffesoli’s (1996) concept of the neo-tribe and Scott Lash’s sense of the postmodern reflexive community, Crabble (2008) contended that the changing nature of social life since World War II brought our society into “liquid modernity” which allow

those with financial resources to have “new freedoms, new levels of consumption and more possibilities for individual choices” (p. 429). Therefore, the traveling groups of English fans were perceived as a series of fleeting, performative ‘communities’ motivated by the sense of temporality and consumerist desire for belonging, which differed radically from the traditional model of fandom with an enduring identity. As a representative of the gatherings conjured in consumer society, this form of imaginary togetherness served more as identity performance than substantial resistance and transgression.

In an attempt to break the theoretical dichotomy around the macro-level structures and micro-level agents, Dixon (2011) borrowed Giddens’s Structuration Theory (ST) to rethink football fandom as everyday processes. According to Dixon, ST emphasized both the importance of structure in social practices and human action based on the self-reflexive agency. These discussions were found pertinent to football fans interviewed in the study “who portrayed themselves as self-reflexive agents with deeply entrenched passions, acted out through routinized behavior” (Dixon, 2011, p. 293). As Dixon argued, “the ‘practical consciousness’ that subjects communicated so well was learned, diffused and altered in multiple ways through social interaction” (p. 293-294). In his later book “Consuming Football Life in Modern Life”, Dixon further questioned the integrity of the traditional and postmodernist perspectives in order to articulate a third way for football fandom studies. Dixon suggested that research could benefit from an investigation of the theoretical space in between those accounts on the meso level and offered an empirical study of mundane consumption experiences that made up football fandom culture within wider social development across time and space. The evidence showed that “fandom was

described by many as an inherited, transmissible practice and a slow process of autonomization involving the consumption of knowledge, discourse and social norms that were noted to underpin one's perception of the practices" (p. 126). However, fans chose to embrace football culture "through vast and various influences that extend one's structural background or habitus" (p. 127) such as interpersonal interactions through new media technologies. As a reflexive consumer, fans were also able to change behavior in accordance with the demands of multiple consumer practices and associated peer groups. Fandom was marked by a series of fluid and varied authenticity claims with otherness taking a variety of forms.

Perhaps the most comprehensive empirical study of football fandom in late modernity stems from Sandvoss (2003), who has also offered one of very few accounts for the role of mass media in forming football fandom. Situating his work at the intersection between audience research and sociology of sport, Sandvoss (2003) understood football fans as both audience and consumer of their cultural texts---hybrid semiotic structures of football clubs "composed of players and managers, tradition and history, board members and fans, stadia and landscapes and their diverse representation in different media" (2003, p. 29). He chose a wide range of social theories, which spanned from Bourdieu's analysis of consumption and taste, Ritzer's work on contemporary regimes of formal rationality, and Baudrillard's theorization of hyper-reality and simulation, to explore how football fandom constitutes an important aspect of the everyday life in the historical context of industrial modernization, mediatization, and globalization. Through in-depth interviews and long-term ethnographic fieldwork, Sandvoss argued that the televised football, the rationality of the modern game and the

standardization of professional clubs have led to a sense of contentlessness in the football texts on which fans could project themselves. He also theoretically positioned football fans as post-modern citizens who can individually choose identity “from a range of opportunities in mediasphere and communication through acts of football consumption” (Dixon, 2013). In Sandvoss’ analysis, football fans were active and self-reflexive, appropriating football texts to make sense of their identities and conditions. But their cultural practices were not evaluated around the discourse of power and resistance in isolation. Instead, the author contextualized and explained the activeness of this fandom in various economic and social processes that characterized late modern capitalism. Meanwhile football fan practices were also integral to these individuals’ self-reflexive project in which they constantly appropriate football clubs to reflect on their social identities, positions and conditions.

The above-mentioned studies offer rich insights for understanding football fandom not only as a form of power struggle but also as the outcome of the complex intertwining social and discursive processes in the (post)modern consumer society. They invited me to raise questions about the nature of Chinese football fandom regarding how it might indicate new formation of identity, community, citizenship, authenticity and self-reflexivity in China at the contemporary historical moment. However, there is not sufficient discussion in the existing literature on two essential issues that are indispensable for fully accounting for the localized productivity of Chinese fans in relation to the globally marketized European football culture. On one hand, very few of them have applied a non-Euro-centric perspective to examine the transnational/transcontinental popularity of regional sport, and football in particular, in

the non-Western world in the context of globalization. Most scholars interested in sport fandom and (post)modernity concentrated their analysis on the European and especially British experiences, thus seemingly assuming such experiences to be generalized to modern societies across the globe. Since globalization has become a trademark process penetrating almost every aspect of the contemporary life, it is necessary to contextualize football fandom in the broader economic and cultural globalization to see the interaction, friction and negotiation between the local and the global. Admittedly, Sandvoss (2003) took into account the transnational football consumption with the aid of television broadcasting, but his focus was primarily on such cultural exchange among Western, industrialized countries. His approach is prone to have a taken-for-granted euro-centric assumption excluding the third world experiences, which has been criticized by numerous theories of transnationalization and post-colonialism. I propose that Chinese fans' consumption of and practices around European football is very likely to tell a different story from Sandvoss' account.

On the other hand, the above literature rarely discussed the crucial role of new media technologies in forming sport fandom as an everyday process. In fact, except for Sandvoss' comprehensive arguments for television and football fans, almost no other researcher has particularly studied sport fans as media audiences or users in general. There is little dispute that mediated spectatorship composes a significant part of sport fandom. For the transnational experiences such as Chinese fans of European football, media even offer these fans the primary (and to many the only) channel to access their fannish objects. Couldry (2003, 2011) even argued that the contemporary society is operated around 'the myth of the mediated center', which means that "the media are our

privileged access point to society's center or core" (Couldry, 2011, p. 214). As he further pointed out, the beliefs, attitudes, and actions that help us "live with media institutions are integral to the wider organization of economic, social, and political production, indeed to the sustaining of the modern nation-state" (Couldry, 2011, p. 214).

In this sense, media have become one of the main forces shaping our life experiences, and therefore research in sport fandom everyday process will not be complete if fans' media use is not taken into account. The rapid development and diffusion of digital technologies have generated tremendous transformative impact on sport fans' communicative and productive activities. In this project, I examine Chinese football fans' mediated experiences with an emphasis on the influence of digital media on the maintenance and transformation of fans' beliefs, identities and practices.

1.4 Literature Review: Digital Media Practices and Transnational Sports Fandom

I now turn to the established theories and empirical studies about transnational cultural consumption and digital audience and fan cultures, respectively. I will present how these additional lines of literature inspire the current investigation of the transnational and digitalized nature of Chinese fandom of European football.

1.4.1 Transnational Sports Fandom and Globalized Football Consumption

The initiation of academic interest in transnational fan cultures is closely linked to the poststructuralist attempt to situate fandom in the radical transformation of everyday life. As Harrington and Bielby (2007) point out, the inquiry of transnational fandom has made efforts to reconcile the macro-level political economic analysis of global media production on the one hand, and the micro-level local media reception analysis of active audience reading on the other. Furthermore, research in transnational fandom has also

been sensitive to the Eurocentric approach in cultural and media studies. Eurocentricism, as Shohat and Stam (1994) argue, refer to a rhetoric that assumed the West as the center of the world's gravity and as the source where all the good things come from. It augmented European and American values and cultures as the only normal and true version reference while belittling the non-Western as irrational, abnormal, and marginal. In fan studies, the Eurocentric assumption is mainly manifested by the prevailing focus in early and classic studies on fandom, fan objects, and practices in the West. Transnational fan studies, however, attempt to break such Eurocentric tendency by turning attention to non-Western fan reception and/or fan texts from the specific national or local perspectives (Harrington & Bielby, 2007).

Transnational football consumption has been largely explained by the framework of 'glocalization', which sees sports as global processes mutually constitutive of and deeply recontextualized in the local cultures (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009). Giulianotti and Robertson proposed the concept of 'glocalization' in order to reconcile two opposing views in the discussion of cultural globalization---cultural imperialism and global heterogenization. Glocalization considers cultural globalization as a process where the global and the local are mutually constitutive and deeply intertwined and where the homogenization and heterogenization simultaneously take place. As a sport rapidly diffused internationally since the beginning of its invention, football has been seen as a representative of sports glocalization. Yet recent literature started to look at the juxtaposition between the global production of mediated professional football and its local consumption.

On the global level, Giulianotti and Robertson (2007) pointed out that leading European clubs including those from EPL cultivated fandom through their integral presence in the banal cosmopolitanization of football, in terms of competing regularly in the world's biggest tournaments, signing, or developing 'celebrity' players, conducting summer tours of new fan 'markets', capitalizing on strong transnational television exposure, and heightening their historical mythology. Similarly, Sandvoss (2003) argued that these major football clubs were now becoming increasingly bland and culturally inoffensive—increasingly meaningless, culturally—as they endlessly trawl the globe for fans and new TV customers.

On the local level, several studies on transnational supporters of EPL have addressed, from non-European perspectives, the processes through which Asian fans interpret the signs of EPL as distinct from the “traditional” English/British fans. According to Satoshi (2004), East Asian fans tend to follow star players more closely than teams, reflecting a different semiotic of the 'sign' of football than is in the mainstream in either UK or Scandinavia. In his analysis of the institutional arrangements, vested interests, and power relations of parties of football following in Japan, Manzenreiter (2004) suggested that the global football consumption provided Japanese fans with distinctive cultural resources for reflecting upon identity, enacting agency and constructing a meaningful social life in relation to a changing societal environment. In addition, Millward (2011) revealed that Malaysian fans of Manchester United critically interpret the meanings of club's 'red devil' badge on the basis of their local religious beliefs.

Meanwhile, several other scholars emphasized on the issues of cultural hegemony and national identity that the discussion of football glocalization has largely downplayed. In their eyes, transnational sports production and consumption are not simply mutually constitutive cultural exchanges but instead imbalanced processes led by neocolonial Western domination. Rowe and Gilmour (2010) made a specific account of the consumption of Western media sport in Asia. The researchers argued that while other media and cultural sectors in Asia such as film and television drama had enjoyed increasing content localization and intraregional exchange, media sport remained Western dominated and experienced little significant domestic or regional indigenization. Western sports interests were complicit with the transnational media corporations to privilege European- or American-based sports leagues in Asia such as EPL, NBA and MLB, which tended to marginalize the spectatorship of the local Asian professional sports. In the authors' opinion, the transnational consumption of media sports still represents the power imbalance between West and Asia in the contemporary cultural globalization, which hampered the development of 'local' Asian sports and media.

The above-mentioned literature guides me to conceptualize Chinese fandom of European football as part of the larger process of cultural globalization in which China is currently actively involved. The concept of glocalization offers a useful framework for me to bridge both the global and local causes for Chinese fans' potential beliefs and practices on an everyday basis. However, with little attention to the history, ideology and politics in national settings, glocalization seems to propose an idealized, dehistoricized and Eurocentric model for the global-local interaction. In this sense, the postcolonial

critique of the power imbalance in sports production and consumption must be considered.

My goal is to discover the local appropriation of European football as a global and dominant cultural form from the “European center” in China through the presentation and analysis of Chinese fans’ own voices and discourses. I am particularly concerned if Chinese fans’ practices have potentials for resisting the Eurocentricism or Western cultural hegemony that European football implies. I choose to focus on fans’ own culturally specific experiences with the globalized text of European football to capture their possible agency in defining and producing sports in the transitioning context. This emphasis on the actors echoes the modifications of postcolonialism and Said’s Orientalism in particular (Carrier, 1992; Chen, 1995; Parameswaran, 2002), which argues that cultural imperialism alone is inadequate to explain the possibility of ‘East’ agency to manufacture its own narratives of othering toward ‘West’. More importantly, it can also bring the valuable thoughts about glocalization into the historicized and contextualized postcolonial account.

Hwang & Jarvie’s (2003) discussion of sports and postcolonialism in modern China sheds light on the Chinese historical, economic, cultural and political contexts which we need to understand to thoroughly examine the nation’s sports culture. The authors suggested that since 1980s sports had developed in China under the influence of two types of postcolonialism---neo-colonialism and Chinese centrism. On the one hand, multinational capital and postmodernist culture have made a ‘neo-colonialist’ invasion into the increasingly commercialized China, causing a significant impact on the Chinese mode of production and communist ideology. As they mentioned, “fresh memories of

material poverty and political suffering in the past may suggest that the Chinese people competed with one another within a culture of hedonistic materialism. ...A recent withdrawal from the traditional ideology together with a crisis in traditional values has in part motivated Chinese people to accept almost uncritically ‘Western’ ideas and values” (p. 74). In this new colonization process, sports were at the forefront as both ‘transnational business’ and ‘diplomatic means’ to facilitate China’s entry into global capitalism. In particular, “Western sports media bypassed national borders and transmitted Western ideologies and desires for Western cultural products direct to Chinese people (p. 85)”. On the other hand, however, modern China is experiencing an internal imperialism, with histories and cultures in certain regions being subordinated to those promoted by the central government. In this regard, sport plays an important role in the construction of a national consciousness in China. With the purpose of maintaining a unified national identity, “the ideological content of the Maoist sport doctrine has actually been retained in post-Maoist sport ideology, which is composed of competition, high-performance sport, sporting ethics, and scientific sport. (p. 85)” Chinese leaders intend to appropriate Western sports as a tool to promote Chinese nationalism against Western imperialism. At the same time, they resist Western culture in their fear of encouraging the idea of Western democracy.

Therefore, in the Chinese postcolonial discourse, sport has served the contradictory roles of upholding Chinese nationalism against Western imperialism and supporting Chinese cultural centrism. Hwang and Jarvie’s analysis of China’s unique experience of duo postcolonialism offers me rich contextual information about Chinese

fans' transnational contact with European football. More precisely, for Chinese fans, European football signifies an ideal against individualism and utilitarianism.

1.4.2 Sports Fandom: From Mediated to Digitalized

The role of mass media in the shaping of modern sports fandom is by no means a new topic in sports studies. Research in mediated sports consumption has mainly focused on how television influences fans' viewing experiences and the economic structures of sports industry. In his synthesis of the historical trajectory of western sports spectatorship, Guttman (1986) identified the dramatic transformation that modern communication and especially television had brought to the contemporary sports spectators. He traced the evolution of mediated sports since the early 20th century from the print journalism in magazines to radio and television broadcasting. According to Guttman, since different sports appeal to different social strata, the spectrum of the specialized magazines corresponded to the class structure of modern society (p. 129). Yet the audience for the earliest printed reports were mostly males from the well-educated, upper-class and younger groups in the society. The later introduction of radio to sportscasting attracted a wider audience who could listen to sports games or news at the same time. Guttman argued that the immediacy and simultaneity of radio made possible the regional and national outbursts of sports-related violence, in that this technology enabled millions of people to experience the thrill of a game or the instant city-wide celebration of victory at the same time. However, it was not until the invention of television when sports truly became mass mediated consumption. The marriage between television and sports had considerably affected the economic structures of both media and sport industries. As for its influence on audience and fans, Guttman found that the demographics of in-stadium

attendance were changed due to the rise of televised broadcasting, with more affluent and younger fans more often attending the live games whereas their older, lower-class counterparts “plopped down before the television screen” (p. 145). More importantly, the televised representation itself fundamentally altered the sport spectatorship by interrupting the originally continuous games with advertisements. Television fans were programmed to expect and enjoy a fragmented, skewed, and impoverished viewing experience different from that of actual game attendance.

Sandvoss (2003) analyzed the role of televisual representation of football as means of rationalization and hyperreality that contributes to shaping football fandom as mass cultural phenomenon. Through the macro-level analysis, Sandvoss argued that the social, cultural and economic premises of the rise of television were interrelated with those of the rise of modern football, in that both institutions were produced and in turn reinforced the structures of decentralized, private and mobile suburban life with the Fordist leisure practices. Thus, television and football spectatorship have grown into an innate aspect of each other. On the micro textual level, Sandvoss articulated the impact of television on football consumption and fandom from fans’ own discourse about their televised experiences. For fans, television has maximized the efficiency in viewing football by offering maximal vision within a minimal space, thus leading to a rationalized form of leisure consumption nicely tied into fans’ routinized everyday life. In addition, Sandvoss used Baudrillard’s notions of hyperreality and simulation to describe how television had created for fans a new reality rather than mere representation of football by overcoming time, space and a singular perspective. The simulation of football on television, as he further pointed out, reflected “the rationalization of the lifeworld in

industrial modernity” (p. 166). Fans’ loss of experience and participation caused by televised football’s privileging of vision and information demonstrated that the forces of rationalization were “socially, culturally and economically manifest in the everyday life of fans and may ultimately be inescapable” (p. 167).

In recent years, more attention has been paid to the formation of sports audience and fandom in the digital era. One line of research analyzes the specific technological dimensions of new media that reconfigure sports fans’ experiences in their everyday life. For example, Rowe (2011) attributed the formation of sport audience to the inseparable interdependence between sports and media in the contemporary society. As he argues, the practices of both physically present in-stadium spectators and the mediated viewers are shifted to accommodate telecommunications and media development, thus forming a more general category of media sport audience that diminishes the solid distinctions between present and mediated spectatorship. On one hand, the in-stadium audiences are not only witness of the sport performance but also integrative to the whole broadcast sporting text as a key element of the spectacular quality for the distant, mediated audience. On the other hand, live sport fans also use various media technologies to compensate their limited viewing perspectives, which ranges from accessing television replays, watching large screens in the stadia to communicating or even generating content by mobile devices.

Tussey (2013) explored the ways in which digital media (websites, apps, and digital programming strategies) reconfigure the forms and space of sports fandom in the case of Major League Baseball. The study showed that “people use workspace media to complement the rhythms of the workday” (p. 42). MLB executives targeted the

workplace audience by encouraging ‘multitasking’ viewing habits with digital sport services. Different forms of digital content about the games such as highlights, statistics and live streaming were produced to serve fans’ viewing habits at different times during the workday. Digital sport fans were also encouraged to become engaged consumers in fantasy sports leagues and sports gambling, who use sports in their daily lives, interpersonal relationships and hobbies. In conclusion, Tussey argued that digital sport services have privileged certain forms of sports fan behaviors and attracted new fans on an international level, thus creating a link between multitasking spectatorship and modern connected labor in the global network economy.

Another line of research examines digital sports fandom in terms of its liberating and democratizing potentials, which well echoes the longstanding utopian/dystopian debate about new technologies. One of the two prevailing yet opposing views argues that digital media offer new spaces for a wider range of sports fans to achieve further interaction, participation and cultural production. A typical example of the democratizing argument pertains to Ruddock (2013), who investigated virtual football fan practices in Australia with an emphasis on ‘digital opinion leading’. Ruddock understood this process through the content of an Internet message board where Melbourne Heart fans debated the appeals of this new team. Tracing how the message board was established and operated with the aid of one fan, he explained the active participation in the circulation and production of media content as integral to the public life of the football fans. New technologies such as message boards are part of the materiality of football fandom, “allowing the democratized ‘fabrication’ of a tradition to be an authentic and rationalized means of finding pleasure and community in a heavily commodified world” (p. 164).

On the contrary, some new media critics question the empowerment of online sports fans with empirical findings suggesting that the dominant ideologies and unequal power relations remain the same in the newly created digital spaces. In an attempt to engage with the issue of gender often ignored in the accounts of digital and sport media, Hynes and Cook (2013) addressed how women experienced and expressed their identities as fans in online forums. The authors conducted online interviews with female football fans and analyzed their web discourses to demonstrate women's positions and identity management within the male-dominated football culture. As they found out, "the popular, heteronormative notions of manliness that drive the masculinization of football offline as a game and cultural milieu also shape the contours of the game's online forums, creating an environment in which women must regulate the expression of their gender identity in order to feel comfortable" (p. 108). As a result, female fans performed their role through "association, dedication, conformity, concealment, non-engagement and active withdrawal via online textual discourse" (p. 108). The authors argued for a more sophisticated approach to understanding the capability of digital networks to facilitate fan participation and greater social and cultural inclusion in football.

Millward (2013) articulated the role of new media in forming football fan movements through his examination of the emergence of 'project', 'resistance' and 'legitimizing' identities among supporters of the Manchester United football club who reacted to the private ownership of the club through networked communications. He connected digital cultures back to fan studies' original concerns for fan resistance by applying Castell's (2000) concepts of different identities and 'the network society'. Millward suggested that online communication technologies were able to assist in the

formation of fan groups that were mobilized to resist or reform the status quo of the football club, yet people's identities in the network society, while potentially powerful on a collective basis, are immensely changeable and far from fixed in time, space and culture. In other words, online forums and other digital network platforms offered the potential to facilitate the development of various identities, but they were not collective actions in reaction to the broader power structures.

My dissertation extends these analyses of digital sports consumption to Chinese football fandom, which has not been overtly explored before. I follow these scholars to more thoroughly examine whether new media technologies provide football fans with possibilities of empowerment and liberation in the special economic political and technological arrangements of contemporary China. The Chinese case will be especially interesting and complicated given that the country has its unique policies and regulations of the mass media and digital technologies. However, just as with my reluctance to define football fandom along the 'resistance/conformity' dichotomy, my primary goal is by no means to find a definitive answer to the utopian/dystopian debate about new media. Similarly, I am not in a technological determinist position to claim that the nature of fan practices, communities and identities has been completely transformed by new communication technologies. Based on the poststructuralist approach to fandom I take, I am interested in how Chinese fans consume European football as everyday practices in the digital era. I aim to find how its inevitable immersion in the state-regulated digital media has influenced the formation and maintenance of this transnational and dislocated fandom.

1.5 Overview of Chapters

The poststructuralist approach to fan studies, along with the literature in transnational and digital sports consumption, has guided me to explore the social, cultural, and political implications of Chinese fans' discourses and practices around European football with the appropriation of digital technologies. Apart from the description of methodology and research design in Chapter Two, my analysis is organized with five subsequent chapters. In Chapter Three, I start with the fundamental conceptualization of European football fans as an active audience and examine these fans' symbolic readings of European football. Using data collected from in-depth interviewing, I demonstrate these fans' interpretations of European football as a collective sport carrying ideal meanings of success. I argue that these fans appropriate the text of European football to produce critical reflections on the ideology of individualism and utilitarianism which is increasingly prevalent in the mainstream public discourse in transitioning China. Chapter Four focuses on the process through which Chinese fans form their taste for European football and establish their fan identity. Tracing their experience with European football in socialization, I demonstrate the articulation between the taste for European football with the subject of young urban middle class emerging from the Post-Maoist social restructuring. Not only is the consumption of European football conditioned by class-bounded material and cultural resources, but also Chinese fans actively produce the discourse of fan authenticity to make distinction between themselves as a social group and other classes and sub-classes. Incorporating the discussions on both fan subjectivity and social structures, Chapter Three and Chapter Four combine to provide a comprehensive account of who are these fans, why they become fans of European

football, and how their experience with European football, particularly their meaning-making process, is broadly related to their ideological struggles as urban middle class in the current Chinese context.

The next three chapters turn to the major digital media practices Chinese fans are engaged in, as part of their everyday life, for their transnational consumption of European football. In the examination of fans' appropriation of social media and digital platforms in televised spectatorship, community building, and online deliberations, I aim to find whether or not digital technology influences these fans' ideological struggles, individual status, and fan community, relationships.

Chapter Five looks at the primary practice of televised football game viewing among Chinese fans and investigates the ways in which the localized use of social media transforms the televised spectatorship of European football. Through the critical examination of the technology affordances of Sina Weibo and Wechat, I demonstrate the paradoxical ways in which social media enable individual fans to virtually watch football together but simultaneously individualizes and fragmentizes offline collective game viewing. Chapter Six moves the attention to the key sector of football fandom---local fan organizations---by exploring their use of digital media in forming communities and coordinating collective practices. With the presentation of the evolution of sampled fan associations aided by social media, I define the fluid nature of the communities formed within these fan organizations which transcends the conventional categorization of real and virtual community. I also point out the consequence of such community nature for football fans' identity performance, interpersonal relationships, and sense of community, with an emphasis on the insufficient conditions of the digital-inspired local fan

communities for more serious political collectivity. Chapter Seven looks at the social and political implications of online fan practices by exploring the case of a Chinese discussion board for European football. I discover the formation of a virtual public sphere there in which discussions about European football produce ideological reflections and struggles over race and sexuality which are rarely allowed in other public spaces in China. I also discuss how this virtual sphere is conditioned by specific technology affordance and textual specificity of the discussion board for European football and why it is difficult for the online deliberations there to be turned to offline activism.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter Eight), I connect all the analytical chapters by pointing out their common finding that the Chinese fandom of European football crosses the boundaries between the individualistic and the collective and between the real and the virtual on both discursive and materials levels. I develop the concept of “individualistic virtual collectivity” to account for the contradiction between Chinese fans’ subjective critique of neoliberal individualism and their objective situation in an individualistic fan collectivity shaped by digital media practices. I finally trace the possible roots of this contradiction to the constraints of the subjectivities of the young urban middle class in China’s state project of authoritarian digital capitalism.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 Overview

The post-structuralist approach to fan studies has driven the research of new generation to a more ethnographic-oriented methodology. Ethnography has been considered as an effective method to capture audience and fans' everyday talk and practices (Bird, 2003; Radway, 1988; Dover, 2007). The ethnographic turn allows audience research and fan studies to not only explore the conventional text-reader relation but also "other ways in which media is embedded in and reconstituted through everyday life and some of the consequences of living in a media world" (Dover, 2007). This directed my exploration of Chinese fans of European football toward a methodological emphasis on fans' interactive processes, personal narratives as well as everyday practices. I conducted a cumulation of one-year ethnographic fieldwork in Shanghai where there is one of the largest European football fan base in China. The first round of the offline fieldwork in Shanghai occurred between March and September 2015. I then returned to the site in the summers of 2016 and 2017 and spent three months there each time following up with the local fan organizations and the participants. My fieldwork mainly consists of in-depth interviewing with fans, participant observations with both individual fans and local fan organizations, and encounters and interactions in other relevant situations. Apart from the traditional offline ethnography, I also conducted "online ethnography" (Johns, Chen & Hall, 2003; Markham, 2005; Hine, 2008) to capture Chinese football fans' use of digital devices and social media for match viewing, discussions and cultural production. I looked closely at the discourses (discussions) and

texts about European football that Chinese fans generated on social media, public forums, and fan websites. I also followed the online activities of those fans and organizations I got contact with in offline fieldwork, primarily by their social media accounts. My selection of participants, fields and methods are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

2.2 Scope of Participants

The participants I focused on were middle class urban football fans whose ages range from late teens to early 30s (who were born between 1982 and 1995). I decided the scope of my participants for three reasons. First, my preliminary research indicated that these young Chinese living in large cities form the majority of the visible fans of European football in China, through both offline organization and online presentation. Indeed, the socioeconomic and geographical formation of this fandom reflects the essential conditions for transnationally accessing the texts of European football in China. Accessing the games, reports and statistics requires the fans of European football to have such communication technologies as television, computer and mobile devices. Especially, as the internet has gradually become the central space for Chinese football fans to watch matches, share resources, and engage in discussion and cultural production, one has to obtain the basic digital knowledge so as to actively participate in this fandom. My preliminary observation also informed me that many of these fans' competence of literacy and foreign languages indicated their possession of certain educational and cultural capital. Although the knowledge of European languages is not indispensable for participating in this fandom, most football fans speak English, thus being able to search for the first-hand news and statistics about European football

competition on English websites. There are also many fans who are fluent in other languages such as German, Spanish and Italian and volunteer to translate and share football information with their peers. These fans' technological, economic and cultural resources indicate that they at least need to belong to the middle class in a developing country like China to get access to European football in the first place. In addition, many fans' self-disclosure in both online interactions and pilot interviews shows that they were mostly born after 1980 in China's more developed urban regions. All these evidence drives me to concentrate on this most representative demographic of European football fans in China in my project.

Second, the participants belong to a significant generation in contemporary China who stand at forefront to experience the radical transformation this country has undergone. Born mostly in 1980s, these football fans are the first Chinese generation who grew up in the era of reform and open up. Chinese public discourse has long defined this group with the term "post 80s" to emphasize the drastic differences in economic resources, cultural values, and education between them and the previous generations (see Feng, 2011; Sabet, 2011). With China's economic take-off and international involvement, post 80s (especially those in large cities) were the first generation to be raised with relative material affluence and new values produced in the reforming society. They also had much easier access to university education compared to their parents who almost lost such opportunity during the Cultural Revolution. Their openness to be the pioneers exposed to Western imports included European football and digital technologies. Yet such material and cultural advantages post 80s got during their school years did not place them into a privileged position when they graduated from university. As soon as they

entered the society, post 80s again became the bearer of China's accelerating neoliberal shift that began at the beginning of the 21st century. Over the past 10 years, China has established an image of being an economic and military superpower on the international stage, while domestically its further privatization and marketization has led the society to face unprecedentedly economic disparity and class stratification. The class reconfiguration has made family network and inheritance the key factor for success in contemporary Chinese society, which produces tremendous obstructions to individual mobility. As the newcomers of the society, post 80s are widely considered as the first victims of state welfare reduction, high housing prices, flexible labor employment and other economic changes driven by liberalism.

The experience of this generation shows the huge impact of China's reform on ordinary people. It is even more interesting to question why many of these post 80s individuals have become fans of European football. What role does European football play in the simultaneously advantaged and uneasy lived experiences of the urban middle-class post 80 fans? How is these fans' fascination with European football related to their unique situations in this intensely privatized and stratified society? The selection of this demographic as my participants will provide an excellent example of football fans situated in this particular historical conjuncture.

Admittedly, my choice of the post 80s urban middle-class football fans is partly due to their visibility and accessibility. This demographic is the major and most active group in both online fan websites and offline fan associations. These communities are still the primary resources for me as a researcher to find potential participants using standard qualitative (and even quantitative) sampling procedures. Furthermore, because I

myself belong to the urban middle-class post 80s, my attempt to invite additional participants outside fan communities through my personal network will most likely lead me to this fan demographic. In fact, I consider my own position within the specific scope of fans under study as a very important factor in the research design. As a fan researcher, I am aware of the potential bias and defensive rhetoric that might be produced in the analysis of my own group. Yet I do believe my familiarity and identification with these fans has offered me advantages in understanding their pleasures and frustrations. It also helped me avoid taking a judgmental attitude toward my participants as a researcher intellectually and morally superior to fans. During the research process, I presented myself as a researcher who shared the same interests in European football with my participants but was eager to know what my participants really thought and did about their objects of fandom. Because my own fan identity affected the researcher-participant relationship and interaction, I was willing to share my favorite club and player if my participants were interested to know.

2.3 Research Sites

The scope of my participants largely determines the ‘fields’ of my ethnographic fieldwork to be located in Chinese urban areas with both online and offline sites. I used Shanghai, the largest city in China with rich traditions of consuming European football, as the primary field of my research. Admittedly, I made such geographical selection based on my familiarity with Shanghai as well as the economic and social resources I could get there. Yet this city was by no means only a convenient choice---as the most developed and international region in China, Shanghai exemplifies the urban regions where European football fans mostly come from.

The other essential field for my research was the internet where a lot of fan practices take place. More specifically, I selected two types of online platforms – social media and public-- as my research sites. These websites represent different modes of online spaces that Chinese football fans are involved in. The first website is the comprehensive discussion board for European football on the H forum, which is the most popular online forum of its sort in China. Being a professional website offering information and news about various global sports, the H forum has a section in its larger forum system for Chinese supporters of various teams and players to gather together and discuss all sorts of European football-related topics across clubs, leagues and tournaments. The second site I will focus on is Weibo (www.weibo.com), the Chinese version of Twitter, where fans can express, share and interact their resources and opinions using within 140 Chinese characters. Just as with Twitter, Weibo allows its users to follow other people, repost with “//@Username”, and add hashtags to form a discussion topic. On Weibo football fans can easily find and follow peers and participate in discussion of a certain football-related topic by reposting comments. The third platform is WeChat, a newly emergent microblogging site that is gaining increasing popularity among textually productive fans and female (slash) fans in particular.

2.4 Selection of Participants

I conducted a categorical sampling in my research sites. The primary goal of sampling was to capture all the range of Chinese European football fans with different modes of organization and fan objects. I recruited participants from both organized fan communities and individual, dispersed fans. Previous research tended to get access to fans of some specific clubs near the teams’ locations. As an established approach, the

club-based sampling certainly has considerable merits for studies of local football fans using conventional ethnography. Although it is still indispensable, this approach is not sufficient for the research focus and the theoretical assumptions of the current project. Taking the post-structuralist approach to studying Chinese European football fandom, I do not only explore the organized fans around certain clubs but also the individualistic endeavors of those who do not belong to a fan community in a traditional sense. Second, it is important to be aware that there are a variety of preferences and choices of objects within the broadly defined 'European football fandom'. The respective fans of football clubs with varied economic, cultural and historical backgrounds are likely to have different understandings of and experiences with football. Similarly, those who concentrate their fantasy around a particular football player might organize their practices and conceive their identities in different ways from the club supporters. In fact, in the poststructuralist world, there may be fans without a static preference of a club or player or with certain fan objects beyond our conventional definition. My sampling included as many types of Chinese European football fans as possible in order to provide a comprehensive picture of their experiences, discourses, and practices. I used my offline and online research sites as two complementary resources to locate different types of organized and individual fans.

2.4.1 Organized Fans

In the offline sites in Shanghai, I contacted fans through local supporter organizations for two clubs: Barcelona FC and Manchester United. The two organizations are called 'Barcelona Fan Association in Shanghai' and 'Reds In Shanghai', respectively. I chose these two fan organizations for two reasons. First, although both are top European

football magnates that have been actively expanding to the global markets and attracting countless fans in China, Barcelona FC and Manchester United are symbolically and materially distinct from each other in terms of national origins, histories, football styles, current performances, as well as the ways of entering the Chinese markets. However, along with their similar economic structures and Chinese fan base, these two clubs signify different symbolic meanings due to their geographical locations as well as recent situations. Second, compared with fan organizations of other European clubs, Barcelona Fan Association in Shanghai and Reds in Shanghai have more active online presence and more regular offline gatherings through which I could conduct participant observations. For both organizations, I first got contact with the organizers on Weibo and asked for permission to attend the events and observe their social media accounts. I was also able to reach fans at the offline gatherings and invited them for private, in-depth interviewing.

2.4.2 Individual Fans

Besides the potential participants from the organized fan communities, I invited some individual fans to join my project. This decision follows the post-structuralist approach to fan studies that pays more attention to the psychological and social experiences of individual fans. With more diverse interests in football objects than my sampling of the two fan organizations, these individual fans offered distinctive data to answer my research questions. The recruitment of the individual fans followed the dual offline/online process. In real life, I contacted individual participants through personal network and snowballing in both Shanghai. These fans may eagerly follow a certain club but hardly join any organized fan communities either online or offline. My preliminary study already exposed me to dispersed supporters of Arsenal, Chelsea, Bayern Munich,

Juventus, Inter Milan, Rome, respectively. I first researched within my own network to locate friends, classmates, colleagues and relatives who were fans of European football or who personally knew such fans. After the first-round recruiting, I asked those fans who agreed to be my participants to introduce more fans to me.

2.5 Methods

2.5.1 Participation Observation

I conducted participation observations at both my online and offline sites. In the offline realm, I attended numerous gatherings and events held by Barcelona Fan Associations and Reds in Shanghai during the three periods of my fieldwork. The gatherings ranged from watching live match, playing football to celebrating anniversaries. I not only observed fans' behaviors and the contexts on these occasions but also actively interacted with the organizers and the event attendees. As stated earlier, I also used these gathering as the opportunities to recruit participants for further interviewing, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. It can be expected that my offline participant observation will mainly focus on the two fan organizations based in Shanghai-- "Barcelona Fan Association in Shanghai" and "Reds in Shanghai". As for individual fans, I asked for permission to join some of them with their fan activities around European football.

My online participant observations were based on the H forum, Weibo, and Wechat. I went to these websites and observed the fan discussions, textual production, and other discursive practices on three times a week to generalize specific themes and discourses in those interactions. I took field notes during my observations and archived (screenshot) the webpages with key data. The forum is openly accessible to everyone, so

I could just log in to these sites and collect the data I needed. As for Weibo where individual users post and share various topics, I searched for and followed specific accounts and tags dedicated to the sampled clubs as well as European football more generally. The accounts I have been following include the official accounts of “Barcelona Fan Association in Shanghai” and “Reds in Shanghai”, the association organizers, public accounts of the major European leagues and clubs, fan opinion leaders (who usually have close relations with the local organizations), and some interviewees I got contact with offline. On the Wechat platform, I followed the public accounts of Barcelona Fan Association and Reds In Shanghai. Besides that, I established Wechat connections with all my participants and kept an eye on their daily updates in Wechat Moments. I also obtained permission from the participants to collect their Moments updates for deeper analysis.

2.5.2 Interviewing

I conducted 50 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with both organized and individual fans in face-to-face settings. The recruitment of interviewees consisted of three steps. First, I talked to the founders of “Barcelona Fan Association in Shanghai” and “Reds in Shanghai”, who then introduced to me other core organizers and fans who were interested in participating in my research. This step brought 8 interviewees to my project, including the two founders. Second, I interacted with fans who I met at the organized gatherings and asked for permission to interview. This procedure generated 17 interviewees. Third, I interviewed another 25 individual fans I got access to through personal network and snowballing. Lasting from 1 to 2 hours, the interviews all occurred in public settings including cafes, restaurants, and bars. All the interviewees were given

an informed consent, from which they had an idea of the overall research goals and what kind of questions they would be asked during the interview. They were also told that the study had no substantial risk on their online and offline life. This offered them the complete autonomy to decide whether they would like to participate in the study process.

My decision to use semi-structured rather than unstructured interviews was largely based on my goal of studying Chinese football fandom as an integrated part of these fans' everyday life and my research questions dealing with fans' conceptual understanding, cultural practices and media use around European football. Instead of letting the fans freely express their feelings and motivation about their fan objects, I attempted to direct my interviewees to discuss their fan practices as part of their lived experience, which helped show how both their personal history and macro influences (e.g. globalization, economic reform) shape their routine football consumption. I organized the interview around the three research questions identified before. First, I asked my participants about their history of being a fan of a particular club/player and football more generally. The interview questions directed the fans to articulate their reading of football as a sport and their beloved team as the unique object of fandom. To put more simply, the first set of questions guided my participants to discuss why they are attracted to what they like---especially why football (as opposed to other sports), why European football (as opposed to domestic or non-European football), and why this particular club. Their answers reflected their notions and ideologies of identity, taste and key social concepts including gender, class and race. Second, I encouraged the interviewees to share with me the daily routine of consumption of European football that they are engaged with. I probed how they watch the games, who they interact with in football discussions, what

texts or objects they produce around football, and some most unforgettable, defining moments in their fan experience. Finally, the last cluster of questions more specifically explored these fans' media usage during football consumption as well as their own understanding of media's impact on the football fandom. For instance, I asked them the ways in which they utilize different communication technologies to access football viewing and discussion. I focused on my participants' digitalized football consumption by letting them discuss how new media play a role in their fandom more specifically. I was also interested in these fans' own feelings and experiences with the websites and social media where I conducted participant observation. In the actual interviews, I invited the interviewees to discuss these three themes in a strictly chronological order. Before interviewing, I gathered some demographic information about the interviewee in terms of their age, location, educational background, occupation, etc. This helped confirm that the interviewees fall in the scope of the participants that I want to focus on. I listed the concrete interview questions in the appendix A. Appendix A includes some questions dealing with very specific themes such as winning/losing, authenticity, taste, football and femininity. These themes emerged from the findings of my pilot research and first few interviews, so I aimed to further explore and verify these findings with more data in the subsequent interviews.

2.6 Data Analysis

I made comprehensive and comparative analysis of the data from all different sources to offer textual and contextual evidence to my research questions. On the one hand, my inclusion of both organized and individual fans' online and offline discourses served to encompass the categorical variety of the types of Chinese football fans and their

practices, thus delineating a more complete picture of this fandom. By taking all these fan categories into account, I was able to make nuanced comparison among organized and individual fans, or online and offline practices, which likely have significant insights to the social and technological motivations behind these different fan formations. More importantly, I take this project as an opportunity to give more visibility to Chinese European football fans. With the goal of showing the social, cultural and political significance of their fan practices, I want to make my data as inclusive as possible to let all types of fans make their own voices. After all the diversity within Chinese football fans is what makes this fandom so rich and creative in its culture and worthy of attention.

On the other hand, my data came from various collecting methods ranging from participant observations, interviewing to online discourse analysis in both online and offline contexts. The achievement of validity is my primary concern to triangulate these methods. My other logic of mixing the methods was based on the complementary nature of the data that these methods can generate. While participant observations gave me access to the naturally occurring discursive texts and practices by Chinese football fans and offered first-hand source about the ongoing states of this fandom, in-depth interviewing enabled Chinese football fans to express their own ideas and emotions of their fan experiences, thus producing more detailed and sophisticated explanations from these fans' own perspectives. There was no doubt that at many times the data from both sides spoke to the same conclusion that I argue with more confidence in its reliability. But the triangulation of the methods also served other important functions. In some situations, my collection of the natural fan discourses exposed me to the key topics, trends and themes Chinese football fans care about, which I was able to focus on in the

interview questions to ask the fans to elaborate in more depth. To some extent, interviewing helped explain the motivations and consequences of the naturally occurring phenomena I observed. On other occasions, natural fan discourses both online and offline became vivid examples to support the interviewees' narratives of their experiences as well as their interpretations of football texts.

2.7 Ethics

Throughout the study, I tried to avoid what Matt Hills (2002) called "moral dualism" set by many scholars according to the academic imagined subjectivity to presume fans' inability to see their own significance whereas researchers are the rational observers and explainers. I let Chinese football fans make their own voices about their fan experiences and attitudes. While Hills (2002) also doubted the assumed articulating capacity of fans and questioned the defensive logic behind fans' discourse which might mask their actual motivation and pleasure, I believe that even fans' rhetorical defense provides rich information about how they relate themselves to the fan texts. To achieve a more equal relation between the participants and myself, I also disclosed to my participants my own interests in European football. This helped me form more common ground, emotional connections and trust with those football fans. I told my participants my favorite club and player if they wanted to know. I took into account my own identity as an Arsenal fan throughout the data collection and analysis. I was aware of the potential influence of my own fan identity on my participants' reactions to the research and my interpretation of other fans' discourses and actions. In addition to the above ethical concerns, this study got the full approval for implementation from the Institution Review

Board (IRB) committee in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst before I began the research plan.

During the interviews and participant observations, I invited the participants to pick pseudonyms that they preferred being used with the data presented in the dissertation. The purpose of using pseudonyms is to protect these fans' real identity and privacy. Similarly, I also created pseudonyms for the online forum and fan websites discussed in the dissertation in order to protect these sites from government surveillance. Before each interview and observation, I showed the interviewee or the event organizer an informed consent which described the purpose, approach, and procedure of my research. Through this consent process, I also obtained their permission to present the interview scripts in my analysis. My participants were aware that the data would be stored in a confidential place to which only I have the access and would never be used in other situations apart from this research project.

All the interviews were first conducted in Chinese (either Mandarin or the Shanghai dialect) and then translated into English by myself. The translation mainly serves the purpose of presenting the interview data in the dissertation. Yet in many chapters, I sometimes showed and discussed the original Chinese because English is not necessarily able to capture the original meaning.

During the writing process, I received several requests from interested participants to read my analysis in English. I took this as a good opportunity to give more voice to these fans and reflect on my role as the presenter of their words and experience. I showed these participants the finished chapters and invited them to give me feedback, particularly on whether or not my translations of their original words accurately reflect

what they meant. While I was careful about differentiating fans' comments from academic or analytical advice, their feedback helped me in my strive to avoid "moral dualism" and set their perspective at the center of my research.

CHAPTER 3

**READING EUROPEAN FOOTBALL AND CRITIQUE OF UTILITARIAN
INDIVIDUALISM**

3.1 Overview

In this chapter, I begin my exploration of Chinese fans of European football from the very basic question revolving around almost all types of fandom: why and how have they become fans of this cultural object? By conceptualizing Chinese fans as an “audience” of the text of European football, I analyze the ways in which these fans’ subjective interpretations of this sport as a cultural text mirror their fan motivations and in turn produce critical reflections on certain values, beliefs, and discourses. For a long time, fan motivation has been an essential issue examined in sports studies which aim to reveal both the individual and the environmental factors leading to fans’ passion or even mania about a sport. Yet psychological and sociological studies of sports fans seem to have rarely looked at how fans understand sports as symbolic systems with cultural and social meanings. On the contrary, classic fan studies revolving around other media and popular cultural fandom have focused on the active readings of the fan texts that produce diverse meanings and reflect fans’ agency for power negotiations in cultural consumption.

To a large extent, the tradition of active audience tends to see ideological struggles as the motivation for fans to engage in active interpretations and practices. This chapter aims to bridge the gap in the existing literature in sports studies and fan studies through the articulation of Chinese fans’ stated motivations and their interpretations of European football. More importantly, as a transnational cultural practice, the Chinese fandom of European football exemplifies how the motivation for consuming a global text,

as well as how such text is read, are rooted in fans' local experience and situations. Through my conversations with the participants, I have found that these fans make sense of why European football and particular clubs have attracted them within their own conceptualizations of the symbolic meanings conveyed by this sport. My participants appropriate the text of European football to critically reflect on the neoliberal discourses that are becoming increasingly predominant in transitioning China. Based on my analysis of my participants' interpretations of European football, I then trace their critique of individualism and utilitarianism to these fans' local experience in the economic and social transformations of China.

3.2 Literature Review

3.2.1 Motivation of Sports Fans

Motivation has always been one of the most studied concepts in sports fan research. From the most widely-employed socio-psychological perspective, fan motivation encompasses a wide range of individual and situational factors based on a unique set of experiences, social-cultural upbringing, and personality (Funk et al., 2012). Accordingly, sports scholars have established "motivation scales" that can supposedly measure fans' motives for spectatorship and support across different sports. Perhaps one of the most accepted measures, Wann's Sport Fan Motivation Scale (1995) examines facets of stress, self-esteem, escape as diversion, entertainment, economics as gambling, aesthetic value, group affiliation, and family needs. Widely used in numerous studies, Wann's scale has inspired researchers to classify individuals with varying degree of these motives into different sport fandoms. For example, fans with a preference for individual sports have reported higher levels of aesthetic motivation, which refers to the enjoyment

of the artistic nature of an activity, while persons with a preference for team sports had higher scores on the eustress and self-esteem subscales (Wann, Schrader & Wilson, 1999). Other scholars have enriched the concept of motivation by adding additional dimensions such as acquisition of knowledge (Trail and James, 2001), drama (Trail & James, 2001; Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James, and Gladden, 2002), player interest (Funk, Ridinger, and Moorman, 2004), vicarious achievement (Madrigal, 2006), socialization (Hur, Ko, & Valacich, 2007), just to name a few. Alternatively, Funk et al. (2006) use Self-Determination Theory to differentiate various motivation facets between intrinsic motives (e.g. aesthetic value, novelty, and challenge), which reflects an autonomy orientation that treats the sport consumption as an end to itself, and extrinsic motives (e.g. escape, family needs, and socialization), which is more control oriented towards receiving benefits from sport consumption.

However, such classification and quantification of the concept of motivation in empiricist sports fan studies presume the existence of some generalizable processes through which individuals are attracted to all kinds of sports. It overlooks the particularities of different sports in relation to their respective rules, histories, material conditions, and symbolic meanings. Neither has the socio-psychological approach attended to the specific economic, cultural and social contexts in which fans likely consume sports in very different ways. Compared to the above-mentioned generalizable categories, I am equally concerned about the specific meanings of one sport that attracts its fans. For this project, I am especially interested in why my participants become fans of football rather than other sports and why they follow European competitions rather than those from other continents. To reveal more nuanced relations and interactions between

the fan subjects and the sport object (European football), my analysis intends to discover such “specific” motivation from Chinese fans’ own understanding of what European football means to them. For this purpose, I choose to take the approach of active audience in cultural studies, to be discussed in the next section, to conceptualize my participants as the “audience”/ “readers” of the text of European football.

3.2.2 Fans’ Textual Interpretation as Ideological Struggles

Classic research in media fandom in the tradition of cultural studies and active audience has focused much more on those fans’ diverse “readings” of media texts. Although the poststructuralist turn of fan studies has challenged the “incorporation/resistance” paradigm underlying most analyses of fans’ textual interpretations in terms of its oversimplification of linear power operation, conformity/resistance dichotomy, and stable identities, I believe fans’ active meaning-making is still key to understanding how their practices produce and reflect their identities, positionalities, and subjectivities. Admittedly, recent fan research seems to have placed more weight on fans’ consumption and production of material and cultural artifacts while overlooked the significance of their basic textual interpretations of the meanings of their fannish objects. But I regard the latter to hold considerable creativity, activeness, and resistance on the symbolic level. After all, acknowledging the limitations of the structure/agency dichotomy and the fluidity of power and identity does not mean that we ought to reject any possibility of fan resistance. For a society like China that is still deeply embedded with different forms of inequality and repression, academic research must have political ambitions. Yet the key question for the current project turns out to be whether and how new forms of power struggles occur in the increasingly

fragmented lifeworld where Chinese fans consume and interpret European football along with other economic, cultural and social practices in everyday life. As poststructuralism theorizes social power as often operating through discourses on the micro-level, fans' meaning-making practices become especially relevant to the understanding of new possibilities of power negotiations.

In addition, I also aim to relate this discussion of fan interpretation back to the basic question of motivation, which is indeed much downplayed, if not completely reduced to ideological struggles in fan studies with the approach of cultural studies. Far beyond demonstrating potential power negotiations, fans' readings of cultural texts likely reflect their motivations for fandom from other facets of subjectivities. As my fieldwork shows, in response to why they become fans of European football and supporters of their favorite clubs, my participants actually present their own interpretations of this regional sport as a cultural text with particular symbolic meanings. In order to explain the attractiveness of European football, Chinese fans articulate how they acknowledge and embrace the values, implications, and ideals that they believe European football signifies. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to reveal how my participants' accounts of motivations for participation in fandom embed their multifaceted readings of European football, which produce rich social and cultural meanings against the dominant discourse and ideology in the local context.

3.3 Analysis: Chinese Fans' Active Readings of European Football

In the interviews, Chinese fans account for why they are attracted to a European football club that have no nationally and geographically proximity to them. They relate their understanding of the sport with their life and fan experience, which reflects their values

and worldviews. My participants' readings of European football certainly link to diverse personal experiences and tastes, but the most apparent similarity is that almost no one used such traditional criteria of sports as strength, victory or trophy to rationalize their affection for the club. Rather, their accounts mainly articulate the cultural meanings of European football as a team sport that prioritizes process over outcomes. Chinese fans' motivation to follow European football teams thus lies in their celebration of the values of collectivity and process which they feel are difficult to be found in popular sports in China. Considering these domestic sports as reflections of the wider social prioritization of individualism and utilitarianism, my participants extend their active interpretations of European football to an ideological critique of the rising neoliberal discourse in contemporary China.

3.3.1 Football as Collective Sport: Critique of Individualism

In their interpretations of European football, Chinese fans construct a critical discourse resisting the ideology of individualism. According to their explanations, fans' support for European clubs is based on their preference for the cooperative nature of football as a team sport in the first place. My interviewees perceived European football as an ideal symbol of collectivist teamwork, which maximizes the potentials of every ordinary individual. When asked about how they started watching football, many participants attributed the major attractiveness of the sport to its high degree of team collaboration through which every footballer, regardless of role on the field, equally contributed to the result of a game. A common theme emerging across the interviews, fans appreciated the fact that the results of football games could rarely be driven by any

individual player at any particular position. Instead, they believed that football relies more on how eleven players coordinate with each other through tactics and team spirit.

Subsequently, my participants thought football's charm as a sport lay in its rejection of "absolute individual competence" and allowance of hope for teams with seemingly weaker players. What my participants especially appreciated was the formation of a "complete" team with average players who can make up for each other's weakness. In their opinion, rather than downplay individual significance in collectivist strategies, football allows each player, no matter how ordinary he is, to maximize his personal value through cooperation with teammates. Accordingly, these fans support their respective European football clubs because the clubs challenge the common sense that "the stronger individual should be more successful" by overcoming the opponents that have star players through cooperation. For example, two Manchester United fans I interviewed separately---Stone and Wei---coincidentally mentioned the "underdog" character of Manchester United (Man Utd). Even though it is widely seen as the most successful in the history of Premier League, Man United is understood by its Chinese fans as a good example of hard work and teamwork overcoming the lack of individual talents. As Stone explained,

...if you look closely, you will find that Man United doesn't have the tradition of super stars, every player seen individually is no more than average, but working together they can be better than any glamorous, stronger team.... My club inspires me the ordinary can also make contributions---even if you are not fast or big enough, you don't have the amazing attacking skills you can still be a defender, tackling probably looks very simple and dull, but if you are responsible enough to

tackle every attacking ball you are also indispensable for the team (August 2016, personal communication).

Along the same lines, Wei offered a very similar account:

After all, football is not like basketball, in basketball weak defeating strong is almost impossible because a genius like Kobe Bryant or LeBron James can easily determine the game. However, football does not depend on the absolute power, some magic is going on and like our team (Man Utd), it always defeats its opponent that has all those stars and dominates the whole match (August 2015, personal communication).

These fans were impressed with Manchester United not because of its glorious history or countless trophies but due to the club's ability to beat superpowers with only "average" players. In their eyes, their favorite club is an ideal model of the collectivist power, which provides hope for the underdogs like themselves. Their discourses confirm that the strength of a football team is not derived from the competence of each individual player but rather from how all the players can work together. They were particularly indifferent to the traditional morality of fair play in sports that normalizes the most talented are sure to win. Indeed, such indifference represents a general tendency of the interviewees to conceptualize true fairness as equal opportunities for everyone to demonstrate his value and contributions to victory in a team.

In addition, my interviewees' celebration of teamwork always goes along with explicit critique of individualist heroism, which is reflected from their comparison between football and other sports. Guided by the interview questions, Chinese fans discussed why they preferred European football to other team and individual sports. Such

individual sports as badminton and table tennis that China particularly excels in the international competitions (e.g. Olympics) are considered as boring and predictable competitions that only highlight the players' personal skills, rather than brilliant teamwork. One fan, Star, vividly produced such interpretation:

I don't like badminton or table tennis because it is too boring to watch; every time you know Chinese players will win as their skills are much better than foreign players. These individual sports are quite absolute, totally relies on one person, and if you are stronger than your opponent there is very little chance that you will lose. I don't like such certainty. Football is not like this; it is really about cooperation and everything can happen (May 2015, personal communication).

Another fan, Anshao, even pinpointed the demanding quality a good badminton player must have:

Badminton seems easy, and you can see so many people play it for fun. But very few people can really reach the physical conditions for the professional level---it requires exceptional wrist strength and moving speed that cannot result only from hard training. Those players in the national team were almost born to do it. They are amazing as individuals, but badminton just lack the beauty of collective strategies. I prefer seeing the chemistry among footballers who work together to make it (victory) happen (June 2015, personal communication).

Similar critiques go to some team sports including basketball and American football. The most common case mentioned for comparison is basketball, which these fans almost equalize with NBA. They do not dislike basketball, and many actually watch NBA on a regular basis. Nevertheless, they admit having much more emotional

attachments as “fans” to the European football clubs than the American basketball teams. In their eyes, NBA is a typical “American” team sport which essentially celebrates the individualistic hero who can “rescue” the team in the last minute. A basketball game is much more easily determined by the performance of certain key player in a team. However, it is exactly the reliance of basketball on star players that makes it less attractive than football to my interviewees. For instance, Dennis compared the footballer Messi and NBA player McGrady to address the differences between these two sports:

Basketball is said to be a team sport, but it has nothing to do with what “team” means to football. The famous story about McGrady getting 13 points in the last 35 seconds will never happen to Messi, even though Messi has probably the best personal skills in the world. McGrady did that totally based on his own ability, it has nothing to do with his teammates, you know. In basketball each side only has 5 players on the field, and individual player can possibly break the defense. But this doesn’t work in football which has 11 players. No matter how skillful Messi is he cannot beat 11 men on the other side without the aid of his teammate. This is the major difference between football and basketball, and for me this is why football is more interesting than basketball (May 2015, personal communication).

Dennis’ words echo those of many participants, who consider badminton and basketball as not so distinct from each other in terms of their endorsement of individualistic heroism. They further articulate the inevitability of individualistic sports to prioritize exceptional biological talents, thus excluding possibilities of success for ordinary players. For example, many fans mention that basketball’s requirement of players’ height prevents most ordinary people from becoming professional whereas in

football there are successful players with varying physical attributes. Therefore, sports such as basketball and badminton are thought to only belong to “special” populations. The exclusiveness of these individualistic sports forms a stark contrast to football’s openness to and inclusiveness of the broader populations, including those with ordinary physiques and sporting talents.

In fact, what my interviewees outline in the comparison between European football and other sports is their understanding of the difference between individualism and collectivism. They appropriate football to not only celebrate team spirit but also redefine the individual’s value within the collective unity. Through the critique of individualistic sports, they express their disagreement with some core individualistic values, particularly individual heroism. These fans emphasize on the “team” (“jiti” 集体 in Chinese, which literally means “collective”) nature of football. However, as their discourses indicate, the teamwork in football does not simply reflect the Maoist notion of collectivism, which mostly aligns with uniformity, conscientiousness, or even totalism. For my participants, being athletically collectivist means equal opportunity in teamwork through which anyone can realize their respective potential. In this sense, what they essentially value is the individual achievement based on collectivist practices. Such readings of football redefine the notion of collectivism away from the Maoist idea and towards the traditional Chinese belief that personal well-being and success is closely connected to surrounding relationships. In this sense, a great football team should redeem every player’s potential, instead of only setting the stage for the all-exceptional stars. This is one of the main reasons Chinese fans offer for the attractiveness of their beloved European club. Although they still recognize the importance and value of such superstars

as Messi and CR7, these fans believe “stars” should serve to lead and inspire the whole team rather than simply utilize personal talents to score for victory.

For most participants, China’s presence and excellence in such individualistic sports as badminton and table tennis, along with its subordination in international football competitions, precisely mirrors the dominance of individual heroism and other related individualistic values in contemporary Chinese society. In the interviews, I followed up with my participants’ critical comments on the individual sports by asking them what they thought were the reasons that China succeeds in these sports but not in football. While several fans believed that this tendency reflects the inherent advantage of Chinese in sports that emphasize on individual skills, many others tended to agree that the dominance of these sports was a result of the state’s emphasis on and promotion of individualistic competition. As Filip pointed out,

Some might say that Chinese is just biologically better at individual sports like table tennis and badminton than team sports like football. But haven’t they forgot about the Chinese female volleyball team winning 5 world championships 30 years ago? It’s not that we Chinese cannot play team sports well, it’s more about what the state and the General Administration of Sports emphasize and support. Nowadays they obviously prefer individual sports because those sports solely rely on personal talents, and as long as you can find such genius, it’s more certain to get success. Team sports require more investment and time. Those officials only want to see the successful results and (focus on) the individual sports make their work easier... They (the officials of the General Administration of Sports) make so many efforts to propoganda the championships those individual players get, as

if they are national heroes. The news reports often tell how the athletes' training is lonely and boring but this is the key to their success. This is actually the tone of our society. Team spirit? Doesn't really have a place (in media and state publicity).

Along with Filip, Song looked more in depth and explained how the state preference for individual sports coincides with how he is socialized in family and school:

[Song] This idea of individual competition is almost everywhere in our society. I think even at school our education focuses on competition---at least for my generation, we are cultivated with this idea of finishing homework "independently" whereas there is almost none team project before university...My parents also hope I can rank high in the exams---that's the sign of a good student. Our education doesn't really teach us how to be cooperative.

[YG] Interesting. But how does this relate to China's advantage in individual sports and disadvantage in football?

[Song] Well, imagine if the athletes grow up in such environments, how are they possible to perform well in team sports with no sense of collaboration? That's why in the national team, everyone thinks he is somebody, the center of the team. No wonder they play so terribly. Even when athletes choose what they want to play in the first place, they will probably choose those with competitions they can have total control with their own ability. This is what we are taught to do throughout our development.

As shown in both Filip and Song's discussions, the prevalence of individualistic values such as personal hardworking and fierce competition not only echoes China's

dominance in individualistic sports but also partially accounts for the lack of success of Chinese football teams on both national and professional levels. In fact, my participants also explicitly criticize the negative impact of the social belief in individualistic heroism on the development of football in China. For example, some participants noticed the public expectation of the emergence of superstars (e.g. a Chinese Messi) to save Chinese football and pointed it was inherently problematic because it was against the cooperative nature of the sport. Other fans attributed the failure of the Chinese national team to the lack of team spirit of the players, which, as Song stated, might be an outcome of education and socialization. Another group of interviewees discussed how many Chinese professional clubs followed the same individualistic logic by focusing on the purchase of one or two foreign star players, which they considered might bring immediate trophies to the clubs but have little contribution to the long-term development of domestic players and football culture in China. In this sense, these participants' choice of watching European football competitions and supporting European clubs may be in part a consequence of their dissatisfaction with the ways in which sports, including football, operate within a logic of individualistic heroism or are utilized by the state to promote such ideology. In their further articulations about why they do not accept individualistic heroism and individualism more generally, Chinese fans are reflexive on their own contradictory positions in Chinese society. According to them, the ideological emphasis on individual hardworking, competition, and success has injected the China society with the law of the jungle and thus left little space for social solidarity. The interviewees frequently refer to such Social Darwinist terms as “the law of jungle” (弱肉强食), “the survival of the fittest” (适者生存) to describe the problems they believe are caused by the

rise of individualism in China. As a typical example, Yuzong, with deep doubts about its validity, pointed out that the individualistic ideology only served the interests of those with superior skills or resources:

The society is cruelly competitive, everyone fights for themselves, and the mainstream idea is like the loser doesn't deserve sympathy...Is this fair? Some people might say yes because they are the winner, they were born with money or talents. But I can only struggle to survive at the bottom of the society. It (the society) is not really for ordinary people you know (personal communication, March 20, 2015)

According to Yuzong, football's most charming characteristic---the possibility for the ordinary and even the weak to win through collaboration---is incompatible with China's celebration of individualism and its underlying motive for maximizing efficiency for economic development. Interestingly, in order to illustrate the negative impact of individualism on ordinary people, he even imagined himself as "at the bottom of the society", which he certainly is not given his university education and financial career. Yet Yuzong's words suggest that Chinese fans' critique of individualism is actually a self-reflexive process in which they refer to their own struggles as ordinary urban middle class in economic life as one of the motivations for such ideological resistance. Along the same lines, they reiterate that watching European football helps them to relocate the alternative collectivist values that they embrace but might be difficult to find among the dominant ideology in China. In fact, some participants choose to carry out what they learn about teamwork from European football in real life and work as not only an expression of support for the team but also a potential way of ideological resistance. For

example, CDD, while admitting that mainstream society concentrates on competition, described how her favorite club Arsenal has taught her about the team spirit that had inspired her work:

[CDD] I have been appreciating Arsenal's team spirit since the beginning, but not until I started working myself did I realize how important teamwork actually was. You know I am doing Public Relations now, cooperation is so primary and important for each task to be completed. Well my job is very different from football, but the awareness of and the emphasis on teamwork I have got from following Arsenal has helped me a lot in my work (April 2015, personal communication).

[YG] You also mentioned before that the colleague relationships in your company were very complicated due to competition for promotion. How can you reconcile this?

[CDD] Those who play politics for resources or personal promotion of course don't understand the value of cooperation. They are detrimental to efficiency and our projects. But they probably will get promoted. The society is like this, isn't it? But I try to stick with what I believe, and this is the lesson I get from being an Arsenal fan.

Therefore, European football is a cultural form on which these fans are able to project their beliefs in cooperation and unity, which lead their everyday life. As many of them pointed out, their favorite European clubs were precisely the role models of team collaboration for themselves to make achievements in their career and personal development.

3.3.2 Prioritizing Process over Results: Resistance to Utilitarianism

If teamwork is the nature of European football in general, Chinese fans also rely on another critical discourse to specify the attractiveness of the European football clubs they support. Their descriptions are underlined with a romantic worldview of success that appreciates the beauty of process and failure, and thus stand at odds with the rising notion of utilitarianism in transitioning China.

The participants tend to appreciate their favorite clubs' unique spirits and rich traditions which are independent of the basic logics of the modern sports industries and markets. In their eyes, football is not merely about winning trophies, producing financial profits, or other outside purposes---there is something more touching and inspiring that only exists for the sake of football itself. While most interviewees agree that winning trophies and financial success are critical to the establishment of a great football team, they think the process of a match---or more concretely, whether the team demonstrates the ultimate aesthetics of football and the athletic spirit---is more important and meaningful than the final result. Many fans emphasize that the club has won their heart by its performance during the games regardless of winning the competition or not. This trend of resisting utilitarian attitudes toward football is particularly obvious among fans of such clubs as Arsenal and Roma, which have glorious history and rich traditions but lack trophies in recent years. Magoo, the only Roma fan I interviewed, was proud of Roma's insistence on beautiful football even at the cost of trophy:

Roma lets me know that football is not only about beating opponents and winning trophies. Watching its (Roma's) games, I mean the process itself is already

enjoyable. If I only chase for championships. I will not follow Roma, but the team showed me the beauty of forwarding (putting the goal forward) and cooperation. Now many utilitarian teams, like Chelsea or other Italian clubs, just focus on defense and only aim at winning 1-0, but Roma hasn't compromised. Focusing on forwarding nowadays might cause loss, but we lose it elegantly. Besides that, we also have players like Totti who has stayed here since the beginning and has never transferred to other clubs. Roma just shows that football is not only about win and money but it's also about process, commitment, and loyalty. It's hard to describe such feelings in words, but you know it is definitely beyond the result of any match or tournament (August 2016, personal communication).

According to Magoo, the idea of 'win-at-all-cost' is too pragmatic to have any sense of beauty, which is the core criteria for his choice of the club. Magoo's discourse particularly refers to Chelsea as the representative of "utilitarian clubs" that only cares about the results. In fact, a lot of interviewees hold negative attitudes towards those defense-focused clubs such as Chelsea and Manchester City as eliminating the aesthetics of football. However, fans of these clubs are able to interpret their teams as models against utilitarianism. As a Chelsea fan for more than ten years, Joseph understood the style of the club not as utilitarian but as practical:

Those who accuse of Chelsea don't really understand it or watch its matches. For me Chelsea reflects the core spirit of football, which is hard work, perseverance, and never giving up until the last second. I started following Chelsea even before it became rich after the purchase of Abramovich. This type of spirit already existed then. It is always touching to see them falling behind during most part of

the game and reversing the score in the last few minutes. You can say their style is very practical, without too many fancy passes. But I don't think such insistence can be called as utilitarian. Can't you disagree that never giving up is also the beauty of football (June 2015, personal communication)?

As these examples indicate, my participants are engaged in active reading of their favorite clubs in terms of the manifestation of the beauty and core spirit of football, which is essentially something beyond the utilitarian purpose of winning the competitions at all cost.

Another way through which Chinese fans appraise European football's resistance to utilitarianism is to recognize its immunity from commercialization. In their eyes, in contrast to American professional sports (e.g. NBA and NFL) with inherent structures and rules underlined with commercial motives, European football is still able to hold up to its integrity and aesthetics in the wave of sports commercialization. For instance, many fans criticize how the interference of advertisements has destroyed the consistency and the aesthetics of those "American" sport games, as compared to football games that have two continuous halves for 45 minutes each. As Zang said:

I really don't like the design of most professional American sports, like NBA and NFL, into four quarters, each of which only last for 15 minutes or less. This is terrible for the flow of the games, and it is mainly for the insertions of TV advertisements between the quarters. In the U.S., sports are just means for moneymaking. I'm not saying football is not influenced by commercialization, but at least football hasn't changed its format due to the pressure of advertisers (March 2015, personal communication).

Other fans celebrated football's independence from total commercialization by articulating the distinct nature of its play transfer, as is exemplified by Stone's words:

American sports are super commercialized, and this can be most reflected the way they deal with player transfers. In NBA, transfers are simply called as "trades", which means it is totally business. In football, transfers have a lot to do with loyalty. It was so controversial when Figo went to Real Madrid from Barcelona because they (the teams) are deadly enemies. There is nothing similar in NBA I guess (August 2016, personal communication).

Apparently, although they are aware of the trend of transnational capital turning to European football clubs as means of profit making, the interviewees believe their own team are engaged in active struggles with this trend to maintain the purity of football. They believe that the commercial operation of their clubs has not made them lose the essence of sport spirits and cultural traditions to the goal of moneymaking. They particularly refer to how their favorite European football clubs have tried to resist such exaggerated commercial impact. For example, Barcelona fans are proud of the club's tradition of not having advertising on the front of the jersey, though this tradition was finally broken in 2016. Arsenal fans often consider the club's involvement in charity as a sign of its resistance to hyper-commercialism. Other fans who support clubs that are still locally owned (e.g. Juventus) also boasted their teams' immunity to transnational capital. They do acknowledge the significant role of capital in promoting football leagues globally and elevating the overall level of this sport. Yet they believe the commercial endeavors such as free trade of players, sponsors, and global publicity, should contribute to the improvement and success of European football as a sport, not the vice versa.

Not surprisingly, my interviewees' appreciation of their football club's resistance to utilitarianism is simultaneously intertwined with their dissatisfaction with the "win-at-all-costs" mentality dominating the discourse of sports in China. The interviewees come to an agreement that the state ideology of sports overemphasizes on championships, triumphs, and gold medals, which can immediately translate to fame and wealth for individual athletes and to political capital for relevant governmental officials. In their opinion, in contrast to their favorite team's attitude toward football, the Chinese public cares most about the results of sport competitions, which leads to disproportionately more audience attention to those sports that are likely to win the gold medals for China. Besides badminton and table tennis, a few interviewees are especially critical of weightlifting as a representative of utilitarian sports whose competition processes do not generate pleasure for audience and merely catch public attention for winning Olympics medals. Not only are they disappointed with weightlifting as an aesthetically boring sport but also the idea of "the second is the loser" that prevails in China's media coverage of this sport. As Apple said:

Some Chinese sports are too much based on gold medals. For example, I don't really enjoy watching weightlifting competitions during Olympics. We all know that China wins a lot of gold medals on weightlifting, but don't you think weightlifting athletes are miserable? They are only there for the Olympics. They are trained so hard, sometimes with almost torturing approaches to keep weight, just to get an opportunity to get public attention every four years. You know many weightlifters are not from very rich families, and they want to change their destiny by winning the gold medals. If they get it they will have everything, but if they

don't, even with the silver medal, it's the end of the world. Haven't you seen one silver medalist of weightlifting crying at last Olympics? Isn't it ridiculous? But Olympics is basically all about the gold medal for China, too goal-oriented (May 2015, personal communication).

Apple's discourse, along with many other participants' reflections on China's approach to sports competitions, pinpointed the utilitarian core of the sports ideology in contemporary China. As a significant part of China's new image at its return to the international stage, professional sports in China are deeply embedded in the "win-at-all-costs" mentality. While closely related to the Chinese nationalism, the infatuation with triumphs is reinforced by the intensive sports commercialization in China, which enable (only) the gold medalists to gain both fame and wealth in a short period. According to the participants, even many Chinese athletes are driven by the financial motives behind the competition and merely take sports as a means to achieve their material interests.

According to my participants, the "win-at-all-cost" mentality in sports mirrors the eagerness for quick success and instant benefit in almost every aspect of contemporary Chinese society. Upon their reflections on China's attitudes toward sports, they frequently mention the term "gongli 功利", which means utilitarian in Chinese. Some of them further use phrases including "this is the social trend", "the whole society is like this" and "it's not only about sports in China" to make sense of the sport utilitarianism as part of the broader social desire that revolves around maximizing profits and gaining quick results. When I further invited those fans to elaborate on what they mean by calling sport utilitarianism as the "social trend", almost all of them turned to "gongli 功利" and "fuzao 浮躁" to describe what they think as the major trend or "problem" in Chinese society.

This idea is clearly shown from the response of a fan named LC to my question about his understanding of *fuzao* being a social problem:

Most people in the Chinese society now are very *fuzao*... Many only care about wealth and fame. In other words, Chinese people are too utilitarian (*gongli*) now, I guess it's because of the rapid economic development. Everyone wants to get rich in the quickest way possible, even without paying the price. This actually explains a lot of social chaos and moral decay (社会乱象), like food security issues or other heartless businessman alike (who chase profit at the cost of citizens' health and life)...I don't think this is good to China's development (LC, personal communication, April 19, 2015)

Fuzao literally means impetuous or frivolous in English, but in the Chinese context, this word echoes *gongli* in terms of the cultural indication of utilitarianism, and most likely refers to the impatience and anxiousness for the pursuit of material interests and financial achievements. In this sense, what these fans essentially disagree with, as reflected in their critique of Chinese sports culture, is the dominant utilitarian mentality that drives the wider economic and social life in China.

It is against such ideological critique of the Chinese society that the football fans articulate their admiration of European football's prioritization of process over results. With its departure from the "win-at-all-cost" mentality, European football becomes a symbolic text from which my participants are able to find the ideals of success and victory that they can hardly capture in the social reality of China. Many fans also admitted that the ups and downs of their football clubs not only echo my interviewees' uneasy lived experience and but also inspire them to stick to the non-utilitarian ideals in

their result-driven work and life environment. Interestingly, no matter how strong their favorite team actually is, Chinese fans chose to imagine it as an underdog with moral power beyond victory and trophies. They were constantly identifying with the subordinated experiences of their club, treating the spirits of European football team as what they could aim for to handle failure and frustration in real life. They often refer to the similarities between themselves and their teams in terms of not gaining worldly success for holding up to certain non-utilitarian values. For example, Arsenal fans seem to agree that the team's insistence on the "beautiful" rather than "utilitarian" playing style represented the idealist chase for dream in the toughest reality. As Amu pointed out that:

I guess so many young people, including me, like Arsenal because they like expressing themselves, constructing their own system, and leading a life close to art, they don't like "speedy classes for success" that Jose Mourinho represents.

Arsenal happens to have those qualities that we chase for---independent, beautiful, fragile, persistent, idealist, tragic. Someone once said that Arsenal fans were all poets (April 2015, personal communication).

Indeed, many fans of other clubs also confessed that the club reflected their own experience of struggling with failure and frustration but still sticking to ideals and dreams. While they are all top clubs in the leagues with numerous trophies, the European football teams, at least to my participants, symbolize "charming losers" who managed to achieve their true value even at the cost of failed outcomes. Inspired by their clubs, these fans seemed to find an alternative way to define and obtain success in real life. Their clubs' insistence on aesthetics, athletic spirits, and historical traditions at the cost of trophy and financial rewards confirm their own beliefs about success and victory. More importantly,

many participants that defined themselves as not financially successful claim to have found the meanings of their “underdog” life in the money-driven society with the inspiration of their clubs’ idealist pursuits.

3.4 Conclusions and Discussions

In the readings of their favorite European football clubs, Chinese fans articulated critical reflections on the discourses of individualism and utilitarianism, which are increasingly prevalent during China’s neoliberal transition (Hu, 2012; Lu, 1998; Osnos, 2015; Piron, 2006; Steele & Lynch, 2013; Sun & Chen, 2015; Zhang & Ong, 2008; Zou & Cai, 2016). In addition, Chinese fans’ meaning making of European football is highly self-reflexive on their own work and life experience in the local economic, social, and cultural contexts. To a large extent, European football’s significations of collectivism and non-utilitarian idealism are what my participants feel very important for their achievement of life goals but are simultaneously what the mainstream Chinese society is increasingly staying away from.

Their critique of social and discursive trends in contemporary China is most visible in these fans’ frequent reference to Chinese sports in the interpretations of European football. The Olympic competitions that China is good at are interpreted by my interviewees as representative of “individualism” and “utilitarianism” that reflect the mainstream ideology of this era. Clearly when fans compare such sports as badminton with football, what they are truly dissatisfied with is the ways in which these sports are represented and constructed as symbols of “individual talents and” and “win-at-all-cost.” Indeed, professional sports have become a sign of the utilitarian and neoliberal shift of cultural values in the reforming Chinese society. The endless pursuit of champions and

prohress in sports coincides with the country's conformity to the logic of free market that rationalizes individual competition, self-responsibility, profit maximization and survival of the fittest. It is under these circumstances that Chinese fans' readings of European football are socially and culturally significant. They are likely to use a foreign fan object to distance themselves from the right-wing, neoliberal values increasingly prevalent in China.

My findings post a different case from previous research on the Chinese young generation. Age-wise, my participants represent the population of "post-80s" and "post 90s", who have long been seen, by both mainstream discourse and researchers, as the leading celebrators of individualism and utilitarianism since the rise of such notion during China's capitalist reform (Ma, Hu, & Gocłowska, 2016; Robert, 2005). Many scholars have attributed the rise/comeback of neoliberal values in China to the import and popularity of Western culture, exemplified by rock music and Hollywood films (Campell, 2011; Li & Wood, 2016; Robert, 2005; Xiao, 2017). However, my interviewees' accounts strikingly counter such established connection between neoliberalism and young generations. The analysis shows that Western cultural texts do not necessarily catalyze the expansion of neoliberal values but might leave spaces for local interpretations that resist such values.

In the current case, it is precisely Chinese fans' appropriation of the text of European football, as deeply localized in their real-life experiences and social positions in the contemporary China, that contribute to the production of their ideological resistance to individualism and utilitarianism. Belonging to the young educated urban middle class, the Chinese football fans I focus on have their own economic and social situations that

might drive them to make such transgressive voices. This demographic group, mostly entering the society for fewer than 10 years, is the main undertaker of the neoliberal trends occurring in the reforming China---low starting salary, high commodity prices, intense competition for limited resources, tremendous barriers to individual mobility, extreme utilitarianism and so on. Though often in self-mocking tones, many participants do talk about their uneasy life experiences as newcomers to the society in the interviews. Therefore, their indifference toward the mainstream values is probably a result of their felt victimization in China's neoliberal shifts. The polysemic text of European football offers a channel on which these fans can project their transgressive views originating from their everyday local situations in transitioning China.

In fact, Chinese fans' readings of European football is not merely a reaction to the right-wing turn in the local economy and culture. Through their constant reference to American professional sports, they also ascribe those market-oriented, capitalist values and influences to American culture. In this sense, the support of European football clubs is a symbolic way for Chinese fans to contest the American cultural hegemony, including its unstoppable material and ideological flow into China. Yet through the insistence of football as "non-American," there is also a tendency among my participants to conceptualize the best version of football as European, which then produces an idealized imagination of Europe. Although this chapter does not have space for further elaboration, Chinese fans do prioritize European football to the Latino and African counterparts which are generally seen as major powers in the football world. Most participants think Latino and African players lack team spirit and/or use football as means of wealth and social status, thus aligning with the individualistic and utilitarian characters. Such stereotype of

football from the non-European regions post interesting questions that deserve further exploration.

By interpreting football, the participants construct a rational and ideal image of Europe that is contrasted to two poles in the world in terms of economic and social development. One is represented by the U.S., whose extreme promotion of individualistic heroism and commercialized utilitarianism through sports is manifestation of the American society's saturation into post-industrial, neoliberal capitalism. According to my interviewees, China is following the U.S. mode in its economic reform, thus similarly prioritizing the ideology of individualism and utilitarianism in both sports and other dimensions of its culture and society. The other pole is exemplified by Latin America and Africa (fans seem to see these actually very different regions as a whole) whose lack of industrialization and commercialization also results in the prevalence of individualistic selfishness and utilitarian practices at least in football competitions. But they simultaneously reproduce the Orientalist ideology by excluding the third world (Latin America and Africa) from their economic and cultural ideals. Meanwhile, these fans are not happy with China's imitation of the U.S., but they still choose to distinguish China from the third world and therefore exclude the possibility of such non-U.S., non-white alliances to resist the American hegemony of individualism and utilitarianism. In contrast, they try to find the symbol of their resistance from the most traditional version of the West---Europe, thus reproducing Orientalism in a more subtle and complicated way.

CHAPTER 4

FAN IDENTITY, EUROPEAN FOOTBALL TASTE AND SOCIAL DISTINCTION

4.1 Overview

In this chapter, I examine how Chinese fans use their consumption of European football to define themselves and others. I am particularly interested in the articulation between my participants' fan identity and their social identity and position in the broader class structures in contemporary China. With this purpose, I conceptualize Chinese fans' practices around European football as transnational cultural consumption that represents their specific taste and forms part of their everyday life-style. With the focus on my participants' own activities and narratives reflecting their identity construction as European football fans, my analysis intends to reconcile the debate over whether fandom is a result of individual choice or objective social reproduction. Based on Bourdieu's framework of taste and social distinction, I map the long-term process in which Chinese fans' choice of European football, as part of the taste system, has been gradually inherited and acquired in the broader historical and social contexts of China from late 1990s, early 2000s until now. I aim to analyze how the taste for European football is structured particular economic and cultural capitals as well as ethical and aesthetic perceptions in relation to the reconstruction of class structures since China's economic open-up.

4.2 Sports Consumption and Social Class

In Bourdieu's (1978, 1984) classical analysis of sports and social class, sporting practices, bound up with other social practices, are parts of the system of taste and preferences that is class habitus. The consumption of different sports depends on spare

time, economic capital, and cultural capital, yet it is simultaneously related to agents' ethical and aesthetic perceptions of the meanings and functions of the sports that are conferred by their class dispositions. Bourdieu distinguishes between bourgeois sports, which are mainly practiced for the functions of physical maintenance and gaining class distinction and are usually closed to working class and lower middle class due to the hidden entry requirements such as family tradition and techniques of sociability, and "vulgar" sports, which are mostly practiced by working-class during youth to squander an excess of physical energy but later function as mass-produced televised spectacles in their adulthood to enable imaginary participation. A key distinction between bourgeois and popular sports is their respective propensity towards active participation (practice) and passive consumption (spectacle). Lacking in the search for social distinction and formation of elect groups, the spectacle turns those popular sports into a mass commodity available to a broad range of lay people. In the historical and social contexts that Bourdieu focused on (1960s' France), football, along with its modern function as spectacle, represents the team sports that repel the upper classes with the vulgarity implied by their popularization, the values and virtues demanded, and the exaltation of competition. Yet even among team sports spectators, Bourdieu pointed out the existence of the "connoisseurs", who, likely as past "practitioners," have schemes of perceptions and appreciations to decipher the meanings of the sports beyond violence, confusion, and results and enjoy the games for their own sake.

Bourdieu's theory offers a fundamental framework to understand the social (re)production of taste for sports that has been used by the sociological research in sports consumption (e.g. Purdue & Howe, 2015; Vangrand, 2001). In contrast to the major

academic critique of his overlook of individual choice in taste (Swartz & Zolberg, 2004), Bourdieu's original words clarify that the subjective understanding of sports, as part of the class disposition, is as important as the objective possession of economic and cultural capitals to the formation of taste. However, Bourdieu's (1978) articulation of football spectacles and working-class is historically and culturally specific to account for the working-class males' domination in the fandom of professional football in Europe in 1970s. What is beyond Bourdieu's original analysis is the dramatic transformation of European football into a middle-class taste since late 1980s due to the rise of the all-seated stadium and televised match broadcast. Sandvoss (2003), for example, used the Bourdieusian approach to explore the consumption process of football fans in Europe in early 2000s. He discovered that football fandom offers a space for the articulation of difference through different practices of fandom. Such differences express not only class positions but also age, gender, and ethnicity. The football fandom articulates conscious aspects of the self such as values, fantasies and self-reflections that speak to fans' subjective understanding of their social and cultural positions. On the other hand, football fans in the recent years have increasingly been emphasizing on fan authenticity and active reproduction, which also stands at odds with Bourdieu's assumption of non-practitioners' simple passive consumption and lack of aesthetics and awareness of the sport's social values. These new findings suggest that the ever-changing class distribution of football consumption needs to be contextualized in the specific social and cultural situations.

In this sense, the current case of Chinese fans' consumption of European football present some new contexts to which previous studies about football taste have not

attended. On the one hand, the nature of European football as a foreign media product to Chinese fans might deeply affect the types of economic and cultural capitals required for its consumption and its perceived social meanings and functions among Chinese fans. On the other hand, the class structure and fractions in the transitioning China, along with their relationships to different levels of capitals and “ethical-aesthetic perceptions” (Bourdieu, 1978), have their historical and cultural specificity that is distinct from the Western experience the previous Bourdieusian studies about European football have relied on. My goal in this chapter is thus to examine the ways in which the taste for European football is socially produced in the specific Chinese context. Based on Bourdieu’s framework, I draw upon the observations and interviews from my fieldwork to demonstrate how Chinese fans inherit and acquire the necessary material and cultural resources for the consumption of European football during socialization. I also analyze how their reliance on the authentic European football fan identity in order to make distinctions from other social classes speaks to their particular class dispositions in contemporary China.

4.3 Material and Cultural Factors for European Football Taste

In contrast to Bourdieu’s assumption of the football spectacle as “passive consumption”, my participants’ consumption of European football consist of diverse forms of active practices conditioned by specific material and cultural resources. This is not only confirmed by my observations but also explicitly articulated by these fans in my conversations with them. More importantly, the interviewees all trace their own roots as fans back to their long-term exposure to televised European football since childhood or early school years, which almost always comes along with the influence from family

members and school peers. Without exception, all my participants started to watch European football at a young age, though some fans fell in love with their club in the first glance and others took some time to decide which to support. As they all agree, it is through such long-term, all-dimensional immersion in the European football culture that they are able to establish their preference for the particular club as well as their adult fan identity.

According to their age (between 23 and 32), the initial years during which my participants developed their interests in European football fall between late 1990s and early 2000s. At those historical moments, the Chinese media access to European football was still limited to particular social groups. The consumption of European football is essentially part of the habitus that my participants have acquired or inherited from their family, socialization and education. In the following section, I will demonstrate the material and cultural factors that structure my participants' taste for European football.

4.3.1 Early Access through Family Inheritance

In spite of the variations in how my interviewees first encountered European football, I have detected some common memories about particular events from my participants' recall of early experience. There were two typical routes through which these fans got to access European football.

For the majority of the participants who are Shanghai locals born in mid and late 1980s, their initial interests in football were largely cultivated during the "golden era" of Shanghai local football, which began after the professional team Shanghai Shenhua (申花) won the league championship in 1995. Shenhua's trophy triggered a football mania in Shanghai, leading to increasing media coverage of both domestic and international

football leagues such as English Premier League. Meanwhile, CCTV-5, the cable channel run by the national TV station that broadcasted other European leagues such as Seria A began to enter local households through subscription. As part of this football mania, those Shanghainese fans with the access to cable TV were able to see and eventually became passionate about European leagues which they considered as more advanced than domestic leagues.

For other fans, especially those born after 1990, it was often China's first entry to the FIFA World Cup in 2002 that took them to the world of football. This historical event created a nationwide football mania displayed in both mass media and urban public spaces for game viewing. More than one interviewee recalled their schools' organization of collective viewing of China's World Cup competition in the classrooms. Ironically, the early knockout of the Chinese national team at the group stage didn't prevent these fans from continuously watching the tournament and falling in love with the sport. Instead they moved their attention to major champion contenders from Europe and South America as well as star players in those teams. The following of certain footballers in the World Cup finally led these fans to actively watch the European professional league where their favorite footballer plays.

These seemingly distinct routes to European football have some apparent commonalities. Taking either route or other alternatives, the participants all emphasize their situation in a local environment that promotes the popularity of professional football. At least for them, the initial attention to European football was largely derived from the support of the local club or the Chinese national team in its heyday. The development of local football contributed to a pro-football environment that could offer sufficient media

resources and infrastructures for the broad dissemination of European football. In the 1990s (and even nowadays), the emergence of such pro-football environment in China was inseparable from economic growth and cultural openness and was mostly based in the cities that are conditioned with professional football, cable television and relevant media resources, and large extent of openness to foreign culture. It is therefore no wonder that all the interviewees are from (or near) cities with local football clubs and/or traditions of broadcasting professional football.

Besides the broader pro-football environment, both routes reflect the central role of family influence in my participants' early access to European football. Yet the even more important impact from family on my participants is the inheritance of the taste for European football. Most fans regard their fathers, or occasionally other male relatives as the first guide who has introduced football to them. Admittedly, most fathers were only supporters of local football clubs such as Shanghai Shenhua and the Chinese national team or keen followers of World Cup, and they had limited exposure to European professional leagues. But from their fathers my participants not only acquired knowledge about football but more importantly inherited the general taste for the sport through the gradual edification, which ultimately led them to explore European football by themselves. Growing up during Cultural Revolution, the older generation acquired the knowledge and taste about football, especially those about the international competitions, since the beginning of China's open-up when the Chinese national team returned to the international stage and World Cup was first introduced and reported on media in early 1980s. The economic and cultural resources (media access, education, spare time) needed

to understand and consume football at that time indicated that they at least belonged to the urban middle-class that was emerging out of the economic open-up.

As the major channels of broadcasting European football in the 1990s and early 2000s, cable TV was yet to be widely diffused in most areas of China. Even in Shanghai, many households did not have full access to cable TV like CCTV 5 until the beginning of the 21st century. In other words, the urban populations with cable services in the 1990s were largely middle-class or above that had more diversified demands of media choices and corresponding material resources to afford them. In fact, nowadays there are only 210 million out of 400 million TV households in China that subscribe to cable TV, according to the 21st annual China Content and Broadcasting Network (CCBN) conference (2013). Therefore, as one of the prerequisites for becoming a fan, the early access to European football indexes one's material condition and social class.

4.3.2 Establishment of Fan Identity through Peer Influence

Based on the early access to viewing European professional leagues, my participants established and confirmed their identity as fans of certain European football clubs during school years. With the active development and cultivation of various consumption behaviors beyond passive televised exposure, they were able to distinguish themselves as European football fans from ordinary audience who merely watched the competitions on TV. Normally echoing the process of socialization at middle school and high school, this is the period when they moved beyond their fathers' exclusive taste on local football to regularly watch European matches and eventually identify a favorite club of which they become long-term supporters until now.

Meanwhile it is during the school socialization with peer influence that my participants obtained the idea of purchasing club merchandise to represent and confirm their fan identity. This particularly applies to male fans who mostly started to join in the football games among classmates since middle school. The requirement of actual football practice to wear specialized jerseys and shoes inspired many fans to purchase the jerseys of their favorite club and even the shoes of their favorite player. For some fans, it was through the collective purchase of certain team's jerseys for football games with other peers that make them decide their choice of fandom. For instance, Li discussed about how he confirmed with his identity as a Real Madrid fan during middle school:

It was not until middle school that I was sure I was a Real Madrid fan. (This is) because we started playing football by ourselves at middle school, and each class formed its own team. It was a big deal for us to choose a unified jersey when playing games against other teams. And at that time the jerseys from those big European clubs were super popular... and my team decided to wear Real Madrid jersey because a lot of us thought it looked nice, and of course like the club as well... I guess wearing the jersey at that age, with my classmates, strengthened my feeling about the club. It simply became part of myself as player as well (March 2015, personal communication).

In either way, the period of middle school and high school is when many participants established their identification with their club through merchandise consumption. Female fans, while rarely practicing football themselves, were exposed to such new way of European football consumption through the interactions with male fans.

Along with watching European football on television and playing football in reality, my participants actively sought out advanced knowledge about the styles and customs of European football and the history and traditions of their club. One common way for these fans to acquire such knowledge, also as a popular trend in the classrooms/among peers, was to purchase and read specialized football newspapers and magazines. The interviewees most frequently mentioned Sports Weekly, and Football as the primary channel they relied on for most updated news and in-depth analytical articles about the European leagues before the urban internet diffusion in mid-2000s. They all see the active consumption of such specialized press as the symbol of the further immersion in the European football culture and thus an important practice representing fan identity. As Henry pointed out, reading Football every week was one of the primary fan activities for him during school year which was prior to the diffusion of internet:

I was kind of old (he meant age-wise compared to other fans)... when I was at school the internet was not everywhere yet, and we still turned to the sports newspapers for the updated information about the European competitions. Even the transfer rumors or player gossips came from those papers, once a week---it's really different from now when you can get everything immediately on your phone. Reading those newspapers were really popular activities among classmates in high school. Football was my personal favorite as there were a lot of in-depth analysis or predictions. In the classroom reading Football actually indicated that you really know the sport...it was a trend... (April 2015, personal communication)

On the other hand, post-90 fans whose growing-up coincided with the internet diffusion tended to get saturated in the European football culture by searching relevant knowledge and information on both domestic and international websites and participation in online discussions, while Sports Weekly and Football also played important roles in the cultivation of the interests in the sport.

Apparently, my participants' all-dimensional immersion in the European football culture throughout growing up requires some level of material and cultural capitals available for Chinese urban middle-class families and above in 2000s. In addition to the access to cable TV for regular game viewing previously discussed, these fans' ability to purchase club merchandise and specialized print media indicates particular geographical locations and consuming power/economic status of their families. Prior to the rise of e-commerce after 2010, European football merchandise (especially jerseys) were almost exclusively available in the stores of sponsor brands in large cities. The consumption of such commodities related to foreign cultures was also associated with the emerging middle class since China's economic reform. This was even more remarkable when it applied to my participants who were still students at that time whose allowance could afford the costs. Similarly, specialized football magazines and newspapers were mostly circulated in Chinese cities that witnessed the wide spread of newspaper stations in early 2000s as part of the urban economic and cultural reconstructions. The purchase of these leisure media products thus reflected not only these fans' economic competence but also their immersion in the broader urban environment with a focus on cultural circulation.

It is important to note that peer influence played a significant role in motivating Chinese fans of European football to try all these consumption behaviors. European

football was a very popular topic for the everyday communication among classmates. Their common interests in European football indicate similar family backgrounds and economic conditions. Therefore, the aggregation of these fans around European football confirm their belonging to the same social group. This was an important way of forming social groups at schools in urban China at that time, since students got in the dominant public schools by entrance examinations instead of class stratification. Furthermore, the peer influence is a major motivation for my participants to focus on European football leagues, which they had not obtained from their fathers whose taste concentrated on local leagues or World Cup. In this sense, the taste for European football is also generational. The shift of the football taste between two generations (my participants and their fathers) reflected that the popularity of the broadcast European league matches in late 1990s and early 2000s failed to catch the attention of the older generation whose taste was already fixed in their youth.

4.3.3 Contemporary Consumption and Social Reproduction

With the cultivation of such taste in the process of socialization, my participants' contemporary consumption of European football, as part of their everyday life as adults, continues to reproduce their social position at the new historical stage of the transitioning Chinese society which has been experiencing industrial transformation, intensified urbanization and marketization, and further political and ideological control. Under the new social circumstance, media access, due to its rapid expansion across China in recent years, is no longer the main resource that confines European football consumption to urban middle-class or above. Yet my participants are currently engaged in additional fan

practices that require apparent material and cultural resources and in turn further distinguish them from other social classes in China.

For example, the collective game viewing at sports bars, as the major practice that all the interviewees have participated in to openly claim their fan identity, is closely associated with urban middle-class consumerism in China. Unlike most Western societies where many sports bars and pubs for football viewing are economically friendly to working class, China has witnessed the emergence of these leisure spaces in cities as part of the Western culture influx targeting the middle-class. The prices of drinks, food, and service at these bars are well above the general price and income of Chinese cities. According to my observations, the average cost of attending a game-viewing event at the sports bar in Shanghai is around 100 RMB including drinks, food, transportation, and other additional fees. This is almost 1/20 of Shanghai's minimum wage (RMB 2190 per month) applied to many low-income populations such as migrant workers (The Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Human Resources & Social Security, 2016). Therefore, these groups are economically excluded from the participation in such contemporary consumption of European football.

In addition, some fans are increasingly engaged in more expensive and transnational forms of fan consumption such as football tourism to Europe. At least 1/3 of my interviewees have been to Europe and watched the in-situ league matches. While some fans get such opportunities when they studied in Europe (mostly UK), others have arranged trips to Europe only to watch some important matches of their clubs. Even those participants who have not been to Europe all told me that going there to watch a live match of their clubs is a plan they can afford and are eager to fulfill if their schedule

permits it. These ways of consumption further indicate my participants' affluent economic conditions that can undertake domestic and global travel, as well as the considerable costs of non-seasonal game tickets. A typical example for football tourism was Dennis, who goes to Europe at least once a year just to attend Arsenal's key competitions. As he said,

I don't have a lot of hobbies except for Arsenal and football. Considering that, going to Europe, at the cost of ten or more thousands of RMB, is still something I can afford with my income. If it is just once or twice every year my savings can cover that. There are many hobbies much more expensive than watching football. Or some people might love different things which all cost money. But I only follow Arsenal, that's the only place I can make some splurge (May 2015, personal communication).

Dennis' Wechat Moments during the time of my fieldwork also showed at least three travels for Arsenal's games in both EPL and European Championships. While Dennis always emphasized that watching Arsenal abroad by no means meant he was rich, his ability to cover the cost of international travels and ticket purchase with his savings indicated his affluent or at least middle-class condition.

On the other hand, my participants continue to use their cultural capital to get full immersion in the European football culture. Their education until college or more has facilitated these fans having sufficient skills and knowledge to comprehend and consume such transnational cultural text. According to these fans, football knowledge accumulated throughout lifetime is necessary for keeping up with the European football world and making sense of the matches in the first place. Their language ability and skills with new

media allows them to obtain the first-handed broadcast matches and club/league information from overseas media. Their broader knowledge about European history, culture, politics and society help them better understand the symbolic meanings and deeper implications of European clubs, players, and leagues. More interestingly, my participants also reported how their interests in European football have reversely motivated them to actively learn more about the countries where their favorite clubs come from.

For Barcelona fans, their identification with the club includes their understanding of the cultural and political conflicts between the Catalans and Spaniards underlying the rivalry between Barcelona and Real Madrid. For Manchester United fans, supporting the English clubs have helped them to know about the evolution and decline of Manchester as an industrial and manufacturing center since the Industrial Revolution. Such knowledge about European football culture even enabled three interviewees to find jobs in sports marketing or sports media. In this sense, these fans' taste for European football allows them to acquire more cultural capital and thus strengthen the boundary around themselves as a social group.

In conclusion, both the interviews and my observations suggest that my participants' European football fan identity is deeply intertwined with their urban middle-class identity which provides them with the material and cultural resources required to access and comprehend European football. The objective production of the taste for European football thus exemplifies the general association between Western culture and Chinese middle class. As a result of the commercialization of European football since early 1990s, the transformation from fans to consumers also applies to the middle-class

taste formation in the Chinese context, as my participants refer to their purchasing power as a key element for their fan identity. But what is more important is the need of fans to acquire cultural capital for the consumption of European football in China.

4.4 European Football's Function of Social Distinction

4.4.1 Distinction from Other Classes

From the interviews, my participants express their subjective perceptions of the meanings and social values of European football, which also indicates their social position. As discussed in Chapter Two, Chinese fans understand European football as a cultural and ideological symbol against the dominant ideology of individualism and utilitarianism in contemporary China. This already suggests that they consume European football not for practical needs. Besides meaning-making, my participants further demonstrate strong awareness of the connection between their social class and taste for European football. When asked about who they think form the major population of European football fans in China, most participants respond with self-reference to their own experience and social identity. "Fans are usually those who are like me...." is a very common response suggesting their sense of belonging to the social group that the Chinese European football fandom represents. By consciously distancing the taste for European football from rural/migrant working class and upper class, these fans reaffirm their social identity and articulate their conception/imagination of the fandom as a community of young urban middle-class with similar economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. The taste for European football in China thus follows Bourdieu's theorization to function for the fans as a sign of social distinction.

On the one hand, the participants firmly believe in the exclusion of working-class and rural populations from the European football fandom in China. Many interviewees frequently referred to migrant workers as the representative of the social groups who are excluded from the consumption of European football. Due to similar geographical locations, migrant workers seemingly have sufficient media resources (cable TV and mobile internet) to watch football, but my participants thought their overexploited working conditions have prevented them from the leisure time and energy for European football consumption. When I asked him who he thought was not likely to become European football fans, Yixiao pointed out migrant workers who he had the opportunity to observe their working conditions:

There is a construction site right behind my company, I pass it every day and always see what they (migrant workers) do and where they live. They work at least 12 hours a day---sometimes when I get to my company by 8 in the morning I already see they start working. I cannot imagine how can they still have energy after work to stay up late to watching those European competitions after midnight---it's just impossible. After all they will need to sleep to gain energy for the next day. Also if you know where they live---they simply stay at those temporary "rooms" made up of cargo containers. Whether they will have a television in such limited space is also a question (March 2015, personal communication).

Moreover, what these fans think essentially distance migrant workers from European football is their relatively low education level and limited exposure to European football and foreign cultures when they grew up in the rural areas. In my

participants' eyes, such economic and cultural conditions make migrant workers to prefer more realistic and relevant to their everyday needs because they don't have the time, money and knowledge to consume and comprehend cultural products such as European football that are far away from their life experience. Some fans even contrasted the popularity of gambling pokers games among migrant workers and the urban middle-class taste for European football. Chenzong, for example, used the word "jiandan cubao" (simple and rude 简单粗暴) to describe poker games which do not require rational calculation and explain why pokers "belong to" migrant workers:

I'm surprised that you are even curious why they (migrant workers) like pokers. Isn't it obvious? Poker games are "jiandan cubao". Pokers don't require a lot of mental work, relying mostly on luck. If gambling on it, they can also get direct economic rewards with limited investment. You shouldn't demand migrant workers to understand football and even foreign football games---that requires background knowledge, like the rules, the tactics, or even the players' foreign names---all of these are related to one's education and cultural level and are beyond migrant workers' competence and energy. They care more about, or perhaps are only able to get pleasure from those realistic things such as money (March 2015, personal communication).

On the other hand, the interviewees are also reluctant to accept the young upper-class, represented by "Rich Second Generation" (富二代), which are the sons and daughters of the emerging political and economic elites with similar age of football fans, as main part of their fandom. This does not mean that these fans totally deny the existence of upper-class fans as well as the possibility for the wealthy populations to have

the habitus of watching European football. Yet they emphasize that the over-affluence of “Rich Second Generation” leads it to have so many options of leisure consumption that European football can hardly become essential to them as it does to an authentic fan. In other words, the “Rich Second Generation” might take watching European football as a hobby, but the European football fan identity might not be a very important part of their everyday life or something that they want to highlight. In contrast, the “Rich Second-Generation” more likely form social circles around the consumption of luxurious products and activities in order to make distinct their social status and economic power. Car racing, for example, is what most of my participants believe the “Rich Second Generation” take more interest in compared to European football. Steven, who believed rich people do not follow European football, pointed out that:

They (Rich Second-Generation) have no need to follow (European football). In my mind, they prefer luxurious cars that can showcase their wealth. I live by a street where there is always car racing by those Rich Second Generation at nights. It’s illegal you know, but they don’t care...They are very materialistic, and watching football is too abstract, not for those people who just want to waste their money (June 2015, personal communication).

In the interviews, my interviewees often had a quite sarcastic tone toward the Rich Second Generation, seeing them as not being able to be engage in meaningful and healthy leisure life except for showcasing wealth. In these fans’ eyes, the ability to consume European football that has rich cultural meanings, is what they have as an advantage over the upper class who are thought to be too materialistic and money-driven.

4.4.2 Fan Authenticity and Distinction From Within

Besides different classes, the distinction significance of European football taste is also mirrored from my participants' attempt to distinguish the fan group from others within the urban middle-class. The distinction beyond the socially and economically structured fan practices is particularly established through the interviewees' discourse of "authentic" and "inauthentic" fans. There are several symbolic characteristics and attitudes that these fans believed to be core to fan authenticity but were not necessarily possessed by everyone with sufficient economic and educational capitals to watch European football. Representing Chinese fans' subjective interpretation of their interest in European football, these characteristics of authentic fans analogize with what Bourdieu called as the agent's ethical and aesthetic perception of European football which combines with the objective social positions to structure cultural and sport tastes.

First of all, almost every interviewee considers rationality as the most critical trait for a true fan of European football. They believe being a rational fan means being polite and respectful to both home team/players and the opponents regardless of the match results. In other words, fan authenticity is articulated with good manners and emotional reserve. Most fans think this form of rationality is a sign of their social status and educational levels. As Momo said,

True fans must be rational...[What does "rational" mean?] Well, I think fans' emotions and actions shouldn't be out of control due to game results. If your team loses, you shouldn't insult the players, either from your team or the opponent. It's not like, they (the players) don't play well once and therefore they are "Shabi" (傻逼; asshole). If we love football, we should respect it right? I've seen verbal

abuse toward players online, too rude. I don't think people with so little civilization can be considered as fans. Football is not a low sport for low actions. I feel like most fans are well-educated, they should have some basic manners (May 2015, personal communication).

Surprisingly, the traditional image of European football hooligan is criticized by the participants as inauthentic practice which Chinese fans should never imitate, even if it has somehow become a stereotype of this sport. Zhangzong described witnessing football hooliganism at a bar and distanced such behavior from the fandom he was identified with:

I remember once I was watching a match between Arsenal and Man Utd with my friend at a bar on Hengshan Road. Some so-called Arsenal fans and Man Utd fans were sitting at different tables. But all of a sudden, they started fighting each other. I didn't know what had happened, the game was still going on, but they were just into the violent fights. everything was a mess. Would you say these people were really Arsenal and Man Utd fans? I don't think so. They claimed to be fans so that they could find excuses to fight. They didn't care about football, totally fake (March 2015, personal communication).

Another theme encompassing my interviewees' discussion around fan authenticity is a fan's level of sincerity toward his/her team or European football as a sport in general. Sincerity refers to whether a fan consumes European football as means to other purposes or just for its own sake. The participants seem to be especially critical of inauthentic fans who exploit European football for other material or symbolic interests. From our conversations, the interviewees categorize several different forms of "insincerity" that distinguish "fake" fans from the authentic counterparts. Perhaps the most representative

example of insincere fans are those normally called as “glory hunters” in English-speaking football fandom. In Chinese fans’ terms, “glory hunters” are those who only choose the clubs that are winning trophies to support and therefore frequently change their home team. In these fans’ minds, glory hunters usually take advantage of the championed clubs to show off their own taste about football instead of actually being fond of the characteristics and spirits of certain team. Song, for instance, contrasted himself from the glory hunters who claimed as Barcelona fans after the club gained major accomplishment in recent years:

As you may know, Barcelona now has a lot of fake fans---those who only chased for the strongest clubs. They “like” Barcelona today because it has the championship, but maybe in the future they will become Real Madrid fans if Real Madrid gets the trophy, or they will totally change to Chelsea not caring about La Liga at all. It’s all about championship, not about the club itself. I paid my attention to Barcelona in 2006, when it was in its lowest point in history. But I still saw its charm, especially how it (Barcelona) had Ronaldinho. I knew from the beginning they would come back to top, and they really made it. True fans will never change their team only because of its performance. They will be with their team to experience those ups and downs (April 2015, personal communication).

Interestingly, my participants admitted that only those with some knowledge of European football culture to tell the power distribution and symbolic values of trophies in football can perform as glory hunters. Consequently, glory hunters, according to these fans, are mostly visible among well-educated young middle-class males because this

group tend to most likely take advantage of the taste for European football to showcase their class and masculine prestige. Some female fans were particularly sensitive to this phenomenon. As a typical example, Sanmei was highly critical of male “fake” fans who exploited European football only to maintain their gendered image:

I try not to be stereotypical, but I always feel like fake fans are more likely to be men. Well many women only watch World Cup and focus on the player’s face and body, and they admit that, admit that they are “fake” fans. What really makes me uncomfortable is those men who don’t know football much but try to perform as an expert in front of me. They might know some basic knowledge, like the names of the clubs and the players, but nothing beyond that. Even with that, they will try to show they have advantages over me. How ridiculous is this! They have the illusion that ‘I know more about football than you because I am male.’ I feel like fake fans are more likely to emerge among this group of people. They have no heart for the sport, it is just a tool for them to showcase their advantages which don’t exist (May 2015, personal communication).

The existence of “glory hunters” precisely demonstrate that powerful European football clubs have become symbols of one’s knowledge, taste, economic resources and social status as young urban middle-class in contemporary China. My participants’ striving for fan authenticity, which is essentially an active search for distinction, demonstrates their subjective affection for and attachment to European football beyond the alignment between the sport and social class.

My participants’ discourse of fan authenticity indicates that European football serves a unique social function for these fans to make the boundary of their elect group

out of the broader urban middle-class. To some extent, such subjective reinterpretation of their taste reflects Chinese fans' agency somewhat separate from the structuring factors that determine their choice of fan object. Yet if put in Bourdieu's framework, this agency can still be understood as the outcome of their class dispositions because these fans' ethical justification for rationality and sincerity (for football consumption) precisely reflects their social positions. These non-economic qualities are what the young urban middle-class can possibly have as an advantage over other classes and class fractions. Relating to Chapter two, the appreciation of rationality and sincerity is consistent with their criticism of individualism and utilitarianism as both are their reactions to the neoliberal transformations in which they have struggled.

4.5 Conclusions and Discussions

The current analysis critically uses Bourdieu's framework to account for the formation of the urban middle-class taste for European football in reforming China. While Chapter Two demonstrates my participants' subjective discourses of why they become European football fans, this chapter, with both historical and contemporary evidence, reveals that my participants' encounter and obsession with European football is not simply a result of "free" individual choice. Instead, this taste is both grounded in the process of these fans' socialization into the urban middle class and reaffirmed by their subjective awareness of class as the core boundary for their fan community.

My participants' experience of developing the taste for European football and establishing fan identity echoes the historical trajectory of the emergence and rise of urban middle class since 1980s, which tells a more complicated story about class reproduction and cultural consumption. As is shown in my analysis, Chinese fans' taste

for European football is not simply inherited from their family as most parents are not European football fans. Instead, the class condition of these fans' families has enabled them to access European football by themselves and consume the sport on a deeper level with peer influence at school. My participants, born after 1980s, are the first generation to develop a considerable fan base of and a social taste for European football in China. In the current case, my participants' parents, many of whom are the first generation of the urban middle class emerging from economic reform, have offered their children class-based resources to access European football, even if they do not necessarily follow it. The formation of the taste for European football among my participants thus can be seen as part of the reproduction of urban middle class to which these fans themselves even more apparently belong than their parents based on their education and occupation. These fans' current ways of consuming European football even more closely align with the lifestyle of the middle-class.

This process illuminates new directions for thinking about the social reproduction of taste in reforming China where the class structure has been and is still under reconstruction since the economic open-up. Cultural tastes, especially those associated with international imports since economic open-up, are not necessarily reproduced from one generation of certain class to the next. The ongoing development and transformation of social classes are likely to pave historically distinct pathways for the reproduction of tastes. Similarly, someone's taste cannot be merely explained, though very often is supported, by their current social class because individual mobility is more likely in a reforming society (in the Chinese context one typical example of this is through university education whose access is based on national entrance examination).

On the other hand, this chapter also demonstrates the ways in which Chinese fans actively appropriate their taste for European football to make distinction from other social groups including those urban middle class that do not follow the sport. Their subjective discourses about European football fans and fan authenticity reflect these fans' self-awareness of the interests in European football as what is socially (re) produced. Although almost none of them explicitly refer to themselves and other European football fans as "middle class," my participants' narrative clearly indicate who they do not assume to be part of the fandom, or in other words, who they try to distinguish themselves from, which include both working class such as migrant workers and more upper class represented by "Rich Second Generation". Moreover, they try to exclude certain people of urban middle class from the fandom through unique discourses of fan authenticity centering around rationality and sincerity.

Through the process of social distinction, my participants define the Chinese fans of European football as a social group with similar social backgrounds, experience, and aesthetic taste. No matter whether they are actually involved in collective practices, these fans form an "imagined community" in their minds whose members share the same taste due to similar class condition. This alternative form of "class consciousness" deserves further attention in the Chinese context where the concept of class is downplayed or even replaced by "stratum", which indicates the mere existence of different social roles among different classes instead of power hierarchy. Meanwhile, collective awareness and actions are discouraged and suppressed by the authority in many other spheres. In particular, this collective consciousness comes along with these fans' contesting ideologies against neoliberal individualism as discussed in Chapter Three. While middle

class in the West has long been thought as lacking potential for political resistance compared to working class, Chinese fans of European football demonstrate the political potential of Chinese urban middle class in a society where they have more resources than the working class to construct agency and more channels to publicize their voices.

CHAPTER 5

SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN TELEVISED FOOTBALL SPECTATORSHIP

5.1 Overview

Starting from this chapter, I turn my attention to Chinese fans' various digital media practices around European football. I first explore their use of social media in the primary form of football consumption---the mediated spectatorship. Two foci have prevailed in recent research in emerging media and sports fandom. On one hand, as broadcasting platforms, digital technologies such as live streaming are widely considered as replacement and improvement on traditional television broadcast, providing audiences alternative access to live football games (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012; Kirton & David, 2013). On the other hand, as communicative means, social media and related websites are conceptualized as liberating virtual spaces where sports fans construct and present subjectivity, creativity, and productivity through their own cultural and discursive practices (Hynes & Cook, 2013; Millward, 2011, 2013; Ruddock, Hutchings & Rowe, 2010). However, how fans' use of new media affects and changes the very traditional way of viewing sports competitions (namely on television) remains largely unquestioned. Such understanding of the "digitized" sports fandom has either overestimated the replacement role of digital media as representational form or overlooked fans' actual embodied experience of spectatorship as a whole.

Indeed, one of the key findings in my fieldwork is the persistent centrality of televised spectatorship in Chinese fans' consumption of European football, though new media inevitably carry out important supplemental functions for the process of game viewing. All the participants identify the regular viewing of European football

competitions on television as their primary practice of supporting their favorite clubs. Yet their televised spectatorship is simultaneously intertwined with and in turn reshaped using new communication technologies, especially social media. This chapter thus focuses on how the nature of the globally standardized televised spectatorship of European football is locally reworked by Chinese fans with the use of social media such as Sina Weibo and Wechat. I am also interested in the ways in which the technological affordances of these local social media reconstruct Chinese fans' identity, relations and discourses as football spectators. I finally articulate the relations of the current case to the broader social, political context and technological arrangement of transitioning China.

5.2 Literature Review

5.2.1 Television and Transformation of Football Spectatorship

As one of the core subjects in the rapidly growing global mediated sport complex, televised football has attracted a vast number of viewers across the globe. The mediated spectacles such as Big Five Leagues and FIFA World Cup have extended themselves to wider cultural and societal dimensions (Sterkenburg & Spaaij, 2015). In the case of European professional football, television has played a significant role in the structural transformation and commodification of the big five leagues since 1990s, when this medium almost became football's primary referent (Redhead, 1997). For example, the establishment of the English Premiership in 1992 was featured with its long-term deal with BSkyB and the BBC for broadcasting live matches, worth 304 million pounds (Giulianotti, 1999). In large part, the rise of televised broadcast has directly contributed to the global expansion of European football and the formation of transnational fandom.

Television is thought to have laid the foundation for the possible destruction of national boundaries in football competition (Rowe, 2015; Skey, 2015).

The increasingly predominant consumption of mediated, or more precisely, televised European football has also redefined the nature of its fandom, shifting fans' primary positionality from supporters to audiences and altering the polarity of longstanding football place/identity relations by patterns of deterritorialized consumption (Ruddock et al. 2010). Television has fundamentally transformed football spectatorship from a practice which embodies organic collectivity and emotions to one more related to standardization, individualism and rationality. Giulianotti (2002) uses his taxonomy of football spectators to suggest the emergence of *flaneurs*, who are "cool", distant, passive, cosmopolitan consumers entering and experiencing football predominantly through a series of virtual, depersonalized media such as television. Flaneurs differ drastically from supporters, fans, and followers, all of whom have relatively more intimate and emotional relationships with football clubs compared to the former.

In his analysis of televised football spectatorship, Sandvoss (2003) theorizes the ways in which television has led to a rational, individualized, and hyperreal way of viewing football games, which is integrated into the structure of industrial and post-industrial everyday life. Television maximizes the efficiency of viewing a football game in the limited space of a small screen by privileging certain angles and shots, employing cutting patterns, close-ups and slow motions, and constantly following the action. The televised representation of football games with varying shots, angles, positions, as well as the fragmentation of game time through replays and slow motion, constructs a new event in itself which threatens to cover the game in its entirety.

Consequently, such televised representations of football, by only allowing for the quick gaze, the rapid vision of the game, eliminate the in-situ spectators' interactions with the action on the pitch which contribute to the construction of the event (Sandvoss, 2003). Television football has substituted an individual perspective in a collective environment (the football stadium) with a collective perspective in an individual environment (Sandvoss, 2003). On the receiving end of a one-way communication process, television audiences lose the active experience of interaction and participation but focus on the reception of information. For Sandvoss, this change echoes television as a medium of, in Raymond Williams' (1974) term, "mobile privatization", which offers decentralized and universal access to football games to its audiences who yet mostly consume the sport alone in the domestic sphere (at least according to his empirical observations). Nevertheless, football spectators have contested the loss of experience in the hyperreal, collective perspective and individualized consumption of television football through communal acts of televised consumption, and especially the collective viewing at live sites or football pubs (Hognestad, 2012; Rowe & Baker, 2012). But these researchers have also found such public viewing still undermines the communal ethos of traditional spectator sport and lacks the capacity to evoke collective emotional responses and active participation to open up new possibilities for social exchange beyond commodified forms of fandom.

5.2.2 Social Media and Spectator Sport

Hutchins and Rowe (2012) offer an extensive account of the influence of social media on spectator sport. They argue that in the transmedia sport experience, different media platforms are used selectively to enrich the experience of sports events by

providing access to “extra-textual elements” (Ross, 2008, p 86) as well as new opportunities for fan communication before, during, and after the sport event. Supplying tools for producing, disseminating and discussing sport related information beyond the capacity of traditional media, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter thus become extensions of the television experience and media practices in their own right. Rather than challenge the control of television broadcast over sport representations, social media are catalysts for increased user and viewer attention for televised sporting moments that already claim mass followings (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012).

Central to Hutchins and Rowe’s analysis is the political-economic critique of the sport industry which convert the emotions, experiences, and creativity of sports fans on social media into market value. In this sense, social media serve as effective vehicles for the industry to promote its commodities and draw users back to the televised sport consumption. Unfortunately, Hutchins and Rowe have largely overlooked, at least in this particular piece, the agency of sport fans in the use of social media to react to their reception of mediated sports competitions or even fundamentally rework their viewing experience. Even within their own analysis, they prioritize the conclusion that social media serve the interests of sport industry on the one hand, and acknowledge the potential for “user choice and collective reactions to sports events” in the split of attention awarded to different media in the viewing process, on the other hand. As Rowe and Baker (2012) point out, new communication technologies possibly enable fans to play a more active role as reflexive spectators, and to lessen their dependency on a single, large screen. These virtual public spaces establish new sources of the self, and conceptions of social life more generally, through the process of reflexivity that

accompanies a range of constantly developing and mutating technologies. My analysis is thus based on the alternative perspective of ordinary users, or more precisely, football fans, to account for the relationship between social media and sports spectatorship.

Another problem with Hutchins and Rowe's analysis, which applies to many other studies of social media, is the exclusive focus on Western-oriented platforms represented by Facebook and Twitter. In the case of China, many of Hutchins and Rowe's arguments for the conspiracy between social networking sites and global media sports industry are not valid because Facebook and Twitter are blocked and in turn the appropriation of local social media by Western sports industry to interact with Chinese fans is quite different, if not limited, compared to what happens in the West. In order to make up for such shortcomings, I focus on the local social media that are simultaneously highly regulated and censored by the Chinese government and actively and creatively appropriated by European football fans. By emphasizing on the role of social media in fundamentally transforming spectatorship itself, I also question the view that social media influence televised spectatorship only in terms of offering extra-textual elements or drawing back viewers' attention to television. In particular, my analysis explores the ways in which Chinese fans interact with (televised) European football through local social media and how such transmediated experience is a specific process of fans' recontextualization of television football representation in local cultural and social settings.

5.2.3 Affordance Theory

In order to answer my research questions about social media, I borrow the affordance theory of technology to highlight the interplay of social media, human agency,

and social context in determining the modes of viewing, communication, and relationships in televised football spectatorship. The concept of affordances is associated with the work of Gibson (1979) in the psychology of perception. For Gibson, humans orient to objects in their world in terms of what he called their affordances: the possibilities that they offer for action (Gibson, 1979). In other words, we are able to perceive things in terms of their affordances, which in turn are properties of things; yet those properties are not determinate or even finite, since they only emerge in the context of material encounters between actors and objects (Hutchby, 2013). According to Hutchby (2013), the affordances of a certain technology are “found” by its users in the course of their attempts to use it for various ends. Affordances are not merely enabling as for certain types of action, but by the same token they can disable. Similarly, Baym (2010) has defined technology affordances from what she calls the “Social Shaping Perspective,” which refers to the possibilities and constraints offered by a technology and in turn adopted and reworked in the everyday life of users. Standing in the middle of technological determinism and the social-constructivist view of technology, the affordance theory acknowledges both the nature and qualities of technologies, which provides the range of possibilities of actions, and users’ agency, which allows users to creatively use technologies for their own needs.

5.3 Transformation of Televised Spectatorship Through Social Media Use

In this section, I draw from my participant observations and in-depth interviews to demonstrate the significant role of social media in shaping and transforming the nature of Chinese fans’ televised spectatorship of European football. With the use of various local social media, particularly Wechat and Sina Weibo (Weibo), for interpersonal discussions,

emotional display, and information search, Chinese fans appropriate and recontextualize their televised football consumption in the local social and cultural settings. Fans' use of Weibo and Wechat intervenes in the individualized, rationalized, and passive nature of televised football consumption and re-inscribes it with collectivist, emotional, active, and authentic traditions.

5.3.1 Background: Introduction of Weibo and Wechat

Sina Weibo (Weibo) and Wechat, both established in China, have become two of the most widely used social networking platforms in China, with 700 million active users and 503 million registered users, respectively. Not surprisingly, all my participants report using Weibo and Wechat as part of their football fan practices. Weibo (微博) is a microblogging website that can be accessed through its mobile applications. Similar to Twitter, Weibo allows users to follow other users; create and repost texts, images, music, and videos; add hashtags; mention or talk to other users using “@UserName” formatting; and verify the accounts if run by celebrities or organizations. Weibo has eliminated the 140-character limit for each post so that users can post longer texts or even chapters. Compared to the Wechat Moments, Weibo is more open because users' posts can be seen by both followers and non-followers, unless they choose to show the content only to mutual friends. In terms of European football, Weibo content is characterized by a lot of official accounts created by the leagues, clubs, and footballers with the purpose of promoting themselves to the Chinese market. Weibo itself has also formed specific accounts for each major league and club to update its game processes, results, and news. A typical example is “Arsenal News”. These two types of accounts attract large number of followers. Other Weibo accounts with considerable follower bases include those

maintained by local fan organizations including those two I contacted during my fieldwork and key opinion leaders such as EPL Humor (英超各种黑). I frequently observe the updates of these accounts as well as the related comments and reposts during the game broadcast. Moreover, many of my participants are nice enough to invite me to follow them on Weibo, which helps me to capture some snapshots of their use of Weibo during game viewing.

Another important way in which the information on Weibo is organized and disseminated is through “Weibo tags”, the equivalent of Twitter hashtags. At any point in their Weibo posts, users can create and use a tag by placing the keywords/topic between two-pound signs (#XX#), which allow others with interests in the same theme to easily find the tagged content through Weibo’s embedded search engine. Weibo even names the space for presenting all the posts with the same tag as a “tag plaza”. By search or clicking a Weibo tag, users therefore “enter” the “plaza” which revolves around the same topic but possibly filled with all different kinds of users/accounts. The Weibo tags are also ranked daily according to reading and participation rates. There are, of course, numerous Weibo tags that are related to European football, including the names of leagues, clubs, players, or even specific competitions.

On the other hand, Wechat (微信) is a cross-platform instant messaging app that integrates text/voice messaging, group messaging, video conference, and various social networking services such as status updates, sharing of photographs and videos, and location sharing. “Moments” (朋友圈) is the main section for social networking on Wechat, where users can post text and image, share music and articles, as well as comment and “like” on their friends’ updates. Only the friends from the user’s contacts

can view their Moments' content, whereas the friends of the user can only see the likes and comments from other users if they are mutual friends. Users can also separate their friends into different groups and decide whether one moment can be seen by particular groups of people. As a result, Moments creates a quite closed and private social circle that often facilitates interpersonal interactions between the user and the commenters/likers. For European football fans, Moments is a space where they can post their thoughts and pictures, share news articles and interact with other fans they know in person (mostly in real life). In addition to Moments, Wechat's group messaging has also led to the prevalence of fan discussion groups, which one can be invited to join by the group founders or those already in the groups. The local fan organizations I have contact with have all established long-term Wechat groups, where group members can discuss team or football-related topics. As I established rapport with my participants and the fan organizations, I became contacts with more than 50 fans on Wechat, and in turn was able to interact with them in both their and my own Moments. I was also invited to join one of the discussion groups by the Barcelona fan organization, which contains 99 group members. With the permission of my participants, I was able to access the first-hand content they post to Moments during game viewing, as well as their group discussions on Wechat.

The overwhelming popularity and dominance of Weibo and Wechat in China cannot be understood alone without the consideration of the crack-down of Facebook, Twitter and other major Western social networking sites by the Chinese authority. This context sets a unique climate for the interactions between Chinese fans and European football industry and media on the Chinese social networking sites, which differs from

Hutchins and Rowe's (2012) observations on Facebook and Twitter where the sport industry thoroughly exploits and monetize social media participation. Admittedly, European football leagues, clubs, and players have been trying to transplant their modes of marketing and promotions on Twitter to Weibo by creating accounts and regularly posting content. However, from the broader scale of the whole Weibo site, the influence of these public accounts is quite limited, as reflected from the number of followers and reposts. Such data are not comparable to those popular Chinese celebrities whose followers start at least from 10,000,000. The ranking of top 50 Weibo tags is often seen as a tool for marketing and public relations, with certain position (5th) allowing to be purchased for PR purposes. Rarely have topics related to European football broken the top 50, which are long occupied by tags relevant to Chinese entertainment and celebrity gossip. Certainly, during my project, I have witnessed tags such as "Chelsea vs. Arsenal", "Messi tax evasion", "Manchester United" showing up in the ranking. However, their relative lower rankings (between 30th and 50th) do not indicate that these clubs "buy" the status of "hot tags" for such content. In other words, these topics become trendy more likely because of fans' spontaneous frequent search and heated discussions. Therefore, compared to Twitter, Weibo is a less commodified space at least for European football fans. As for Wechat, the privacy and closeness of the interpersonal/group communication and Moments is not very efficient for marketing in the first place. Although some major European clubs have created Wechat public accounts to attract their fans, the numbers reading their articles are far from the standard of "influential" or "opinion leaders" for Wechat public accounts (10,000 above). In this sense, the limited permeation of European football industry to Weibo and Wechat likely make these platforms distinct

from Facebook and Twitter and in turn contribute to Chinese fans' unique experience of "transmedia" football spectatorship.

5.3.2 Virtually Watching Together

While most participants, if not all, considered televised football spectatorship as an individual endeavor they mostly do by themselves at home, they all admitted that such individual experience is often accompanied with the use of Wechat and Weibo, through which they are able to search for information and communicate with other fans. Fans' occasional access to social media during game viewing is closely related to their critique of the limitations of televised football broadcast. A popular comment on live football games by my interviewees regards how they try to move their attention to Wechat or Weibo when television presents some "boring periods" of a game or fails to capture key scenes. As Chenzong (interviewee) points out,

I don't think it's wrong to use social media during a game. Of course, watching it on the big screen is the major task, but we all know that not every minute of a game is worth attention...Sometimes the game just gets to a boring period or "trash time", or maybe it is the television camera that somehow sticks to one place (on the field) that nothing is happening. At that time I would probably open my Weibo to see if there is interesting news or gossip that is not on TV (March 2015, personal communication).

As reflected from Chenzong's comments, television not only represents the unexciting parts of the game but is also likely to produce such moments on the screen because of the minimum scope of the football field that TV cameras can cover. Social media serve to make up for these limitations of the single-perspective, individualized

representation of football on television, which produces some “boring” time while leaving off other important moments in the game. My participants’ use of social media thus is an active choice to recontextualize and improve their spectatorship enabled and constrained by television. They attempt to avoid watching those uninteresting periods during a game while catching up what television representation has missed. Through social media, individual and dispersed fans achieve the status of virtually watching together, which integrates and/or poses challenges to both the collectivist, emotional, in-situ model of spectatorship and individualistic, rational, televised viewing. Fans’ transmedia experience with television and social networks generates a new form of mediated football spectatorship that breaks the boundaries set up by mediated and in situ viewing between the individualistic and the collective, between the rational and the emotional, between the public and the private, and between the real and the virtual. Yet the distinct technological affordances of Weibo and Wechat also constrain the ways in which virtual collectiveness is constructed. In the following analysis, I will demonstrate how Chinese fans use Weibo and Wechat in different ways to rework their individual televised consumption of European football.

5.3.2.1 Weibo: Information Circulation

Weibo serves as a circulating channel of news, statistics, jokes, and all other information regarding the football game being watched. Weibo is usually a reliable source for verifying what fans have missed from the TV screen or supplementing images and information that are not covered by the single-perspective televised broadcast. A routine of almost all official Weibo accounts of European football clubs is to update the progress of their games in concise Weibo posts. By offering timely announcement of key

moments such as goal, missing goal, player exchange, red cards, etc., these “live texts” help fans to keep track of a game if they have missed those scenes or cannot watch TV broadcast in the first place. However, Weibo is even more often accessed by fans before or after the competition or during the half-time break, when they have longer periods of time to read match statistics, analysis or background stories posted by those official or public accounts of leagues, clubs, fan organizations, and opinion leaders. In the interviews, most fans mentioned their habit of browsing Weibo for information during the game breaks, which, for them, is a nice way to avoid TV commercials. My observations on Weibo reveal that the content posted during half-time breaks, or right after the competitions receive much more “reposts” than the updates of game progress. There are still a few comments under such posts, but the number of the comments, usually fewer than 20, is not sufficient to form continuous discussions. During the game broadcasts, fans tend to engage more in the action of reading and reposting relevant information on Weibo compared to reciprocal, collective discussions through comments or Weibo’s private messaging system. Rarely have there been heated discussions in the comments of Weibo posts during a live match. But my interviewees do admit their enjoyment of reading and reposting such content. For example, Siyun (interviewee) told me about her addiction to search and repost analysis and jokes about the game during half-break or right after it finishes:

[Siyun]: I rarely join in game discussions on Weibo or other online platforms, but after the game, or sometimes even during the break, I cannot help but log into Weibo to look for newly-created jokes that describe what has taken place in the game. They are really funny. ...I also like to read some end-of-match statistics or

analyses; there are tons of them on Weibo, and they help me better understand the games in a serious way.

[YG]: Would you repost or leave comments under those Weibo posts? Or simply read them to have some fun?

[Siyun]: I don't leave comments---such interactions with strangers are a bit embarrassing. But reposting is much easier. If I like something, I'll simply repost it. Just to let more people to see it (April 2015, personal communication).

Reposting represents a mode of indirect interactions among fans: by clicking the “repost” button and sometimes adding their own comments, they do not have to directly talk to others, but they are still able to convey and express their opinions, or simply circulate some key information with a potential audience in mind. Enabled by reposting, the existence of this “imagined audience” indicates my participants’ sense of community for other fans who have similar interests in European football and the Weibo content they repost. Meanwhile, fans’ action of reposting is often carried out along with the creation of certain “hashtag”, which helps these posts to be presented and circulated in the space of “Weibo Square”. With the use and search of “hashtag”, which highlights the theme in discussion, the personal identities of those who create or disseminate Weibo posts are downplayed. In this sense, the affordances of both reposting and hashtag cooperatively allow for more collective interactions among fans which mainly focus on the content and in turn lean towards a form of community.

Weibo mostly serves for the dissemination of objective information and rational analysis about the game that can be shared publicly without provoking controversy or debate. In particular, my participants turn to Weibo for the information that televised

broadcast fails to catch or elaborate. What happens in the parts of the stadium out of the TV screen, such as the coaching area, the stand, and the unspotted space of the field, is of special interest for the viewers. With its instantaneity, Weibo enables users with alternative news or witness resources to update and expose those scenes overlooked by the broadcasting camera. It is also easy for spectators to catch up what they have missed on the TV screen due to distractions. This is why we can often see some fans repost the game updates with comments such as “I just went to the restroom for a second and we scored!” or “Left for a while, perfectly missed the moment of the goal.” Moreover, compared to the hasty illustration of game statistics in television broadcast, Weibo’s long-term and unlimited storage creates more space for data presentation and allows fans to thoroughly read and analyze them during half-time break or after the match. As Phillip (interviewee) said,

The function of searching on Weibo is very powerful. Whatever information about the game you want to know, simply enter some keywords and more or less you will find something. You don’t need to hurry up, they (Weibo posts) are always there. And if the analysis is too long to read immediately, I will just repost it and come back at another time (July 2016, personal communication).

All these examples reflect that my participants tend to use Weibo as an extension of television to complete and enrich the rational televised spectatorship. Weibo’s circulation of multi-perspective and rational content that supplements the limited angles and storage of television screen makes it more like an alternative mass medium. It is reasonable to argue that Weibo rationalizes the football spectatorship to a further step by providing more resources to understand, analyze, and deliberate about the live game. It is

worth noting that fans do not take advantage of Weibo's possibility for anonymity and openness for emotional or irrational expressions which stand at odds with the mainstream assumptions about social media's anonymity and user irrationality (that the affordance of anonymity promotes irrational, "bad" behavior among social media users). In relation to my interviewees' account of Wechat in the later section, being anonymous on Weibo makes the discussions there run more risk of turning to irrational disputes, which violates their expectation of appropriate emotional manifestation as football fans.

On the other hand, such anonymity and openness arouse the sense of community as fans of a club. It is easier for unknown fans to mutually follow each other and build various levels of interactions on Weibo than on Wechat. In addition, the virtual gatherings at "Weibo Plaza" through the actions of reading, posting, and reposting revolve around the same club or the game as keywords/hashtags and in turn emphasize the collective fan identity. Meanwhile, the indirect interactivity achieved by reposting the same content downplays interpersonal relationships and personal identity and enables a unique form of imagined collectiveness among football spectators.

5.3.2.2 Wechat: Reinscription of Sympathy

Wechat provides Chinese football fans with a platform to interact with other fans they know in person about the progress of a game. Despite the instant communication that Wechat affords through private and group messaging, the participants tend to communicate with other football spectators with the function of Moments to share texts and images. This means that instead of directly and instantly talking to someone, fans usually post their thoughts and feelings about the game and comment on related posts by their Wechat contacts. The asymmetrical communication embedded in the actions of

posting and commenting in Moments allow the viewers to freely initiate, join, and leave an interaction at any time in accommodation to the ups and downs of a game. In other words, Wechat Moments successfully affords the viewers' subjective needs for contingent, discontinued, fragmented discussions as escapes from the "boring" moments in the middle of the televised game, though my participants still rely on the background sound and commentary from television to follow it. The rationalization of television football through the predominance of vision is thus disrupted by the use of Wechat. For example, when I was watching one Arsenal competition with CDD, I witnessed that she was checking and typing on her Wechat through cell phone Moments from time to time, but her attention could easily return back to the television screen if there were any cheers from the in-situ audiences or the TV commentators which indicated possibility of goals. When asked what she was looking for on Moments, CDD told me that she enjoyed reading her friends' immediate updates about the same game. She believed that "(during the game) there are always some funny thoughts and feelings other fans post on Moments, and they are nice accompaniment for watching the game when the field is quiet (April 2015, personal communication)." Sometimes CDD even showed me some posts from her Moments to provoke interactions between us. For example, she shared with me a moment by a female fan (CDD's friend who I do not know) which celebrated Aaron Ramsey's goal by asking "everyone who wants to give birth to Ramsey's kid to leave your name here!" As a loyal fan of Ramsey, CDD of course left a comment under this post to express her excitement of the player's performance.

Chinese fans' intervention in the rationalized televised spectatorship of football is also achieved in terms of the content they post on Wechat Moments. Their posts during

the game viewing are mostly emotional reactions to certain dramatic incidents that occur in the match, which include scoring goals, missing goals, incorrect ruling, penalties and red cards. As CDD's example shows, fans sometimes take advantage of Moment updates and comments to collectively celebrate goals or express affection for certain players. Besides this format, some fans like to directly post the slogan of their clubs to express either their enjoyment of victory or self-encouragement of loss. For Arsenal fans, the most famous slogan is certainly COYG (Come On You Gunners). As an Arsenal game starts, it is not unusual to see several fans posting "COYG!", sometimes with a picture of the television screen, to announce that they are watching the game. In addition, some participants also use "biaoqingbao" (表情包), an image that denotes their psychological and emotional state along with the text to illustrate their feelings. For instance, a picture of a dozen pills with the text of "Arsenal heart-attack pill" is very popular in many Arsenal fans' Moments posts. Signifying the uncertainty of Arsenal's performance, this picture is often posted by fans after Arsenal almost loses a goal, or gets a tie in the last minute, and vividly illustrates their psychological changes along with the dramatic ups and downs of the games. The interactions around such posts do not usually deal with rational deliberation but more likely signify fans' empathy for what has happened in the competition.

In the interviews, my interviewees confirm that Wechat Moments is what they turn to most if they want to find the right atmosphere for watching football games. For example, Song (interviewee) regarded Wechat Moments an ideal platform to release emotions when watching games in the middle of the night without interfering other family members:

[Song]: I usually use Moments while I am watching games on TV.....Emotional expression is key to watching football, but Barca's games, you know, are mostly after midnight, and my parents have fallen asleep at that time. It's not very appropriate to shout out; I need to keep quiet and even keep the tv volume low. But I can write some updates on Moments to celebrate goals. Sometimes I just can't help but want to let my feeling come out.

[YG]: do you receive feedback if you post such content on Moments?

[Song]: yeah, some friends leave comments for me or just celebrate with me by liking my posts. I don't think getting feedback is that important. When your emotion reaches to that level, you just want to express it out. Wechat is the best way for this when you are watching the game alone at home... At some key point, especially when the team scores, you can see many people simultaneously update their Moments about it. This already makes me feel like I'm watching it not only by myself (April 2015, personal communication).

Song's ideas suggest that the space of Moments is appropriated by fans to reinscribe the expressions and sharing of feelings and sympathy, as well as the organic, irrational atmosphere, which are essential components of the organic, in-situ collective spectatorship.

It is important to note that the visual structure of Moments accommodates vertical browsing habits on mobile phone screens and in turn prioritizes the presentation of images and short texts. In fact, although the length of posts in Moment is unlimited, users are only shown the maximum of 100 characters (which is about 6 rows on an iPhone 6S screen) unless they intentionally click the "whole article" button to expand the posts. This

affordance of Moments has led to users' tendency to update short, concise texts that can be seen in full without additional clicks. As the above examples demonstrate, my participants' posts related to game-viewing are mostly composed of one or two short sentences that describe fans' instant, spontaneous reactions to the match. The routinized conciseness of Moments' posts well echoes the viewers' need for the relief of emotions, sentiments, and sometimes even irrationality toward the football drama, which has been largely inhibited by televised spectatorship. Conversely, Moments' prioritization of brevity leaves little space for rational, in-depth analyses and deliberation of the game situations and team tactics, which are almost nonexistent in my participants' updates during game viewing. In this sense, the virtual collectiveness enabled by Wechat destabilizes the individualized, rational viewing style that has been maintained by televised broadcast of European football.

However, the closeness, privacy, and identifiability of Wechat also accommodate these fans' understanding of emotional outburst as a personal, even private affair that is most suitable to carry out through interpersonal, relatively private communication platform such as Wechat rather than more public, anonymous social media. Zhangzong (interviewee), by comparing Wechat with other fan websites such as Baidu Bars, pointed out that the former is a more comfortable space for game-related interactions:

I think saying something on my own Wechat is more than enough. You will see I like to post on Moments during or after a game. And I can say whatever I want to say in my own space. This is my own business, no need to publicly announce it on those websites. Public websites like Baidu Bars intimidate me. I've been there before. I've seen how the discussions are so easy to turn to quarrels or even verbal

abuse. Maybe because it is anonymous. So irrational and childish. Watching football is already an emotional action, discussing it on those forums only enlarges all your emotions. But on Wechat, those who often reply to me are who I am most familiar with. No worries about conflicts (March 2015, personal communication).

Interestingly, Zhangzong's critique of other online media does not lie in these platforms' failure to present emotions but instead their tendency to provoke irrationality and verbal violence that distort the desirable emotions as an authentic football fan. For my participants, the problem of anonymous social networking sites or public forums does not lie in their inability to afford emotional expression. In contrast, the anonymity is seen as easily provoking inappropriate emotional outbursts---those presenting irrationality, verbal abuse and violence, and conflicts among fans who are strangers. These are exactly what they try to avoid in the process of virtual collective viewing. As Stone told me, he preferred to (virtually) watch football games together with his friends who do not support the same team with him through Wechat mainly because of the harmonious interactions he can expect:

I prefer rational, harmonious communication under any condition. As a football fan, I think rationality and politeness are still necessary. Discussing a football game with strangers, especially online, will provoke conflicts. Many anonymous fans on public forums are very biased and even keen on fighting with each other. This happens even if they support the same team. So I'll pass on it. Talking to my friends and colleagues on Wechat, even though our teams may be rivals, it doesn't

matter. With them you know where is the bottom line, and you know you won't fight just because of a game (August 2016, personal communication).

In this sense, the virtual collective game viewing is not simply the reenactment of the traditional, embodied, and irrational fan collectiveness. The affordances of Moments---conciseness, textuality, closeness, and privacy---precisely serve my participants' desire for appropriate emotional expression during game viewing.

To some extent, fans' demand for private emotional sharing accounts for their general preference for interpersonal, intimate discussions through Wechat with friends, relatives, colleagues, or at least acquaintances in real life, rather than with random, unknown fans in other virtual spaces. For many fans, whether the person(s) watching the game support the same team with them is not critical to such collective viewing and discussing experience. In fact, several interviewees emphasized that talking to friends on Wechat, especially in Moments, makes them more comfortable compared to joining anonymous online discussions elsewhere such as public forums about European football or Baidu Bars. The quietness in the fan discussion groups on Wechat during the game broadcast also reflect the members' reluctance to interact with unfamiliar fans as a supporter community, as such groups are usually composed of those who do not know each other in reality. The digitized televised viewing is more toward a form of networked spectatorship where fans are socialized in interpersonal, private, and civil manners with the prominence of personal identity and privacy disclosure. The communication through Wechat destabilizes the togetherness and solidarity as a community that supports the same team in traditional supporting styles by downplaying, if not totally erasing, the collective identity and sense of community as fans of a certain club.

5.3.3 Individualized Collective Viewing

In addition, social media reshape the televised spectatorship of European football by facilitating the local fan associations in China to organize the collective viewing gatherings. Undoubtedly, watching games together is perhaps a practice closest to in-stadium spectatorship that Chinese fans can carry out to challenge the limitations of their remote, televised consumption of European football. Such collective viewing events also witness the recurrence of many organic, embodied supporting styles rooted from the in-stadium fans in Europe.

In the first place, the achievement of such localized offline collectiveness is based on fans' connections established through social media. As the major organizers of the viewing events, local fan associations rely on social media such as Weibo and Wechat for everyday maintenance and operation. Indeed, the foundation of the fan associations is based online, as most organizers and members report that they get to know each other, as well as form these organizations, through the internet, particularly Weibo. Both fan associations I have contact with hold regular fan gatherings for game watching at local bars. For the Manchester United fan association, this is an almost weekly routine with a fixed location that everyone can join in without advanced registration. For the Barcelona fan association, the organizers arrange public viewing events for major competitions such as the El Clásico, European Championship finals, and Copa del Rey finals. The participation in these events requires online registration and special dress code of Barcelona jerseys or accessories. Both associations use their Weibo accounts and Wechat discussion groups to post announcement for fan gatherings.

Yet the influence of social media does not stop after fans are able to gather together in real life. My attendance at multiple game viewing gatherings inform about how social media affect fans' televised spectatorship and interactions during such organized collective events. On the one hand, many fans are fond of sharing their experience at the fan gatherings on their social media platforms, especially Wechat Moments. At the events I have attended, I often see fans around me taking pictures of the event scenes or selfies and immediately posting them on social media through their cell phones. In addition, my own Wechat Moments frequently see the updates of my participants about their attendance at the collective viewing gatherings. Such updates occur across the progress of an event, but most usually show up before the actual game starts, after the gathering ends, during the half-time break, or when dramatic incidents happen during the game. Even the organizers are keen on recording the gatherings for showcase on social media. A ritual I have experienced at every Barcelona and Arsenal gathering is the group photo at the end. The Arsenal fan association even places a huge banner in front of the fans in the photos. These group photos are without exception posted to the organization's Weibo account as indication/summary of the success of the events.

With the use of Wechat Moments, fans are able to present their communal viewing with other fans in their personalized online space and in turn break the boundary between the real-life collective football spectatorship and the virtual individualistic football consumption. Central to this practice is the individualization of the collective experience. It is important to note that Moments is a platform for self-presentation—what fans post there become signifiers or performances of their (online) identity as a European football fan. Each fan has his/her own perspective at the gatherings, thus their online

representation of the collective spectatorship might also be independent and idiosyncratic. The audiences of Wechat Moments are interpersonally related to the producers of the updates, and for them, the posts about the collective viewing is only part of the updater (football fan)'s everyday life, just as other posts about his/her work and life as an individual. It is true that fans highlight their group identity as supporters of certain team, but most importantly, the narrative in Moments is almost exclusively "I" instead of "us".

Unsurprisingly, social media use disrupts the communal, close interactions among fans during the collective viewing. At spare time before or after the game, the strangers (fans) that sit next to each other rarely talk, but rather focus on their cell phones. When I was at the gathering for El Clásico, I observed that whether before the game or during the half-break, no one around me was attempting to talk to other fans around them. In this quiet, even awkward situation where everyone was looking at his/her cell phone, I tried to start conversations with Eric, who sat next to me and finally became my interviewee. He told me that he was comfortable with coming to the gathering alone and immersing himself in the collective atmosphere of game viewing. But for Eric, getting to know someone in particular and interpersonal conversations were not the key motivations to attend such an event. During our conversation, Eric was constantly checking his Weibo for random updates about the game. He seemed to enjoy his individual space with his social media within the crowds of strangers. In fact, in the later interview, Eric explained the pleasure of such a paradoxical experience:

[YG]: Does it matter if you don't know anyone in the viewing event? You said you often come to such occasions by yourself.

[Eric]: Well I actually really enjoy watching games with strangers. We know we are all Barcelona fans and we all come here because of that. That's enough for watching games together---we can cheer, shout, and express any similar emotions along with the match. For this we don't even have to know others' names right? If I want deeper communication (during viewing) I can just send wechat messages to my real-life friends who I am used to have in-depth conversations with. These two things are not incompatible (May 2015, personal communication).

Moreover, I also talked to two other fans who sat in front of Eric and I and kept silent with attention to their cell phones. Only through our interactions did I realize that these two fans actually knew each other---they were roommates from a famous university in Shanghai and one of them introduced the other to the gathering. For most of the time, they were checking their cell phones instead of directly talking to each other. Cell phone use can even be seen during the two halves of the game. Interestingly, when the home team scores, the celebration at the gathering with other fans seems insufficient for some fans as they still need to express their joy again on social media. The lack of communication among physically proximate fans and the frequent use of mobile social media forms a vivid example of "absent presence" regarding mobile communication, which means that "one is physically present, but is absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere' (Gergen, 2002; Turkle, 2011).

It seems that fans have to rely on social media, especially Wechat Moments, to fulfill emotional needs even if they are already in a collective situation that social media originally serve to make up for. The collective viewing is individualized, as everyone focuses on their cell phones, sharing their personal perspective of the gathering on

Moments, searching information on Weibo, just as they are at home, or discussing the games with their friends in Moments, which could have been achieved with other fans physically beside them. In fact, several interviewees mentioned that they have been increasingly reluctant to go out for public game viewing due to the convenience of social networking platforms. In this sense, the relationship between social media and fan collectiveness is contradictory. The organic embodied collective fandom reflected from public game viewing is first and foremost based on fans' connections with each other through social media. However, the sense of community and solidarity that such collective practices initially attempt to achieve is disrupted by fans' frequent use of social media on such occasions.

5.4 Conclusions and Discussions

As the above analysis shows, Chinese fans' appropriation of local social media (Weibo and Wechat) during European football viewing has invented distinct forms of collectivity that fundamentally transform the nature of conventional televised football spectatorship. On the one hand, the appropriation of social media during the domestic/private viewing of football competitions enables these fans to form virtual collectivity which simultaneously reinscribe the collective emotional expressions (mostly through Wechat) and maintain spaces for public information deliberation. On the other hand, the same technological affordances of Weibo and Wechat have restructured fans' experience during public game viewing by turning the original collectivity embedded in such events into an individualized or networked form of collectivity that might disrupt on-site solidarity.

Full of contradictions and nuances, such dual processes through which Chinese fans are engaged with European football spectatorship have rich social and political implications for the reshaping of distinct forms of collectivity among Chinese urban middle class through social media. The “virtual” collectiveness established in the digitized football spectatorship not only virtualizes and privatized fans’ emotional releases but also connects different viewers through individualized networks that tend to weaken the sense of community among the attendants at public gatherings for game viewing. Indeed, both processes accommodate with the ideological and political premises of the Chinese authority to maintain harmonious social relations; release the potential tensions between the state and citizens, and eliminate any sort of social turmoil or upheaval. In other words, although Weibo and Wechat create opportunities for Chinese fans of European football to form collective awareness through televised spectatorship, the ways in which these citizens rely on local social media to be connected with each other and conduct collective actions essentially align with and conform to the state expectations and arrangement. This conclusion informs that the technological affordances of Chinese social media have to be situated in the broader economic, social and political context of the reforming China. This is of course not to say that Weibo and Wechat merely take their roles in the conspiracy with the state---in fact, these social media do provide Chinese fans with resources for the formation of collectivity that are not enabled by traditional media/(mediated football) consumption. Yet it is still worth noting the adaptive relations of technology to the state arrangement, which is likely an important reason Chinese fans are free to appropriate Weibo and Wechat for collective football spectatorship in the first place.

In spite of its political limitations in the local settings, the local social media to some extent resist the hegemony of global digital capitalism represented by the dominance of the transnational ICT corporations such as Facebook and Twitter. From a global perspective, Chinese fans' appropriation of Weibo and WeChat adds cultural peculiarities for their televised football viewing that is originally part of the licensed and globally standardized TV broadcast of European football competitions. Although both Weibo and WeChat are owned by Chinese ICT tycoons (Sina and Tencent respectively) with considerable government control, the cultural specificities of these platforms tend to restrict the Western sports industry---in this case---European football clubs and media corporations---from fully exploiting such online spaces for marketing and public relations purposes. Compared to the transmedia experience of discussing European football spectatorship on Facebook and Twitter, Chinese fans' discourses on Weibo and WeChat are less interfered by the commercial motives from the global mediated sports complex.

CHAPTER 6

MEDIATED FORMATION OF LOCAL FAN COMMUNITIES

6.1 Overview

In this chapter, I continue my examination of Chinese European football fans' digital media practices by moving focus onto the formation and maintenance of the local fan communities. In Chapter Four, I have argued for the articulation between the taste for European football and the urban middle-class identity in China. It is apparent that the objective social condition, as well as fans' own subjective understanding of their taste and fan authenticity combine to produce this fandom as a "distinct" social group. The participants also express their identification with the "imagined fan community" whose members are thought to share similar economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Such identification has little to do with whether or not these fans have contact with other fans or are involved in embodied collective practices. Therefore, beyond fans' "imagined" belonging to a social group based on intersubjective understanding of social positions and fan authenticity, it remains important to ask how the fan communities are formed and maintained locally in real life. I am particularly interested in the ways in which Chinese fans of European football comprehend their position and relationships with other fans in such fan community.

The rise of the city-based fan organizations revolving around different European clubs in large Chinese cities is perhaps one significant manifestation of the existence of the local communities within the Chinese fandom of European football. As the Weibo accounts suggest, top European football clubs such as Barcelona, Manchester United, Arsenal, AC Milan, and Bayern Munich all have local organizations formed by Chinese

fans in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu. My participants also referred to the local fan organizations in Shanghai when asked about their knowledge of and experience with fan communities or collective fan practices. Aiming at coordinating in-person gatherings and forming local fan networks in the same city, these organizations are formed and maintained through both offline collective events and online communications on various social media.

This chapter explores the ways in which local fan organizations take advantage of social media to form and maintain communities that connect both online and offline spaces. I also discover individual fans' subjective sense of community about the fan association they are affiliated with. My ultimate goal is to explore whether or not these fan communities can provide alternative space for collectivity and solidarity that are increasingly restricted in China's public spaces. In my fieldwork, I have established frequent contact with two of the most well-known and active representatives of local fan organizations in Shanghai: the Barcelona Fan Association in Shanghai (BFA) and Reds in Shanghai (RIS) (for Manchester United). I will use them (and in particular BFA) as the typical cases to answer my research questions.

6.2 Literature Review

6.2.1 Media Technology and Community Formations

Communication scholars have long taken community as a key concept for understanding human relationships, social interactions, and collective practices. Some scholars define the concept of community not only as a bounded territory of physical and/or ideological sorts but also a reference to common character, identity, or interests (Fernback, 1997). In other words, a community should provide its members with both a

mental feeling and a material experience of belonging. Other scholars see community as a space for social interactions and relationship maintenance regardless of the geographical distance between the members. The social-mental bonds established through communication and discourses are thought to be more important than the physical aggregations in community-building (Chayko, 2002; Rheingold; 2000; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Other scholars argue for the idea that community emerges from the common strategies and activities its members collaboratively create and implement. In this sense, the autonomous participation of individuals in shared collective practices with others already foregrounds their situation in a community (Anderson, 1993; Baym, 2000; Meyers, 2012).

To synthesize the ongoing evolution of these various types of community, Willson (2006) distinguished among traditional, modern, and postmodern forms of communities according to the communicative patterns operated in them and the level of individual choice of membership they allow. The traditional communities are constituted and organized around face-to-face communicative relations and embodied practices, with unambiguous designation of members' social roles, expectations, and identities. The modern community, on the other hand, encompasses membership over larger geographical areas and is constituted around more extended communicative relations and abstracted forms of embodiment. The modern community is similar to Benedict Anderson's (2006) classic proposition of modern nation-states as "imagined communities" that are enabled by the historical prosperity of print-capitalism. As Anderson pointed out, the consumption of print media, along with its unification of language, generated among its audiences at distant geographical locations a conception of homogeneous, empty time

that enabled them to realize the existence of others within the same national boundaries. Finally, the postmodern community “organizes itself through mediated and abstract integrative practices, where the primary form of interaction and communication is disembodied—detached from presence and mediated through technology” (Willson, p. 39). Virtual communities in cyberspace are representatives of the postmodernist project where “enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships” (Rheingold, 1993, p.5).

Correspondingly, the online social relations come out of an evolving process which forms a sense of community based on convenient togetherness without real responsibility (Fernback, 2007). Such unstable, contingent social interactions also allow people to drift in and out of different virtual communities as long as these communities are “providing a solution or fulfilling a need in their life” (Ward, 1999, p. 103). These different approaches to community share a focus on the relations between the community structure/characteristics, determined by the patterns of boundary, communication, and practices, and individual subjectivity, reflected from identity performance and sense of belonging. Both factors are mediated by the communication technology that dominates in the community.

6.2.2 Historical Trajectory of Football Fan Communities

Following the conceptualizations, we can find that football fan cultures are able to build communities in every sense as they facilitate the aggregations of individuals with common interests, identity and practices. With the development of new media technologies and radical transformation of professional football leagues, football fan communities in Europe have transformed from the modern to the postmodern form. The

1990s saw the dominance of locally organized working-class groups that met at football stadiums and were actively involved in collective fan activism to influence their clubs or to protest their increasingly exclusion from in-stadia audiences. For example, King (1997) analyzed the contradictory responses of male fans of the Manchester United club to the transformation of football consumption in Britain during 1990s. He found that these lads' autonomous but subordinated masculine and working-class identities mediated their opposition to the capital owners of the club as well as the development which obstructed the creation of ecstatic solidarity. Lads resisted such transformation as increased ticket prices, restrictions of all-seated stadiums, and marketization strategies through both personal interpretations and organized actions. But simultaneously there were moments of compliance when the club provided the lads with a central social and cultural resource for their masculine pride. Nash (2001) explored the contemporaneous growth of organized football fans such as Independent Supporter Association (ISAs) with the "modernization" of English football since 1992. Drawing on research on four ISAs across England, Nash demonstrated the existing yet limited extent to which ISAs formed a working-class democratizing force to oppose football's adoption of consumerism, entertainment, and commercialization, visible primarily in stadium redevelopment, shifting crowd demography, massive rises in ticket prices and redefinition of match-day experiences. As collective communities organized by football fans, ISAs often challenged some dominant values and arrangements in the football spectacles and demanded changes within the localized football context, yet these ideological subversions were not sufficiently translated to social activism for wider social transformation.

European football fans since 2000s have formed the virtual or emotional

communities in non-territorial spaces such as internet chat rooms, post-match phone-ins and fanzine letter columns, which are characterized ‘by fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal’ (Crabble, 2008). While some researchers have found virtual football fan communities confer agency of decision-making to the participants or even enable political resistance with the aid of technology (Hutchins, Rowe & Ruddock, 2009; Levental, Galily, Yarchi, & Tamir, 2016; Ruddock & Rowe, 2010; Guschwan, 2016); other scholars point out the branding nature of the online football communities, arguing that fans’ use of technology to consume football has become part of the branding project of football clubs and sports industry in general (Checchinato, Disegna, & Gazzola, 2015; Healy & McDonagh, 2013; Popp & Woratschek, 2016).

Apart from the clear distinctions between the real-life organized groups and virtual communities, the city-based fan organizations for European football clubs in China, with their activeness both online and offline, seem to provide new research inquiries about football global fan communities in the digital era that previous studies have not covered. More importantly, particular Chinese social media have become dominant modes of communication in these fan communities. Thus, for the current case, the role of communication technology in community-building needs to be contextualized in the social, political, and technological arrangements of contemporary China. Based on the central relations between structure and agency, my investigation attempts to discover how the local fan organizations of European football take advantage of social media to build communities and how individual fans, partly as a reaction to the organizational influence, maintain relationships with others and construct their sense of belonging to these communities.

6.3 Formation of Local Fan Communities with Social Media

In my fieldwork, the representatives of such organizations are Barcelona Fan Association in Shanghai and Reds in Shanghai. They both play an important role in facilitating fans' interactions and collective practices around respective clubs (Barcelona and Man United) in Shanghai. Obviously, the local communities provide opportunities for independent fans to gather together and conduct collective practices. In contrast to their interpersonal intercommunication with family members and peers about European football during socialization, fans' contemporary participation in these organizations centers on the performance of their identity as fans of a particular European club. It also enables these fans to form relationships with other fans beyond face-to-face social relations. In the following analysis, I will draw evidence from my fieldwork to explore how the local fan organizations rely on social media to form fan communities and how individual fans perform identity, form subjectivity, and maintain relationships through their involvement in the collective practices organized by these fan associations. I will discuss about how these communities combine to construct a relatively spontaneous form of collectivity.

For both fan organizations (BFA and RIS), their formation and expansion reflect the ongoing interweaving of fans' virtual and real-life communications/networks/practices. Admittedly, the regular collective practices in real life---such as game-viewing, football playing, and involvement in other events directly hosted by the European football clubs (fan meeting, summer visit) ---compose the core of the local organizations which differentiate them from the purely online communities. Most typically, both fan organizations often hold fan gatherings for game-viewing at bars

in the city center of Shanghai. For RIS, this is an almost weekly event that everyone can join without registration. For BFA, public viewing events are arranged for the team's major competitions such as El Clasico and potential finals of European Championship and Copa del Rey. In the case of both associations, the offline activities cannot succeed without the aid of social media such as QQ, Weibo, and Wechat, which offer the primary channels for BFA and RIS members to get to know each other and keep connected. The growth of BFA and RIS goes along with the evolution and diffusion of various social media in China. Both organizations started from QQ chat groups more than 10 years ago when QQ was still the most popular instant messaging tool in urban China, and later on increasingly turned to Weibo and Wechat to promote their real-life events and strengthen the local fan networks. To a large extent, the use of social media lays the foundations for the everyday communication and operation of these fan organizations. Yet what has interested me most is the ways in which different forms of social media contribute respective roles in the development of BFA and RIS as fan communities across virtual and real spheres. In the following analysis, I will use BFA as the main example to demonstrate how local fan organizations have evolved with QQ, Weibo, and Wechat and eventually reach the current form of community.

6.3.1 QQ: Initial Set-up

The foundation of BFA can be traced back to April 2007 when its founder and current president, Yazi, created a QQ chat group to organize football games among student fans of Barcelona Football Club in Songjiang University Town. Located in the northwestern suburb of Shanghai, Songjiang University Town consists of seven universities and colleges. As the group members got easily familiarized with each other

through the face-to-face encounters in football competition, the QQ group soon became an active space for these fans to discuss and share their common passion about Barcelona and football in general. As the group members came to increase and include those who did not play football, Yazı began to hold offline gatherings for game viewing in the University Town, which in turn attracted more fans to join in the chat group. As they graduated from university and entered workforce, Yazı and other members were able to promote the chat group to their expanded social networks and planned for events out of the University Town. Yazı then decided to establish a formal local association for Barcelona fans in Shanghai to replace the loosely-connected chat group that was mediated through just QQ. With the rapid development of social media in recent years, Yazı has built various channels in addition to QQ to connect with general Barcelona fans in Shanghai and hold more offline viewing events. In this sense, the BFA community already took shape from the beginning thanks to the clearly bounded QQ chat group. This chat group allows for a closed community in a relatively traditional sense. Apparently, this community started from face-to-face encounters in playing football and was further developed by interpersonal recommendation as well as additional embodied practices such as collective game-viewing. The connection of the initial participants was based on geographical proximity and similar social identity as college students. The boundary between the in-group members and out-groups is quite clear. However, QQ also revised the “traditional” nature of the community by facilitating virtual interactions, which, as the chat group expanded, gradually became the primary practice for its members.

6.3.2 Weibo: Expansion of Community

The rise of Weibo since 2009 has allowed BFA to make itself and its offline activities well known to a wider audience and in turn broaden the range of potential members. With 20180 followers, although it occasionally reposts news and comments about Barcelona posted by other public or private fan accounts, the BFA weibo account is primarily responsible for making announcements and records about its own fan gatherings and promoting other local Barcelona-related events organized by the media, sponsors, or the club itself.

BFA's weibo usually posts the announcement of an event at least 10 days in advance, and then frequently reposts it to catch followers' attention. It also creates a hashtag called "Offline Game Viewing for Barcelona Fans in Shanghai" to coordinate all the posts related to event announcements. The announcements are usually made in the format of poster with both texts and images. Figure 1 is the poster the BFA uploaded to their Weibo for announcement the event for El Clasico (March, 2015).

As we can see, this announcement indicates the time, location, transportation, cost, dress code, and agenda of the event. It also highlights the awards to be given and the required registration process. Surprisingly, the organizer chooses to arrange the online registration exclusively on Wechat instead of inviting fans to leave comments under the announcement posted on Weibo. In fact, there are only 6 comments under this sample announcement, which constitute one conversation between a fan and the BFA account about the location of the event. In reality, however, this event gathered more than 200 fans to watch the game together, while several fans I met on the site told me that they obtained the information about the event from the Weibo announcement. This

announcement is a typical example of BFA's use of Weibo as a promotional tool, or a mass medium that circulates information to potential Barcelona fans. In spite of its embedded interactivity, Weibo is mainly used by the BFA organizers to establish the unidirectional, and one-to-many communication with the potential participants of offline activities. Similar to the findings in Chapter Four about fans' reliance on Weibo as information source during televised game viewing, the Weibo account is treated by both BFA and its 20180 followers as a channel of mass communication instead of an interactive platform.

Compared to the previous QQ chat group, Weibo offers more open access for Barcelona fans to get the information about the association and thus broadens the range of BFA's participants. The search function of Weibo enables anyone who wants to connect with other Barcelona fans or attend offline events in Shanghai to easily find BFA's account, the announcements, or the hashtag about game-viewing activities. My interviewees who have attended BFA's events all told me that they first got to know the organization on Weibo, through which they were connected to BFA's organizer Yazi and then stayed tuned with the activities the fan association hold. In fact, my own participation in BFA's gaming-viewing events also started from my intentional search for the potential local fan organizations on Weibo. Right after I found and followed BFA's Weibo, I saw the most recent announcement for a viewing event for the El Clasico in March 2015. I followed the direction to add Yazi's Wechat and asked for his permission to participate in the event as a researcher. Although I developed my contact with Yazi and other BFA members through other social media as well, Weibo was the starting point where I first obtained knowledge about and access to the association. In this sense, Weibo

is key to the expansion of BFA by allowing anyone to freely follow or access to BFA's account and obtain updates of its offline practices. Weibo removes the closeness and exclusivity of the QQ chat group, and simultaneously blurs the original boundary of BFA's community set on QQ. Although BFA's Weibo account has 20180 followers, not all these followers have ever participated in BFA's events. Yet the attendance in the offline gatherings is often considered as the most apparent symbol of the membership/affiliation to the fan association. Due to the limited interpersonal communication on the BFA weibo account, the Weibo-based community, mediated through one of the most advanced web 2.0 technologies, have rich legacies of the modern notion of community, accomplishing extended and embodied communicative relations across great geographical areas.

6.3.3 Wechat: Rebounding Community

Along with and slightly after the rise of Weibo, Wechat emerged and gained popularity since 2012, and soon became the major interpersonal messaging tool in China. The BFA organizers have fully explored the diverse functions of Wechat to redefine and rebound the fan community. I have observed three means in which BFA connect with its members through Wechat.

The first one is the interpersonal contact between Yazi, BFA's president and other Barcelona fans. The president is probably the most important channel for fans to join in BFA's activities. Although most BFA events are formally announced through Weibo and the Wechat public platform, BFA always requires interested fans to add Yazi's personal Wechat account for details and registration. This step is essential for those gatherings that only allowed for limited number of participants. For example, when the association

rented the whole bar for game-viewing by paying the bar, fans, whether coming as individuals or groups, must contact Yazı directly to register in advance with contact name, cell phone number, and number of companions. In addition to the registration process, individual fans can also get in touch with Yazı through personal networks. Either way, Yazı does not only communicate with fans for procedures but is also eager to form personal relationships with other fans through the conversations about the common passion for Barcelona FC. For some participants, Yazı is more like a friend, and the participation in BFA's events is based on their private connection/friendship with him. As this process shows, instead of simply relying on Weibo to promote events, Yazı has used Wechat to set up long-term personal relationships with fans, which is otherwise not afforded by Weibo.

The second platform BFA has built through Wechat is a set of chat groups: as each free Wechat group has the maximum of 100 participants, BFA had formed four such groups by the time I completed my fieldwork. The group I have joined in now consists of 96 members. The Wechat groups operate pretty like QQ chat groups except for the fact that Weibo is initiated on mobile devices rather than computers. QQ, on the other hand, started as a computer-based instant messaging system which later developed its mobile app. Although each Wechat group can generate its two-dimensional code for those who want to take part in to scan and access to the group, BFA tends not to publicize those two-dimensional codes and relies on private introduction by the existing group members as the primary way to attract new participants. Indeed, on both Weibo and Wechat public platform, BFA only publishes Yazı's Wechat account and invites fans to join discussion groups through Yazı. Besides that, the offline gatherings are key occasions where one can

get to know some fan who can add him/her to the Wechat group. For example, I was added to the group by one of the event organizers when I first attended the El Clasico viewing. Certainly, the dynamics of the Wechat groups---ongoing changes in group members and creations of additional groups when the existing groups reach the maximum number---make the private introduction the most effective way for group formations. But it is reasonable to assume that such way of access to Wechat groups serve to strengthen the personal connections among fans affiliated with BFA. Only those who have contact with Yazhi or other members can get access to the Wechat groups. On the other hand, the discussions in these groups are often closely related to the offline events where these fans have encountered each other in the first place. Some group members also show their private relationships in their public conversations in the group. In this sense, the BFA Wechat groups signify smaller, more closed circles derived from the wider potential participants revolving around BFA's Weibo account and Yazhi himself. It rebuilds the exclusivity and sense of community of the original QQ group that have been lessened by Weibo. But compared to the original QQ group that was based more on real-life location and identity (as college students), the Wechat groups downplay fans' actual social identity and present a more post-modern sense of community.

The third platform is the public Wechat account that can be followed by interested fans. This account offers daily updates about the fan organizations such as event announcement and summary, Barcelona news and pictures, and gossip discussion about the club and players. The public Wechat account is similar to Weibo in terms of information circulation, but its format is much more prone to the presentation of long articles. In addition, the public account tends to update content once a day as a cluster of

two to three articles, which is different from the separate posting of Weibo content. According to the statistics provided by the organization, the BFA Wechat account has around 8,000 followers. BFA always refers to this number as a rough estimate of the number of the organization members in its self-introduction on different platforms. Combining the public account with the discussion groups and the Yazi's personal account, Wechat helps BFA reset its boundary as a community that is smaller than the Weibo follower group but much larger than the original QQ chat group. Although the core of Wechat is interpersonal and group discussions, the public account services create the opportunity for larger number of fans to gather in a relatively closed space. Compared to Weibo, individual fans' search for and following of the Wechat public account indicate their great efforts to pay attention to and get involved in BFA on a daily basis. This might be the reason why the following of the public account is considered as a sign of the organization membership.

The above analysis shows that the local fan organizations exemplified by BFA expand along with the evolution of Chinese social media from QQ, Weibo and Wechat. It is important to note that the BFA organizers still simultaneously use these different platforms to coordinate activities and maintain mutual relationships, though they prefer to use Wechat public account and its followers as the reference of the boundary of the BFA community. The fan communities based on the local fan organizations are thus constantly engaged in transformation and evolution along with the rapid technological development. In the current historical moments, QQ, Weibo and Wechat have respectively served their roles in the initial formation, further expansion and rebounding of the fan associations. Meanwhile, the dynamics of the local fan communities also keep changing back and forth

among the traditional, modern to post-modernist forms. In this sense, we can probably predict that the nature of the fan communities might continue to change because of the emergence of new media platforms in the future. Yet the association-based fan communities still cannot sustain without social media.

6.4 Football Fans' Identity Performance and Sense of Community

In the previous section, I focused on how local fan organizations take advantage of different forms of social media to develop their communities. The examination reveals the role of social media in forming the structures of the fan communities that individual fans can possibly fit in. My attention now moves from the structural setting of the fan organizations to the subjectivities of the individual fans who are affiliated with the organizations through online communication or offline events. With the virtual and real-life spaces formed by the local organizations, individual fans are able to perform identities, form subjectivities, and maintain mutual relationships paralleled to the collective communities the fan organizations (BFA and RIS) aim to maintain. This in turn influences these fans' subjective sense of community and belongings regarding the fan organizations.

6.4.1 Hybrid Identity Performance

BFA's break of the real and the virtual boundaries has provided spaces for individual fans to flexibly play with their online and offline identities. As the fan communities are maintained by the combination of online communication and offline gatherings, the identities that individual fans choose to display in the context of the fan organizations are intertwined with both their online presence and real social status. At least for those participants I have contact with, the online identity, manifested through a

pseudonym, normally remains stable across different social media. Such identity centers around the fan's passion about the football club they support while largely downplays, if not eliminates, their age, gender, occupation, education, etc. As an indication of football fan identity, the online names are often composed of the name, abbreviation, or other indirect symbols of their club. While Barcelona fans like to create names in the format of "Blue and Red+XXX", Man Utd fans' online names sometimes include "Red Evils".

In addition, the online identity that fans create for the social media platforms is what they try to present to peers in the real-life events. Fans often maintain the same online identity in the real-life gatherings. At the BFA and RIS' events I have attended, most participants, including the event organizers, choose to use virtual names for communication. As the event registration and the interactions with the organizers and other fans are all conducted through social media, many fans found themselves to be most comfortable with using their online names. In their opinion, the online identity with an emphasis on their interests in European football, is more relatable and familiar in the communication with other fans. It thus helps reduce the difference among fans who are strangers in real life and encourages them to focus on common interests and fan practices.

The anonymity enables the attendants to highlight their collective fan identity by wearing club jerseys and singing club slangs for goal celebration. According to my observations at the BFA gatherings, when Barcelona scored, the attendants either started to cheer together or to sing the celebration slang originating from Spain even if many of them did not know each other. For example, at the one event for the Copa del Rey final in May 2015, two fans besides me who had never talked during the event suddenly made high-fives to express their excitement, though they never interacted with each other again

for the rest of the match. The moment of celebration allowed these fans to reaffirm their common fan identity and constructing solidarity without further forming long-term and transparent relationships.

In this sense, through the participation in the local fan organizations, Chinese fans of European football strive to separate their fan experience from real-life work and life. The online identity offers these fans an opportunity to depart from real-life identity, experience, and relationships that they feel are restricted by environmental and structural factors. For some fans, such identity enables them to find part of their subjectivity that cannot be fulfilled in their everyday work and life. As an active member in RIS, Kevin was happy about his friends in the association just called him “cousin”, which is the name he used to present himself among Man Utd fans.

[YG] Do they know your real name? You think it’s enough to just call you

[Kevin] They also know my English name (Kevin), but I feel more comfortable that they called me that (“cousin”). Everytime I hear this name I know I am with Man Utd fans who have similar interests with me, not with my boss or my colleagues. When we watch games together, we don’t really care about what’s your real name is. Real names are even too formal, like business relationships. What is really important is that we know we support the same team and we can have a good time with each other during the matches (June 2015, personal communication).

For other fans, the presentation of virtual identity creates distance between themselves and other fans that can protect their privacy and part of real-life identity. It is exactly such distance and selective disclosure of themselves that make them more willing

to express emotions not permitted in most other realms of their lives. Eric is a fan who sat next to me at the BFA's event for El Clasico and later developed long-term connection with me. Just back to Shanghai from his master's education in UK, Eric didn't know anyone on the site except for Yazi who he got in contact with on Weibo and invited him to the event. He told me about his preference for coming alone:

I don't mind (not knowing anyone). My main purpose is to watch the game with other Barcelona fans. It's not an interpersonal relationship. For me collective viewing is a good way to release emotions as fans---I might shout out during the match. This is what I don't want to do in front of acquaintance. If your boss sees you are so crazy about football, what will he think about you? But with strangers who also support Barcelona, I am free to do so, nobody will judge me, everyone here understands such craziness and we can shout together (May 2015, personal communication).

Apparently, it was precisely the unfamiliarity between him and other attendees at the events that encouraged him to forget about his social roles and responsibilities and release his emotions/irrationality as much as he wanted. For Eric, the virtual fan identity is an escape from and even resistance to his real-life situations.

On the other hand, individual fans' participation in the offline gatherings inevitably reconstruct and substantiate their online identity by making their gender and age visible to others. Since fans' collective practices, whether the material consumption or the football discussions, are shaped by economic and cultural capitals, they also more or less reveal fans' social class. In this sense, the local fan organizations provide a space for individual fans to affirm their imagination of the European football fandom as a social

group part of the young urban middle-class. Big Uncle, the leader of RIS, told me that it was easy for him to figure out the decent economic and educational conditions of the fans who attended the fan gatherings he organized:

I would say I can tell well that the participants in RIS are affluent. Of course I know a lot of participants in person (so I know their backgrounds). But even from the observations you can tell they are not from the working class. If you come to the bar to watch the games with us, buying a drink is the minimum request. Most fans normally spend over 100 RMB for drinks and food. Plus the games are always at night, sometimes after the public transportation is over, so they need to drive to take taxi to go home. Let's say attending one event cost about 150 RMB on average, and if you come to our weekly gathering that's not a small amount of money that working-class can easily afford (May 2015, personal communication).

Big Uncle's words indicate that the offline collective fan activities inevitably expose the participants' real identity and social status. Through the co-existence of the online and offline spaces of these organizations, the members are able to perform a fan subject that includes both realistic and virtual facets, yet these fans' subjective choice to stick to the virtual identity around football fandom is still an attempt for them to form subjectivity distinct from their real social roles as workers or family members.

6.4.2 Contingent Relationships and Sense of Community

The hybrid identity that Chinese fans perform in the local fan associations (BFA and RIS) have influenced the ways in which they maintain relationships with each other and make sense of their belongings to the fan communities. Admittedly, there is a small group of fans (around 10) who are involved in the management of the fan associations or

have actively attended the organized events on a regular basis. The frequent contact among these core association members has revealed large part of their off-line identity and allowed them to form a small yet tight social circle beyond the practices and communications targeted at the larger fan community. In this case, the fan associations serve as a channel for these fans to develop friendships in reality. However, once such close relationships are established, these fans tend to turn away from the fan associations' social media platforms to more private communication tools such as personal Wechat conversations. Their face-to-face encounters are no longer limited to the collective practices around football. Instead, they have also transformed the social capitals in the field of fandom to those in the field of work and life. The BFA staff has become a close friend circle that hangs out regularly for non-football reasons. They even held a birthday celebration for two members who were both born in July. Similarly, Steve, who attended almost every RIS game-viewing event, considered other attendees as his real-life friends who he had turned for help on many occasions in real life:

(Our relationship) is not only for Man Utd; there are occasions we have contact when for other stuff beyond football. Once I needed to use a car for an emergency travel to another city, and one fan from our group just helped me. You don't know how appreciative I was toward him---it just saved me. They are all very nice people. Many are already my friends in life (June 2015, personal communication).

For these core members, the fan association is important to them because of the limited number of friends. In other words, their sense of collectivity has transitioned to close interpersonal relationships/individualism independent of social media, which eventually weakens their belongings to the larger fan community.

However, for most other fans ever participating in the organized activities, their relationships with the fan associations are much more contingent and unstable than the core members. Because neither BFA nor RIS has formal registration process or criteria for their memberships, the participants have relatively weak sense of belonging to the fan associations. Fans have no obligation to pay annual membership fees or attend every offline event, so there is no definite symbol that they can refer to claim their identity as the formal members of the fan associations. In addition, the offline events are neither exclusive nor mandatory---on the contrary, it is very easy for anyone to get relevant information on social media and decide by him/herself whether to attend or not. With the common response of “I will go whenever I am free”, my interviewees admitted that their involvement in the fan associations is quite convenient based mostly on their mood or work schedule. Such loose and unstable connection between individual fans and fan associations directly result from the use of social media in the coordination of these collective practices. Therefore, the fan communities around the local fan organizations, despite its offline collectivity, interestingly display a convenient pattern of relationships characterized with virtual communities.

Corresponding to the occasional and convenient participation in the organized activities, these fans think it not necessary to purposefully get to know others at the events. Neither are they eager to build further, substantial friendships with other fans outside the offline events or the social media platforms. Instead, they are more comfortable with the spontaneous interactions merely concentrating on the particular matches. Just as I have described before, fans who didn't previously know each other can easily clap hands with each other without any preceding conversations. No matter how

heated such interactions might be, these fans seem to have no interest in extending them to topics beyond football, especially those about personal life. According to my participants, the core value of the collective practices, lies in the feeling of the abstract collectiveness that you are one of the whole fan public to witness the competition of your club while the concrete relationships among individual fans are not so important. In other words, watching football together does not require fans to know about each other's real-life situations; what attracts them most is the immersion in such unknown crowd with common passion about the club. As Liu described:

I enjoy the feeling of being one of the Barcelona fans. When we watch the competitions together, what matters is the game and the collective atmosphere. Who is each of those fans that form this collective atmosphere is not very important, at least for me. Even without knowing each other's names, ages or occupations, we can still enjoy the game together right? Becoming friends is on a totally different level. For attending the gatherings, our same support of Barcelona fan is more than enough (May 2015, personal communication)

These fans' unwillingness to develop more tight connection to the community and closer private relationships with other fans is partly produced by the reliance on social media in the community. As SJ said,

Every-time I see different participants except for those organization staff. Even if I had a nice conversation with a fan at one event, there is no guarantee that I will see the same person again at the next few gatherings. Either he or I might be absent, or simply because we sit at different places. Maybe we add each other's wechat, but I cannot imagine purposefully contacting him just to meet each other

at the events. Without further face-to-face encounters it is difficult to develop the one-time interaction to friendship...I go to the gathering mainly for watching the games. Making friends is certainly a plus, but I am probably not going to actively seek that (July 2015, personal communication).

Indeed, most fans lack trust in social media and social media-based fan community as a reliable source for constructing real-life relationship. Fans' virtual identity generated and maintained through social media raised the uncertainty about the material and social commonality among different fans in reality, which my participants believe are more crucial for the formation of real-life friendship than sports taste. For some participants, the common interests in the European clubs does not guarantee the same worldviews and values (political and cultural values). Other fans are more concerned about the possibility of economic, geographical and occupational distinction between themselves and other association members. But they all agree that neither the communication on the organization's online platforms nor the offline collective practices enabled by social media offer opportunities for fans to know more about others' worldviews or social positions. Returning to Eric who I have mentioned before, he decided to tell me his real name after I interviewed him for more than 2 hours. He explained to me that he made this decision because he felt that our relationship became closer during the in-depth conversation. Yet he admitted that such thorough interactions might never occur at the game-viewing events or in the BFA Wechat groups. This finding is intriguing given that these same participants also have an abstract imagination of the Chinese fans of European football as belonging to the same social class with them. It is

apparently their critical reflections on social media that make these fans revise their theorization of the fandom in concrete cases.

As individual fans tend to maintain a hybrid identity, a weak sense of community, and a contingent relationship with other fans, the collective awareness required for potential fan activism is hardly possible for the communities based upon local fan organizations. The separation of the collective fan experience from fans' social experience through the performance of the virtual identity prevents them from incorporating/presenting their material and ideological struggles in the practices of the European football fandom. Such disconnection suggests that the local fan communities can hardly transform the collectivity developed in online interactions and offline gathering to further political actions such as resistance performed by the British organized fans in the 1990s.

6.5 Conclusions and Discussions

Through the comprehensive demonstration of the process of community formation by the local fan organizations based on European football clubs, this chapter reveals the “blurred” nature of the local fan communities which cross the boundaries between the real and the virtual, between the public and the private, and between the collective and the individualistic. The organizations' appropriation of social media including QQ, Weibo and Wechat play central roles in the development and determination of such community nature. My analysis continues to show the consequences of the fluid nature of local fan communities for individual fans' subjective understanding of identity, relationships, and community. The mixture of online and offline participation allows for individual fans' performance of hybrid identity, which in

turn lead them to have a relatively weak sense of community toward the fan organizations and hold contingent, convenient relationships with other fans in the collective practices. In other words, the efforts of fan organizations to form collective communities through social media are constantly negotiated with fans' subjective understanding of their participation in the community as individualistic and contingent.

These intriguing findings lead us to reconsider the relationships between new media and fan communities. Recent years have seen the trend in fan studies to focus on celebrating social media platforms' contributions to the formation of virtual fan communities revolving around discursive practices (Baym, 2015; Bird, 2003; Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). Yet this chapter calls for more scholarly attention to the role of social media in facilitating embodied collective fan activities and subsequently in maintaining fan communities that are beyond the essentialist categorization of traditional, modern, and postmodern forms of community. The power of social media to enable offline fan collectivity is especially socially and politically significant in the context of China where there is increasing censorship and restriction of collective actions in the public spaces. Indeed, sensitive to any form of collective gatherings, the Chinese authority has been aware of the potentials of Weibo and Wechat for spreading dissenting ideas and organizing offline political protests or other collective civil actions. Thus, those social media accounts, discussions, and texts (e.g. those around NGOs) that are explicitly and directly related to civil rights, democratic changes, and other political issues are under severe governmental surveillance and regulations. One of the main purposes of such censorship is to prevent social media from being used to organize more formal collective actions or oppositions in real life which threatens the political authority of the

Chinese Communist Party. In contrast, the local organizations of European football fans are among few exceptions who can initiate and coordinate offline collective actions with little government censorship and suppression. Given their liberal critical reflections on the utilitarian individualism dominant in the current Chinese society (as shown in previous chapters), the rare freedom European football fans have in the formation of offline collectivity through social media might offer new potentials for further resistance and contestations.

Meanwhile it is also important to note that individual fans' weak sense of community and convenient interpersonal relationships, caused by the contradictory nature of their communities, are likely to hinder long-term solidarity required for the achievement of further collective actions on other social and political levels. According to their discourses, my participants emphasize more on their individual agency in choosing to participate in the collective practices, rather than their long-term, stable belonging to a collective unity. Such individualistic nature of the collectivity might explain why these fans, at least at the current moment, have not extended their ideological and discursive resistance to more substantial levels such as political actions, even with their class consciousness and relative freedom to form offline collectivity.

CHAPTER 7

ONLINE DISCURSIVE PRACTICES AND VIRTUAL SPHERE

7.1 Overview

In Chapter Six, I have displayed the dynamics and structures of the fan communities based in local urban spaces in China. Along with the boom of offline local fan organizations, what deserves equal attention is fans' online discursive practices on public forums, social media, and other fan websites, which contribute to the formation of personal connections, communities, activeness and empowerment in the virtual space. The online platforms have undoubtedly encouraged Chinese fans to produce and disseminate their own discourses and creative content regarding European football. New technology has not only liberated Chinese fans' limited access to transnational football texts in the television era, but also offered virtual spaces for them to produce and disseminate relevant fan texts and discourses that reflect various forms of productivity and activeness. In this chapter, I move my attention from the digital media use connecting fans offline to the fan practices purely occurring online. I conduct the case study of the H forum and articulate the ways in which Chinese fans' discursive practices on the forum empower them in the context of the media-saturated capitalist society. I also reveal how such empowerment is hindered by the government control and the industry's exploitation of the fan discourse as well as the limitations of the new technologies themselves.

7.2 Conceptual Frameworks

7.2.1 User-Generated Content and Online Fan Discourses

Along with the rise of Web 2.0, the studies of online sports fandom are seeing a turn to the research focus on fans' discursive practices on social media, increasingly

treating the user-generated content as one of the representatives of fan productivity (Gill, 2016; Kwak, Kim & Zimmerman, 2010; White & Cheung, 2015). Echoing the prosperity of user-generated content, the online activities of Chinese fans of European football certainly contain fans' creation of textual, audio, and video materials that convey their agency and negotiation with power by reworking the text and images of European football. Yang, Wang, Yuan and Billings (2016) conducted a content analysis of the online discussions about the 2014 World Cup on Sina Weibo, with a purpose to identify differences between fanship comments and non-fanship comments in terms of the focus of the content and the degree of valence. They found that fans were more likely than non-fans to use positive valence in their comments to enhance the value of the World Cup and discuss topics closely related to the event itself, such as teams, athletes, and factual information/news about the World Cup, establishing identification with in-group participants. Moreover, the findings also imply important insight regarding electronic commerce opportunities.

On the other hand, my own research in Chinese women fans' queering of European football players through writing/reading novels and/or editing images and videos has presented a typical example of fan's textual productivity (Gong, 2017). Besides that, fan-produced football jokes are also gaining popularity on Chinese social media, which refer to short narratives that use humorous and sarcastic tones to describe and criticize the dramatic moments of a football match or the funny characteristics about a club or a player. Quickly disseminating on Weibo and Wechat Moments, football jokes convey Chinese fans' wisdom of accurately describing football drama and relating them to their local experience in a concise and spreadable form. Yet despite Chinese fans'

productivity in slashing European football or creating football jokes, these practices are rarely linked to explicit political activeness or ideological resistance. Furthermore, fan texts featuring football jokes are frequently appropriated by the local mainstream media and sport industry/complex for the purposes of profit-making and market expansion.

This circumstance has urged me to look beyond the most popular form of football jokes to discover other forms of online discourses with more manifested potentials of political and ideological struggles. My attention is thus caught by the continuous activity of the H football forum, a product of web 1.0, against the overwhelming prevalence of social media in the European football fandom. Through close, long-term observations of the discussions on the European football discussion board on the H forum, I have found distinctive ways of my participants engaging in political negotiations that rarely exist in the web 2.0 environment which revolves around user-generated content, collaborative consumption, and interoperability on social media.

7.2.2 Online Communities, Fan Productivity and Public Sphere

Discussion is not a new phenomenon in the popular cultural fandoms including that of global football. In the classical approach to fan studies, Fiske (1992) has defined the interpersonal communication and discussions as one of the three forms of fan productivity. The three forms of fan productivity he distinguished include semiotic, enunciative, and textual. Semiotic productivity refers to the interpretation and creation in the process of reading, and therefore takes place on an intrapersonal level. Enunciative productivity described the verbal and non-verbal social interaction that occurred during fan consumption. Textual productivity refers to the materials and texts produced by fans based on original content, which include fanzines, fan fictions, music videos, etc. Such

productivity has been found to link fandom with issues of viewer activism, interpretive community, cultural production and alternative social community (Jenkins, 1992). In the pre-internet era, sports fans often presented their textual productivity through fanzines which subverted the dominant, commercial sports media through the redefinition of masculine identities (Haynes, 1993). But the online content sports fans generate with digital media include both naturally occurring discussions and textual/visual media materials, thus enabling fan productivity on both enunciative and textual levels. The online football discussions thus can be conceptualized as the new form of enunciative productivity emerging with the development of internet and digital technology.

On the other hand, discussion is also one of the most significant practices for sports fan communities. Represented by the European football fandom, sport fans have been considered to have the capacity to produce a public sphere for social and political discussions both in stadium and the virtual space (Guschwan, 2016; Kim, 2008; Sandvoss, 2003). The original concept of public sphere coined by Habermas (1989) refers to an ideal speech situation where all individuals have equal status and are aware of their right to use their intelligence to criticize any issue of public interest. The term emphasizes the collective and equal participation of private individuals in the rational-critical deliberations and dialogues for public concern in order to generate public discourse and influence state activities (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). The public sphere enables the “communicative action” which, based on free will and rational thinking, aims for democratic discourse, mutual understanding and social integration.

New media research has revealed the potentials of internet and surrounding technologies to revive a virtual public sphere that transcends the geographical and class

boundaries embedded in Habermas' original concept (Pappacharissi, 2002).

Pappacharissi (2002) differentiated between virtual public space and virtual public sphere as the latter facilitates democratic exchange of political discourse free from government or corporate influence. As she argues, in order for the online space to transcend to public sphere, deliberations developed there must have offline implications for the transformation of political and social structures. In the case of online sports fandom, such virtual sphere has been particularly discovered in the discussions about Olympics and international football (Brownell, 2012, 2013; Levental, Galily, Yarchi, Tamir & Ilan, 2016; Tamir & Galily, 2017).

Certainly, previous scholarship in the online sports public sphere inspires my curiosity about the possibility of the emergence of the public sphere from the Chinese fans' online discussions about European football. After all, the social and political significance of such public sphere is more than apparent in the context of the speech censorship by the Chinese authority. From my observations of the H forum, one of the major online platforms for European football discussions, I did discover, surprisingly, numerous dialogues, debates, and deliberations that started from European football competitions but eventually extended beyond the sporting topics to social, cultural and political issues.

Yet my attention has been caught by two interesting phenomena. First, the online fan discussions continue to prosper on the public forums and/or discussion boards representative of the H forum in spite of the rising of social media in the era of web 2.0. Even in the personal interviews, my participants mostly mentioned the H forum, instead of Weibo or Wechat, when asked about where to participate in or witness online football

discussions. Second, there are two prominent political issues---race and sexuality---that are more frequently discussed by Chinese fans than other public concerns. With more and more studies shifting focus on the sports public sphere for general political discussions to social media, these characteristics of Chinese fans' online discussions Chinese raise interesting questions. Why do the online football discussions in China still rely on the traditional forum rather than the newly emerging Weibo and Wechat? Why do fans' dialogues tend to have specific touch on race and sexuality? To what extent is the virtual public sphere accomplished in the online discussions with these unique characteristics? My essential goal is to understand the ways in which the architecture of the H forum offers necessary conditions for virtual public sphere and these political issues in deliberations. With this purpose, I focus on the discussion board for European football on the H forum (H) to reveal the ways in which it creates a virtual public sphere in the contemporary Chinese context. In particular, I analyze how the architecture of this public forum allows for fans' rational deliberations on the serious issues of race and sexuality with the symbolic resources of European football.

7.3 From Football Discussions to Political Deliberations

The H forum is a comprehensive bulletin board system (BBS) for the discussions across various sports. The forum has ten large sections devoted respectively to football, basketball, sports facilities, sports lottery, translation team, etc. The section for international football (namely) includes 12 discussion boards, all of which essentially focus on European football. While the "Big Five" European leagues each account for one discussion board, the most visited and posted in the section for international football is the board called "football topics", where European football fans come together for

general discussions regardless of the club they support. The football topic board welcomes all sorts of discussions across different leagues, clubs, and players, which range from football competition, match analysis, club reformations and transfers, to out-of-field gossips. The board is arranged in the format of discussion threads by the chronological order. With free and anonymous registration, the users can freely initiate or take part in any discussion threads relevant to European football or international football in general. Users can access each discussion post by simply clicking its hyperlinked title.

My everyday reading of these discussion posts during and after the fieldwork made me attend to the frequent occurrence of topics regarding race and sexuality, which are normally neglected or even suppressed in mainstream media and other public discursive spaces in China. Based on the initial observations, I purposefully searched some keywords relevant to these two issues (e.g. homosexuality, gay, race, black people, people of color) in the in-board search engine to more accurately locate these posts for further analysis. In the following section I will use specific examples to demonstrate how these deliberations are developed and what kind of mutual understanding of race and sexuality is reached in the H discussions.

7.3.1 Deliberations on Race and Racism

There are two types of discussion posts that initiate collective deliberations on race and racial equality. The first category of posts critically reacts to the incidents of racism that occur in (European) football competitions. In the football topic board, those notorious racial discriminations on the football fields such as Luis Suarez against Patrice Evra and John Terry's racist words toward Rio Ferdinand tend to receive serious attention among Chinese fans. In these posts, the discussants tend to easily agree on the

critique and condemnation of racism in not only European football but human society in general. Although most victims of the racial discrimination in European football competitions that have caught public attention are of African descent, Chinese fans have also been actively discussing about the on-the-field racism toward East Asians, which have not obtained sufficient Western or domestic media coverage. For example, one discussion about the discrimination on East Asians in European football included 274 comments. The initiator of this discussion listed several cases of East Asian footballers being imitated and mocked by fellow players and European media and posted the question about whether slanty eyes is a racist gesture toward East Asians. One participant then provided a detailed historical account of the origin of this insulting gesture:

“It is true that most East Asians has the biological characteristic of relatively smaller eyes, but in addition to biological characters, the gesture slanty eyes also remind the unfair exploitation and discrimination that early Chinese migrant workers experienced in the U.S. ‘There is a dead body of a Chinese worker under every mile of the railway.’ This saying is not made up. This “historical” gesture contains the discrimination and injustice treatment Chinese experienced at that time. So we shouldn’t only see the meaning of the gesture on the surface, it is based on the long embedded racism toward East Asian.”

Another fan then extended their reflections on implicit racism towards Asians in general:

“Not only is racism horrible, but also their failure to realize that this is a racist gesture. Many non-Asians often discriminate you in the name of humor or making jokes. If you are unhappy about being discriminated, you will be charged of lacking sense of humor. What is even more horrible is, you suffer from racism but

you don't admit. Racism is insulting, if you are friendly with those who discriminate you, it is both horrible and sad.”

Based on the critique of slanty eyes, some fans even started reflecting on other unconscious racist actions and implicit racism that occur in the local situations. As one discussant commented:

“We are also not very sensitive to racism. Terms like “Guizi” (disparaging term for Japanese), “Bangzi” (disparaging term for Koreans), “A San” (disparaging name toward Indians), “Maozi”(Russian), “Heigui”(Africans), Chinese are so often to use them privately, but not in front of people from those countries.”

This example vividly showed that European football fans on the forum are able to form collective awareness of and resistance to racism toward Asians that are neglected by the mainstream European media and discourse. Chinese fans' deliberations initiate from their knowledge about the racial problems in European football (especially those related to African descendent players), but with localized experience, their discussions eventually extend to reflections and critiques of racism more generally, beyond the boundary of the sport.

The second type of posts related to race pertains to those paying positive attention to players of color in European leagues. Mostly starting with a fan's curiosity about the talents or characteristics of black footballers, these discussions deal with such topics as “are black people the most talented for football?”, “are black defenders more and more popular?”, and “why are there few world-class black goal-keepers”? Admittedly, the question raisers' racial categorization of players, along with their specific interests in black players, implies some extent of implicit racism by associating race with certain

football talents. But these questions provoke extensive deliberations on the global racial structures with an overarching positive attitude toward black footballers. For example, in several conversations about African descended players' absence from key positions in a football team such as managers or goal-keepers, the respondents attempt to counter-argue such racialized assumption by pointing out many counter-examples. A popular comment is "this is not a question of race". In contrast, another type of conversations focuses on the motivations and implications of the rise of African descended footballers as cores or super stars in European football.

In one discussion post, one fan touched on the topic by simply asking how everyone thinks about increasing young black players in the powerful European clubs and whether this trend suggests that football relies on individual ability and physical strength. Some typical responses reflect fans' critique of this question and doubts about the validity of overemphasis on the players' skin color in the first place:

"As long as (the player has) good techniques, kicks the ball beautifully, and outstanding physical quality, who cares about skin color?"

"Isn't Pogba very skillful? I just don't understand why some people here are sensitive or even dissatisfied about the fact that there are more and more African descents in (European) football."

"I don't understand either. I have seen such posts several times in the football topic section. Is there any problem with football having more black players?"

"Increasing black players=the domination of individual ability and physical strength. You are so biased."

Other respondents seriously analyzed the underlying mechanism of the rise of African-descendent players and came to an agreement that their previous silence and marginalization in football was due to socio-economic inequality. An example of this is the following dialogue among fans emerging from the post:

“This is the result of fair competition. It is not like those openly discriminative bills like Sca-5¹ or ab1726² advocated by the American Democrats. So it (the rise of black players) is still normal. Among several sports I follow, only tennis has limited number of first-class black players. I don’t know why.”

“Probably because there are few black people from higher class background. Sports like tennis, swimming, golf, and horseback riding require a lot of financial investment. They belong to the so-called noble sports. Maybe that’s why few black people can engage in them. But as long as they can afford (the noble sports), they are not bad. For example, Tiger Woods, the Williams, and the black girl who won the swimming gold medal at this Olympics. ”

“Tennis training needs a lot of money, including hiring coach and renting the courts. Before turning to professional or getting sponsorship, normal people

¹ Sca-5 refers to the California Senate Constitutional Amendment No. 5 which would ask voters to consider eliminating California Proposition 209’s ban on the use of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in recruitment, admissions, and retention programs at California’s public universities and colleges. It was passed in the California Senate on Jan. 30, 2014, but was subsequently withdrawn by Hernandez due to strong opposition, mainly from Asian Americans.

² AB-1726, as called as The AHEAD Act, is an assembly bill in California for the expanded disaggregation of state public health and higher education data to include at least ten more ethnic categories for AAPIs (Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders). This bill is designed to take the first step towards helping the thousands of Asian American and Pacific Islander Californians who are currently underserved by state and federal services. Bu Asian American opponents think this bill is essentially unfair and racist because it only targets at Asians but no other race. They fear this could be a backdoor way of ending California’s ban on affirmative action.

without family support cannot afford it. CCTV has so many paid channels, and only the tennis and gold channel is profitable every year. So it is really a noble sport.”

“It can only be said that such phenomenon occurs largely due to social factors, other things like body or physical are only minor factors.”

“Now the number of black players is increasing because previously they didn’t get enough access to football and professional training. Now the percentage of black players will be gradually the same as the percentage of black population.”

Another theme emerging from this post is the appraisal of football as a fair sport whose rules and nature already resist racism:

“Football is a very equal sport, regardless of skin color, if you play well you can stand out, and become the bread-winner for your family. It’s just African-descended players have more urgent need to change life through football. In top leagues, anyone who performs well can become the main force of a team. Black players’ goals accommodate with the clubs’ needs. Where is the problem?”

“Yes, at least I think football is quite fair play (at least hard training will lead to result). Europe is the top stage for football, so I think great the emergence of players of any skin color is all normal.”

This discussion vividly displays a debate over sporting ability between racial determinism and social constructionism. It touches on deeper thoughts about race and racism beyond simple criticism of racist words and actions performed on the football field. The participants also attempt to explore the democratic potentials from football itself to fight against racism.

The critical reflections through these online football discussions are culturally and politically progressive in the contemporary Chinese society because of European football fans' explicit reference to race and apparent critique of racism. As an assumption that has long existed in traditional Chinese culture, racism is embedded and even taken-for-granted in both traditional and online media discourse along with the increasing exposure of the black populations in China (around 500,000 including legal and undocumented immigrants) to the Chinese public. While the mainstream news and entertainment media tend to exclude the representations of the local black community and completely ignore the conflicts between local Chinese and black immigrants/residents, the online content on Weibo and other major platforms often stigmatizes the black community in China and produces explicit racist discourse toward people of color as a whole. For example, with the residential population of about 16,000 (Guangzhou Police Department, 2014), the black community in Guangzhou has been considered by Chinese netizens as one of the major sources of social instability of the city. Online search for "black people in Guangzhou" (广州黑人 in Chinese) leads to most, if not all, negative reports, comments, or discussions about this community. In fact, the online discourse of race generally revolves around the "problems" black/African immigrants have brought to Chinese society. In contrast, the football topic board remains one of the few online spaces through which race is deliberated while racism is admitted and seriously criticized. In their discussions, Chinese football fans produce consensus against racial discriminations that resists the dominant racial ideology in Chinese society.

7.3.2 Debates over Sexuality and Equal Rights

As another prominent social issue that triggers heated debates among the H users, sexuality is often taken seriously in those posts that react to the incidents of homophobia or the campaigns for sexual equality in the European football leagues. As discrimination of (homo)sexuality is increasingly reported and resisted in European football competitions, Chinese fans also tend to pay specific attention to the anti-homophobia campaigns on the field as well as football players' support for LGBT groups through words and actions in their online discussions. For instance, one post based on the news about the famous footballer Thierry Henry, who encouraged homosexual players to come out, eventually turned to a more general debate over attitudes toward and understanding of homosexuality. While the majority of discussants appreciate Henry's support for the LGBT group, one fan openly defined homosexuality as violation of natural law of reproduction with two comments:

“The continuity of species is the foundation of everything. No matter how you are appraisal of homosexuality, you cannot deny that homosexuality violates the natural laws. It's already enough not to discriminate them, no way to seek support.”

“I am very bothered by homosexuals all through my life. There is no point of discussing supporting homosexuals or not until they can reproduce.”

These comments then received wide criticisms that defend the variety of sexualities from different perspectives. One group of fans directly pointed out the flaws in the assumption about reproduction as the basis for legitimate sexuality:

“The meaning of human beings alive is only for reproduction?”

“According to what you said, (homosexuals) are legitimate only when they can reproduce. Then let me say something bad: men can donate their sperms and leave, women can handle everything else and can bore children by themselves. Do you like such opinion?”

“Whether heterosexuals or homosexuals, it’s fine as long as they do not cause troubles to the society. Regarding reproduction, there are so many infertile heterosexual couples, in your logic, you should say they are also causing social troubles. Remember they are heterosexuals. There are also many news reports about homosexual couples adopting children, which is beneficial to the society. There have been so many homosexual in history, and human beings have become extinct. In contrast, human behaviors have caused the extinction of a lot of animals and plants even if they are heterosexual.”

Another group of fans emphasized that the support for homosexuals is necessary because it is essentially the support for equal rights for everyone regardless of background. Yet some fans were reflexive that supporting LGBT doesn’t equal to the action of calling for coming out:

“Henry encourages homosexuals to come out, which means he respects your choice if you are homosexuals. He’s not encouraging heterosexuals to change their sexual orientations. Those who just read the title and got angry should get out of here.”

“Most people do not support “homosexuality, but “equal rights for homosexuals”. In addition, it is true that the continuation of species is basic, but it’s not all. I have seen an academic view that the certain percentage of homosexuals in any

species is a choice of dissolving risks by the genes for the purpose of continuation.”

“First, homosexuality is nature instead of infectious disease. The belief that human beings will become extinct if everyone is homosexual is nonsense. Second, homosexuals were treated unfairly in history, so it is their rights to chase equality now. Third, it is a right attitude for a public figure to openly express his respect for others.”

“I think Henry just expressed his attitudes. I don’t think there is any difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals. But not everyone thinks like that. It requires a lot of courage to come out because the public pressure is unusual.”

“In the case of football, although Henry’s encouragement is very nice, I personally do not think this (homophobia in football) can be fundamentally eliminated by a few people’s support. It is different between supporting homosexuals and supporting coming out. These two things should be separately considered. I support the LGBT group, but coming out is too dangerous in the environment of contemporary football. The pressure they will face is not what we can imagine. I think this issue needs to be seriously thought about for the reason of safety.”

As this example shows, such dialogues almost always turn to more serious debate over the legitimacy of different sexual orientations or deliberations of the nature of homosexuality. Compared to racial equality, sexual equality has not been fully accepted as common sense even among online European football fans. A major debate exists between those who take a pathological conception of homosexuality and others (the

majority according to my observation) who aim to defend homosexuality as normal and natural and argue for equal rights, and even consider the practical strategies for the sexual minorities to deal with discrimination in reality.

Another way to promote sexual equality on the football topic board is the critical responses to those posts about the imaginations of particular players' sexual orientation. As a popular topic on the football topic board, the open discussions/assumptions about football players' sexuality often provoke reflections on the legitimacy of such discussion itself. The famous Italian footballer Inzaghi is often at the center of some discussions. A search for Inzaghi's name on the discussion board generates 5 posts that are explicit and direct about his sexual orientation. Some fans think Inzaghi's sexual orientation should not become a topic that deserves such central attention because it has nothing to do with the player's football talents and competence. Two representative comments are as follows:

“Why do you care so much about his orientation? Is this even important? No matter who he loves, it does not interfere that he is one of the greatest forwards of all time; it does not affect how much I like him.”

“You have created several posts asking about Inzaghi's sexuality. You seem to be so interested in this irrelevant issue. Doesn't this imply discrimination toward homosexuality?”

For these fans, the special focus already suggests certain level of discrimination. On the contrary, other discussants recognize the political value of such discussions as they believe the action of referring to the possibilities of alternative sexual identities of football players is in the first place a resistance to heterosexual hegemony. They think keeping silence to the issue of sexuality very likely becomes a form of consent to the

heteronormativity in both European football and broader Chinese society. Therefore, the discussion board should keep a space for such posts of imagination instead of simply taking them as irrelevant to football talents or strategies. Interestingly, no matter how polarized these two opinions towards the imagination of players' sexuality are, they both indicate the discussants' respect for alternative sexual identities and thus challenge to heteronormativity.

The above deliberations around homosexuality is progressive given that sexuality remains a silenced topic in China's mainstream political discourse yet is simultaneously commercialized in popular culture and in particular online entertainment. On the one hand, the mainstream news media are still silent to the issue of homosexuality while in the online space homosexuality is increasingly stigmatized in relation to cheating marriage and AIDS infections. On the other hand, the popular culture industry has started to exploit the values of homosexuality by highlighting the homosocial bonds among self-claimed heterosexual male stars to attract potential female audience. The suppression, stigmatization and commercialization of homosexuality have prevented the prosperity of rational, serious debates about sexuality in the over-entertained online spaces including Weibo and celebrity gossip forums. Yet the close connection of European football with this issue creates possibilities for Chinese fans to focus on it with an alternative attitude not allowed elsewhere. Although some comments are underlined with implicit homophobia, they mostly lead to disagreeing responses that reinterpret homosexuality in more positive ways.

7.3.3 Formation of Virtual Sphere on H Forum

I now analyze the ways in which the architecture of this football topic board allows for the formation of the virtual public sphere for the issues of race and sexuality among European football fans in terms of the key conditions for an ideal speech situation: equal participation; public interests; rational thinking; discursive democracy.

First of all, inclusive of varied topics across different leagues, clubs, and players, the football topic board is a comprehensive and general platform for European football that breaks the boundaries among club-based fan communities and facilitates equal participation of individual fans regardless of their club preferences. Such openness and inclusiveness make the discussion board easy to attract fans with different tastes (for leagues, clubs, and players) and in turn probably varying experience, opinions and thoughts to collectively form communicative actions. In addition, the gathering of fans across clubs is more likely to move the collective attention to the general public issues such as race and sexuality that apply to European football as a whole. In this sense, the football topic board offers the indispensable condition for public deliberations that social media cannot provide.

Compared to the H forum, the fan interactions on both Weibo and Wechat are usually limited among those who support the same team. In Chapter Six, I have demonstrated the significant roles of social media in the formation of Chinese local fan communities for European clubs. In fact, whether QQ, Weibo or Wechat, social media are based primarily on interpersonal connections among individual fans, which tends to produce an individualized, networked mode of communication rather than a communal space for public deliberations. On Weibo, European football fans including my

participants tend to follow peers supporting the same team with them and public accounts about particular clubs or club-based fan organizations. As a result, the Weibo fan communities as well as the interactions produced there often have clear boundaries that limit communication among fans of different clubs. Wechat has a similar design with Weibo to allow fans to get connected with peers, form discussion groups about their favorite team, or follow the public account of the local fan organization. Comparatively, the football topic board enables Chinese fans to come out of the enclosed community based on social media in which they follow their favorite club and exchange ideas with fans of other European teams or even their opponents. Taking neutral attitudes to all clubs and players, the forum guarantees the equal participation of each user despite their preferences and backgrounds.

Second, the broad coverage of European football as a whole by the football topic board is another important factor for Chinese fans to raise awareness of racial and sexual equality. Their online deliberations on these public issues are inspired by discussions about European football, a sporting text with rich cultural and political implications for race and sexuality in the first place. From the example posts, we can easily find that European football itself has significant symbolic resources and ideological potentials that foster Chinese fans' political sensitivity and public concern to race and sexuality. These resources (e.g. reported incidents of discrimination, anti-discrimination campaigns, etc.) are unique because they are not available in local cultural texts and domestic sport competitions that are under tight ideological control by the Chinese authority to only promote the "core socialist values" and represent the "harmonious society" without social struggles. More importantly, through football consumption, Chinese fans have long been

exposed to the rise of the activism and campaigns against racism and homophobia in the European leagues and perhaps more progressive attitudes toward race and sexuality. This might explain why the online discussions around European football, which still contains serious racism itself, produce such progressive and counter-stereotypical discourses that are distinct from the Chinese dominant racist and heteronormative ideologies reproduced in mainstream media and other online spaces. In other words, the consumption of European football, along with their class position that enables their foreign language learning and international travel for football consumption, has prepared these fans with unique cultural capitals to conceptualize these social issues.

Third, the eloquence and rationality of deliberations shown from the H posts go far beyond fans' mania for certain club or player as imagined by the public. It is apparent from the example discussions that Chinese fans take race and sexuality as serious topics that deserve the judgment of legitimacy rather than objects only for entertainment and stigmatization. Indeed, these interactions display rational deliberative processes that rely on the presentation of evidence and theories instead of emotional, irrational quarrels that often occur in the Weibo comments. Fans' rational thinking is most apparent in those debates over biological determinism and the nature of homosexuality where both sides of the contrasting opinions can freely and fully demonstrate themselves in the continuous discussion flows. The football topic board suggests that the instant and anonymous nature of online discourse still leaves potentials for rational discussions as long as the discursive object---in this case European football---has sufficient symbolic resources to call for the discussants' concern for public issues. In addition, the unlimited data storage and presentation of the discussion board facilitates more in-depth, rational communication

compared to social media that are featured with the display and circulation of concise content. Each participant to the discussion thread has enough room to fully express their ideas without word limit. As a bounded online territory, the football topic board has also established regulations to promote rational and meaningful discussions and prevent verbal violence.

Finally, thanks to the topic (European football) it focuses on and the ways in which it presents fans' discussions, the H forum allows for relatively democratic exchanges of discourse that obtains some level of autonomy from government control. It is one of the very few platforms in China that still allows for continuous, rational deliberations on racial and sexual equality under the intensified Internet surveillance by the Chinese government. First, the implicitness of the political and cultural connotations/significance of European football has conferred it more advantages over other foreign cultural products in terms of free circulation and discussion on Chinese websites and social media. During the period of my dissertation writing, the Chinese authority has started taking intensive actions to forbid the censorship-free circulation of foreign (especially Western) films and TV drama on video websites. In July 2017, bilibili.com, the largest website for user-generated videos with live comments, deleted most full-length foreign cultural products translated and uploaded by netizens themselves with the excuse of copyright protection and resisting content with counter-socialist values. Accordingly, the websites, social media accounts, and discussion boards that follow these cultural texts are under high level of surveillance and control over free speech. For example, Weibo has prohibited its users from using names of foreign shows as part of their account IDs. The reference to some popular shows (e.g. the Korean reality show

Running Man) is completely blocked on Weibo, which forces viewers to create abbreviations or nicknames for strategic discussions. The gossip board on douban.com, one of the major online platforms for entertainment and celebrity gossip, is also exerting heavy control over the discussion posts and attempting to delete any post that touches on social problems. In fact, such censorship of posts is usually conducted by the managers of the discussion board who try to eliminate any risk of the crackdown of the board by the authority due to coverage of sensitive topics. This trend of restriction of circulation signifies the government's attempt to suppress the ideological impact of the online foreign cultural texts and the liberating deliberations potentially generated around such content. However, this incident seems to have little influence on European football as well as its online discursive space represented by the football topic board. The symbolic character of European football such as its seeming distance from ideology and politics makes itself a tolerated topic that is not at the center of the governmental censorship.

This of course does not mean that the football topic board is totally free from surveillance and censorship---as one of the most popular online sports fan community, the H forum has no reason to escape the authority's attention and alert given the current online environment and internet policy in China. Yet besides the symbolic advantages of its central topic (European football), the discussion board has other technological characteristics which might help it avoid surveillance to some extent. The H discussion posts normally start with European football itself and gradually develop into serious, rational deliberations. Hidden in the flow of the conversations, the political issues in discussion as well as fans' possibly counter-hegemonic ideas become less explicit and

more immune to the detection by the internet censors that focus more on the direct presentation of relevant keywords in the post titles.

7.3.4 Limitations for Further Activism

Despite its potential for a virtual public sphere, the football topic board has some limitations against the full accomplishment of deliberative democracy. According to Habermas' original framework, the public sphere should enable the participants with varying backgrounds and opinions to eventually form certain kind of consensus or mutual understanding on the public issue in discussion. No matter how rich the presentation of contrasting arguments and evidence is, Chinese fans' online deliberations might come to an end at any time without generating any clear conclusion, not to say concrete agreement. Indeed, the difficulty to guarantee the rational debate being continued until consensus is achieved applies to almost all types of virtual public sphere as long as the participation is voluntary and convenient, just as with H users' activities on the football topic board.

Moreover, although the discussion board provides H users with a precious space for rational deliberations and critical reflections on racial and sexual equality that are rarely possible on other Chinese online platforms, most debates there revolve around the theoretical justification and political promotion of such forms of equality. Some fans occasionally extend their critique of racism and homophobia in the context of European football to concrete cases of discrimination that occur in the contemporary Chinese society, but the H deliberations can hardly develop into formal local struggles such as offline political campaigns against racism and homophobia. In other words, the political

potentials of Chinese fans and their online discussions have not been visible to or incorporated in the actions of the Chinese activist groups.

Finally, Chinese fans' online deliberations concentrate on the political issues most visible in European football. This means that other public concerns more widespread than race and sexuality, such as government corruption, economic disparity, and political democracy, are still insufficiently mentioned, if not totally ignored, on the football topic board. In this sense, the offline implications of this virtual sphere for the transformations of contemporary political and economic structures are still limited.

7.4 Conclusions and Discussions

This chapter demonstrates the formation of virtual public sphere on the H forum and the emergence of struggles over race and sexuality Chinese fans' discussions in this sphere. The in-depth analysis of Chinese fans' online discourses indicates that the conventional form of online discussion board for European football possesses specific technological and symbolic affordances that allow for serious deliberations on certain social and political issues that can rarely be openly discussed in other public spaces in China. First, the formation of such virtual public sphere in the online fandom relies on the distinctive ways in which the discussion board displays the flow of discussions, which not only makes the reference to sensitive issues possible but also allows for deeper and longer conversations compared to social media that are featured by concise texts and conversations. Second, the textual specificity of European football also offers necessary conditions for my participants to realize the issues about race and sexuality and develop relatively safe discussions about them with little governmental surveillance or control. Coinciding with Habermas' original theorization about public sphere as historical and

social formations, my observations inform that the emergence of virtual public sphere depends heavily on the social, cultural, and technological conditions in which the discursive practices are situated.

As discussed in Chapter Four, Chinese fans' access to the text of European football through various media technologies is closely related to their position as young urban middle class in transitioning China. In this sense, although the online space has long been thought to destabilize identity and break the social hierarchy in real life, the virtual sphere still likely has its class and social boundaries based on offline experience. Through their online discursive struggles over race and sexuality, Chinese fans of European football once again present their political potentials as young urban middle class in reforming China. Yet such class-bounded virtual public sphere in the European football fandom inspires us to rethink about the virtual sphere as a product outside of the embodied social structures.

On the other hand, this chapter pointed out how unlikely it is that the virtual sphere for Chinese fans would develop into offline activism for social and political changes. This is largely be due to the technical limitations of the forum from forming discussions that can produce long-term solidarity and unity. The spontaneous and convenient nature of the democratic deliberations is quite similar to that of fans' relationships in local organizations which are partly established through social media. Overall, the collectiveness of my participants, whether in the local organizations and the virtual sphere, is dissolved and individualized through the new technology to the extent that it does not necessarily lead to more substantial collective actions of resistance.

Finally, the examination of the H forum has also led me to reflect on my role and approach as researcher. My claim about the forum as a rare and safe sphere for racial and sexuality struggles is likely to expose this sphere with democratic potentials to the governmental surveillance and control. Therefore, I am cautious about making the balance between demonstrating the power of fans' online discourses and protecting them from being spotted by the Chinese authority. This is why I have not presented the actual name and web address of the H forum in this chapter. I have also kept all the comments in analysis here as anonymous so that the identity of the discussion participants remains unknown to the public. This is particularly necessary after China passed the Cybersecurity Law in 2016 which associates the online identities of Chinese citizens with their real names and national identification number in order to strength the surveillance of citizen's online activities.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS: FOOTBALL FANDOM AND SUBJECT FORMATIONS IN AUTHORITARIAN DIGITAL CAPITALISM

8.1 Introduction

This project offers an initial comprehensive examination of the Chinese fandom of European football in the context of China's economic and social transitions. Using online and offline ethnography, critical discourse analysis, and textual analysis, I explore the sociocultural roots, technological conditions, and political implications of Chinese fans' discourses and practices around European football.

8.2 Summary of Chapters

8.2.1 Subject Formations of Young Chinese Urban Middle Class

Using the poststructuralist approach to fan studies, my analysis defines this fandom as part of the subject formation of the Chinese urban middle class whose material, cultural and social conditions allow them to form the taste for European football and appropriate this transnational text for local ideological struggles. This definition is largely posited in Chapter Three and Chapter Four where I present both these fans' subjective meaning-making of the fan text and their objective situations in contemporary Chinese society. Incorporating both cultural studies and cultural sociology (particularly the Bourdieusian approach), I articulate the interplay between my participants' agency as active fans and their class positions which contextualize their consumption of European football. This interplay, as my analysis shows, leads to fans' challenges to the mainstream neoliberal discourse of utilitarian individualism as well as their efforts to make distinction from other social groups with the taste for European football. In this sense, my

participants' fan experience is articulated with the conditioned subjectivity of the urban middle-class that emerges from the post-Maoist reconstruction of social structures.

8.2.2 Digital Media Practices: Formation of Individualized Virtual Collectivity

While I answer the broad question of why my participants become European football fans in the third and fourth chapters, I continue to explore how these fans consume European football as part of everyday life through digital technology in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. Through the investigation of these urban middle-class fans' digital media practices around football spectatorship, community building and online football discussions, I discover that local social media and websites, with their distinct technological affordances, play important roles in shaping football consumption and the structures/relations of the fandom. I argue that digital technology, along with the text of European football, allows my participants to achieve a unique form of collectivity that transcends the real/virtual spaces. Represented by the prevalence of offline gathering and virtual sphere in the fandom, such collectivity is hardly possible in other transnational cultural consumption or digital media practices which receive increasingly severe governmental control in China. However, the European football fan collective carries such individualistic characters as fluid identity, convenient participation, and flexible relationships. I propose the concept of "individualized virtual collectivity" to account for this contradictory nature of Chinese fans' digital media practices. This concept is set apart from the idea of the "networked individualism" (Castells, 2001; Rainie & Wellman, 2012), one of the mainstream academic views about nature of digital connections, which states that individuals are networked as members of diverse and dispersed groups in which they seek different things (Castells, 2001). My participants are essentially

collective with common taste, collective practices, a specific form of community, and even class consciousness, though their collectiveness is quite different from the conventional criteria of collectivism in terms of the presence of individual identity and relationships, and actions. This individualized virtual collectivity has posed obstacles for the participants extending their ideological struggles and class consciousness to more substantial political actions in real life.

8.3 The Contradictions

A holistic review of the previous chapters suggests an interesting paradox in Chinese European football fans' discourses, practices and their power negotiations reflected from these processes. On the discursive and ideological levels, the participants are progressive enough to contest the neoliberal values characterized by utilitarian individualism which are rising from China's economic re-orientation toward state capitalism and global free market. Their celebration of collectivism from the interpretations of European football echoes their awareness of the class base of the fandom as well as their collective presence in both offline and online spaces. Along with this ideological resistance to neoliberal individualism, European football fans' discursive practices also involve critical reflections and deliberations on other sensitive issues such as race and sexuality. All these factors direct to the democratic potentials of this fandom.

Nevertheless, on the material and practical levels, the fan subjects are situated in this individualized virtual collectivity shaped by digital technologies, which essentially holds many individualistic characters and in turn dissolves the solidarity and sense of community required for formal collective activism. Subsequently, at least reflected during the period of my research, Chinese fans' subversions on the ideological level has

not been fully developed to more concrete and explicit resistance through political actions. Their collective concern for issues such as class, race, and sexuality has not inspired them to engage in local activism for these social problems.

This paradox between European football fans' subjective critique of individualism and their objective situation in the individualized collectivity needs to be understood in the complex context of China's economic and social transitions. As discussed in Chapter One, since the beginning of the new Millennium, China's economic reform has been deepening by switching its focus from the industrial labor-concentrated manufacturing sector to the post-industrial technology-concentrated information sector. This transition is part of the state project of legitimizing Communist Party's continuous control through economic and political means that are internally contradictory with each other. In the economic sphere, the Chinese authority must guarantee the sustainable economic growth of the state, which is the one and foremost basis of its political control according to the public discourse it has produced. However, in recent years, China's economic development, formally relying on labor-centered industries, has been facing such challenges as increased labor cost, surplus productivity, and saturated domestic market. To overcome these problems, the state is strengthening the neoliberal reform by further promoting and participating in the global market, which is perhaps represented by the initiation of the transnational project of "One Belt One Road Initiative" (一带一路)³.

³ One Belt One Road Initiative, also known as The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, The Belt and Road, and The Belt and Road Initiative, is a development strategy proposed by Chinese Government that focuses on connectivity and cooperation between Eurasian countries and China. The strategy underlines China's push to take a larger role in global affairs with a China-centered trading network. In the past three years, the focuses were mainly on infrastructure investment, construction materials, railway and highway, automobile, real estate, power grid, and iron and steel.

Meanwhile, the state's economic focus has to turn to the service and information sector driven by new technology to both release the burdens on manufacturing industries and create new space in the domestic market. As the current trend shows, the digital technology industry, with tremendous governmental support, does not only produce information commodities within itself but also serve as a crucial means for other capitalist endeavors. The Chinese authority is also eager to promote the commercial potentials of digital media for profit-making and convenient life. A typical example of this is the rapid growth of e-commerce in China, whose best representative, Alibaba Group, has almost become the symbol of China's hi-tech industry with international recognition. Nevertheless, the intensified capitalist reform has not brought more democratic changes in the political sector. With the possibility of the slowdown of economic growth, government has to reinvent a conservative ideology and take a more oppressive approach toward political resistance to maintain its authority. The government is particularly sensitive to and tries to repress the power of digital media to facilitate the dissemination of dissenting opinions and the coordination of political protests in real life. This is most apparently manifested from the deletion of the online discussions about political issues and the blocking of social media accounts of political dissidents and social activists. In other words, the Chinese government shapes digital technology as an entrepreneurial and consumerist vehicle but oppresses its potentials as a democratic means for civic and political engagement.

In this sense, digital technology is at the center of China's state project of authoritarian capitalism which is paradoxically promoting neoliberalism in the economic sphere and strengthening authoritarian control in the political sphere. It is within China's

transition to such authoritarian digital capitalism that Weibo and Wechat and other digital media that European football fans use to form their collectivity are rapidly rising and taking prevalence for everyday communication. These platforms, along with China's technological revolution in general, are themselves products of this contradictory totalitarian neoliberal reform and are constructed in a way to facilitate consumerism and avoid resistance. Therefore, it is very likely that the political potentials of digital media are dissolved in the conspiracy between neoliberal capitalism and authoritarian control. On the other hand, Chinese fans' social status as urban middle class might also contribute to the inconsistency between their ideological resistance and practical conformity/silence. Their material conditions situate them in a position that creates dissatisfaction about the status-quo, but which is not miserable enough to form social mobilizations against the authority. Similarly, their use of digital technology for their fan practices does not explicitly carry political purposes.

8.4 Broader theoretical implications and Future research directions

In this final section, I outline some broader implications this project can contribute to the theoretical development of fan studies, digital media, and transnational cultural consumption. First, I have attempted to integrate the "incorporate/resistance" paradigm into the poststructuralist approach I take to explore the Chinese fandom of European football. While the poststructuralist conceptualization of fan experience as part of everyday life runs the risk of overlooking the political potentials of popular culture fans that are actually embedded in their seemingly apolitical practices, this project investigates the possibility for fan empowerment and power struggles of the discursive and digital practices in the everyday context. As my analysis shows, instead of being

totally incompatible the “incorporate/resistance” framework, the poststructuralist approach nicely explains how fans’ resistance and/or conformity is dynamically produced, maintained, adjusted and dissolved from various discursive, ideological and material dimensions. For the current case, this approach helps reveal the articulation between Chinese fans of European football and the young urban middle class as well as the details of these fans’ daily experience in a reforming society toward the dual intensification of marketization and authoritarianism. These findings lay the foundations for the further discussions about the possibility of these fans’ power struggles over the broader economic, social and political arrangements in China, and why such struggles are likely or not. My dissertation indicates that the better way to study fandom is a poststructuralist “incorporate/resistance” approach, which searches for the possible resistance and agency of fans from their real experience of subject formations on a daily basis.

Second, this project suggests a complex and even contradictory view about the liberating power of digital sports and cultural consumption. Previous research on digital media and sports fans has centered around the utopia/dystopia debates over digital technology, either seeing digital media as new platforms for fans to make voices, form subjectivity and showcase productivity (the cultural studies perspective) or criticizing them as the conspirators with sports commercialization that exploits’ fans free labor for branding and expansion of the profit-oriented sports teams (the political economy perspective). Chinese fans’ appropriation of digital technology in the consumption of European football does not support such simple dichotomy. It indicates the ways in which digital media practices allow football fans to exhibit subjectivity through online and offline collective formations which simultaneously have their social and political

limitations. More importantly, rather than only determined by the technology, the process of fans' subject formation is based on the coordination among the technology affordances (those of local social media and websites), the meanings of the digital text (European football), the political and social context, and fans' own identity and position in that context. As for the European football fans in China, some of their digital practices and discourses, such as the social media-initiated gatherings and the online deliberations about race and sexuality, might seem normal and not even be considered as political in other national contexts. But these non-commercial digital practices already hold specific political significance and democratic implications during China's transition to the authoritarian digital capitalism when the digital technology is solely promoted by the authority as a capitalist vehicle. On the other hand, how these urban middle-class fans use digital media might not tell the whole story about the general political implications of digital technology in China. Other social classes are likely to use new technology to produce, consume, and discuss very distinctive texts and topics in drastically different ways from the urban middle-class. Correspondingly, the democratic potentials of digital media for these classes, including how their power struggles are developed and dissolved by the social formations of the authoritarian digital capitalism, need further separate exploration. After all, this project offers insights into how the political potentials of digital practices are compounded by social transitions and state control and in the context of China's transition to a digitized authoritarian capitalist state.

Finally, this project attempts to contribute to the theorization of transnational cultural consumption a non-Eurocentric perspective. The Chinese fandom of European football presents an interesting case of the role of transnational media and cultural

practices in the class and social formations in transitioning China. The discovery of distinct processes and the proposal of new concepts in my dissertation suggest that non-Western societies should not be treated solely as empirical sites for verifying Western theories but as starting points for new theoretical approaches. In addition, my focus on European football shows that contesting Eurocentrism does not have to completely get rid of Western media and cultural texts as research objects. Rather, we can start with the reception side of these text and see them as what local subjects project their ideological contestations on without determining the textual meanings based on the production process in the Euro-American contexts. The study of how Western content is consumed by non-Western subject is indeed an attempt to decentralize Western cultures and place the fans/users at the center of the inquiry. Future research can continue to more deeply explore the transnational consumption of and practices around the globalized Western cultural texts in other social contexts and the ways in which subjectivity and resistance are possibly formed.

APPENDIX
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background Questions:

1. How old are you?
2. Where were you born?
3. What is your occupation?
4. What is your education background?
5. What is your monthly income?

Part I: Reading of football and fan objects

6. When and how did you start watching football?
7. Are there particular clubs, players, or leagues that you follow? How did you come to follow these ones?
8. What unique characteristics of your club/player attract you most to make you a fan? (This question might be followed by other questions guiding the interviewee to talk about their views on class, race and gender. For example, if the interviewee if the interviewee likes an individual player, his/her discussion of the player's characters will likely reflect his/her ideals of masculinity. Or if this player is non-white, the interviewee is likely to talk about his/her ideas about race.)
9. Do you think winning trophies are an important condition for the club to win your heart?
10. Could you remember some most impressive and defining moments during your support of the club/player?

11. Are there any clubs (or players) that you particularly do not like? Why? What are the differences between your beloved clubs/players and disliked ones?
12. Why do you prefer football in general? How do you think football is distinct from or perhaps better than other sports?
13. Why do you choose to support a European club/player instead of the local ones?
14. How will you compare European football with other locally popular sports?
15. As we all know, we Chinese are notorious for not being good at football, does this fact have any influence on your attention to European football? (national identity-related)

Part II: Fan Practices and Productivity

16. What is your routine of following your club/player?
17. How often do you watch the live matches of your club? Why?
18. How is this routine related to your daily life as a whole?
19. How do you usually watch games? What do you do besides watching the games?
Who do you discuss football with?
20. How do you make balance between your work/study schedule and your leisure interests in watching football?
21. (If you are interested in online fan discussion), what topics do you find most interesting and valuable? How would you participate in the discussion?
22. (If the interviewer is a member of the fan organizations) What do you usually do with other members? How often do you contact with each other? What does this fan community mean to you?
23. Could you recall any unforgettable experiences or practices you have undergone in your following?

24. What are your relationships with other fans? Do you know anything else about your peers besides your common interests in the club?
25. How would you define an “authentic” European football fan? What an authentic fan should do?
26. Are there any practices by other fans of your club that you do not like?
27. Who do you think can be called as ‘inauthentic’ fans?
28. How do you think about the increasing number of female football fans? (follow-up questions regarding the relations between female fans and inauthenticity).

Part III: Media Usage

29. Which medium do you usually choose to watch games? Find information?
Engage in Discussion?
30. How do you use the internet and other digital media in your fan experiences?
31. What role do you think new media play in your fan experiences? How is the digital media different from traditional media such as television and newspaper in accessing games, information and discussion?
32. Do you want to become friends in real life with those who you discuss football with on the internet? (class-related)

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