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Challenges and complexities of imagining nationhood: The case of Hong Kong's naturalized footballers

Abstract

In the field of sports and nationalism, little has been done to explore the process of how a member from another nation become representatives of another imagined community. In view of the growing significance of naturalization of foreign sporting talents in international sports, this paper highlights the complexities of the imagining a '*deep, horizontal comradeship*' through the case of Hong Kong's naturalized football representatives, with a focus on the negotiation of 'Hong Kongness' and 'Chineseness' among fans and naturalized representatives regarding selected contents in the stadium. It is argued that fans and naturalized players are constantly reminded of an inclusive Hong Kongness and an exclusive Chineseness that facilitated the acceptance of naturalized footballers as representatives of Hong Kong's imagined community. But at the same time, paradoxes are identified in the imagination of a '*deep, horizontal comradeship*' between Hong Kong citizens and the naturalized footballers.

Keywords: football; nationalism; imagined community; naturalization; Hong Kong

Introduction

Anderson's *Imagined Communities* thesis provided an alternative explanation to the theoretical debate on the origin of nations and nationalism with a macro, historical approach. Instead of positioning nationalism ideologically, Anderson (2006) proposed to regard nationalism as a specific way to make sense of belonging through the imagination of a '*deep, horizontal comradeship*'. He argued that our social world is consisted of imagined communities, ranging from sizes and ways that are being imagined.

'(a nation) is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.' (Anderson 2006, 6-7)

For Anderson, the concept of nation is imagined, as it requires one's imagination to consider the sharing of a common membership with people that he or she had not met before; limited, as the sovereign land of a nation is always finite but subjecting to changes; sovereign, as the legitimacy of a nation is embedded in its nature for the making of its citizens. He proposed the idea of printed capitalism as a crucial element in the making of nations in modernity, which emphasized the significance of language and media in the construction of nationhood that is possible for the imagination among different individuals. From a modernist and constructionist position, Anderson's work contributed to the primordialist-modernist debate in nationalism studies, as his work emphasized the important role of vernacular language, modes of communication (print-capitalism), and the concept of time as homogeneous and empty, as essential elements that contribute to the imagining of nationhood.

This article uses the case of Hong Kong's naturalized football representatives to recontextualize Anderson's work considering the naturalization of athletes in international sports and its impact to the understanding of 'Hong Kongness' and 'Chineseness'. Although

Anderson had not further elaborated the process of imagining the nation at a personal, self-identified level in his work, this article supplements the complexities in the negotiation and making of a '*deep horizontal comradeship*' as suggested in Anderson's work when racial and ethnic others become representatives of another imagined community. This could lead to different imaginaries regarding the identities of naturalized national representatives as members of the same imagined community, which is a consequence of the interconnectedness of various forms of imagined communities (national or subnational) that people are feeling attached to (Anderson 1983, 15). By exploring the understanding of 'Hong Kongness' and 'Chineseness' among Hong Kong's naturalized footballers and fan groups members through their perceptions of contents (chants, slogans and posters) in the stadium, this article highlights the complexities in the process of imagining and accepting 'others' as 'we', and the challenges arise in the imagination of a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' under the trend of naturalization of foreign sporting talents. Through the Cantonese and English contents, Hong Kong fans are constantly reminded of the authenticity of the naturalized football representatives' distinctive 'Hong Kongness'. And the latter sections of this article discuss the paradoxes identified in the process of imagining racial and ethnic others as members and representatives of Hong Kong's imagined community.

Researching sports, imagined communities and naturalization

A modernist and constructivist perspective, as found in Anderson and many others' work, has successfully staged the discursive power of media discourses, especially those in traditional printed media, at the centre of the discussion, but the medium and the process of imagining and negotiating nationhood has gone beyond novels and newspapers. For instance, the use of social media and other online platforms might have taken over the position of printed media and the simultaneous reading of newspapers as a ritual of creating national consciousness (Sofer 2013), and the significance of competitive sports as the medium for the demonstration

of national performance (Edensor 2002) and inculcation of nationalistic sentiments among members of the nation are being acknowledged in nationalism studies. As Hobsbawm (1996) pointed out,

‘The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people. The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of the nation himself.’

(Hobsbawm 1996, 147)

There are adequate researches of the negotiation of national identity and nationhood through the lens of sports with various theoretical and methodological approaches, ranging from the study of national press (Vincent and Hill 2011; Jiang 2013; Vincent and Harris 2014; Falcous 2015; Skey 2015), television (Erik Meier and Leinwather 2013), online discussion platforms (Gibbons 2015; Ho and Chiu 2016), perspectives of the elite athletes (Back, Crabbe and Solomos 2011; Holmes and Storey 2011; Bowes and Bairner 2019; Kyeremeh 2019), other members of the nation (Bradley 2011; Ho and Bairner 2013; Whigham 2014), and particular cases or sporting events (Lechner 2007; Bocketti 2008; Goig 2008; Harris 2008; Ewen 2012; Choi 2018; Lee 2018; Penfold 2019; Storey 2020). However, there is also the need to address the call from Bairner (2015) to revisit Anderson’s framework instead of casually referring to the concept of imagined community in a taken-for-granted fashion. As Choi (2018) argued, the imagination of racial others becoming national representatives could be limited by historical, economic, and political conditions in different societies—the increasing presence of naturalized athletes has made the formation of a ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’ problematic. Furthermore, the active role of fans and athletes as members and embodiments of the nation, and their agencies regarding the changing socio-political circumstances in the era of globalization and migration should not be overlooked, especially when naturalization of sporting talents has become a common practice across the globe. National identity has not yet

detrterritorialized as Poli (2007) proposed, as cases have suggested that the introduction of naturalized athletes remains contested, while the case of Taiwan supported the idea and naturalized athletes become the ‘significant others’ (Chen and Chiang, 2019), the case of South Korea has highlighted the difficulties of such practice in a perceived racially and ethnically homogenous society (Choi, 2018), and it was under heated debate in England (Gibbons, 2015). If the existence of a ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’, as Anderson proposed, has the power to create meanings and willingness for one to make sacrifices for the community regardless of the existence of inequality and exploitation, would the presence of naturalized representatives as racial others in Hong Kong’s case, challenge or reaffirm people’s understanding of nationhood? This issue of naturalized athletes is becoming more relevant among the rising tides of nationalism, populism, migration, and outcry for racial justice in our societies.

Contextualizing football and (sub)national identity in Hong Kong

Hong Kong had a vital role in the development of football in Asia: it launched the first professional football league in Asia in 1968, and Hong Kong was one of the founding members of Asian Football Confederation (AFC) in 1954 (Bridges 2016). Football was introduced by the British as an elite sport among expatriates at the beginning of the colonial era, but the local Chinese community in Hong Kong soon gained access to football and took over their colonizers in the early 20th Century. Nurtured outstanding Chinese footballers, the advancement of football development in Hong Kong had earned the fame to be known as the ‘Football Kingdom of the Far East’ –Team Republic of China (ROC), which mainly consisted of ethnic Chinese players from Hong Kong, won nine gold medals in the Far East Games between 1915 and 1934 (Lee 2018). Yet, the recruitment of Hong Kong Chinese footballers soon became a political tug of war between the two Chinese regimes, given that Hong Kong’s elite footballers preferred to play as Chinese representatives (Lee 2018), despite of Hong Kong’s separate membership

in International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) and International Olympic Committee (IOC).

ROC lost the membership in AFC in the 1970s and most local elite Chinese players in Hong Kong decided to represent British Hong Kong when Hong Kong was drawn against North Korea in the Asian Cup Qualifying. Although Hong Kong lost to North Korea by penalties, Lui (2012) argued that this match is one of the key moments that lead to the emergence and acceptance of a Hong Kong identity, but it should also be noted that this formation of Hong Kong identity was first emerged from cultural space without nationalistic imperatives and the focus was on the cultural difference between Hong Kong and mainland China, through the interplay between media and non-media processes (Ma 1999).

Because of Hong Kong's specific socio-political context, there was a lack of top-down construction of national identity in Hong Kong during the colonial era, which makes Hong Kong an exception when having a national identity is being perceived as natural and taken-for-granted (Matthews, Ma, and Lui 2008),

'China has been their cultural home, but also a dictatorship from which many in Hong Kong once fled; and Great Britain was felt as no home for most, but only a distant colonizer. Today this detachment from national belonging is beginning to fade, as more in Hong Kong come to accept that they indeed emotionally belong to the Chinese nation, if not necessarily to the Chinese state; but this issue of identity continues to be a matter of intense debate.'

(Matthews, Ma, and Lui 2008, Prologue)

A sign of this process of identity negotiation and ambivalence among Hong Kong citizens could be shown by the variations in identification as the handover of Hong Kong's sovereignty was approaching (Ma 1999; Law 2018). Hong Kong citizens have developed different understandings of their self-identified national identity, namely, 'Hong Konger',

‘Chinese living in Hong Kong’, ‘Hong Konger living in China’ and ‘others’ (Fung 2004; Ma and Fung 2007; Steinhardt, Li, and Jiang 2018). The variations in this categorization also shown the cultural, racial and political dimensions in perceiving Chinese identity (Ortmann 2018).

Unlike other former colonies of Britain, decolonization and self-determination did not happen in Hong Kong, the return of Hong Kong to China is portrayed as ‘*a child’s sentimental return from his ‘foster father’ back to his ‘biological mother’*” (Law 2018,14). The consequence of this delay of decolonization, in the forms of cultural and socio-political conflicts, soon led to the intensification of nativist and separationist ideologies, distrust of Chinese authorities resulted as waves of major social movements such as the Umbrella Movement in 2014 (Lam and Cooper 2018) and the Anti-extradition Bill movement in 2019 (Lee 2020). In Hong Kong football’s context, a significant event would be the Chinese Football Association poster incident (CFA poster incident) which took place shortly after the Umbrella Movement in 2015: Hong Kong and China were in the same group in the World Cup Qualifying Stage, together with Bhutan, Maldives, and Qatar. For publicity purpose, CFA issued a series of promotional posters about each of its opponent, and this had led to controversies regarding the description of the naturalized players of Team Hong Kong, as the CFA poster said, *‘HK’s team has black skin, yellow skin and white skin people, playing a team with such diverse background, you’d better be prepared’* (translated to English)

The emphasis on the skin colour of the naturalized representatives of Hong Kong resulted in an outrage in Hong Kong, many found the poster’s message racist, and Hong Kong Football Association (HKFA) responded by a poster that highlighted the diverse but equal nature of every player in the squad (Ho and Chiu 2016).

'Don't let other people look down on you, our team has black skin, yellow skin and white skin, but the goal is the same to fight for Hong Kong, you are Hong Kongers so you must support us!' (translated in English)

Although some, including footballers of Team Hong Kong, regarded the CFA poster as 'a poor sense of humour', the controversies of the CFA poster have drawn huge attention to the qualifying stage matches and Hong Kong's naturalized footballers¹. For many Hong Kong citizens, matches of Team Hong Kong had become a channel to expressing their anger and sentiments in defending the pride and values of Hong Kong as a multi-ethnic society, fans expressed their discontent by booing the national anthem² *The March of Volunteers* in 2015 (Bridges 2016), a similar phenomenon could also be observed in 2019 during the Anti-extradition Bill movement as some fans jeered the national anthem and sang the protest anthem *Glory to Hong Kong* in the stadium before and after the match against Iran, which highlighted the significant role of football in Hong Kong as the field of identity negotiation as these actions have yet been found in other sporting encounters between Hong Kong and China.

Challenges to the imagining of a unified Chineseness in football

The performance of Hong Kong's footballers in the two draws against China have attracted interests from clubs in Chinese Super League (CSL) and China League One, as several Hong

¹ All home games of Team Hong Kong in the Group Stage were sold out as fans were motivated to support Hong Kong. In view of the political tension after the Umbrella Movement, extra police officers were deployed to separate home fans and away fans from mainland China in Hong Kong's home game against China.

² The booing of the March of Volunteers occurred the world cup qualifying match against Qatar in 2015 soon led to disciplinary actions from FIFA, but this has not stopped the fans from booing the national anthem, as the same deviant behaviour has been continued since then until the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020. But it is expected that the booing will be stopped by the recent introduction of the National Anthem Law in Hong Kong.

Kong footballers took the chance to play in Chinese leagues. However, the CFA adjusted their player registration regulations in the professional leagues in China during the 2016 season, which no longer regard players (passport holders) from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan region as local players. Interestingly, this change in player registration is then reversed in early 2018, allowing each club in CSL and China League One to register one player from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan region as local player. Naturalized players are being recognized as ‘foreign players’ and only those who previously held a contract in China or who only been registered in HKFA throughout their whole career are eligible to register as local players.

Although there are no actual proofs towards CFA’s intention, the controversies of the poster incident and the changes in CFA’s regulation of player registration have raised questions on the different understanding of citizenship and nationality between Hong Kong and mainland China. As Hong Kong citizens are constantly reminded of their identity as Chinese nationals and the articulation of Hong Kong being an inseparable part of China, what happened in the football world seem to be challenging the imagining of ‘Hong Kongness’ into a homogenic, unified ‘Chineseness’ as promoted by the PRC regime.

Methodology

This paper aims to re-contextualized Anderson’s framework using the case of Hong Kong’s naturalized players, with a focus on both naturalized footballers and fans’ perspectives towards posters, chants and slogans in the stadium to explore how the presence of naturalized footballers, as racial others, are being imagined, perceived and justified. This approach articulates the agencies of fans and footballers as their interactions in and outside the football stadium are contributing to the production of meanings of these contents, which facilitate the imagining of nationhood via football. A particular focus would be the understandings and interpretations of ‘Hong Kongness’ and ‘Chineseness’ of the naturalized players by both

naturalized players and fans. By outlining the imagination and negotiation process of a distinctive Hong Kong identity that is argued to be increasingly incompatible to a homogenous Chinese identity, this article could enrich the understanding on the dynamics and complexities of Hong Kong people's imagination of the 'deep, horizontal comradeship' as stated in Anderson's work, particularly on how the imagination of Hong Kong's naturalized footballers may succeed or fail to transcend the presence of a strong, common cultural root through contents created in Cantonese and English.

To explore the different understanding of 'Hong Kongness' and 'Chineseness' in Hong Kong's football world, certain contents in the stadium are being selected, reviewed and analysed, as shown in the following:

1. The 'We are Hong Kong' chant from fans (in English)
2. The 'Hong Kong Kickass' (香港勁揪) chant and slogan from fans and HKFA (in Cantonese and Traditional Chinese script)
3. The 'We Stand Together' diversity tifo from fans
4. The 'Support you own people' (撐自己人) slogan from HKFA (in Cantonese and Traditional Chinese script)
5. Poster issued by HKFA in CFA incident (in Traditional Chinese script)

These materials were used by fans and HKFA in official matches of Team Hong Kong from 2015 to 2019, this particular period of time is identified because it is right after the CFA poster incident which led to a heated discussion of the identity of Hong Kong's naturalized footballers. In-depth interviews of ten Hong Kong's naturalized footballers (call-ups from 2014 to 2019) and twenty fans from two major fan groups were conducted from January to September 2019 to explore the perspectives from both parties.

Imagining through the repetitive contents in the stadium

Anderson highlighted the role of media and the practice of simultaneous reading of newspapers in the imagination of nation as an imagined community. In the context of competitive sports, a similar ritual would be the consumption, creation and repetitions of chants, slogans, and other contents or national symbols in and out of the stadium. As reflected by both fans and naturalized footballers in the interviews, the chants ‘We are Hong Kong’ and ‘Hong Kong Kickass’ have contributed to the consolidation of imagining of a distinctive Hong Kongness through a selected remembering and forgetting process. Although the contents being imagined by the fans and naturalized footballers may not be as significant as the narratives of official history as highlighted in Anderson’s thesis, it is argued that the elements of remembering and forgetting, and the bottom-up approach of the creation and use of the contents for the ‘ritual in the stadium’, have similarities to Anderson’s argument about the construction of a nation’s past.

The slogan ‘Hong Kong Kickass’ was invented by fans and first appeared in Kai Tak International airport in 1985, as hundreds of Hong Kong citizens welcomed the return of Team Hong Kong after defeating China by 2:1 at Beijing Workers Stadium, which shattered Team China’s dream to proceed to the next round of the 1986 FIFA World Cup Qualifying. This victory, also known as the ‘519 incident’, marked the beginning of the rivalry between China and Hong Kong in football, some Chinese fans in Beijing started a riot because of the devastation caused by the humiliating defeat to a weaker British Hong Kong team (Xu, 2008). But it is argued that this rivalry had appeared in a lukewarm manner as the celebration of the ‘519 incident’ in Hong Kong did not come across the humiliation of Team China and the focus was on Hong Kong’s success into the group stage of the competition (Lee 2017). Also, the verbal use of ‘Hong Kong Kickass’ has a distinctive cultural meaning as the phrase ‘Kickass’(勁揸) is a vernacular Cantonese expression. The use of the chant and slogan ‘Hong

Kong Kickass' serves as a symbolized reminder of the '519 incident' and Hong Kong's Cantonese culture, and was reintroduced in Hong Kong's football circle by fans and HKFA in 2011. When Hong Kong played against China in 2015, 'Hong Kong Kickass' was the official slogan and could be found in HKFA's official merchandise, promotional posters, and repeated in banners and chants among fans.

As Anderson tried to illustrate how nations construct their own narratives of identity through remembering and forgetting certain historical events, a similar approach could be observed in the selection and creation of 'official' contents as representations of Hong Kong football's history among fans and HKFA. Through the re-emergence of the Cantonese 'Hong Kong Kickass' chant and slogan that was exclusively used in football, although many younger fans have not witnessed the historical victory or knowing the names of the footballers in Hong Kong's squad at that time, the remembering of the '519 incident' through the chant became a shared experience of Hong Kong people and naturalized footballers while many other victories and defeats of Hong Kong seem to be forgotten.

'The 519 incident is a good example of how football works.....If Team Hong Kong had done that before, we can do that again against stronger teams.' (Naturalized footballer A)

'I was not born yet when it happened (519 incident), but this is a huge encouragement to us and our players. This reminds me of the spirit of Hong Kong as we always work our best and do not give up.' (Fan group representatives A)

For both fans and naturalized footballers, the articulation of a sense of 'we' as found in the 'We are Hong Kong' chant and the remembering the '519 incident' are crucial to their imagination and understanding of Hong Kongness in football.

'This reminds me of Hong Kong's unique role. Hong Kong is not a country, but we have our own team to compete internationally.....Having a representative team means a lot to me as a

Hong Konger and a local football fan. It means we have something to fight for.' (Fan Group Representative B)

As this fan had articulated, Hong Kong's independent membership in international sporting bodies is significant to the imagining of Hong Kong as unique compare to other regions of China. As promised in the principle of 'One Country, Two Systems', the uniqueness of Hong Kong, namely a capitalist style of living, common law system, westernized understanding of freedom and civil rights, and a hybridized culture, all contribute to the formation of a distinctive subnational Hong Kong identity and values, as legacies of a former British colony and advantages of being a Special Administrative Region of China. By articulating a sense of 'we' as Hong Kong people in the chants, the consumption and repetition of this sense of 'we' contribute to the boundary setting process that separate Hong Kongers from others.

As the CFA poster incident stirred up a heated debate regarding the different understanding of citizenship and sense of belonging in Hong Kong and China (Ho & Chiu, 2016), the message of HKFA's poster as a response to the CFA poster had highlighted the civic inclusiveness that is being embedded in 'Hong Kongness'. Both fan group representatives and naturalized footballers have mentioned the idea of a relatively civic understanding of Hong Kongness and emphasized the practice of naturalization as a lawful, common phenomenon, as they recalled their experiences during the CFA poster incident in 2015.

'I couldn't agree more with FA's poster (HKFA) because we (naturalized footballers) are also Hong Kongers. It's ironic, isn't it? They (CFA) were picking on us few years ago, but now they have their naturalized players. It (naturalization of foreign talents) is so common now in modern football. I don't understand why they did that at that time.' (Naturalized footballer D)

This naturalized footballer's view is being shared by most interviewees as both footballers and fans named examples of naturalizing footballers in France, Germany and recent opponents of Team Hong Kong, such as Qatar, Guam and Taiwan. Fans and naturalized footballers have also highlighted the 'irony' mentioned by naturalized footballer D as they are aware of CFA's introduction of naturalized footballers in 2019³. Some naturalized footballers admitted that there are certain cultural similarities between 'Hong Kongness' and 'Chineseness', but there are also many differences as Hong Kong society appeared to be more 'westernized and progressive', a fan group representative's response to the HKFA poster made a good supplement to this view.

'FA did the right thing to defend the diversity of Team Hong Kong. All Hong Kongers are Chinese nationals but not all Chinese are Hong Kongers, if you know what I mean. Maybe they could tell who a Chinese is by skin colour in mainland, but it is not how it works here in Hong Kong.....There are locally born and raised South Asians who are browner than us, there are African Hong Kongers, there are European Hong Kongers, there are even mainland Chinese who became Hong Kongers.....' (Fan group representative E)

The response from this fan has implied a mixed civic and cultural understanding of Hong Kongness, as a person's 'Hong Kongness' could be acquired and should not be bounded by race or place of birth. Contrastingly, his understanding of 'Chineseness' is closely related to racial and political identity, which is argued to be influenced by a state-driven, Han-Chinese racial discourse in China (Ortmann 2018) and the political reality of Hong Kong being a Special

³ In August 2019, the CFA made a historical announcement of the naturalization of Brazil-born striker Elkeson as the first player of non-Chinese heritage to represent PRC for the World Cup qualifying. Elkeson's naturalization is crucial as he fulfilled the five-year residency requirement by FIFA as he first joined the CSL club Guangzhou Evergrande in 2013. It is reported that all naturalized players (including those with Chinese heritage) are monitored and educated by their correspondent clubs in CSL regarding the knowledge of Chinese history, culture and knowledge of the Communist regime, so that they could develop patriotic feelings towards China.

Administrative Region of China. For many locally born and raised fans in Hong Kong, this understanding of Chinese as a racial identity is prevalent, as many have abided to a socially constructed definition of Chinese as a race of ‘*yellow skin, black hair, and black eyes*’ and the mythical description of ‘*heirs of dragon*’, which placed the understanding of Hong Kongness and Chineseness into the two ends of the civic-ethnic dichotomy as Kohn (1944) proposed.

Imagining Hong Kong as a diverse, international city

‘I know some people still question our identity and passion to fight for Hong Kong, I am not born and raised here but I am a Hong Konger and this is my home now. Yes, we are Hong Kong.....’ (Naturalized Footballer B)

Naturalized footballer B’s response served as a typical answer for the naturalized footballers being interviewed, all naturalized footballers have shown similar understanding of Hong Kong as home and expressed their eagerness to represent Hong Kong, yet, an apolitical attitude also stood out among some naturalized footballers, which is different from most fans’ responses.

‘To be honest I don’t know much about politics, I am just a footballer. Some fans are very upset with China and booed the anthem...I understand their feelings, but that’s not appropriate as this is putting the FA and us to risk (being punished by FIFA). I know we (Hong Kong and China) are very different after living here for ten years. I could tell who a Hong Konger is and who is not on the streets.....Hong Kong is very international; it is convenient to live here. People are polite and could speak very good English. And you could succeed if you work hard.....’ (Naturalized Player C)

Although Naturalized footballer C did not go further to elaborate the differences between ‘Hong Kongness’ and ‘Chineseness’, his response had again articulated the significance of Hong Kong’s ‘internationalness’, as an element that is being valued highly in Hong Kong. In

fact, this narrative of Hong Kong being an international city is being used repeatedly by the interviewees to justify Hong Kong's ethnic and racial diversity, as a contrast to the imagining of China's Han-ethnocentric nationhood, which becomes an ambiguous boundary setting criteria to be drawn between the imagination of 'Hong Kongness' and 'Chineseness'. An example of the promotion of racial diversity and solidarity in Team Hong Kong's squad would be the use of the 'We Stand Together' tifo that is created by fans against the criticisms of increasing reliance on naturalized footballers in Hong Kong's squad. The tifo depicts an image of footballers with different skin colour supporting each other, as a celebration of Hong Kong's 'multi-racial' squad. Most interviewees have stressed the importance of ethnic and racial diversity in Hong Kong as an international city.

'Hong Kong is an international city and embraces values of freedom and respect of each other. Our naturalized footballers have fulfilled the requirements of naturalization and therefore they should be accepted as members of Hong Kong, not to mention the sacrifices they have made on and off the pitch fighting for us. I agree that total reliance on naturalized talents is not a sustainable approach for the advancement of Hong Kong football, but it does not mean that foreign born players should be rejected and excluded.' (Fan groups representative B)

'They (naturalized players) have stayed in Hong Kong for more than seven years; they are holders of HKSAR passport and therefore they could represent us internationally. It has nothing to do with their colour of skin or place of origin. They are Hong Kongers and a part of our society.' (Fan groups representatives C)

To most of the fan groups representatives, this understanding of a strong civic 'Hong Kongness' is key to justify their acceptance of non-ethnic Chinese footballers as representatives of Hong Kong. In fact, the same narrative of Hong Kong's internationalness

is being celebrated by both the government and the Hong Kong society to justify the positive presence of non-ethnic Chinese population in Hong Kong, allowing ethnic and racial others to become members of the same imagined community through citizenship and the adoption of a Hong Kong style of living. However, it should be noted that the acceptance of naturalized talents in Hong Kong football may not guarantee a general acceptance of racial others in the city, as some naturalized footballers who are originally from Africa have experiences of being racially discriminated in Hong Kong.

'Yes, it is the reason why FIFA is working so hard to deal with racism in football. I am happy to see the fans doing it (showing the tifo on the stand). I could remember when I first arrived Hong Kong, there were people who refused to sit with me and my friends on the train just because we are black. People used to call me names from the stands, but it has improved a lot now as I am doing better. More people recognize me on the street and welcome me. I think everyone has a chance here (in Hong Kong) because we all speak the same language (football) on the pitch and we train hard. I have friends and teammates from all over the world here, I met my wife here, my child is born here.....Hong Kong gave me everything. This is my home and I want to give back to Hong Kong and fight for Hong Kong.'

(Naturalized footballer A)

The personal story of this naturalized footballer had shown a different side of the politically correct narrative of the embracement of internationalness and diversity in Hong Kong. As he said, despite his strong emotional attachment to Hong Kong, he is welcomed because he was recognized by other people on the street as a representative of Hong Kong. This echoes with Yung, Chan and Philip's work (2020) on Hong Kong's naturalized footballers, which suggested that the acceptance of the 'racial other' as Hong Kongers is influenced by a mix of meritocratic and civic values. While Anderson tried to put aside the existing inequalities as preconditions of the imagining of nationhood, the case of Hong Kong's naturalized

footballers shows that racial ‘others’ have to prove his or her worth to the society to be recognized as members or even representatives of the same imagined community. The ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’ being imagined by the fans appeared to be de-ethnicized and inclusive, but at the same time conditional, exclusive and grounded on values of pragmatism, as long as the introduction of naturalized footballers could strengthen the squad and is allowed by the rules of FIFA.

Paradoxes of imagining your ‘own people’

In order to publicize the matches of Team Hong Kong, HKFA created the ‘Support your own people’ slogan as a reminder of the Hong Kongness that is being shared by fans and Team Hong Kong. Yet, the slogan’s message is paradoxical as fans need to be reminded of the naturalized footballers’ ‘Hong Kongness’. This is even more ironic as most fans tried to describe their support of Team Hong Kong as ‘natural’ and obligated, regardless of its rankings or fame.

‘I used to be a big fan of English Premier League and had never watched local league before. But after the CFA poster incident, I realize that if we do not support our league or our players, then no one would...we have to support our people.’ (Fan group representative C)

‘I see myself as a Hong Konger, so it is natural to support my people (Team Hong Kong). Yes, some of our players are not born and raised in Hong Kong, but they chose to become Hong Kongers and fight for us, if they are eligible to wear the red jersey, they are Hong Kongers... Different colour of skin or birthplace would not disqualify their Hong Konger identity. If you embrace the values and culture of Hong Kong, and regard here as home, you are a Hong Konger.’ (Fan group representative D)

The naturalized footballers’ intentions behind the naturalization process, ranging from ‘careerist’ to ‘nationalist’ position (Holmes and Storey 2011), are being questioned by fans.

Different intentions behind naturalization were also mentioned by a naturalized footballer as he voiced out his doubts over a pragmatic, careerist consideration in contrast to his love of Hong Kong.

'I know some treat Hong Kong as a working place, some may leave after retiring, but I love Hong Kong and I want to stay here with my family for the rest of my life. After retirement, I want to help as a coach to develop players for Hong Kong.' (Naturalized footballer E)

Fan group representative D stressed the importance of embracing Hong Kong's core values, alongside with the adaptation of Hong Kong's culture and its style of living, which is a typical response from the fans regarding their imagination of the Hong Kongness of the naturalized footballers. Apart from the uniqueness of Hong Kong as mentioned in previous sections of this article, around half of the fans mentioned the 'Lion Rock Spirit'. Similar to the storyline of the 'American dream', the 'Lion Rock Spirit' symbolizes Hong Kong people's collective experience of perseverance, diligence and solidarity (Ortmann 2018), and is often emphasized in the story of Hong Kong's success from a village being transformed into a prosperous international financial centre.

'I support the team because I am a Hong Konger. The question is 'who is your people?', the reality is, apart from the white communities, many ethnic minorities are being neglected in Hong Kong. South Asians and Africans are being labelled as troublemakers or fake asylum seekers.....it is not fair to exclude the remaining 8% of the population as 'our people'. The hardships they are experiencing as immigrants are the same when my grandparents came to settle in Hong Kong after the civil war. People often forget the difficulties the naturalized footballers have experienced in Hong Kong. I am not sure if the players know much about the Lion Rock Spirit but what they have experienced is close enough to it.' (Fan group representative E)

While a few naturalized footballers talked about the experience of being racially discriminated, most naturalized footballers tended to mention the experience of hardships, ranging from adopting a fast-paced style of living, learning a new language, to the competitiveness and expectations they experienced as foreign players. A naturalized footballer highlighted the challenge to pick up Cantonese and the efforts he had made as a justification of his 'Hong Kongness'.

'Yes, I am a Hong Konger too (repeated 'I am a Hong Konger' in Cantonese).....I could not speak good English and Cantonese when I came, I am lucky that my teammates helped me to learn the basics of Cantonese. You know, many foreign players can speak English, so they are not learning Cantonese because it is difficult..... Personally, it is important to speak good Cantonese in Hong Kong because it helps me to connect with local people, it is why I am learning and practicing it every day.' (Naturalized footballer E)

'Some naturalized footballers are very good at Cantonese, but many are not. Of course, they are all Hong Kongers because of more than seven years of residency, but I feel closer to those who could speak Cantonese. It stands out when you approach them after a match outside the stadium.....I mean, most naturalized footballers look like foreign tourists if you don't know them, so their Cantonese ability is a proof of their eagerness to be Hong Kongers and fit in.' (Fan group representative F)

The articulation of one's Cantonese proficiency as a determinant of 'Hong Kongness' seems contradictory to the ability to speak English as a sign of the internationalness being celebrated as an element of 'Hong Kongness', but one's Cantonese proficiency is commonly accepted as a proof of one's 'Hong Kongness' among the bilingual local fans whose mother tongue is Cantonese. This sense of cultural sameness could not be substituted by one's English proficiency in Hong Kong, but at the same time it seems difficult for a local citizen to expect

a non-ethnic Chinese person to be able to communicate in Cantonese until he or she speaks. The perspectives from fans and naturalized footballers of Hong Kong show two sides of the influence of vernacular language as Anderson had articulated in his thesis: on one hand the vernacular language enables an imagined community being imagined as inherently limited by becoming a criterion in the boundary setting process between the in-group and out-group; on the other hand it may limit the imagination of ethnic others as members of the same imagined community just because their outlook may not fit to the existing understanding of members within the in-group. These resulted in the paradoxes being identified in the contents in the stadium, Hong Kong citizens (including non-football fans) may find difficult to imagine the naturalized footballers as representatives and members of Hong Kong's imagined community even if they are well-accepted by the fans who have prior knowledge of the Hong Kongness of the naturalized footballers.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the complexities of imagining nationhood through the case of Hong Kong's naturalized football representatives. It is argued that the imagining of a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' as proposed by Anderson is being challenged by the practice of naturalization of foreign sporting talents. The selected contents that are created and repeated in English and Cantonese in Hong Kong football circle have shown certain difficulties of imagining 'Hong Kongness' and 'Chineseness' as compatible identities. The different perceptions of the two identities as reflected by fans and naturalized footballers on one hand facilitated the imagining of racial others to become representatives of Hong Kong in football, and on the other hand challenged a homogenous Chinese identity, as shown in contestations surrounding the CFA poster and China's recent introduction of non-ethnic Chinese naturalized footballers. The case of Hong Kong suggested that the consumption and repetition of chants, slogans, tifos and posters act as constant reminders of the 'Hong

Kongness' of the naturalized players that differentiate a civic and cultural 'Hong Kongness' from a racial and political 'Chineseness'.

Furthermore, the imagining and negotiation of 'Hong Kongness' among fans have shown a 'layered and conditional' imagining of comradeship rather than a horizontal one as proposed by Anderson. On one hand Hong Kong's internationalness is articulated by respondents to justify the presence of ethnic others and a multi-ethnic football squad in Hong Kong, and on the other hand the fans' acceptance of naturalized footballers in Hong Kong's squad may be grounded by meritocracy. And the paradoxes being identified in the chants have shown the difficulties and challenges of imagining naturalized footballers as representatives and members of Hong Kong's imagined community. As the naturalization of sporting talents remains a common practice for sporting nations across the globe, the acceptance and imagination of racial and ethnic others as embodiment of nationhood may continue to challenge the construction of a homogenized imagined community.

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