

The Formation of Global Sports Fandom in China: Capitalism, Masculinities and World Order

by

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Abstract

In the wake of the globalization of capitalism, cultural domination of the West has been legitimated on a global scale through transnational corporation (Schiller,1991). This essay argues that global sports fandom in China, which was facilitated by the global expansion of the Western sports industry, works as a mechanism of ideology, as it helps to reproduce Western masculinity in China through Chinese fans' transnational identity towards Western sports brands. Following this, this essay uses global sports fandom in China as a microcosm to examine the myth of economic superpower and cultural vulnerability in post-reform China, which reflects on China's complex role in shaping the contemporary world order.

By using three-dimensional discourse analysis(Fairclough,1992), this essay locates the formation of global sports fandom in China in the context of the globalization of capitalism, in which the interweaving of the global expansion of Western sports industry and market economy reform in China collectively facilitated this cultural phenomenon. Following this, this essay uses the English Premier League fandom on Chinese social media platform Sina Weibo as a case study to explore how global sports fandom formed in the Chinese indigenous context through the strategy of cosmopolitanism and the deployment of fans' emerging class consciousness in post-reform China. In addition, discourse analysis also examines how Western masculinity becomes hegemonic on a global scale through creating a sense of fraternity in global sports fandom.

Keywords: global sports fandom, Premier League, China, social media, globalization of capitalism, class consciousness, hegemonic masculinity, world order

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1. Why Study Fandom?

Why study fandom? This basic problem has been the topic of constant conversation since the beginning of fan studies. For a long time, fandom carries a non-academic stereotype that academics tend to situate fan studies on the fringe of media studies (Jenkins, 2007). As Lewis (1992) points out:

We all know who the fans are. They're the ones who wear the colors of their favorite team, the ones who record their soap operas on VCRs to watch after the work day is over, the ones who tell you every detail about a movie star's life and work, the ones who sit in line for hours for front row tickets to rock concerts (p.1).

In general, fans are represented as cultural dopes in the consumerist society, who "we all know" so they are not worth spending time to study (Jenkins, 2007). This, to some extent, gave rise to the lack of academic achievement in the area of fan research.

Accordingly, it seems necessary to justify fan studies in the first place. First, from the perspective of cultural diversity, it seems that fandom should not be overlooked, since it is precisely these informal spheres that contour the range of popular culture. As some scholars ((Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007) points out, the laconic answer for studying fandom is that "it matters to those who are fans" (p.1). In this sense, academia should be a site where different types of knowledge are being paid equal attention, instead of creating academic hierarchy based on the difference of popular culture and so-called high culture.

Second, in terms of academic value, fan studies should be considered on equal footing as far as importance compared with other fields in media studies, since fans are no longer perceived as passive viewers and consumers particularly with the rise of

digital media. Instead, they are active producers of media content. Just as Jenkins (2007) points out, core concepts of fan studies, such as participation, virtual community and technology for empowerment, are all similar with the core concepts of other media studies. In this sense, the research of fandom should be paid more attention to

Third, in terms of the rapid development of fandom, along with the rise of digital fandom and global fandom, increasingly diversified fan practices entail a rethinking of the social meanings of fan culture and significations associated with it. For instance, along with the rise of cyber world, the formation of fandom breaks many traditional boundaries, such as nation, ethnicity, and race. In this sense, fandom is no longer a single culture phenomenon, it could be seen as a key point of entry to understand the dynamics of globalization processes.

1.2. Why Study Global Sports Fandom?

This section introduces why study global sports fandom and the use of English Premier League football fandom in China as case study in this essay. Many Western scholars have already discussed the relationship between sports and social development (Jhally,1984; Gruneau,1999; Jansen,2002). However, the social effects of sports have expanded beyond national contexts to international contexts along with the global expansion of Western sports industry. For instance, nowadays, fans' active embrace of Western sports brands, such as NBA and the English Premier League, has become a truly widespread phenomenon in China. For example, a survey shows that the English Premier League is seen as the preeminent national football league in China(Repucom,2015). According to data, global fan base of the English Premier League football is 1.2 billion, 174 million are from China, which has the biggest fan base of English Premier League football in the world.¹

However, little academic attention has been paid to this phenomenon. How these numerous Chinese sports fans identify with Western clubs that are far away from their

¹ Data is published by Repucom in 2015.

home? What is their emotional investment in foreign sports fandom? What social effects the global sports fandom have brought? All these questions entail a rethinking of the formation of global sports fandom.

As Whannel(2002) points out, “sport has the appearance of being a cultural practice which unites men; yet it is also a practice that divides men” (p.28). As the most popular sport in the world (*Topend Sports*), British football’s prevalence in non-Western countries, not only give a chance to offer exciting football games to football fans in non-western countries, but also implicitly reproduced dominant Western masculinity on a global scale by legitimating the white male sporting culture in non-Western society. In this sense, we should be aware of global sports fandom formation, instead of taking this cultural phenomenon for granted.

In this sense, by situating global sports fandom in the social contexts that it is tied to, the primary aim of this essay is using the English Premier League football fandom in China as a key point of entry to understand how the globalization of capitalism is occurring in China through cultural hegemony and to explore if there is opportunity for transformative challenges in terms of fan culture. As scholars (Gray, Sandvoss& Harrington, 2007) points out:

To study fans is to study many of the key structuring mechanisms by which contemporary culture and society work; thus, the future of reception and audience studies requires thoughtful and innovative study of fans in all their forms, identities, media, and spaces (p.10).

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

2.1. Fan Studies through History

2.1.1. Three Waves of Fan Studies

Some fan scholars summarize three waves of fan studies through history based on different theoretical framework and research direction (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007; Lu,2008; Deng,2009). According to Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007), the first wave of fan studies took inspiration from de Certeau's most well-known work, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). The first wave of fan scholars inspired by de Certeau's creative interpretation of strategy and tactic in the context of consumerist society, defining fans' practices as "the tactics of the disempowered" in resisting "the strategies of the powerful" (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007, p.1). Following this, the first wave of fan studies has been concluded as the phase of "fandom is beautiful" ((Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007, p.1), in which fans were being seen as active and productive audiences who use their own object of fandom to empower themselves and resist powerful class in the consumerist society.

In the second wave of fan studies, instead of seeing fan culture as a site of struggle where disempowered fans resist dominant culture tactically, the second wave of fan scholars developed French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) perspective of cultural taste to interpret the choice of fan objects as fans' habitus that ultimately decided by their social hierarchy. Habitus, as Bourdieu(1992) points out, is "within limits of its structures, which are the embodied sedimentation of the social structures which produced it"(p.19).

In this sense, the second wave of fan studies has two new features compared with the first wave. First, fan studies are situated in a larger social structure, such as the analysis of the relationship between people's choice of fandom and their possession of capital. Second, rather than seeing fandom as force of resistance to power-bloc, just as the first wave scholars did, the second wave scholars interpret fandom as "agents of maintaining social and cultural systems" (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007, p.6).

Current fan studies are being called the third wave of fan studies. In this phase, the analytic scope of fandom has been expanded greatly based on former two waves. From the contemporary perspective, fandom is being examined not only as culture phenomenon, but as an integral part of daily life practice(Deng,2009). In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington concludes "fandom and modernity" as the theme of the third wave fans studies. As they point out:

Fandom is no longer only an object of study in and for itself. Instead, through the investigation of fandom as part of the fabric of our everyday lives, third wave work aims to capture fundamental insights into modern life (p.9).

2.1.2. The Limits of Former Fan Studies

Based on a review of literature of fan studies in three different waves, the limits of former fan studies and the challenges of current work are obvious. First, in terms of academic omission, it is obvious that there is a lack of canonic texts in recent decade's fan research. In a survey (Harrington&Bielby,2007), fan studies scholars in different parts of the world reached a consensus in terms of the most important publications on fandom²:

² Information in the table is collected by the author from *Global Fandom/Global Fan Studies*.

Table 1 The most important publications on fandom, year, author

Name	Year	Author
Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture	1992	Henry Jenkins
The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media	1992	Lisa A. Lewis
Fan Culture	2002	Matt Hill
Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth	1992	Camille Bacon-Smith
Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature	1984	Janice Radway

These canonic texts in fan research undoubtedly laid a solid foundation for fan studies. However, these former important publications are mostly based on fan research in the age of mass media. With the rise of the Internet, many scholars have pointed out that increasingly changing media technologies require modification in media reception theory (Crane,2002), since comparing with the old days, audiences are no longer couch potatoes who “watched television, bought products, and didn’t talk back” (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007, p.361).

Following this, current fan studies also need modification to accommodate to today’s complex media environment, since previous academic views of fans are out of date in today’s new media environment. First, fans are no longer “textual poachers” in the first wave of fan studies, who can only poach media texts and use it in a tactic way(Jenkins,1992). Nowadays, fans are active producers who are responsible for vast amounts of user-generated content(UGC) by virtue of new media technologies. Second, nowadays fans are also not the “agents of maintaining social and cultural systems” in the second wave of fan studies, (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007, p.6), since higher monetary access is no longer the only way to display fandom in the rise of Internet.

Second, in terms of theoretical development, there is a lack of core theories in contemporary fan studies. Although former two waves of fan studies both have a clear theoretical framework, they are directly inspired by other research field. Some fan scholars noticed that there is a lack of core theories in contemporary fan studies and tried to fix it. Matt Hills (2002) criticizes that “theorists follow their own institutional or theoretical agendas, and use fandom within these theory wars and territorial skirmishes” (p.2). In addition, Chinese fan scholars also pay attention to this pressing issue. Lu (2008) points out that fan scholars are being trapped in discourse structures that

constructed by themselves. This problem leads to a result that the culture dynamics of fandom might be overlooked by using existed theoretical framework.

2.1.3. Global Fandom: New Direction of Fan Studies

In order to prevent situating fan studies in a chaotic empirical world, some scholars in the third wave of fan studies try to offer specific directions to deal with the theoretical deficiencies in current fan studies. In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (2007), six directions of current fan studies have been identified:

The emphasis on the symbolic and the representations that mark contemporary mediated worlds; the dissolution of boundaries between different textual and cultural forms leading to the erosion of binary oppositions between popular and high culture; the changing relationship between physical place and virtual space and the social interactions and performances taking place within them in an increasingly deterritorialized world; the interplay between the global and the local in processes of cultural globalization; new identities and practices arising out of the transformation of production in mediated discourses(p.11)

Following these directions, it is obvious that globalization is one of the new features of fandom in the increasingly mediated world. Following this, the analysis developed in this essay follows the fourth direction, which explores “the interplay between the global and the local in processes of cultural globalization” by examining global sports fandom in China (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007, p.11).

In general, the aim of this essay is offering specific and further research of global fandom for contemporary global fandom studies. Based on the review of literature, it is obvious that although some fan scholars have examined fandom in the Information Age, less studies pay attention to fandom in the context of today’s complex global environment. For instance, in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, fan scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) interprets fandom as participatory culture in the wake of digital media. In *Digital Fandom*, Paul Booth (2010) explores digital fandom from the approaches of new media studies. However, the context of globalization has been ignored in these digital fandom research.

The academic omission of global fandom may result from the difficulty of defining what is global fandom. In *Global Fandom/Global Fan Studies* (Harrington & Bielby,2007), several basic questions in terms of global fandom have been posed:

Does the term “global fandom” even mean? Does it mean studying the meaning of “fan” in different parts of the world? Does it mean studying how fans in different countries all respond to the same “global” text? Does it mean studying import/export trade patterns and how fans in one cultural context respond to texts from another cultural context (p.179)?

These questions reflect the status quo of global fandom studies First, it is obvious that the development of current global fandom studies is in a preliminary period. Theoretically speaking, there is a lack of theoretical foundation in terms of fan studies, as well as global fandom studies. Second, since defining and framing “global fandom” is difficult in the first place, current empirical studies are easily unsystematic.

However, deficiencies reflect possibilities. In the contemporary academia, much research pays attention to formal subjects and spaces of globalization, which ignores and gives opportunities to study informal spaces of globalization (Nagar, Lawson, Dowell &Hanson,2002). In this sense, global fandom can be seen as an alternative entry to understand globalization since it is an emerging field in the process of cultural globalization. As many scholars (Nagar, Lawson, Dowell & Hanson, 2002) point out, “without attention to how people experience globalization processes in their communities and homes,” “our understanding of globalization is incomplete (p.262). In this sense, it seems that global fandom could be seen as a complementary study of globalization, since it offers us a different angle to examine globalization processes in the increasingly mediated world.

2.2. Related Perspectives of Sport Studies

2.2.1. The Development of “Sport/Media Complex”

The relationship between sport and media has been examined by many scholars. Jhally (1984) concludes three phases in terms of” the evolution of the sports/media complex” (p.41):

Table 2 Three Phases of “Sport/Media” Complex Through History³

Time	Phase	Media	Feature
1890-1920	Beginning phase	Newspaper	The sports audience being produced as a commodity
1920-1940	Development phase	Radio	Sporting events played a crucial role in the populace of radio
1940-1980	Consolidation phase	Television	The symbiotic relationship between sports and media has formed through sports' television broadcast rights

Following “the evolution of sport/media complex” in different media age (newspaper, radio and television), Jhally explores “the material and cultural dynamic underlying the development of North American sports” (p.41). However, it is without doubt that there is a rapid development in terms of the sport/media complex in the Information Age. Hutchins, Rowe and Ruddock (2009) points out that new media “is reshaping the media sports cultural complex” by analyzing networked media sport (p.89). In addition, some studies explore the relationship between sport and social media, which reflect the new directions of sport and media studies in current media environment. For example, by using women’s sports blog as a case study, Antunovic and Hardin(2012) points out that “the emergence of social media has provided a space for discourse and activism about sports that traditional media outlets tend to ignore”(p.305).

In terms of the study of sports fandom and new media, Phua(2010) examines sports fan’s different media use and concludes that online media have the greatest impact on sports fans’ identification. In addition, several studies further explore social media’s influence on sports fans’ behavior and social identity (Miranda, Chamorro, Rubio& Rodriguez, 2014; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Larkin & Fink, 2016).

³ Information in this table is summarized by the author from *The Spectacle of accumulation: Material and Cultural Factors in the Evolution of the Sports/Media Complex* (1984)

In terms of the theoretical framework, Makay and Rowe(1987) offer “the critical paradigm of sport and media studies”(Jansen & Sabo, 1994, p.2), which has been applied broadly in critical communication studies. For instance, many writers examine how sport was being utilized to fulfill the U.S government’s political purposes by virtue of the sport/war metaphors in American media (Jansen, Sabo,1994; Jansen,2002).

However, the development of sport/media complex requires an examination of indigenous media in export counties along with the global expansion of Western industry, since the media representation of sport in Western media, such as the sport/war metaphors, might be different in a non-Western context. Following this, this essay applies the “sport/media complex” in examining the global sports fandom in China, trying to find out new features of the “sport/media complex” in Chinese social media.

2.2.2. Sport and Masculinities

Many scholars have pointed out that sport has a deep structured relation with male identity (Beisser,1972; Lipsky,1979; Sabo & Runfola,1980; Jhally,1984). Following this, the relationship between sport and masculinities has become a key point of entry to interpret the social power relations behind sport. For instance, Makay and Rowe (1987) explores how Australian media legitimate masculine hegemony, and conclude that “politicizing media representations of sport is an important part of the counter-hegemonic struggle in patriarchal capitalist societies” (p.258). Jansen and Sabo (1994) also examines the media representations of sport during the Persian Gulf war, and concludes that the “sport/war metaphors” in American media are not only the “crucial rhetorical resources for mobilizing the patriarchal values that construct, mediate, and maintain hegemonic masculinity,” but also “rationalized the war and strengthened the ideological hegemony of white Western male elites” (p.1).

This argument has been extended in Jansen’s book, *Critical Communication Theory: Power, Media, Gender and Technology* (2002). In this book, Jansen brilliantly

interprets how Western elite legitimates hegemonic masculinity and marginalizes lower class through the media representations of sport:

Use of sport/war tropes allowed the allied nations and white Western males to flex their muscles and, to use President Bush's own sport/war metaphor, "kick some ass." Ironically, while elite white males made ample use of images of hegemonic masculinity in rallying around the flag (i.e., athletic and combat images of physical strength, aggressiveness, violence, hardness, emotional stoicism, competitive zeal, Promethean transcendence, and denial to death), they actually waged war at a safe distance through the use of computers and so-called smart bombs and with military forces comprised primarily of lower-middle-class, lower-class, and minority males (p.194).

However, these former studies overlook how sport reproduced capitalist power relations on a global scale in the wake of globalization of capitalism. In this sense, this essay interprets how global sports fandom in China helped constructing the hegemonic world order by legitimating the white male sporting culture in Chinese society through Chinese fan's transnational identity towards Western sport brands, such as the English Premier League football.

2.2.3 Sport and Social Class

In the 1970s, the sociological study of sport has become an emergent study in the field of social sciences. In *Sport and Social Order: Contributions to the Sociology of Sport* (1975), the significance of sport has been examined through a sociological way. For instance, the relationship between "sport, social differentiation, and social inequality" has been examined in one part of this book (p.117). In *Sport and Social Class* (1978), French sociologist Bourdieu further explores the relationship between sport and social class by pointing out directly that "sport, like any other practice, is an object of struggles between the fractions of the dominant class and also between the social classes" (p.826).

Following this, a critical paradigm has also been developed in many works in examining the relation between sport and social class. In his book *Class, Sports and Social Development* (1983), Gruneau points out:

Human choices and possibilities expressed in and through play, games, and sports are influenced by the differential resources that people can bring to bear on their life situation as a result of class differences in social life (p.29).

This argument develops a critical perspective of sport that sport is “actively involved in the production and reproduction of society” (p.30). In this sense, it seems that in the context of the globalization of capitalism, sport could also be seen as a key point of entry to understand the reproduction of capitalism in the globalizing world.

Additionally, Gruneau(1999) offers a further argument that sport could be seen as a medium for accomplishing the social identity of the youth. According to Gruneau, this argument took inspiration from Britain scholar Paul Willis (1977), who explores how capitalist social relations are being reproduced in Britain society through diverse cultural forms, such as profaning sport “as the pursuit of informal mastery in spheres separated from necessity” (Guneau,1999, p.41).

These perspectives of sport and class have been applied in sport studies in different parts of the world. However, based on a review of literature, it seems that few sport studies in China have paid attention to the sociological study of sport, not to mention related research on examining the relationship between sport and class issues in Chinese contexts. In this sense, this essay plans to use a sociological and critical approach to examine the formation of global sports fandom in China. Inspired by former researches that related with sport and class, this essay argues that in the context of the globalization of capitalism, the interweaving of the global expansion of Western sports industry and Chinese socialist market economy collectively facilitated the formation of global sports fandom in China by deploying the emerging class consciousness in post-reform Chinese society.

2.3. Fan Studies in China

Along with China's "Reform and Opening Up" policy that was launched in 1978, the increasingly liberal cultural policies in the mainland China facilitated the emergence of fan culture. Zhang (2014) points out that in the beginning of China's reform period, pop culture fandom was thriving in the mainland China, since pop culture from Hong Kong and Taiwan has been exported to the mainland China in the context of liberal cultural environment.

Most Chinese fan studies identified that fan studies in mainland China started from 2005 (Li, 2008; Cai, 2009; Jing & Wang, 2012; Guo, 2013; Chen, 2015). In 2004, a reality television singing competition, *Super Voice Girls*, broadcasted on Hunan TV⁴ and became the most popular singing show in Chinese broadcast history. Those singers who won the contest had become super stars with vast loyal fan bases. Following this phenomenon, many Chinese scholars have become interested in exploring this emerging fandom in China.

Fan practices have become increasingly active in China by virtue of various new media platform (Cai,2010). Following this, many scholars explores digital fandom in Chinese social media. For instance, Lu (2008) explores the development of television fan culture in network society by examining television fans' practices in Baidu Post Bar. Jing and Wang (2012) examines the virtual social interaction of digital fandom on the platform of Sina Weibo.

However, based on a review of literature, there are three academic voids in current Chinese fan studies. First, a majority of current fan studies in China only focus on interpreting fandom per se and overlook "the wider social structures that fandom is tied to" (*Background on Fan Studies*). Second, although some scholars did notice the rise of global fandom in China (Lu, 2009; Deng, 2010; Tang, 2012; Cao &He, 2012), most of them only examine global fandom in the local context and overlook "the interplay between the global and the local in processes of cultural globalization" (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007, p.11). Third, although some fan studies did pay attention to sports

⁴ A provincial satellite TV station, which is also the second-most-watched channel in China (Wikipedia).

fandom (Ling,2005; Zhang,2013; Zhang,2014; Wang, Liu&Yang,2014), none of those that have been identified examine the relationship between sports and masculinity in Chinese context.

As Tao (2009) points out, although nowadays Chinese fan numbers might be the biggest in the world, current fan studies in China are still quite weak, theoretically or empirically (p.15). In this sense, one aim of this essay is hoping to extend previous Chinese fan studies by using a critical paradigm of fan studies to examine global sports fandom in China which are overlooked by current Chinese fan studies.

Chapter 3.

Theoretical Framework

3.1. A Critical Paradigm of Fan Studies

It seems that a critical paradigm, which combines political economy and cultural studies, can be applied in the research of global sports fandom, since it offers a critical insight to examine the social and global contexts that underlie the emergence of global sports fandom. The analysis of fandom has been limited in the framework of cultural studies in the previous two waves of fan studies (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007). For instance, the “culture struggle” perspective in the first wave only focused on active fans who resist dominant culture by using media texts tactically while excluding casual viewers from research. In the second waves of fan studies, however, although fan studies in this phase moved beyond the “incorporation/resistance paradigm” (Abercrombie&Longhurst,1998, p.15), the macro insight of “social and cultural hierarchy” overlooked fan’s subjectivity in the Information Age.

In this sense, this essay focuses on interpreting “the wider social structures that fandom is tied to” (*Background on Fan Studies*). First, in order to analyze fans’ motivations, this essay takes an interpretive perspective of cultural studies (Geertz,1973), examining global sports fandom as a powerful symbol which has social meanings embodied in (Geertz,1973, p.89). Second, in order to examine global sports fandom in “the interplay between the global and the local in processes of cultural globalization” (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007, p.11), this essay also takes a Gramscian approach by integrating Cox’s (1983) theory of world order and Connell’s(1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity.

Connell(1987) develops the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which offers a new framework to notice an implicit hierarchies among the male. In addition, Connell

(1998) offers a framework of “masculinities and globalization” to examine masculinities on a global scale. However, further studies in particular contexts are still needed, since the issue of “masculinities and globalization” is too broad. For instance, Connell argues that the globalizing masculinity in the postcolonial period is marked by “political decolonization” and “economic neocolonialism” (1998, p.8). However, how economic neocolonialism disrupts traditional masculinity in different parts of the world and then constructs hegemonic masculinity in a certain context? This question entails a more specific research rather than just a framework of “masculinities and globalization”. As Connell (1987) said, “the notion of ‘hegemony’ generally implies a large measure of consent” (p.185). In this sense, the prevalence of global sports fandom in China could be seen as a point of entry to understand the process of being hegemonic in terms of masculinity.

Besides, although Connell mentions that “the interplay between different forms of masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works” (p.183), further understanding could be extended to the context of globalization. A context where “the interplay between different forms of masculinity” on a global scale could be seen as an important part of how a hegemonic global gender order works. Accordingly, this essay extends Cox’s framework of World Order by integrating Connell’s idea of hegemonic masculinity in it, since Cox pays less attention to global gender politics when he analyzes “hegemony and international relations” (1983, p.162). Within this theoretical framework, this essay is able to explain how the global sports industry helps to maintain contemporary world order by legitimating and reproducing Western hegemonic masculinity in Chinese society through “the winning of consent” (Hall,1986, p.16). In this case, it is the winning of fans.

3.2. Methodology: Three Dimensional Discourse Analysis

In terms of methodology, and in order to conduct a comprehensive examination of the context, the discourse and the text behind the formation of global sports fandom in China, this essay plans to use three-dimensional discourse analysis (Fairclough,1992).

There are three reasons for using three dimensional discourse analysis in this essay. First, based on the reviewing of former fan studies, it is imperative to understand

fandom from a dynamic perspective, rather than just focusing on analyzing single fan text. For example, Henry Jenkins (2013) concludes that fans are active media producers instead of passive consumers by analyzing Star Trek fandom's fan texts, such as fan fictions. However, discourse analysis suggests that texts should be considered as "a material manifestation of discourse" (Phillips&Hardy,2002, p.4), which belongs to a constructed discourse and should be initially located in a broader context.

Second, as Phillips and Hardy (2002) points out, "social reality is produced and made real through discourses, and social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning" (p.4). As the consequence of global expansion of the Western sports industry, the formation of global sports fandom cannot be fully understood without analyzing how the Western sports discourse being internalized in China, such as under what context and through what kind of text. In this sense, this essay plans to analyze three questions. First, how the global context, which is the globalization of capitalism, facilitates the global expansion of western sports industry? Second, how Western sports discourse could find some compatibility in the Chinese indigenous context? Third, what is media's role in this process?

Third, the specific analysis of related texts is also important in fan studies, since the broader examination of the context and the discourse may overlook individual subjectivity, which can be seen as an essential part of cultural studies. In this sense, a discourse analysis of selected football fans' forums on Sina Weibo was conducted as a case study to explore what broader social issues has involved with sports fandom in post-reform China.

In conclusion, the following writings include three parts. In chapter 4 of this essay, the English Premier League is employed as a case study to show how Western sports discourse is being internalized in China in the context of the globalization of capitalism, which facilitates the global expansion of Western sports industry.

In chapter 5 of this essay, I examine how global sports fandom takes place in China along with China's market economy reform, which facilitates the emerging class consciousness in China and the marginalization of traditional Chinese masculinity, which in turn, leads to Chinese sports fans'—especially male fans' vulnerability to resist Western hegemonic masculinity that comes packaged in Western sports brands. In the

end, conclusions will be presented in chapter 6, which includes an examination of the transnational cooperation between the Western sports industry and Chinese media and the global effects of global sports fandom towards the construction of contemporary world order.

Chapter 4.

Case Study: The Rise of the English Premier League in China

This part uses the rise of the English Premier League in China as case study to show how Western masculinity becomes hegemonic in the neoliberal context through transnational sports brands, which work as “means of legitimation for the whole gender order” (Connell, 1998, p.16) by using the rhetoric of free market. First, this part offers two pieces of evidence to argue that the formation of the English Premier League in 1992 is a neoliberal agenda of British football. First, its formation was totally supported by the rhetoric of free market. Second, its priority to capital is obvious in its pursuit of high broadcast rights revenue, rather than protecting football fans’ interests. In this sense, by interpreting the relationship between neoliberalism and the English Premier League, this part indicates that the global expansion of Western sports industry legitimates the dominance of Western male sporting culture on a global scale by speaking “a gender-neutral language of market” (Connell, 1998, p.16).

Second, with the English Premier League serving as case study to discuss how local Western sports brands use cosmopolitanism as strategy for the creation of global fandom markets. Following this, this part could answer how Western sports brands could be seen as compatible with the indigenous contexts of China through a de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing process, in which Western sports discourse have been internalized in China successfully through a strategic transformation from local brand to a cosmopolitan sports symbol that global fans could also invest in.

4.1. Neoliberalism and English Premier League Formation

In 1992, the Premier League, which consisted of 20 British football clubs, formed under a new tier based on the period exist third-tier English football league system. The reason for calling it “the Premier League” is that this new league makes up by 20 elite football teams out of 92 football clubs in the British football league system. The establishment of this new league is described as “football’s big bang moment” (Rodrigues,2012). It becomes one of the reasons that some scholars identified the period of 1990s as the transformation of English football(King,2002).

However, it seems that the formation of the Premier League could be identified as a neoliberal transformation of British football. Hargreaves(1986) points out that it was the financial crisis of British sports that “rendered sports vulnerable to market forces and subject increasingly to a capitalist pattern of rationalization” (p. 117). However, although it is obvious that the economic pressure and profit stimulus facilitates the formation of the Premier League, the pure economic interpretation is easily falling in the trap of “economic reductionism” (Hall,1986). In this sense, it seems that the formation of the Premier League should be interpreted within a historic framework, since it offers a comprehensive perspective to understand this cultural phenomenon.

First, it is important to understand that the neoliberal trend in terms of the British football had already happened and laid a firm foundation for the formation of the Premier League. In 1960s, the regulation of the maximum wage of professional football players was abolished(Hargreaves,1986). It is obvious that this political change leads to the dramatic rise in terms of professional footballers’ wage. It is not obvious, however, whether this political change directly guaranteed the neoliberal foundation of British football league, since it embraced free competition that supported by the rhetoric of free market.

Similarly, the rhetoric of free market also facilitates the formation of the English Premier League in 1992. The primary aim of forming a new tier of British football league based on the old football league system was making sure that those top football clubs in British could maximize their potentials without averaging by other less competitive clubs. According to Rodrigues (2012), the claim of these elite clubs for forming the Premier League is that “they earned and spent the most and wanted to form an elite division so

they could do more of the same”. However, it seems to me that the formation of the Premier League, which was called the “elite super league,” is a total neoliberal transformation that supported by the rhetoric of free market.

Second, the priority to capital rather than football fans has been guaranteed with the formation of the Premier League. The most obvious evidence is that the exclusive television broadcast right of the Premier League was sold to *British Sky Broadcasting*, a pay channel which runs by Rupert Murdoch, rather than ITV, a free channel that used to have the exclusive broadcasting rights of British football league before 1992 but failed to get the same rights of the Premier League since its bid was lower than *BSkyB*. This phenomenon indicates that the formation of the Premier League was more organized around the needs of capital, rather than satisfying football fans. In this sense, it is also obvious that the global expansion of the Premier League originated from the needs of global markets, which provided transnational capital for the development of local sports brands in the West.

The rhetoric of free market makes the global expansion of the Western sports industry seems like a mutually-beneficial arrangement for both sports corporations and global sports fans. However, as Connell (1998) points out,

The neoliberal agenda has little to say, explicitly, about gender: it speaks a gender-neutral language of “markets”, “individual”, and “choice”. But the world in which neoliberalism is ascendant is still a gendered world, and neoliberalism has an implicit gender politics. The “individual” of neoliberal theory has in general the attributes and interests of a male entrepreneur, the attack on the welfare state generally weakens the position of women, while the increasingly unregulated power of transnational corporations places strategic power in the hands of particular groups of men” (p.15).

Follow this, sports, which has “the auspices of the ‘no politics in sport’ rule” (Hargreaves, 1986, p.143), and “the appearance of being a cultural practice which unites men” (Whannel, 2002, p.28), are easily to legitimate an implicit “masculinity politics” (Connell,1998, p.16), which allows Western masculinity being reproduced to non-Western countries and becoming hegemonic on a global scale in the wake of neoliberalism.

4.2. De-Contextualizing and Re-Contextualizing: Local Team or Noble Team?

As Wang(1998) points out, “the basic idea of Gramsci’s definition of cultural hegemony is that the formation of cultural hegemony never relies on passive acceptance. On the contrary, it naturally formed when the passive side become the active side” (p.340). In this sense, active sports fans become a key tool to accomplish the ideological work of sports. However, the main role of each Western sports brands plays in their home country is local sports teams. For instance, in Britain, the main role that each football club of the Premier League plays is the local team of a city. In this sense, it is normal that local football fans have emotional investment in their hometown team. However, how about foreign football fans such as Chinese sports fans? How do they identify with these British clubs that are far away from their home? It entails a deeper investigation.

The English Premier League football fandom in British could be interpreted with fans’ national identity(Gibbons,2016). However, the nationalist framework is clearly not suitable for analyzing the popularity of the Premier League in China, since it is a foreign football league for Chinese football fans. In this sense, this section analyzes the digital fan base of the English Premier League football on a Chinese social media platform in order to find out why Chinese sports fans developed transnational identity to foreign sports brands.

The following table shows the follower numbers of each English Premier League football club’s official account on Sina Weibo:⁵

Table 3 EPL football club, follower numbers on Weibo

Name	Weibo Followers
Manchester United FC(曼联足球俱乐部)	8,670,000
Manchester City FC(曼城足球俱乐部 MCFC)	8,110,000
Arsenal FC(阿森纳足球俱乐部)	3,560,000
Chelsea FC(切尔西足球俱乐部)	2,500,000

⁵ Information in the table is collected by the author from Sina Weibo on June 1, 2016; football clubs are from 2016-17 Premier League (25th season).

Liverpool FC(利物浦足球俱乐部)	1,770,000
Tottenham Hotspur FC(托特纳姆热刺俱乐部)	1,380,000
Leicester City FC(莱斯特城足球俱乐部)	510,000
Aston Villa FC(埃斯顿维拉足球俱乐部)	390,000
Sunderland AFC(SAFC 桑德兰足球俱乐部)	120,000
West Bromwich Albion FC(西布朗足球俱乐部官微)	100,000
Stoke City FC(斯托克城足球俱乐部)	60,000
Everton FC(埃弗顿足球俱乐部微博)	10,000
Bournemouth AFC(AFC 足球俱乐部)	7,606
West Ham United FC	N/A
Newcastle United FC	N/A
Southampton FC	N/A
Swansea City AFC	N/A
Norwich City FC	N/A
Crystal Palace FC	N/A
Watford FC	N/A

An obvious feature of the Premier League fandom in China has been showed in this table. There is a dramatic gap between the fan base of these 20 football clubs, even they are both belonging to the Premier League. This table shows three tiers in terms of football clubs' fan base in China. First, the first six clubs (Manchester United FC, Manchester City FC, Arsenal FC, Chelsea FC, Liverpool FC and Tottenham Hotspur FC) are the first tier that have millions fans in China, which totally account for 97 percent of the Chinese Premier League fans in China. The second tier is the following seven football clubs (Leicester City FC, Aston Villa FC, Sunderland AFC, West Bromwich Albion FC, West Bromwich Albion FC, Stoke City FC, Everton FC and Bournemouth AFC) that total number of their football fans in China is around 700 thousand, even lesser than a single team in the first tier. The third tier is the last seven football clubs (West Ham United FC, Newcastle United FC, Southampton FC, Swansea City AFC, Norwich City FC, Crystal Palace FC and Watford FC) that do not even have an official account on Sina Weibo, which indicates their minor fan base in China.

This dramatic difference in terms of the fan base of different football teams reflect that some British football clubs successfully found compatible with Chinese context by decontextualizing their role as local teams of certain British cities. As national football

league in Britain, football clubs of the Premier League do not have linguistic, cultural or geographical connections with most Chinese fans. However, some football clubs, especially the first tier in this table, have re-contextualized as cosmopolitan sports symbols that global fans could also invest in, instead of maintaining their role as mere local teams of Britain. For instance, some football clubs try to build a sense of global community in their official team accounts on Weibo. For example, the official team accounts of Manchester United posts "Welcome Zlatan joins the family of Reds" when reporting that Manchester United confirmed the signing of Sweden striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic(July,1,2016). The term "family of Reds" was used to build a sense of global community. Similarly, official team accounts for Arsenal used cosmopolitanism as strategy to create a sense of global community. For example, a commercial for Puma that was posted by Arsenal's official team account on Weibo (July 14, 2016) combines visual and textual message to showcase cosmopolitanism. The visuals included images of different race and ethnicities (Figure 1), images of world wide landmarks (Figure 2), and even images of different socioeconomic classes (Figure 3)—from elite football players to average fans and taxi drivers. In these shots, football fans of Arsenal in different countries says the slogan "We are the Arsenal" in front of landmarks of different cities, such as Arsenal Station in London, Empire State Building in New York and Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai.



Figure 1 Images of different fans



Figure 2 Images of worldwide landmarks



Figure 3 Images of different socioeconomic backgrounds

As Connell (1987) points out, dominant masculinity never requires bodily force to become hegemonic, it requires “a large measure of consent” (p.185). A sense of community that was created to appeal Chinese football fans could also be seen as a kind of fraternity that helped to reproduce Western masculinity through Chinese fans’ supports for their favorite Western football clubs. For instance, the official accounts of Manchester United States initiated an activity named “learning team song” to interact with Chinese fans of Manchester United (July 13,2016). Football fans of Manchester United were asked to post videos of themselves singing the team song of Manchester United if they wanted to win two team shirts. This kind of activity gave male fans the

opportunity to demonstrate masculinity through language and ritual, such as displaying their manhood through singing a team song with wearing their team shirt. However, it is without doubt that this kind of manhood is based on Western male sporting culture.

As Connell (1987) points out, "hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support" (p.185). In this sense, it is obvious that the consent of large numbers of Chinese fans to Western sports brands legitimates dominant western male sporting culture and further facilitates the reproduction of Western masculinity in China.

Chapter 5.

The Formation of Global Sports Fandom in China

The global expansion of Western sports industry facilitates the formation of global sports fandom in China. However, it seems that it is not coincidence that the booming of global sports fandom just happened in conjunction with China's rapid economic transformation period. There must have deep social factors that impinge on the emergence of this cultural phenomenon. Accordingly, an examination of Chinese indigenous contexts is conducted in this part to explore what is Chinese sports fans' emotional investment in global sports brands. By examining global sports fandom in China in the context of China's market economy, this chapter discusses how global sports fandom in China formed along with two consequences of China's market economy—an emerging class consciousness and the marginalization of traditional Chinese masculinity.

Additionally, in the end of this chapter, this essay extends Jansen's(2002) study of the "sport/war metaphor" in American media to Chinese society by analyzing the sport/class metaphor in Sina Sports on Sina Weibo, a social media platform. The primary aim for examining this media metaphor in China is to show how sports fandom formed through media texts by deploying the emerging class consciousness in post-reform China.

5.1. The Marginalization of Traditional Chinese Masculinity

In the wake of the globalization of capitalism, China started its market economy reform in 1978, which led directly to a significant change in terms of indigenous gender norms. For instance, women's gender representation in the area of production increased as more attention needed to be paid to labour since it became a significant component of the new market economy. However, some implicit changes, such as the

norms of official masculinity in the society, have been overlooked by most gender studies in China.

Before economic reform, political superiority used to be the first norm for evaluating people's social status in China, as well as evaluating official masculinity. The Chinese constitution defines China as a socialist state "led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants".⁶ In this sense, traditional Chinese masculinity is focused two norms in pre-reform China. Firstly, it emphasizes men's dedication to states and society in the context of a collectivist economy. Second, it dominates a type of working class masculinity based on political necessity. For instance, media images of traditional Chinese masculinity in 1960s is Wang Jinxi and Lei Feng. Wang Jinxi is a worker who worked in Daqing oilfield, which is China's first-rate oilfield in the beginning of 1960s. Lei Feng was a soldier in Chinese army. They become media images of Chinese male in 1960s for two reasons. First, their political superiority, as a member of working class or CCP's army, is beneficial for political harmony of socialist China, which "led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants." Second, their images as models for national labour or good citizens who are devoted to the state or the people accords with the socialist political propaganda of that period.

⁶ Constitution of The People's Republic of China, adopted on December 4,1982



Figure 4 Media image of Wang Jinxi, the “Iron Man” who jumped into state-owned oil well in severe winter



Figure 5 Image of Lei Feng, captions says, “ Follow Lei Feng’s example: Love the Party, Love socialism, Love the people”

However, this kind of traditional Chinese masculinity, which emphasized attributes of collectivism, has been marginalized in the wake of China’s market economy, since the political superiority has given way to the economic priority. Nowadays, the power of neoliberalism has changed the norms of masculinity in China from a collectivist

way to a individualist way. This manifests in the cultivation of men's attention to individual success in areas such as physical strength and financial wealth. In this sense, in the Western sports industry, it is easier to cultivate global male football fans' identity towards Western sports brands given the erosion of traditional collectivist masculinity and the rise of a new individualist masculinity. This change has made Chinese football fans vulnerable to Western sports brands, which package the globalized sporting masculinity that is "largely built around the individual's attributes" (Hargreaves, 1986, p.146). This is not unlike the production of media sports stars (Whannel,2002), who are depicted as the ideal images of men who have muscular bodies and are visibly extremely rich. However, the formation of global sports fandom is also easier to cultivate gender inequality on a global scale by legitimating Western male sporting culture in non-Western countries.



Figure 6 Men's health's Chinese edition, issue 3, 2012

Note: Cover person is former football stars of the Premier League, David Beckham, who represents the globalizing sporting masculinity: white male with confidence, muscular body, super rich

5.2. Sports and the Class Consciousness in China

It seems that in the wake of consumerism, global sports fandom implicitly works as a class signifier along with the rapid economic development in China. China saw a dramatic development along with its “Reform and Opening Up” policy that launched in 1978. However, the class stratification has also emerged implicitly in post-reform China (Hong & Qian, 2010). Although the rhetoric of class is rare in the official discourse in China, since the sociological ideology emphasizes “removing class”, class consciousness still emerged inextricably in Chinese society through all kinds of class symbolisms that was reified through consumerism.

A phenomenon that happened in online football forums could show how sport works as a class signifier in contemporary China. Nowadays, young men who were born in a working class or peasant family who used to have political superiority in China’s pre-reform period are being called “*diaosi*” (a new word which is created to represent “loser”). Interestingly, this famous Internet buzzword was created in a football forum of Baidu Post Bar in the first place (Cao & Xu, 2015). In the beginning, this word was used only by football fans to attack rival football fans’ economic inferiority. However, football fans started to use this insulting word for self-mockery and made it become a very common word used by the whole society, not just in the football fans’ community.

Many Chinese scholars have deconstructed this Chinese “loser culture.” For instance, Cao and Xu (2015) argues that we should understand the creation of *diaosi* from perspectives of political economy and social gender by articulating masculinity in China’s market economy transformation (p.27). However, little attention has been paid to the subject that created this word— sports fans. Once again, fans have been neglected in relation to media studies.

From the perspective of fan studies, it seems to me that Chinese football fans’ sensitivity to their economic inferiority, which leads to the creation of the word *diaosi*, reflects that the choice of sports fandom has become a class signifier in contemporary China. In this sense, it is easy to understand Chinese sports fans’ emotional investment in Western sports brands, such as the Premier League. For instance, becoming leading teams in the Premier League shows fans’ superiority, since the access to global sports fandom connected to higher socio-economic class. For instance, the display of global

sports fandom in wearing particular commodities, such as a pair of Nike shoes that are endorsed by international celebrities or a team shirt of Manchester City football club requires that they be bought from overseas, requires a much higher monetary access than the display of indigenous sports fandom. Following this, an implicit class distinction has been formed along with the display of global sports fandom.

5.3. Class Imagination: Sport/class Metaphor in China

It is important to understand that Chinese media are involved in constructing class imagination of global sports fandom. Many Western scholars have explored the relationship between sports and cultural hegemony by examining the “sport/war metaphor” in Western media (Mckay & Rowe,1987; Jansen and Sabo, 1994; Jansen, 2002). However, it seems that Chinese sports media reflects an indigenous feature of using sport/class metaphor. For instance, in the official team accounts of English Premier League teams on Weibo, which runs by football clubs—wealthy football clubs, such as Manchester United, Manchester City, Arsenal, Chelsea and Liverpool—prefer to suppress their image as wealthy clubs by building the image of friendly community to fans. However, Chinese sports media are inclined to use sport/class metaphors to appeal fans’ attention. For example, Sina Sports, which is the most popular sports news service on Sina Weibo, describe Chelsea FC (July 3,2016), Manchester United FC (July 2,2016) and Liverpool FC (February 15,2016) as haomen(豪门), a typical class term that implies “upward mobility” or “class elevation” in China. This term was used in relation to these football clubs signing football players from less competitive/wealthy football clubs (Figure 7) or football club signing contract with commercial brand (Figure 8). In this sense, it seems that Sina Sports are using class metaphor to imply upward mobility and class elevation to appeal fans to follow these football clubs or buy products that these football clubs are endorsed.



Figure 7 Sina Sports' post on July 2

Note: Class term *haomen* was used to imply upward mobility



Figure 8 Sina Sports' post on July 25

Note: Class term *haomen* was used to imply class elevation

Chapter 6.

Conclusion

6.1. Transnational Cooperation Between Sports and Media: A Win-Win?

The “sport/class metaphor” works as a mirror to reflect the increasingly frequent cooperation between Western sports industry and Chinese media. Nowadays, it is common that Chinese media conglomerates seek opportunities to cooperate with Western sports industry, even through fierce competition and high bids. According to a recent report, three Chinese media companies, *Sina*, *Tencent* and *Letv* have obtained the online broadcasting rights with a total of \$54 million for the 2015/16 season of the English Premier League football, which is a new record based on previous bids(*sports.cn*).

This kind of transnational cooperation benefits from China’s economic transformation. In the wake of the economy’s reform, the media industry in China completed its market-oriented transformation, which has laid a foundation for the transnational cooperation between Western sport industry and Chinese media. In this sense, transnational cooperation seems like a mutual-benefit cooperation for both Western sports industry and the economic development of Chinese media industry.

However, the rhetoric of “transnational cooperation” sometimes “obfuscates more than it illuminates” (Schiller, 2014, p.357). Schiller (2014) points out that the rhetoric of the free flow of information on a global scale “portrays deep-seated economic and strategic interests in an appealing language of universal rights” (p.358). Following this discussion, it is important to understand that the foundation of the Western sport industry’s global expansion is based on unequal world information order, which is hidden by the rhetoric of “transnational cooperation,” since cooperation per se implies a double-win meaning and the rhetoric of free market speaks “a gender-neutral language” (Connell, 1998, p.16). The truth is, this kind of transnational cooperation between

Western sport industry and Chinese media emerges in the context of unequal world information order. Fundamentally, it is the Western developed countries controlling the power, both economically or ideologically, to decide the types of export information and the direction of information flow. Accordingly, transnational cooperation between Western sport industry and Chinese media is actually the expansion of Western cultural hegemony, through which Western sports discourse, which is packaged in implicit gender politics, has been exported to China under the protection of the rhetoric of transnational culture cooperation, which works as “a means of legitimation for the whole gender order” (Connell,1998, p.16).

6.2. Globalizing Masculinity and the Construction of the World Order

The study of global sports fandom in China offers a new perspective to examine the relationship between masculinity and the construction of world order, since it could be seen as a microcosm to look China’s complex role in shaping contemporary world order by reflecting the myth of economic superpower and cultural vulnerability in post-reform China. On one side, China’s rapid development has influenced the world greatly; on the other side, China has been exploited because of its economic superpower. For instance, those Chinese fans of the English Premier League, have been used not only to purchase sports product, but also to help to reproduce Western masculinity on a global scale.

As Schiller(1991) points out, “national power is not the exclusive determinant of cultural domination”(p.15). Following this, it is important to recognize that the global sports industry not only works as mechanism of transcultural cultural communication, but also as mechanism of reproducing “organic ideologies, which are organic because they touch practical, everyday, common sense” (Hall,1986, p.20). For instance, Western sporting masculinity has been transformed as an organic ideology, which was implicitly reproduced on a global scale through internalizing it in global sports fans’ active identity towards Western sports brands.

In addition, it is also important to understand that as an important type of global power relation, gender order greatly influence the construction of world order. The global

reproduction of Western sporting masculinity is an integral part of a hegemonic world order, since it works as “a mode of production” (Cox,1983, p.171), which reproduce and legitimate the dominance of Western masculinity in different parts of the world through global sports fandom.

As Cox (1983) points out:

To become hegemonic, a state would have to found and protect a world order which was universal in conception, i.e., not an order in which one state directly exploits others but an order which most other states (or at least those within reach of the hegemony) could find compatible with their interests (p.171).

In this sense, in terms of gender order, hegemony was reached in the winning of consent on a global scale—by the subliminal winning of global sports fans.

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