Sports as a lens: The contours of local and national belonging in post-handover Hong Kong

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Abstract
Through the lens of sport, this article explores the trajectories of local and national belonging in various forms and degrees, which, in turn, bespeak the evolving Hong Kong–China relationship in the larger socio-political context of post-handover Hong Kong. With an eye to cross-border sports competitions (e.g., the Hong Kong-China football rivalry), sport-related events (e.g. gala performance and sports demonstrations by Chinese Olympic gold medalists in Hong Kong) as well as their media representation and repercussion, this article examines the multifarious articulations of local and national identifications registered in the athletes’ and the spectators’ performing bodies, their mediated images and embodiments. The ultimate goal of this article is to tease out the body and identity politics embedded in the production, mediatization and narrativization of local-national relations in an array of official and non-official discourses disclosed through sports practice and viewership partaken in different scenarios.

Keywords
Athletes, body politics, Hong Kong culture and identity, local/national/global, media, nationalism, post colonialism, social movement, sport, umbrella movement

Introduction
Having fully lifted the sports coverage from its primetime news since January 2017, the free-to-air television channel TVB in July 2018 called another end to “Sports World,” a once-popular sports magazine broadcast since 1980. Even in ViuTV, the only sports program “About Sports,” an outsourced production acquired since the official launch of the channel in 2016, was halted in March 2018. Contrary to the suspended production of local sports program and the limited televised reportage of sports, pay-television providers, like i-Cable and Now TV continue to retain several
frequencies in their respective networks for foreign sports channels such as Fox Sports (formerly ESPN) and beIN sports to operate in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, sports broadcaster LeSports, having rapidly expanded in Hong Kong since September 2015, ended its rather short-lived streaming subscription service in March 2018. What remains in the shadow is, ironically, the suspected correlation between the network’s wide-ranging purchase of sports broadcasting contracts and its abrupt closure upon overdue rent, customers’ complaints and a liquidation petition filed by its creditors.

At this juncture, revealed in the skewed production and transmission of sports programs is a rather peculiar media ecology in Hong Kong that is complicated by the local spectators’, media’s, and businesses’ mixed interests and varied perception toward sports: In the presence of a sizable sports audience and their demand in the domestic market, resources are often allocated to the curtailment of, usually non-local, mega sport events, and the accession of their exclusive transmission rights, revealing the unequal status of local vis-à-vis international sports. The acquisition of the broadcasting rights of popular overseas events such as the English Premier League, the US National Basketball Association (NBA) league and the FIFA World Cup has been the major battleground of local television service providers for ratings and advertisement sales. The shrinking role of local sports journalists, commentators, and sports programs is, on the one hand, testimony to a globalized media culture and the ever-accelerating information traffic in the digital age; on the other hand, the indifference toward local athletes and local sports journalism is gradually challenged by the rising local subjectivity and the outcry sparked off by the local sporting community.

Through the lens of sport, this article explores the trajectories of local and national belonging in what I identify as a local sports spectatorship that bespeaks the evolving Hong Kong–China relationship in the larger socio-political context of post-handover Hong Kong. With an eye to cross-border sports competitions (e.g., the Hong Kong-China football rivalry), sport-related events (e.g. gala performance and sports demonstrations by Chinese Olympic gold medalists in Hong Kong) as well as their media representation and repercussion, this article examines the multifarious articulations of local and national identifications registered in the athletes’ and the spectators’ performing bodies, their mediated images and embodiments. The ultimate goal of this article is to tease out the body and identity politics embedded in the production, mediatization, and narrativization of local-national relations in an array of official and non-official discourses disclosed through sports practice and viewing partaken in different scenarios.

The local and the national in sports narratives

Regarding sports development in Hong Kong, many scholars believe that the city’s sports culture, as of the new millennium, is still fairly underdeveloped and so is its sport policy (Bridges, 2013; Zheng, 2016). Their argument mainly draws on the lack of homegrown sporting mega event in Hong Kong that is capable of drawing the local population’s attention and involvement. For instance, the biennale Hong Kong Games that was introduced by the Hong Kong SAR Government in 2007 proves to have little social and economic impacts and failed to stir up local interests and support (Ho et al., 2016). In addition, the failure to promote mass sport participation, elite sports training, and Hong Kong as a hosting city for regional and international games in balanced terms indicates the government’s “hesitant and conservative” attitude toward sport (Zheng, 2016, p. 331), as well as the population’s lack of confidence and adherence toward sport-related issues (Bridges, 2012; Tsoi, 2010, qtd. in Ho et al., 2016, p. 1209). In a similar vein, the authorities’ attitude toward sports in Hong Kong and the dismissal of a local sporting identity also direct how the domestic sports sector is positioned and narrated in the official discourse (Bridges, 2011, 2016).
In the social sphere, the development of the post-millennial sport culture in Hong Kong, meanwhile, lies on the disperse constituency of its viewership and a burgeoning dependence on the visual: Considering the sport-themed webpages and social media networks that are run by not just print newspapers like Apple Daily and Oriental Daily, but also television channels like NowTV, it is noteworthy that toward the 2010s, the visual component has become a key to the construction and the consumption of a sporting world amid the change of medium and the migration of platform. The impacts of the evolution of the media landscape and the expansion of cyberculture are certainly not exclusive to sport. Adding to its complexity, what I called “local sports spectatorship” in the context of Hong Kong is not necessarily derived from the attention to the local sport sector, but consists of varied viewing interests and behaviors of the local sports spectators that contribute to the dialogic fabrication of identity. Intriguingly, next to the internationally oriented taste of Hong Kong sports viewers, characterizing this locally based sports spectatorship are a wide range of socio-politically contextualized experiences and the subsequent local relations the population strike with their territory in response to the entangled localizing, nationalizing and globalizing forces in the post-handover era.

The local sports spectatorship finds expression during the 2019 Movement, but not only, when several Hong Kong-based football teams fan clubs—from Manchester United to Liverpool of the English League—issued statements in support of the pro-democracy protests and their demands. These football fans furthered to form a human chain in Victoria Park on 18 September where they also exchanged jerseys to extend amicability, despite the “rivalry” between their supporting clubs. Humorously described as a moment of “reconciliation,” this event, in addition to its carnivalesque nature which would become a rare found with time, demonstrates the solidarity of the sports fan community in defense of local rights and freedom. Their identification with foreign sports teams overlaps their local concern and belonging, resulting in the subscription of simultaneous membership, spectatorship and participation on the scale of a member of the fans club, a spectator of sports event and a citizen exhibiting civil responsibility and local consciousness. This thereby points to two distinctive attributes of the local sports spectatorship in Hong Kong where sports viewership and local identification aggregate to convey a sharedness that transcends nationality, locality and their essentialist reading. This observation bridges the gap between the international and the domestic sporting worlds in terms of their polarized reception in the local broadcast industry and disproportionate attention from journalistic as well as academic points of view. Therefore, the local and translocal qualities of such local sports spectatorship highlight the conflunce of hybridized social contacts, cultural environment, and global exposure which constantly generates and renews fluid and multiple identities in Hong Kong. Illuminated by the material–semiotic approach in actor-network theory (Law, 2009), it is noteworthy that in the context of post-millennial Hong Kong this spectatorship not only entails communal bonds but is also capable of mobilizing real-life actions such as the abovementioned human chain event.

With this in mind, this article argues that the politics of sports and identity is played out through visual engagement and virtual participation of local sports spectatorship and meta-spectatorship in post-millennial Hong Kong. In this regard, current scholarship has extensively argued for the role of sports in identity construction in visual texts (Baker, 2003; Crosson, 2013; Lieberman, 2015; Rowe, 1998). Anderson’s (1991) concept of the “imagined political community” through the “image of communion” (p. 6) is also an oft-cited theory that considers sports viewership as an integral procedure of the nation-building project. With regard to “regional and local nationalisms” (Hall and Held, 1989, p.183), Billig’s (1995) in conceptualizing the practice of “banal nationalism” has also addressed the competition between identities and the feasibility to reproduce nationalisms,
or produce alternative belonging by way of routine everyday practices. Nevertheless, identity formation in connection to sports is never a straightforward process for Hong Kong: a former British colony and a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People Republic of China (PRC) since 1997. Hong Kong’s hybrid image—composed by its prevailing international image and the newly introduced national identification with China—is “not only expressed but, ironically, also reinforced” in the sporting mega events development from the 2008 Olympic Games and onwards (Bridges, 2013, p. 15). While the Beijing Olympics notably demonstrates the nationalization project of the Chinese government, comparative studies have accounted for the divided views in the understanding of “Chinese identity” (Ho & Bairner, 2012; Lau et al., 2010). According to two quantitative analyses conducted on secondary school children’s responses to the Games, “national identity” in Hong Kong is still distinctly characterized by the presence of a local identity (Ho & Bairner, 2012; Lau et al., 2010). This deviation from the observation made in China reveals not just the intrinsic difference but also the complex identity formation and its ongoing transformation in post-handover Hong Kong.

“Occasional” fans: navigating between nationalism and local attachment

Immediately prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympic games, 51.5% of the respondents in Hong Kong referred themselves to as “Chinese” and/or “Chinese in Hong Kong,” marking the highest record ever between 1997 and 2019 in this longitudinal identity survey conducted by the Public Opinion Program of the University of Hong Kong.2 Although the Beijing Olympics seemed to have fostered a temporary growth of Chinese identity, this boost by aggrandizing the national through sports achievement is incapable of canceling out the negative impacts of “social ills, corruption and the breach of human rights” from China (Fung & Chan, 2017, p. 9). In this regard, varied sports spectators, from the manifested to the suggested, and the meta-spectatorship engendered give light to a schizophrenic condition of indifference and sensitivity toward respective sports sectors in Hong Kong and China. Revealed in the politics of sports and identity is, therefore, the city’s peculiar socio-political landscape in the post-handover era: From the same survey, the general decline in the identification with Chineseness after 2008 and the continuous growth of a Hong Kong identity, where the latter reaches an all-time peak of 76.3% by June 2019, are precisely indicators to the gradual contestation between local and national belonging.

In the wake of the 2014 Umbrella Movement—a 79-day civil disobedience campaign in Hong Kong demanding for real universal suffrage—manifested on the sports ground is also the altering relationship between Hong Kong and China (Yu, 2018). The high-profile demonstration of an exclusively local sporting identity starts with the locals’ boo of the Chinese national anthem in regional football matches from around 2015 and onwards. Despite the costly penalty FIFA issued to the Hong Kong Football Association, similar incidents continued to take place, even when the PRC national team was not present. The underlying message is captured by Ortmann (2017): “From the perspective of the fans, Hong Kong should have its own anthem.”3

In other words, a dual identity looking to both Hong Kong and China is no longer compatible from the within, reflecting the growing Hong Kong-China divide in a wide range of social, political and cultural conflicts: In particular, PRC’s Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (SCNPC) had the national anthem law passed on 1 September 2017 in China and inserted into Annex III of Hong Kong Basic Law, creating uproars in the society towards the controversial law
itself and the “legislative backdoor” opened.\textsuperscript{4} Through the lens of sport, the paradigmatic shift in the post-handover official discourse is obvious, despite that Hong Kong still keeps the tradition of sending its own sports teams to international events: Reflected in the refusal of Hong Kong government officials (including the Chief Executive) to openly state the team they support (Apple Daily, 2015) is an ideological conflict as a result of the internalization of a post-1997 “political correctness,” which is indicative of the unequal power relation \textit{a priori} inscribed to the expression of the local and the national in discursive practices and body politics.\textsuperscript{5} The question, trivial as it sounds, epitomizes not only the polarization but also politicization of local and national representations, finally causing the breach in the narration of “Hong Kong” and “local”. As the juxtaposition of the two sport sectors unfolds the geopolitics involved in the treatment and the narration of sports, the surge of “occasional” fans in support of domestic athletes and sports teams can be regarded as a public backlash against the official discourse that subordinates the local to the national.

\section*{Dialogic spectatorship and meta-spectatorship: from lacking narration to the narrative of the lack}

Defying on the official discourse that demands national allegiance over local leanings, previously insignificant sport events garnered fanfare, just as oppositional narratives met with real-life actions to evince perceptible impacts in terms of spectators’ reactions and behaviors in the post-handover years. The meta-spectatorship that is present involves participation, physical or virtual, where different modes of spectatorship and their propagating trajectories are scrutinized at the levels of production, operation and reception. Meanwhile, this phenomenon not only underlines the perceptible impacts of identity narratives in the form of spectators’ reactions and behaviors in real life; but also indicates the consensus view of a presence of an identity split which has become increasingly irreconcilable with time.

Provoking such identity clash profoundly yet tacitly in political terms included a comment made by then-chief executive C.Y. Leung in 2014. Addressing the return of local athletes from the Asian Para Games, Leung openly referred the religion and sport sectors to groups that made little contribution to the city’s economy (Ming Pao Daily, 2014a). Unsurprisingly, Leung’s remarks offended many during the high time of the Umbrella Movement, and henceforth, transposed sports matters into the stand-off between the establishment and the pro-democracy population (South China Morning Post [SCMP], 2014). With hindsight, the government’s disregard of the local sport sector had stimulated the integration of sports into the local discourse. To be precise, the popularization of the local sports spectatorship took shape in 2015 when teams from Hong Kong and China were assigned to compete in the same group of the 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifiers.

Under the circumstances, the manifestation of the local sports spectatorship unfolds the clash of identity and the highly mediatized moments of identity performance. Prior to the actual matches, the Chinese Football Association released a poster warning their supporters of the “black skin, yellow skin and white skin people” in the Hong Kong team (SCMP, 2015). The aggressive message caught the attention of the media as well as Hongkongers, sport fan or not, leading to the naming of the forthcoming matches as the “Hong Kong-China Battle.” In the end, capturing the gaze of the world was not the games but the pro-Hong Kong supporters’ vocal disapproval of PRC’s national anthem. If both teams’ mutual usage of the PRC’s national anthem, in addition to the constitutional underpinning, indicates their political tie and power relation, the booing that took place regardless of the presence of the Chinese team or not further symbolizes the domestic spectators’ foremost
objection of the official identity bestowed to the city upon the handover. Alongside Hong Kong supporters’ wish to prevent China from being qualified for the World Cup, the discursive practices and the behavior involved in discrediting the national symbols of China defy the identity construction project instructed by the official discourse (Wong in *New York Times*, 2015). Articulated in the support for the domestic team is thereby a local subjectivity that finds expression in the local sports spectatorship.

What is distinctive about the case of Hong Kong lies on the *occasionality* of the fan activities with regard to sports events that local athletes partake: On an immediate level, such local belonging encompasses different degrees of connection with local places, objects, and communities. The citizens’ attention to local sports matter is a response to the authorities’ little recognition of the sector. Likewise, the straightforward support directed to athletes who represent Hong Kong, alongside the disconnection with the Chinese national team, indicates a local identification that diverts away from the state-engineered national belonging. Meanwhile, how locally based narratives steer away from the nationalist discourse should not be oversimplified into an antagonism between the local and the national *on the surface*—what is noteworthy is the disparity of their underlying logics when manifested in different discourses. Underneath the poster that sparked off the “Hong Kong-China Battle” in 2015 are ideological differences that have spilled over the border: an inherent hybridity as to the cultural and historical experiences of Hong Kong vis-à-vis the amalgamation of state centrality and Han-Chinese centeredness. Facing the accusation of being “too” diverse, the domestic supporters fervently chanted “we are Hong Kong”—which is also a reference made to the punchline of the Hong Kong team’s response poster—not only to demonstrate solidarity, but also acknowledge the hybrid constituency of the Hong Kong identity.

In post-millennial Hong Kong, such counter narrative revolving around sport has different usage and implications: Just as C.Y. Leung’s statement propelled local athletes and scholars to speak up in 2014, the same line has since then become a rhetoric to argue for the opposite and invite between the line readings (*Ming Pao Daily*, 2014b; *Apple Daily*, 2016; Porteous, 2016). In addition, sport matters are employed as a discursive strategy in the political arena. This is, for instance, when the former Financial Secretary John Tsang (2016) addressed “sports economics” in his blog and claimed that “sport is big business”—J. Tsang’s (2015) repeated outspoken support of the local sports sector was interpreted by critics and commentators as an act of political communication to portray a contrasting image from the then-Chief Executive, in order to pave way for his campaign for the 2017 Chief Executive election (Kwok, 2016; *Sports Commune*, 2016).

All these examples show that in the name of “local” interests, local sports advocacy pertains to cultural, political, and social implications. In the light of the city’s entangled landscape, how the “local” is conceived and perceived is closely correlated with how local and national belongings are constellation. Contrasting the authorities’ lack of interest in the subject matter, the attention paid to local sports—in narratives and actions—sets forth a wide range of alternative positionings that reinvent existing relations and practices. For instance, the introduction of public live broadcast (mostly by Internet streaming) can be deemed a manifestation of the local sports spectatorship where the presence of individual spectators lends not only physicality, but also visibility and visuality to the viewing activity. Moreover, the sharedness evinced from these viewing experiences is intensified by the openness and accessibility of the event venues—ranging from rooftop of some industrial building, street corners to university campus. As a whole, the emergent spectators of local sports events, be they occasional fans or not, contribute to the remaking of urban space, community-building, and an audience-initiated mediation as well as mediatization of sport. The
interest in local matches thereby transmits locally oriented experiences on the ground into local perspectives that induce concern for the local (sporting) community. A community campaign that took place in 2017 to preserve a communal football pitch from being demolished by the government (HKFP, 2017) and the human chain event aforementioned are examples to this.

Arriving at this point of the discussion, the oft-mentioned statement about the absence of a sporting culture and its propagation can be interpreted in at least two directions: One being an empirical observation and another being a trope on a discursive level. To scrutinize the latter, it is useful to invoke what Cartier (2008) has identified as the “cultural desert placism” in Hong Kong. According to Cartier’s analysis, the representation of Hong Kong as a “cultural desert” is politically loaded metaphor that emits a “discursive practice of geographical bias, formed in comparative context and often expressed as a remark of geographical derision, a term of place othering” (p. 62). In this way, the trope “cultural desert,” precisely for being a buzzword, hinders alternative perspectives and narratives to arise, by imposing a way of reading Hong Kong with a designated point of view and a particular set of values. The lesson to learn is therefore to constantly stay alert to stereotyped representation and be critical at the violence of misrepresentation, intentional or not.

In a similar vein, the oft-cited claim of “no sport culture” in Hong Kong should be put under scrutiny: After all, how should, or can, a line be drawn between representation and the probable creation of a stereotype? With reference to Cartier’s inquiry (“if the word ‘desert’ signifies absence, whose culture is absent in Hong Kong?,” p. 62), one might as well ask: What does the narrative of the “lack” yield? What other representations about sports are available? In the light of sport, the pairing of spectatorship and meta-spectatorship offers a lens to examine the frames that constitute multi-faceted realities and meanings. Reciprocally, these spectators’ communities and their backers, be it an institution, an ideology or simply a liking, become manifested, as the resultant spectactorships become visible, encapsulating response and interpretation into perceptible spectacles.

Local sports spectatorship as spectacles

Spectacle is an essential component of the local sports spectatorship where diversified modes of viewing and viewing behaviors are highlighted: Just as the match itself, the fans in the stadium as well as audiences of live broadcasts constitute various spectacles when they take place (Tomlinson & Young, 2006), their transformation into media spectacles invite further mediation in the discursive space where a series of second-order spectatorships in form of reviews, commentaries, and news, are evinced, giving rise to different circles of influence and opinion. Meta-spectatorship is therefore reflexive virtual participation and visual engagement where not only different modes of spectatorship but also their propagation are visualized at different levels of representation, reproduction and reception. The significances of occasional fans, as have been identified earlier, lie on their offshoots from the normative memberships fixated or designated by daily routines, social behavior, and economic activities partaken in the city. Spawned from the formation of a spectatorship is thereby an expression of identity.

When football matches from 2015 onwards demonstrate a bottom-up aggregation of local attachments, the government-promoted spectatorship in the gala performances and sports demonstrations where Chinese Olympic gold medalists were presented as “national heroes,” with hindsight, entails the propagation of the official discourse and its top-down appropriation in sporting events and sports representation. Since 2000, the visits of Chinese gold medalists to Hong Kong have taken place after every Olympic Games for five times. Co-organized by the HKSAR
Government and the Sports Federation & Olympic Committee of Hong Kong and supported by the Chinese authorities, each visit composes of demonstrations where athletes display their sporting skills and a variety show where athletes sing songs and perform with local celebrities. While the former emphasizes athletic professionalism and skills in connection to their accolades, the latter by producing an “exclusive” spectacle that sports audiences could not have seen in conventional sporting events constructs a star image that portrays the national athletes as amicable and approachable. This bilateral operation has remained unchanged since its adoption in 2000.

By boosting the stardom of the Chinese athletes invited, the intent of these events to create an exhilarating atmosphere is apparent and reinforced in the emotionally charged subheading of the gala show: “the splendor of the dragon” (2000) and “the pride of Chinese” (2004). Although the use of subheading has been dropped from the third edition and onwards, the implied messages behind the organization of the visit are underlined in government’s press releases and Chief Executive’s welcome speeches to the delegation. Serving the purpose of political communication, these speeches share a common frame to project and valorize a nationhood: The praise of the nation is facilitated through the Chinese gold medalists where their achievement in international mega sport events (the Olympics Games in this case) is transformed into a national pride not just in China, but also to be shared in Hong Kong. Such equivalence conveyed between athletes and their home countries is neither new nor exclusive in the sporting world. Nevertheless, complicating Hong Kong’s case is the city’s atypical post-handover condition and its relationship with China: Facing the Chinese Olympians, the city’s own delegation is largely displaced from this picture by being rendered unrelated to this hall of fame.

The association of Chinese Gold medalists to honor and charisma further intensifies the assumption of Hong Kong sports sector as a lack; by measuring an athlete’s success with the gold medal(s) earned (NB only gold medalists are invited to Hong Kong), the official discourse administers the ideal athlete’s image by an elitist logic which marginalizes the local sports sector, quite ironically, by the prevailing narrative of deficiency. As a result of this twofold negation, the “lack” of the Hong Kong athletes is readily filled up by the elite athlete from China where the latter are constantly portrayed as the role model of their Hong Kong counterparts (Tung, 2000) and the national heroes (D. Tsang, 2008; Tung, 2000, 2004). The celebration of the achievement of Chinese athletes in Hong Kong is an attempt to assimilate the special administrative region into the nationhood: Considering the Chief Executive’s welcome speeches, domestic athletes are either left unattended (Leung, 2012; D. Tsang, 2008) or subordinated to the national elite (Lam, 2016; Tung, 2000, 2004)—even when mentioned, they are not presented as part of the host. With an eye to the rhetoric used under Tung Chee-hwa’s administration, the adoption of possessive pronoun indicates the entanglement between fostering national belonging on the one hand and the intrinsic geopolitical difference on the other hand. Just as Tung (2000) refers the Chinese athletes to “wo men de yun dong jian er 我們的運動健兒 (our athletes)” that make “wo men mei yi ge Zhongguo ren 我們每一個中國人 (us Chinese)” proud, the collective “we” that otherwise means “Hong Kong” mounts the Chinese identity to the physical territory of Hong Kong. The transition from 2000 to 2004 deepens the power difference between Hong Kong and China, as “Hong Kong athletes” have become “Hong Kong special [administrative] region athletes.” The incessant and alternate use of the pronouns “we” and “you” in Tung’s welcome speech delivered in 2004 furthers the intent to close the gap between Hong Kong and China while simultaneously exposing it:
Today, this hall of ours glitters with glamour because of your arrival. The heroes who earned 32 gold medals for our country, you are here and we Hong Kong welcome you. On behalf of the people of Hong Kong, we warmly welcome your arrival.  

The alternate appearance of the second-person plural “you” and the first-person plural “we” in every other phrase seems to suggest a certain degree of self/other separation. Although the use of first-person pronouns conventionally indicates the construction of the self, the frequent invocation of the second-person plural “you” cancels out the attention paid to the collective “we,” with an intent to play down the self-other distinction that can hardly be evaded in real-life situation and are inevitably created by means of utterance. Just as the overlap of a common possessive pronoun as in “our country” and “our/we Hong Kong,” as have been discussed, conveys an equation between the nation and the local territory, the constant switch of pronoun throughout the speech, rather than yielding a change of perspective, facilitates identity assimilation and political affiliation in accordance with the identity politics engineered in the official discourse (see Boyd, 2013). The pervasion of hospitality and the emphasis of “your arrival” without even a change of word, while propagating redundancy, further a priority of the other over the self, hence revealing the delocalizing intent of this identity work. This is how the sporting world depicted in the official speech extends an ideal relation between Hong Kong and China that is approved and promoted by the authorities.  

By 2008, in addition to the Beijing Olympics itself as an externalization of nationalistic sentiments, the Chief Executive’s welcome speech visualizes a spectatorship that exhibits and accentuates on national belonging. A scene where the people of Hong Kong as television spectators cheering for the Chinese national team athletes during competitions and prize giving ceremonies are vividly rendered. The local-national relationship is envisioned through a spectatorship that exclaims and exhilarates when the Chinese athletes receive gold medals and the Chinese national anthem is sung. At the end of the speech, this imagined spectatorship of the national sport sector is projected into the welcoming public in Hong Kong looking forward to the visit of the Chinese elite athletes. The construction of a highly anticipated public and the projection of national pride can also be found in the speeches delivered by C.Y. Leung in 2012 and Carrie Lam in 2016—despite that these speeches were read out during the welcome reception for the Chinese delegation, the impressed spectators are visualized in a similar celebratory tone in the media, conjuring up an imagined spectatorship that is bonded by a celebration of their national belonging in common with regard to the nation’s sports achievement at international level. Such spectatorship propagated by means of political communication and through media representation not only disseminates the nationalistic sentiments preferred by the authorities, but also reveals the critical perspectives offered by meta-spectatorship when spectatorship, its modes and operation are scrutinized on multiple dimensions.  

At this juncture, a counter-example is offered by the local Paralympians whose achievements are seldom celebrated in any way comparable to the Chinese Olympians despite their accolades in international games. The aim of the official narrative to bring forth and instigating a China-looking spectatorship is, therefore, apparent by the government’s effort to boost national attachments. Nevertheless, the spectatorship idealized seems to have shrunken in reality as to the change of venue of the gala show from the Hong Kong Stadium to the less spectacular Queen Elizabeth Stadium. Contrasting the outspoken spectatorship and the fans community generated, however ephemeral, in the aforementioned football matches after the Umbrella Movement, the local population’s unmotivated attitude toward government-run sporting events such as the biennale Hong Kong Games showcases the difficulties in fostering a sports culture in a top-down manner.
Meanwhile, the authorities’ contrary attitudes toward sports at local and national levels are also noteworthy: Unlike the promotion of the Chinese nation through the PRC national team, the Hong Kong SAR Government aligns local sporting events (including the Hong Kong Games) with the theme of “sport for all” that pins down sports as leisure activities, by carefully not reinforcing any local identification and communal affinity that might challenge official nationalism.

Rex Tso: a “Hong Kong” for all?

With regard to the public and the media attention paid to the Hong Kong football team since 2015, the detoured limelight, by prioritizing previously ignored competitions over government promoted mega events, signifies a bottom-up redistribution of significances that is based on the identity shared and socio-political experiences resonated among the local population. The media image of Hong Kong’s first-ever professional boxer Rex Sing-yu Tso gives further light to the multiple orientations pertained to local belonging.

Tso’s debut match in 2011 did not attract much media coverage, even at last he won against a PRC’s opponent—this contrasts not only with the noises stirred up in what some media would cook up as the “Hong Kong-China Battle” in 2015, but also the fame Tso would later garner as “Hong Kong’s wonder kid.” What is intriguing about Tso’s media image is the consensus shared by the media, despite their contrary editorial stances and funding sources, in “celebrating” his Hongkongness: As he gains his popularity with his accumulative wins, Tso’s outspoken affinity and devotion to his home city is a known identification bond among his supporters and is often applied by the media as an emotional appeal. After attaining his 19th straight win on 14 May 2016, Tso from the ring shout to his fellow citizens: “Hongkongers can make it!” How different media react to this much anticipated sport event and the phenomenal audience response can be read as an analogy to the media’s take in the making of a Hongkongness, whatever it means, through sports. Although not every newspaper relays Tso’s zealous message, Apple Daily, Mingpao, and Singtao all highlighted this climatic moment by citing Tso directly in their headlines. All major newspapers shared in common a celebratory note on Tso’s all-winning record, an emphasis of a full-house attendance of 2,800 spectators for the event and a description of Tso’s gratitude to the general public for their encouragement. In other words, an emotionally charged coverage of Tso’s victory finds expression in both pro-Establishment and pro-democratic press—if the press in Hong Kong is to be categorized with respect to media ownership and the political orientation involved (Liuqiu, 2017): Ta Kung Pao in its headline draws special attention to the tears Tso shed for Hongkongers’ support; Wen Wei Po, in honor of Tso, has the spirited line “Heung Gong, jeui ging!” (Hong Kong, the best!) printed on the A5 page of its main news section, despite that the two China-funded newspapers are known for speaking as “the Chinese government’s mouthpiece” in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2016).

At this point, it might still be too early to conclude that the phenomenal popularity of Tso—not to mention his amicable image liked by many media and creative agencies—has outweighed editorial and/or political discord momentarily, although it is undeniable that the spectatorship Tso generates is closely connected to the media and public recognition of his local identification, albeit the ambiguity of this “Hongkongness” being valorized and consumed. On top of Tso’s positive image that is characterized by his hard work and the sportsmanship he upholds as an athlete, his local affinity is simultaneously acknowledged and reinforced as he continues to speak for advertisement slogans like “good spirits for Hongkongers” for the health supplement company Brand’s, “fight for
Hong Kong” for the locally based Tai Hing Catering Group and “Hongkongers are invincible” for the television channel TVB in 2017. Former Financial Secretary John Tsang’s multiple visits to Tso during the Chief Executive election campaign were (?) also read by news commentators as a gesture to pose a different image from then-Chief Executive. After all, embodied by Tso’s athletic body and his athlete’s image are the complexity and flexibility ascribed to a Hong Kong identity in the post-millennial, post-Umbrella Movement era. A 1-minute advertisement Tso posed for the Hong Kong International Airport precisely illustrates such entangled positioning of the local, the national, and the global.

In this commercial titled “World’s Stages Gateway” (Lam, 2016), the airport—portrayed by a series of interior and exterior shots highlighting its streamlined structure and professional services—is visualized as a site for Tso to be connected with the rest of the world. On an immediate level, Tso as a local professional boxer who triumphs in international championships easily fits into the ideal identity with a global outlook that has been frequently typified in the official discourse such as the image of Hong Kong pinned down by the Tourism Board and the Brand Hong Kong campaign (see Chu, 2011; Ku, 2002/2015). Despite this, the promotional video of the airport is complicated by Tso’s presence which readily disseminates local connotations and connections, thus inviting the viewers to scrutinize the latent implications symptomatically: On a semiotic level, the appearance of Tso and a boy carrying out drills together not only depicts the hardship undertaken by an athlete, but Tso’s verbal command (“keep running,” “faster,” “show me your strength”, etc.) and the child’s fightback also convey a strong sense of defiance throughout the first-half of the video. Against a construction site in the distant background, Tso and the child skip ropes next to the sea, as the male narrator gently recounts: “It is always said that the young generation can tolerate no hardship. In fact, they do, only nobody knows.” During training and sparring, the images of Tso and the child juxtapose and overlap. Finally by arriving at the airport the boy appears as Tso’s reflection on the wall and in the following scenes they are rendered in similar pose and fashion. At last, they exchange regard as Tso enters the boarding gate: Facing each other, the boy takes off his cap to salute the champion as Tso, smoothly putting on the same cap, smiles and walks away. By means of the affinity shared between Tso and the boy, the video makes an open rebuke against any stigmatization of the young generation, which in practice gets the primary aim of promoting the airport sidetracked but showcases a localized reading into Tso’s athletic image that symbolizes resistance and persistence. At the end of the video, the boy’s ambiguous identity as Tso’s split self and/or an epitome of his boyhood alternately echoes and contrasts the opening scene where Tso and the boy as two blurry silhouettes run side by side in dusk. Rather than the conventional use of solid images to highlight the advertised object, the video stimulates an ambivalent sensation by blurring the division between adulthood (the international image of the airport extended from the ideal Hong Kong model) and youth (a symbol of defiance and surprise) and unsettles the readily straightforward depiction of the airport on the surface into a series of open interpretations when read against the grain.

This brief overview of the media coverage and advertisement where Tso’s athletic image is produced and consumed offers an extra-dimension to examine a mediatized spectatorship of Tso that is not restricted to the sports arena but is also indicative of social implications and cultural readings of visual media texts. Meanwhile, facilitating the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of a mainstreamed model identity is the manifold connotations given to “Hong Kong” in a spectrum that are made available and visible by Tso’s flexible identity and multi-faceted image: On the one hand, Tso as a representation of “Hong Kong” is based on his status as an elite athlete
who represents the city to win in international contests. In this case, sports elitism contributes to the visibility and popularity enjoyed by Tso. On the other hand, Tso’s local as well as translocal outlooks also destabilize, by hybridizing, any reading that tends to hegemonize “Hong Kong” or the “local.” In this context, sport evinces a space of resistance as well as allegiance in mediating, arbitrating, and even subverting concordant and conflicting logics, sentiments, and identities that co-exist in the presence of each other.

Conclusion

From real-life events to their transmission, representation and mediation, sports spectatorship has become diffused and widespread with the proliferation of Internet-based outlets and digital channels where sports news, competition outcomes, and statistics are constantly fed to their users, be they active sports spectators or not. As the dual phenomenon of media and audience fragmentation disintegrates the collectivity of the “mass” audiences (Napoli, 2011; Neuman, 1991), the augmented audience autonomy empowers the audiences to influence media production through consumption (Napoli, 2003, p. 148). Although audience autonomy might not be sighted in the marketing strategy and the production agenda of certain local television networks, the growing audience attention to local athletes and contests that represent Hong Kong is reflected on the growth of sports news platform (e.g. Sports Road) and filmmakers’ and local viewers’ interests in sports-related subject (e.g. Steve Chan’s Weeds on Fire (2016) and Sunny Chan’s Men on the Dragon (2018)).

Meanwhile, the public lamentation over the withering sports media culture in Hong Kong and the complaints about the little attention paid to local sports sector are at once hermeneutic and at once stand-alone events. The former observation, as argued, marks a change of the media landscape and the strategy of the television broadcast providers. On that note, the linkage made to the two scenarios actually underlines the ground gained by the latter as a voice vying for recognition and spotlight to be shed on the local sports sector. In this regard, the emergence of a local identity and community in support of the local sports sector registers varying degrees of engagement from the social world and alternate forms of participation that are viable in the virtual space. Under these circumstances, the schizophrenic state characterized in the inconsistent reactions of the public, the media, and the policymakers toward local sport events and sport-related matter can be further explained by the complex emotional meeting between different post-handover identities-in-the-making.

In addition to sold-out stadium, the introduction of live broadcasts for the said soccer matches in 2015 on voluntary basis and that took place on the streets, in campuses, in church and other make-shift space demonstrates the “spectacular” characteristic of the phenomenal crowd generated. The carnivalesque nature of these sport-viewing activities stems from not only the emergence of occasional fans but also the unforeseen surge of local sentiments. Considering the reciprocity shared between the unprecedented spectatorships generated and the visual and virtual reverberations of these sporting events, the resulting meta-spectatorship materializes visual engagement and virtual participation in support of local sports and athletes into the manifestation of the local.

As a whole, the local sports spectatorship that emerges after the Umbrella Movement is characterized by actual encounters and active engagement in varying degrees. Sports events as well as sports-related utterances, practices, narratives, experiences, and cultural products are subject to multiple degrees of mediation in the presence of each other. Exposed in the process of their inter-mediation and mediatization are serial frames of reference that intersect identity and body politics, media ecology with different entangled discourses. The local sports spectatorship as spectacle encompasses an interplay of visibility and visuality where attachments and relations traversing the
national and the local dimensions become perceptible. As a result of the successive clashes between
different nationalist and localist discourses that come into play after the handover and especially
the Umbrella Movement, identity expression can hardly be accurate due to the semantic restriction
caused by the multifarious and sometimes contradictory connotations bestowed to once-neutral but
now-polarized identity markers in the name of “Hong Kong” and “local.”

In the aftermath of the Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong athletes’ expression of their identity
had become a dilemma between the requirement to ‘remain’ politically neutral and the individual
expression of personal views. After the first large-scale police-civilian clash of the Anti-extradition
Law Movement on June 12, 2019, Chris Tsz-man Cheng from the Hong Kong karate national team
voiced on Facebook his support for the pursuit of rights, freedom and democracy. Apart from his
concern for the young people and the injured civilians, Cheng mentioned that as an athlete repre-
senting Hong Kong he might be reprimanded and demanded to adhere to an apolitical stance.
Cheng’s reflection of a social event and his identification raise question over the taken-for-granted
dualism between an athlete’s status and their individuality performed by the same body: In this
case, Cheng’s civic identity ran the risk of being suppressed due to his athletic profession even in
a situation outside the competition ground.

As the post-handover experience deepens with time, the dilemma faced by the athletes is fur-
ther complicated by the chance to perform one’s identity but only the one proven by the state
ideology. By reminding those who do not have an umbrella to go home early on Facebook on
October 1, 2019, track cyclist Sarah Sze-wai Lee attracted “likes” but was also condemned by Ta
Kung Pao on October 3, 2019 under the headline “Supporting violence implicitly, Drawing
Hatred, Wai-sze Lee deletes her Facebook [Page]”. Be it an over-reading or mis-reading, the pro-
protest and the pro-China factions, despite their antagonistic relationship, ironically arrived at the
same conclusion by correlating Lee’s message to the pro-democracy protest according to her
mentioning of “umbrella” and reminders such as “be careful” and “go home early” on a sunny
day. A few months later, Lee’s Facebook page released a statement when relaunched on the first
day of 2020. The post mentioned the inevitable “identity issue” faced by a Hong Kong athlete, but
without offering any deeper reflection or solution. Referring to the past happening in an ambiva-
lent tone, it said the chaos caused by Lee’s intention to avoid a “political topic” were unexpected.
Despite the safety distance maintained, the ambiguous statement not only recalls the unsolvable
query similar to Cheng’s case, but also questions the definition and the varied perception of the
‘political’ especially when facing politicizing forces that claim to ‘de-politicize’. It is, nonetheless,
noteworthy that one month prior to the release of this statement, Lee (Stand News, 2019) said
in person that she was deeply moved during the past few months as “everyone cares a lot about
this place”: “Everyone has their way to express opinion. I hope through sport we can demonstrate
the spirit of Hongkongers”.

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**Notes**
1. The “five demands” of the movement include the withdrawal of the extradition bill, holding the police
accountable for their excessive use of violence, having all arrested protesters released, retracting the
charges of rioting and dual universal suffrage.

2. Since 2019, the Public Opinion Program is no longer affiliated with the University of Hong Kong. All surveys are hosted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute.

3. According to the Basic Law, Hong Kong has its own flag and emblem as its official symbol but shares the same national anthem with the PRC.

4. By the new law, any person who disrespects the national anthem is subject to strict punishment. Yu (2018) provides an informative study of the potential impacts of the National Anthem Law in Hong Kong.

5. Political correctness has its special connotation in Hong Kong under Beijing’s influence. The term was first applied by Tung Chee-Hwa, the first Chief Executive appointed to the Hong Kong SAR after the handover, where he expressed the necessity to adopt a “political correctness” that conformed to PRC’s state ideology.

6. The original text is: 今天，我們這個大廳金光閃閃，這是因為你們來了，我們國家奪取三十二面奧運金牌的英雄，你們來了，我們香港歡迎你們。我代表全體香港市民，熱烈歡迎你們的到來！

7. For instance, in 2004 Summer Paralympics, Hong Kong sent 23 representatives competing in 5 sports and won 11 golds, 7 silvers and 1 bronze.

8. The International Olympic Committee published a new rule in January 2020 that protests and demonstrations including the display of political messaging and gestures are not permitted during the Olympic Games.

9. After winning the first round of the Hong Kong Open on November 13, 2019, badminton player Cheuk-yiu Lee made the “5+1” hand sign and trusted that “those who understand will understand” when asked by the press; boxing champion Day Yuen made the same gesture in an award ceremony in Malaysia after winning an international tournament. After captioning the photos with protest slogans such as “five demands, not one less” and “liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times” on Instagram, Yuen’s personal social network was attacked by pro-Beijing netizens with threats and profanity—A pro-Establishment online news platform demanded the police to probe Yuen to see whether he was a “rioter”.

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