

The China Question in Football in Australia

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Introduction: Geopolitics and Football

In the 21st century, China became Australia's largest trading partner (both export and import), and a major (though by no means the largest) investor in the country.¹ Following the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement, in operation since December 2015, Australia has become the second largest recipient of Chinese outbound direct investment and China is now one of the country's top investors.² Chinese immigration has been prominent in Australia since the mid-nineteenth century, but it is only in recent years that the country (since 1997 incorporating, of course, the former British colony of Hong Kong) has become the largest single source of permanent new migrants to Australia.³ Australia's principal strategic ally, the US, is its second largest trading partner, but when two-way investment is taken into account, the US remains Australia's largest economic partner.⁴ Australia, therefore, is in various ways caught between the dominant world power and its main imperial rival, while retaining a significant historically-conditioned postcolonial linkage with Britain. Its regionally-oriented turn towards Asia has also meant that Australia must carefully negotiate multiple relationships with major Asian powers such as Japan, Korea, Indonesia and India, as well as with the 43 other countries of varying proximity and size across the continent. Australia also has affiliations and responsibilities in the western Pacific across Australasia, Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia.

Football (still frequently called soccer in Australia, despite the efforts of its governing body, Football Federation Australia) has necessarily been implicated in these major geo-political, economic and national-cultural matters. For example, in leaving the small Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) for the much larger Asian Football Confederation (AFC) in 2006 (after

many years of trying), football aligned itself with the direction advocated in 2012 by the Gillard-led Labor federal government's,⁵ which makes explicit reference to "football diplomacy" in Asia. Professional football in Australia, especially at national league level (the current iterations of which are the A- and W-Leagues) has struggled, like many of its regional counterparts in the Asia-Pacific,⁶ to establish itself in competition with rival sports (in Australia's case including three football codes, rugby union, rugby league and Australian rules⁷ and with Europe-based competitions like the UEFA Champions League, English Premier League and Spain's La Liga. In contrast, its major national men's and women's teams, respectively the Socceroos and the Matildas, are well recognized in the country, in Asia and beyond. The Socceroos are current AFC Asian Cup champions, defeating South Korea in the final in Sydney in 2015 after beating China in the quarter-finals in Brisbane, and have qualified for the last four World Cups. The Matildas, at the time of writing (August 2018) ranked eighth in the world by FIFA (the Socceroos being 43rd), have been finalists in the last three AFC Women's Asian Cup tournaments (winning the Cup in 2010), have qualified for the last seven World Cups, and were winners of the inaugural Tournament of Nations in 2017, the same year in which they were Public Choice Team of the Year at the Australian Institute of Sport Awards.

Australia's broad need to take careful account of developments in China is no less applicable to the sphere of football. Although China does not dominate football in Asia in either economic or sporting terms, its unparalleled state-endorsed expansion and ambition⁸ is of particular significance in the Australian context. This chapter addresses key manifestations of football in Australia's relationship with China: Australia's identity and China's approach to recognition of Australia as an Asian football country (for example, the foreign player rules regarding Australian players in the Chinese Super League, and attitudes of Chinese and Australian football fans towards Australia competing in Asian competitions); Chinese interest

in football in Australia, including actual and proposed ownership of A-League clubs and inter-club networking; and orientations to football among Chinese-Australian communities, particularly the positioning of grassroots Chinese leagues and football fan connections to the game in Australia. In bringing these various threads together, we seek to illuminate football's global, regional and national dynamics, while exposing the many ways in which the game – and sport in general – is inevitably embedded in social, political, cultural and economic relations ranging from the hyper-local to the global.

Positioning Football in Australia

Australia's attempted positioning as an Asian nation (at least in some respects) has been resisted both internally and externally in that, as a former British colony (only achieving the status of an independent nation-state in 1901 – albeit one which retains the Queen of the United Kingdom as its head of state), it is historically aligned with the West. As noted earlier, though, this concept of the West does not equally embrace all notionally Western nations, with Australia's connection to Britain, the US and the broader Anglosphere (including Ireland in Europe and regional neighbour New Zealand) a powerful influence on its national identity. Ironically, football in Australia, despite Britain being the “home” of the transformation of “folk football” into the modern game, became associated with elements of the West that were also identified with the “Other”, especially the post-World War II wave of southern European migrants⁹. Thus, football in Australia is in some ways doubly anomalous in the Asian context – many in Asia and inside the country do not see Australia as an “Asian” nation,¹⁰ while many in Australia have not viewed football as a genuinely “Australian” sport.¹¹ It appears that, despite intermittent tabloid media over-reactions to football fan disorder that are often ethnocentric, and criticisms by other football codes,¹² the game is becoming more integrated into mainstream Australian culture. Nonetheless, there is still some resistance to its identification with Asia, from both within and without.

Inside Australia, a focus of anti-Asian sentiment since the mid-1990s (later with a more specific anti-Muslim turn) has been focused on the politician Pauline Hanson and her political party *One Nation*.¹³ In wider political circles, some anxiety has been expressed regarding China's economic and political rise in the region, including the exertion of Chinese Communist party influence in Australian society via, for example, businesspeople and international students. Former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull referred to "disturbing reports about Chinese influence",¹⁴ while Clive Hamilton's (2018) *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia*¹⁵ has claimed that agents of the Chinese state have insinuated themselves into Australian public life.¹⁶

Outside Australia, there have also been moments in which Asian leaders have questioned Australia's presence in Asia, including Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's 2002 well-known interview with the *Australian* newspaper in which he stated that, "Australia has to choose whether it's an Asian country or a western country. If you take the position of being a deputy sheriff to America, you cannot very well be accepted by the countries of this region."¹⁷ Rumblings among some AFC members in the west of the continent about removing Australia, which came on the eve of the 2015 AFC Asian Cup Final that, as noted, was hosted and won by Australia¹⁸, indicate how such sentiment also resonates within football in Asia. From the perspective of Football Federation Australia (FFA), the great advantage of being part of the AFC was not just that, compared with the OFC, it was entering a much larger, more lucrative sport market and was able to participate in a higher level of competition. FFA's *We Are Football: This is Our Vision: Whole of Football Plan* also envisaged a much wider community role, including that:

Football will become more than just a sport. It will have an increasingly important role to play in social cohesion, community integration, physical health and well-being, and international relations and economic development, particularly in Asia.

...

The Asian Century. The rise of Asia will mean changes to who populates Australia, who we trade with and where we source capital from, an evolution that will change everyday life in Australia.¹⁹

China is not singled out for discussion in the Plan. While this absence is to some degree understandable given that it is only one part of Asia, it is nonetheless both of particular economic importance to Australia and, as noted, the subject of considerable political sensitivity.²⁰ Significantly, most Chinese investment in Australia has been undertaken by state-owned enterprises.²¹ Despite recent restrictions on its outbound investment,²² there is evident Chinese willingness to use sport to advance both its international influence and image. Following the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, seen as a “milestone in [its] exploration of soft power”,²³ Chinese backing of football expansion has accelerated. Just as sport is conceived as a domain of public diplomacy in Australia, China has also appreciated the diplomatic possibilities of sport/football to operate as a vehicle of softpower in which cultural influence and social networks are emphasized rather than economic and military prowess. It is useful, then, to explore more closely Chinese involvement in football in Australia.

Chinese Investment in Football

For a national sport that was bankrupt and reliant on major public funding at the start of the 21st century,²⁴ an infusion of capital is welcome, irrespective of its source. While the country’s national teams are currently enjoying playing success in the AFC, it is uncertain whether the projected financial advancement will be realized. In the men’s game, since 2007 the New Zealand Knights (a foundation member of the league), North Queensland Fury, and

Gold Coast United clubs have been expelled from the elite professional men's competition, the Hyundai A-League, by FFA on grounds of being financially unviable. The A-League continues to be beset by financial worries, with the clubs claiming that they had lost AU\$300 million in the first 14 years of the competition,²⁵ and a number struggling to pay player wages at various times.²⁶ Pay disputes between FFA and both the national women's team and the country's elite women's competition (the W-League) have also occurred in recent years. Against this backdrop, inward investment in football in Australia is appealing, notably from an expansionist China. Clubs and players have looked to capitalize on the recent, rapid financial rise of Chinese football in a variety of ways. First, in something of a reversal of traditional sport labour migration patterns,²⁷ China has become an importer of overseas players (and notably those close to the peak of their careers, such as the Brazilian players Oscar, Hulk and Alex Teixeira), and Australians have increasingly profited from the high wages on offer in the Chinese Super League. Unlike the AFL, which has tried to 'export' an overwhelmingly, unknown game to China, football has the advantage of already being established there and across the world.

Since Australia's move to the AFC, 38 Australian players (as of July 2018), including a number of Socceroos players (such as Matthew Spiranovic and Robbie Kruse) and the country's record goal scorer and best-known player, Tim Cahill, have played in the Chinese Super League. Although Chinese clubs face restrictions on the amount of money they can spend on foreign signings and the number of foreign footballers that they are allowed to field, Australians have benefitted from the requirement that, of the maximum three foreign players who can take the field for a club, one must be from an AFC nation. For this reason, it has been claimed that the "Chinese view of the Australian football market is that it's second after Europe" for sourcing overseas players.²⁸ However, the presence of a comparatively low salary cap in the A-League, and restrictions on the transfer fees that can be paid when players move

between Australian teams, means that Chinese clubs have been able to secure “relatively cheap” deals involving Australian players.²⁹ Therefore, owners of Australian clubs have not reaped the same financial rewards from transfers as European clubs (who can demand higher transfer fees if players are not free agents), and have looked to capitalize on Chinese investment in other ways, such as through the sale of the clubs themselves.

The Shenzhen-based Ledman Group, styled as a “leading high-tech LED signage manufacturer, operator and integrated sports business,”³⁰ purchased the Newcastle Jets A-League club in June 2016 for a reported price of AU\$5.5 million.³¹ Of particular note is that this infusion of Chinese capital into an Australian club replaced, following an interim period of FFA ownership and control, ownership by the Australian coal mining magnate Nathan Tinkler. In 2015, FFA cancelled Tinkler’s Hunter Sports Group A-league licence after he had placed the Jets in voluntary administration.³² Ironically, Tinkler’s financial travails, which led to bankruptcy, were caused by the downturn in a coal market that had previously boomed largely due to demand from China, as well as by ill-advised football, rugby league and horse racing investments. The purchase by Ledman Group was hailed as a “significant step in Australian football’s engagement with Asia” by FFA Chairman Steven Lowy, who also claimed that this sale was evidence that the relocation to the AFC had “delivered a dynamic relationship built on trust and mutually beneficial activities.”³³ This position echoed that of the Australian government³⁴ that football’s enmeshment with Asia could deliver both financial and diplomatic benefits. During the media conference that announced the takeover, Ledman’s chairman, Martin Lee, outlined the company’s reasons for the purchase:

We [Ledman] see a bright future for football across Asia and the Hyundai A-League is at the forefront as one of the top professional leagues in the region...The investment aligns with Ledman's activities in several sectors of the sports industry and I'm excited by the potential of the club.³⁵

This investment was linked in some press reports explicitly to President Xi Jinping's strategy to develop the Chinese sports industry, and with a strong emphasis on football.³⁶ Yet, it should be noted that the internal and external development of Chinese football predated Xi's presidency, which commenced in 2012. For example, since the turn of the new century, large Chinese companies have invested in football to gain favour with their national government and to assist in the quest for the country to become a football superpower.³⁷ Ledman certainly has strong ties to domestic football in China. It has been an official partner of both the Chinese Super League and the second-tier China League, and has a strategic partnership with the Chinese Football Association. It also owns Shenzhen Ledman Football Club, which competes in the third tier of Chinese football. Furthermore, it has a history of overseas football investment after acquiring the naming rights to Portugal's second tier.

Lee also stated that his aim was for the club to compete in the AFC Champions League within three years, which the Jets achieved when securing a place in the group stages of the 2019 edition by reaching the 2018 A-League Grand Final. The AFC Champions League is second only to its European equivalent in terms of prize money for an intracontinental club tournament (the 2018 winners receiving US\$4 million). It is, therefore, an opportunity for a return on Ledman's investment, in addition to aligning with the Chinese government's ambition to extend the nation's influence in football around the region and the world. Significantly, Lee pointed to the relative ease of qualification for the regional competition through a 10-team A-League that does not relegate teams finishing at the foot of the table, when compared to the larger, more capital-intensive Chinese Super League in which two teams are annually relegated (and, of course, promoted):

It [qualifying for the AFC Champions League] is a very difficult thing in Chinese football. For the Ledman group to invest in the Jets and to achieve this. This step will help the Ledman Group get more business.³⁸

Ledman Group has found additional ways to leverage the takeover, mainly through the use of what can be called softpower overtures. For example, in 2016 Newcastle embarked on a pre-season tour to play friendly matches against teams in China. This trip was in the financial interest of the club in helping to develop a Chinese fan base and to find a larger market for its merchandise, and by enhancing its profile in China. The Jets' players and staff were also given a tour of the company's headquarters, speeches from staff, and a video "explaining Ledman Group's operations in order to give them a deeper understanding of the company's diverse business profile."³⁹ With this demonstration of the company's (and, by extension, the country's) economic and technological prowess, the depth and breadth of China's links with Australia were exposed and consolidated in a manner that foregrounded the role of the culture of football within an extensive web of relations. As a further indicator of the growing interest from Chinese football investors (among others) in the Australian market, in March 2018, Adelaide United, a fellow A-League club, was bought by a group of "predominantly European businesspeople with commercial activities in Europe, Australia and Asia",⁴⁰ and with company offices located in Hong Kong. The new owners are reported to "want to integrate Adelaide United into sort of a global football family"⁴¹ which already involves clubs in the Netherlands, France, and China.

Chinese investment in Australian clubs has also aimed to exploit the potential growth of the domestic competition. To strengthen the A-League, FFA announced that two additional clubs would be joining the competition, commencing with the 2019/20 season. Despite fears surrounding the financial viability of an expansion and ongoing challenges to the governance of football in Australia,⁴² 15 consortia entered the bidding process.⁴³ Amongst these bids to

secure a professional club license to compete in the W-League, A-League and National Youth League was one from the Gold Coast, which was reported to be backed by “Chinese investors”⁴⁴ and another, led by the Southern Expansion group that is based in southern Sydney/Wollongong. Southern Expansion, with prominent broadcasters (the late) Les Murray and Craig Foster as its local “champions”, was widely reported to be backed by the Chinese property conglomerate Jia Yuan Group.⁴⁵ It subsequently announced a formal “sister club” relationship with Guizhou Hengfeng Football Club, which plays in the Chinese Super League. This relationship stemmed from an investment by Jia Yuan in the parent company of Guizhou and, according to Southern Expansion’s chairman, Morris Iemma (a former Premier of New South Wales), would “provide Southern with a direct pathway into the fast-growing Chinese Super League [...] [creating] meaningful relationships, programs and future initiatives.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, it was suggested that the link would provide engagement opportunities at a social and cultural level, with the two clubs considered to be ‘commercial and sporting brothers.’⁴⁷ While it can be assumed that Jia Yuan saw similar business opportunities to those identified by Ledman’s Lee, reciprocal benefits are apparent regarding Southern Expansion. In this instance, there seems to be evidence of the “dynamic relationship” and mutually beneficial activity that Steven Lowy had earlier heralded, but it would be naïve not to consider the softpower influence that will also be “at play” in this regard.

The interest of Chinese corporations in football in Australia demonstrates that closer strategic ties are being forged between these nations’ football communities, with an increasing number of football links between Australia and China in recent years. For instance, the governing body of football in New South Wales (Football NSW) has hosted several Chinese football clubs at its Valentine Sports Park training complex, welcoming a delegation from the Beijing Football Association in 2017 with the aim of promoting “football cooperation” between the two nations⁴⁸. Chinese Super League clubs Guangzhou R&F and Liaoning Whowin have also

toured Melbourne and New South Wales respectively during their pre-season preparations. The Matildas played a two-match “International Series” against their Chinese counterparts in 2017, with one aim of the series being to engage the local Chinese community in Melbourne⁴⁹. It is to this community level that we now turn.

Grassroots Football and Chinese-Australian Communities

At its grassroots, football is in the paradoxical position of having the highest overall participant rates yet the lowest fan, media, and revenue support among football codes.⁵⁰ Official participation data collected by AusPlay estimates that a total of 1,160,932 adults and children play football compared, for example, to 666,871 who play Australian Rules Football.⁵¹ The Australian Sports Commission⁵² (renamed Sport Australia in August 2018) also found that football is one of the top 20 most popular activities among adults and children in Australia: approximately 5.8 per cent of adults participate in football compared with 2.5 per cent in Australian rules football and 2 per cent in (the rugby-related) touch football. Importantly, 4.5 per cent out of 18 per cent of those engaged in club-centred sport are involved in football, which is ranked first among all other club sports. This paradox is compounded – or perhaps explained – by the pivotal role of non-Anglo ethnic communities in providing the foundation of the game in Australia. As Hallinan and Hughson⁵³ have noted, the policy in the early 21st century of ‘de-ethnicizing’ football, including constructing city/regionally-based rather than community-based club franchises at the professional level in the formation of the A-League, was motivated by commercial considerations (marketability) and to re-configure the game’s image as, in some sense, ‘post-ethnic’.

This ‘mainstreaming’ of football in Australia was reinforced through strategies including banning ethnic flags at games and preventing state league teams from openly acknowledging their ethnic lineage or their sponsors from community organizations with ethnic affiliations.⁵⁴

However, ethnicity remains important to community organization, not least in football, and to embracing the involvement of Chinese-Australians. The current sociocultural and political landscapes relating to Chinese-Australian communities' everyday engagement with football are important in going beyond a concern with Chinese financial capital in football in Australia to appraise its social capital dimensions (as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu⁵⁵ would conceive it). To take one area of everyday life, the media are influential sociocultural forces in, and transmitters of, information about sport, as they operate at the point of intersection between ethnicity and public diplomacy in the digital age. Chinese-Australians have access to a range of English and Chinese language media on multiple platforms produced in various local and international spaces. They can, for example, read Chinese and English versions of Chinese-owned newspapers like *China Daily* or the Chinese-Australian press. Sport/football content may vary greatly across these media – for example, the English language versions of *China Daily* in newspaper and website forms contain much more sport content than the Chinese language versions. The China-originating WeChat social media platform 'is transnational, linking Chinese speakers in Australia with the mainland Chinese population as well as with diasporic Chinese all over the world', with 11.4 per cent users in China 'Using WeChat sports'⁵⁶.

Current online social media news aggregation and blogging services (for example, Google News, Weebly, and Wordpress) are restricted in their description and understanding of Chinese communities' relationship to sport⁵⁷ - in this case football. In more traditional media, like newspapers, the meanings of both football and of Chinese communities are framed in ways that tend to highlight China's overseas investments and global economic prominence. The business opportunities that football brings through accessing potentially vast new audiences is often represented as the rationale for promoting football to Chinese communities. For example, headlines such as 'How Australia can benefit from China's football

investment'⁵⁸ and 'Chinese property group Jia Yuan throw support behind possible A-League team in southern Sydney'⁵⁹ are common in local English-language newspapers and on media websites. There is much less concern in these media with the role of football in the lives of Chinese-Australians.

Little is known and written about Chinese communities' everyday cultural interests and the feasibility of investment in local participation in football. But glimpses can be gained when, for example, major global football events are held in Australia. For example, during the 2015 AFC Asian Cup, football was frequently depicted as a tool of cultural diplomacy that could be used to strengthen relationships between Australia and its diasporic communities,⁶⁰ including Chinese-Australians. According to the *Brisbane Courier Mail*, 'a priority for organisers has been community engagement and the Chinese community of southeast Queensland plan to be out in force during the opening week'⁶¹. One observer, a stadium architect, reflected on the experience of watching the China-Australia quarter final of the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in a crowd of 50,000 at the stadium with 'more than 20 million people [were] also watching that same match on television in China'⁶². This relationship between co-present and distant audiences, connected via multiple media technologies from television to mobile phones, reveals the scope and diffusion of Chinese football communities.

Football within Chinese cultures cuts in various ways across class, gender and ethnicity.⁶³ However, despite the continuous, rapid growth of Chinese migration to Australia,⁶⁴ the development of grassroots football within Chinese communities has not been commensurate with its population size. In terms of participation and spectatorship in sport, Chinese-Australian communities are generally regarded as uninterested in sport and difficult to engage in all codes of football in Australia.⁶⁵ Often, rather one-dimensional explanations of their non-participation relate to a rejection of sport in favour of academic pursuits oriented to social

mobility and advancement and/or a lack of interest in sports such as football. Chinese-Australians tend to be represented as ethnically monolithic in a manner that ignores the considerable diversity across and within communities.⁶⁶ Although some academic studies⁶⁷ have demonstrated that there are Chinese-Australian young people who are interested in sport (including in football and rugby at a school level), they have also shown that this group experienced various social, economic and political challenges to participation. More broadly in relation to young Chinese-Australians' lifestyles, this research found that, despite in some cases wanting to do more sport, Chinese-Australian students may have fewer opportunities at home to deviate from traditionally dominant Chinese cultural practices such as academic and musical study. Thus, in promoting sports such as football to young people and their parents, it suggests that having different values and practices regarding sport can in many cases be a barrier to their participation. In explaining why so few Chinese-Australian girls have aspirations to pursue any kind of sport as a career, Pang and Hill⁶⁸ have noted that professional sport is 'unthinkable' (some possess the 'right' physical capital, in Bourdieusian terms, but have never thought about sport in those terms); 'unachievable' (some lack economic capital); or 'undesirable' for young girls (some lack interest in sporting culture and/or are concerned about its relationship to gender, social class and 'race').

Comment [DR1]: Op cit in Endnotes

As noted, the Chinese in Australia have historically tended to be viewed in monocultural terms, including in relation to lack of interest in sport.⁶⁹ But, in 1923, when the first Chinese football team toured Australia and played matches against an Australian team, it attracted positive media coverage⁷⁰ that challenged the anti-Chinese sentiment that had hitherto characterized many Australians' understandings of the Chinese, and certainly those presented in the media. In this sense, football had started to become a tool of cultural diplomacy encouraging Australians to rethink their attitudes towards China and to Chinese-Australians. Significantly, this pioneering Chinese football tour encouraged exposure of the myth that

Chinese-Australians constituted a singular 'race' and class. Familiar stereotypes of fragile, reserved Chinese uninterested in sport could also be challenged and reimagined in these circumstances. Researchers such as Honey⁷¹ have discussed how the tour promoted a public embrace of the Chinese in Australia that contributed to the reconciliation process for the victims of deep-seated racial hatred as manifested by the White Australia Policy⁷² which, until well into the 20th century, selected migrants on the grounds of 'race'. For local Chinese-Australian communities, the Chinese football tour provided an opportunity to confront White Australian prejudice and racial hierarchy. At the time, the Chinese press in Australia (for example, the newspaper *Tung Wah Times*) was instrumental in using the tour to help shape the interpretation of football as multicultural practice (although the concept was, as such, not yet in use), and to enhance understanding of the internal situation of China and its relationship to Chinese communities in Australia not generally well understood by European Australians.⁷³

It is worth noting that, almost a century after the first Chinese football tour of Australia, and despite the deepening of the Australia-Asia sport relationship,⁷⁴ the content of contemporary English language online social media sites⁷⁵ (~~Pang and Hill 2018~~) and empirical research findings still indicate that the Chinese are generally perceived as an undifferentiated group.⁷⁶

This culturally essentialist perspective tends to view Chinese-related cultural practices and interests as inherent and static, somehow removed from their sociocultural context, fuelling simplistic and essentialist perspectives of Chinese-Australian communities' lack of interest in sport. Such perspectives feed into a politics of difference that highlights fundamental incompatibility and irreconcilability, with little appreciation of diversity and relationship to social context. There is broader research⁷⁷ that disputes this perspective and which emphasizes the nuanced complexity of the values and practices of those who identify themselves as being of Chinese background, particularly with regard to their choices and

Comment [DR2]: Op cit in Endnotes

interests in sport and physical activity. Nonetheless, there is a dearth of academic research specifically related to Chinese-Australian communities' everyday experiences of grassroots football and their contribution to football culture in Australia.

Despite this knowledge gap, there is some evidence of a degree of engagement with football among Australia's Chinese communities. For example, the Australian Chinese Soccer Association (ACSA) is the first Chinese football association to be established in the country. Since 1995 it has aimed to promote football to Chinese communities in Sydney. Similarly, the Melbourne Chinese Soccer Association (MCSA) aims to 'provide opportunities for young people, predominantly but not exclusively of Chinese cultural heritage, to play football in a friendly competitive environment'.⁷⁸ At the executive and administrative level, an obvious observation from appraising the websites of ACSA and MCSA indicates that there is a lack of female and/or Anglo-Celtic committee membership. Thus, a multi-dimensional appraisal of organizational diversity reveals internal weakness regarding gendered and cultural representation. Nonetheless, MCSA notes that it has registered players and officials from more than 50 ethnic backgrounds. ACSA's and MCSA's community presence has had some positive effect on the increased participation of Chinese communities and of other ethnic groups in grassroots football. There is considerable scope, though, for this current, promising engagement to be translated into more substantial club membership, attendance at local football events, and an improved gender balance in executive roles within the clubs.

With regard to football spectatorship, the paucity of Chinese-Australian players and those imported players from China at football clubs in Australia helps to explain Chinese-Australian communities' low engagement with those clubs. As Parry indicates in his research on the role of "heroization" in the development of club culture in Australian rules football through a case study of the Greater Western Sydney Giants, identification with players is crucial to attract

new participants and audiences in demographically diverse urban areas.⁷⁹ Currently, Ma Leilei is the only Chinese imported player contracted to an A-League club – the Chinese-owned Newcastle Jets. As noted above, football in Australia was established at community level principally by northern and southern European migrants, who are often predisposed to follow major European teams rather than Chinese or Asian teams. Although the A-League was subject to the aforementioned policy of de-ethnicization designed to dissolve singular ethnic identification in favour of attachment to a cosmopolitan city or urban zone, such affiliations endure.⁸⁰ In any case, the global dominance of European club football, as signified by the major European leagues and the European Champions League, is such that it attracts vast audiences from around the world, including Asia. As has already been observed, Asian football clubs consequently find that their own domestic audiences may be more interested in glamorous European football ‘product’ than their domestic leagues.⁸¹ But national-ethnic-cultural affinity retains a capacity to establish affect- or emotion-based connections. Therefore, Chinese players and/or those of Chinese origin can attract those who identify with them to play and watch football. The same can be said of club owners. For this reason, Chinese involvement in the game’s development in Australia is an important factor in extending and reinforcing Chinese-Australian participation and spectatorship.

While China and Australia constitute rather divergent social and political landscapes, football can operate as common ground in helping to forge inter-communal relationships in transnational socio-cultural spaces.⁸² But the use of football to bolster both international relations with China and intra-national relationships with Chinese-Australian citizens remains underdeveloped. Regarding the latter, in order to establish better connections between Chinese communities and Australia football clubs, the meanings of cultural practice and consumption through engaging with football requires a deeper, ethnographically informed understanding that is yet to be established.

Conclusion: Softpower, Hard Ground

At the end of the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, *China Daily's* cover story, which consisted of four separate reflections on China and football, emphasised the scale of its global ambition regarding the game.⁸³ The involvement of Chinese sponsors such as, Dalian Wanda, Mengniu, Hisense and Vivo meant that the “seven Chinese companies” World Cup sponsorship totals US\$835 million, which is more than one-third of the event’s total revenue from sponsors’,⁸⁴ while China’s 2016 50-point plan for the reform and development of football is cited with specific reference to its goals of making its men’s and women’s teams among the strongest in the world. The sheer scale of this economic and sporting program puts Australia’s modest strategic initiatives in *We Are Football* into perspective. Here, “Australia comes into the frame”⁸⁵ as an offshore site for the development of football in China. According to player agent Tony Rallis:

It's a certainty that Chinese investors will look to buy A-League clubs. They see massive, untapped potential in Australia and, specifically, their academies...

The great part is they don't want to replace Australian kids, they want top Chinese juniors to learn alongside Australian juniors. So Australia gets to reap the benefits of academies that are well-resourced with top coaches, increased competition and better players...

Europe is financially ruined and long-term, China is where it's all going to happen, especially in regards to Australia. Inside ten years, Asian investment will drive world football. In many ways, it already is. But this is our chance.⁸⁶

Here the ambivalence towards China discussed above is again registered. Its economic investment in football in Australia is welcomed, but there still needs to be some reassertion that this does not entail dominance or displacement. The game in Australia is said to benefit from improved resourcing as China/Asia replaces Europe as the centre of world football, while the other key beneficiary is Chinese football itself. Sensitivities around hard economic, military and political power⁸⁷ are not altogether ameliorated by such appeals to softpower via football relations.⁸⁸ In addition, emphasis on transnational flows of football capital, knowledge and labour⁸⁹ is not accompanied by an equivalent concern with cultural flows or a recognition of the cultural dynamics of the lives of Chinese-Australians.

The China question in football in Australia is, then, a vexed one to some degree, involving a sport that has had historical barriers to recognition seeking to involve communities that have also experienced marginalization. Both football and Chinese-Australians are moving closer to the Australian cultural mainstream, and encountering some resistance from other sports in the case of the former, and from those concerned about the “New Chinese” (principally from the mainland⁹⁰) regarding the latter. The “field of dreams” on which football in Australia and China is played extends across the Asia-Pacific and the globe, and is shaped by forces far greater than the game itself.

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