

## **Booing the National Anthem: Hong Kong's Identities through the Mirror of Sport<sup>+</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Since Hong Kong's reversion to China in 1997, the Special Administrative Region's government and its people have been grappling with a dual-sided problem. Firstly, to adjust to being a "new" part of China and what that means in terms of national consciousness and local identities, particularly given the Beijing leaders' expectations that Hongkongers should come to "love China". Secondly, drawing at least in part on the past British colonial legacy, to maintain Hong Kong's international role as a cosmopolitan and commercial city, not least through the aspiration to be "Asia's world city". In the past few years, however, typified most clearly in the discourse surrounding the Occupy Central movement, there has emerged a third trend, the so-called "localism", which posits a separate and unique identity for Hong Kong. This article explores the ways in which these three competing narratives intersect in the sporting arena. Sport is frequently seen as a means to express or reflect nationalism or at the very least contribute to the formation of national identity. By using the case studies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2009 East Asian Games and recent post-Occupy

sporting fixtures, it will be shown that the mixed messages coming from these activities reflect the ambivalence felt by many Hongkongers themselves about their place in China and the world.

**Keywords:** *sports policy, identity, patriotism, localism, Hong Kong*

## 1. Introduction

Although Hongkongers may have nostalgic memories of the skills of the football teams of the 1950s and 1960s when Hong Kong was one of the top Asian footballing centres, Hong Kong has rarely figured highly in the minds of football enthusiasts in other parts of the world<sup>1</sup>. Hong Kong has never made it through to any World Cup Finals and its current ranking by FIFA (as of June 2016) is a lowly 143, on a par with the small island nations of Aruba and Mauritius. Nonetheless, at the same time, compared with some other parts of the world that have suffered from fan violence and other disruptions Hong Kong has also maintained a reputation as a relatively trouble-free if low-key environment for sporting activities. Yet, in early October 2015 the Hong Kong Football Association (HKFA) was hauled before the sport's governing body, Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), and fined HK\$40,000 (US\$5,160). The reason: Hong Kong fans booing the national anthem played at the beginning of a World Cup qualifying match with Qatar the previous month (Wong, 2015). Since the 1997 handover the Chinese national anthem, *March of the Volunteers* (義勇軍進行曲), has been played on all public occasions, including international sporting events, as the "national" anthem of Hong Kong. World Cup matches are no exception.

After the fine was imposed the HKFA reported that FIFA had warned it that "any further infringements will lead to more severe

sanctions” and called on fans to “refrain from such action at all future matches” to avoid additional punishment. However, some football fans repeated the booing when the national anthem was played at the start of a crucial Hong Kong versus China World Cup qualifier in November 2015. Other fans turned their backs or held up hand-written notices with the word “boo” on them, while during the match some fans chanted in English “We are Hong Kong”. FIFA formally opened disciplinary proceedings against the HKFA and raised a second fine, this time for twice the amount, in early January 2016 (Callick, 2015; *Malay Mail*, 14th January 2016). While only a minority of fans appear to be involved, the booing was clearly less a reflection on the performance (or expected performance) of the Hong Kong team and more a symbol of the state of mainland China-Hong Kong relations, particularly in the aftermath of the “Occupy Central” ( 佔領中環 / 佔中 ) movement of 2014.

Next year, 2017, will mark the twentieth anniversary of the handover of the former British colony to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). While the anniversary will no doubt be celebrated by the Hong Kong and Chinese governments with due pomp and circumstance, opinion amongst Hongkongers will surely be decidedly mixed. To a greater extent than at any time since 1997, opinion in Hong Kong is divided over whether the unique policy concept of “one country, two systems” is actually working in practice. But not just politically, perhaps more fundamentally at the social-cultural level, the nature of interpersonal relations between mainlanders and Hongkongers has also never been brought into such sharp focus. A series of incidents over the past few years involving what can best be described as “clashes of culture”, either individually or seemingly collectively between mainlanders and Hongkongers, has served to remind people in Hong Kong – and in China – that Hong Kong does have its own special identity<sup>2</sup>.

The aim of this paper is to examine what sport can tell us about these identity clashes. After more than 150 years of British rule, Hong Kong in 1997 did not become independent but instead reverted back to Chinese sovereignty. Consequently, as in many other aspects of its international status, Hong Kong finds itself in a rather anomalous situation in terms of its global sporting status. Although now a part of China politically and administratively as a Special Administrative Region (SAR), Hong Kong has retained its separateness from China in a wide range of international organisations, including sporting recognition within the Olympic movement and international sporting federations, under the designation of Hong Kong, China. This is accepted under and is in compliance with both the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law (基本法), Hong Kong's mini-constitution, both of which enshrine the principle of "one country, two systems" and a "high degree of autonomy" for Hong Kong.

Under the "one country, two systems" (一國兩制) principle, Hong Kong and Hongkongers have been struggling to reconfigure their relationship to mainland China since the handover from Britain in 1997. While most Hongkongers accept that they are indeed part of China once again and draw pride – and quite often profit – from the economic growth record of the rising China, there have been nonetheless frequent debates within Hong Kong, particularly during the most recent years, about the evolving nature of the relationship, especially in socio-political terms. While government leaders and "pro-China" figures have stressed the importance of "patriotism" and the "one country" part of the formula (and the role that national education within Hong Kong should play in reinforcing that aspect of Hongkongers' identity), they have found themselves butting up against growing concerns amongst Hongkongers that their own "local" identity and "system" is being swamped by the

“one country” concept. This has led other social and political groups to argue that the “two systems” part is vital to Hong Kong’s own especial identity. Initially, this implied sustaining Hong Kong’s unique role in the international system, of which the global sporting system is one important example. But, in recent years, this has become supplemented by efforts – frequently encapsulated in the controversial term “localism” – to preserve and sustain Hong Kong’s particular socio-cultural heritage, values and way of life in the face of mainland influence. The influx of mainland tourists and immigrants are seen as an existential threat to the established institutions and social customs of Hong Kong, while the mainland’s political authorities undermine efforts to promote greater democracy (Wong, 2004; Chan, 2014; Yew and Kwong, 2014; Cheung, 2015). Most crucially for Hong Kong’s future is the younger generation of Hongkongers – school and university students – who feel increasingly frustrated with the mainland authorities; “this sense of alienation from the mainland is prevalent among a substantial number of young people” in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2016).

Identity, both in its individual and collective senses, is a rather nebulous concept and certainly not an immutable one. Nonetheless, as has been widely identified in the literature, sport can be seen as contributing to the social and psychological processes involved in forging identities and as such sport has been frequently utilised by governments and politicians as a means of nation-building and identity-building (Jarvie, 1993; Lee, 2009; Ho and Bairner, 2013). In this context, international success by individual sportsmen/women or teams is seen as contributing, consciously or unconsciously, to the creation of a “community” or as Benedict Anderson argued, “a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, 1991: 7). At the same time as embracing this ideational objective governments also view sport in instrumental terms, as a means for minimising social divisions and inequalities, for

promoting healthier life styles (and thereby reducing medical costs), and contributing to the national economy.

However, Hong Kong has had a relatively under-developed sporting culture, despite the British predilection for taking their sports with them as their “chief spiritual export” wherever they conquered territories. Even in post-war Hong Kong long-standing constraints remained a factor: Hong Kong is a highly urbanized and modern city, with excellent infrastructure but limited space available for sporting facilities; the colonial authorities lacked the vision to create integrated policies for sports development; and continuing family and societal pressures in the local Chinese community to concentrate on study rather than sport (which offer few if any employment prospects) all played a part (Johns and Vertinsky, 2006:184-194; SF&OC, 2011: 60-175). Arguably it was the very fact that sport could be a stimulant for nationalism that contributed to making a colonial government, careful to avoid any semblance of nationalist expression, so cautious about promoting sport. As such sport played a very limited role in contributing to “community” feeling in colonial Hong Kong. Conversely, the post-1997 government became increasingly interested in harnessing sport for enhancing national identity and consolidating social cohesion. By using the case studies of Hong Kong’s partial involvement in the 2008 Beijing Olympics (hosting a torch relay and the equestrian events), its hosting of the 2009 East Asian Games, and recent sporting fixtures in the “post-Occupy” era the competing narratives about identity within Hong Kong are explored, while showing how the Hong Kong (and the Chinese) governments have sought to overcome the contradictions of Hong Kong’s multiple identities through sport.

## 2. The Dilemma of World City versus Chinese City

“Ours is a cosmopolitan city. Our ability to embrace the cultures of east and west is one of the secrets of our success, shaping a unique social culture of our own.”

(Tung Chee-hwa 董建華's Policy Address, 9th October 1997, *The Standard*, 10th October 1997)

Despite the phraseology of the above quotation, it is fair to say that in the first post-handover policy address by the then HKSAR Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, in 1997, he wanted to emphasize above all that Hongkongers should come to understand and love China better: “As we face the historic change of being reunited with China, for every individual there is a gradual process of getting to know Chinese history and culture, so as to achieve a sense of belonging” (*The Standard*, 10th October 1997). In the view of two social commentators, in the immediate post-handover years “Tung’s emphasis on national identity and Chinese values was the central element of his campaign to depoliticise Hong Kong” (Loh and Lai, 2007: 35).

However, Hong Kong’s postwar history in relation to China has been a convoluted one. In the first years after 1949, the colonial authorities deliberately tried to “de-nationalize” the local and incoming population; a tendency that was reinforced by the riots of 1967. However, by the 1970s a distinctive local identity began to emerge as the city’s social and economic development moved forward and by the 1980s this identity was frequently manifested through disparaging contrasts with mainland China. By the 1990s the attitudes of many in Hong Kong reflected a “self-understanding of being superior to their Mainland compatriots” (Lee, 2009: 196, 205). It was against this background that Tung and his officials tried to instil in Hongkongers a

new sense of pride in and identity with China. In effect this would become a “re-nationalization” project. But, the results have been rather mixed.

Since 1997 public opinion polls have fluctuated in displaying Hong Kong people’s identification with China. The University of Hong Kong’s now regular six-monthly polls provide ample evidence of these changes in mood, even though they often seem to reflect recent events or anniversaries in the preceding weeks before the polls. Asked to choose between four categories – Hongkonger, Hongkonger in China, Chinese in Hong Kong and Chinese – the middle two self-designated categories seemed to change little over the years, but the Hongkonger and Chinese categories have been more variable. Up until around 2001 (when China joined the World Trade Organisation) Hongkongers outnumbered those who felt themselves to be Chinese citizens, but during the 2000s the balance began to swing the other way, culminating in the highest percentage (38.6%) for Chinese citizens on the eve of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 (only 18% of those interviewed then identified themselves as Hongkongers). But since then, the general trend has been for declining identification with China and greater identification as Hong Kong citizens. The latest poll, in December 2015, showed the sense of identity as Chinese citizens at one of its lowest levels since the handover (18.1%), while if the two categories of those who saw themselves as Hongkongers and as Hongkongers in China are added, 67.6% saw themselves as “Hong Kong people” (University of Hong Kong, *People’s ethnic identity*, public opinion programme). These opinion polls – and similar polls by other organisations and universities produce somewhat similar readings (see, for example, Mathews *et al.*, 2008) – do not always make comfortable reading for the Hong Kong government and so-called “pro-China” circles.

So, one continuing policy headache for the HKSAR government over the past 19 years has been how to encourage and foster that greater sense of belonging that Tung advocated. Various socialization agents have been utilised. Undoubtedly, the mass media has had a role to play, with television in particular shifting to programming that emphasizes a “strong and powerful” Chinese nation (Mathews *et al.*, 2008: 58-77), while the print media broadly seemingly has been exercising some degree of self-censorship regarding “sensitive” news stories from the mainland. However, the spreading of Internet news and social networking sites has made it much easier for Hongkongers to learn more about all aspects of what is happening on the mainland. Hongkongers are more engaged with the mainland, but that does not mean just travelling there more frequently for pleasure or business; it also implies wanting to do more to support the rule of law, environmental protection, or even democratization. Education in Hong Kong is also seen as important, with schools increasingly stressing Hong Kong’s Chineseness both through the formal curriculum and through flag-raising, school visits to the mainland, etc. (Mathews *et al.*, 2008: 78-95). A new “national education” curriculum, with greater emphasis on civic education and “love” for the Motherland, had been planned to be introduced, but had to be aborted in 2012 as local opposition became too strong against what was widely perceived as “propaganda” and “brainwashing” (Yew and Kwong, 2014: 1102). As will be argued below, sport has also become another means by which the Hong Kong (and Chinese) governments try to inculcate patriotic identity.

The other problem for the new HKSAR leadership, however, was how to keep Hong Kong competitive, especially as the Asian financial crisis ravaged the Asian Pacific region, including Hong Kong, after 1997. Closer integration with the expanding Chinese economy, which

proved resilient both in the late 1990s and subsequently, was an inevitable part of that process, but so too was sustaining, and even strengthening, other external linkages through better branding of the city's cosmopolitan characteristics. Despite Tung's early usage the word "cosmopolitan" features only infrequently in the HKSAR government's public pronouncements about the city; instead "world" is much more prominent. Since 1999 Hong Kong has been promoting itself as "Asia's world city"; this positioning was designed both to highlight Hong Kong's existing strengths in areas such as financial services, trade, tourism, transport, communications, and as a regional hub for international business and a major city in China as well as to be aspirational as a benchmark by which Hong Kong's development as a society and an economy could be gauged and debated (Hong Kong Government, 2010). The HKSAR government's official definition of a "world city" does not specifically mention sport (referring only to Hong Kong being a "cultural hub"), but trying to act as the host of international sporting events has come to be seen by policy-makers as chiming in well with the aspirations to be such a "world city".

Hong Kong adopted a low profile in global sport during the colonial era. Although its athletes competed regularly in international competitions, Hong Kong achieved limited success in winning medals at the Olympics and other international sports mega-events, only gaining the first Olympic gold medal in 1996 (SF&OC, 2011: 204-205). Olympism as a concept was not widely understood. Despite being aware of (or perhaps even because of) Hong Kong's relatively under-developed sporting culture, the post-1997 HKSAR government did, by contrast, begin to seek a more prominent role in global sport. Although funding was put into elite sport support, such as expanding the Sports Institute with its specialised sports training programmes, it was through bidding to host regional-level mega-events that the new government tried hardest

to make its mark in the global sporting world. These efforts to host such events were frequently cast in terms of improving sporting infrastructure, raising the standards of sporting performance and bringing economic benefits to Hong Kong. More altruistic aims, such as promoting Olympism, were rarely mentioned. Although a bid to host the 2006 Asian Games lost out to the financial clout of Doha (Qatar), in 2008 Hong Kong hosted the equestrian parts of the Beijing Olympics, in 2009 it hosted the East Asian Games, and in 2010-11 it actively debated whether to bid to host the 2023 Asian Games.

### **3. Olympic Equestrianism**

Hong Kong was, of course, much interested in and enthused by the successful Beijing bid in 2001 to host the 2008 Olympic Games. Subsequently, senior Hong Kong government and sporting officials hinted to the Chinese authorities that Hong Kong would be willing to stage one or two events, even though the original Beijing bid document had not mentioned Hong Kong at all (*South China Morning Post*, 3rd September 2004). Finally, with the approval of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Hong Kong was given the responsibility for hosting one of the sports, the equestrian events, that for animal health and other logistical reasons Beijing was unable to host. Although many Hongkongers have a strong interest in horse-racing (which garners a large income through betting, much of which is re-cycled for charitable purposes), it has to be admitted that very few had previously participated in or watched equestrian events, whether dressage, eventing or show-jumping (Ho, 2012: 26-28). Equestrianism is not a sport that has widespread popular appeal in Hong Kong, not least because facilities are both extremely limited and expensive.

As a part of China, Hong Kong in May 2008 also hosted the torch (flame) relay in the run-up to the Beijing Games. The local enthusiasm generated by the torch relay – and more broadly by the preparations for the Olympic Games hosting in Beijing – undoubtedly contributed to a rise in “Olympic nationalism” in Hong Kong in the run-up to and during the Olympics (Ho, 2012: 9-10; Lau *et al.*, 2011)<sup>3</sup>. In the words of Choy So-yuk 蔡素玉, a leader of the pro-Beijing political party, the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, “the whole Olympics has raised Hong Kong people’s sense of being part of China and their sense of pride in being Chinese” (Bradsher, 2008). One of Chief Executive Tung’s closest advisers, Paul Yip 葉國華, later reflected on a related phenomenon: “Hongkongers used to look down at the mainlanders. But the watershed came in 2008 because of the success of the Olympic games in Beijing and then we suddenly found we should look up to them.” (So, 2012)

Speaking in advance of the Olympics, Home Affairs Secretary Tsang Tak-sing 曾德成 argued that the equestrian events “will help arouse Hong Kong people’s interest in sports, foster a stronger sense of national identity as well as promote Olympic spirit and the idea of healthy living” (*South China Morning Post*, 8th August 2007). So, although the approach of the Hong Kong government, the equestrian organising committee and even major advertisers tended to draw on both the Chinese patriotic and the “internationalist” Olympic dimensions, overall the emphasis fell more strongly on the “one country” side of the Hong Kong-China equation. The government’s Leisure and Cultural Service Department set up open air “cheering sites” with live broadcasts of events in Beijing on giant screens, but the motto was: “Go! Go! China! Go! Go! Hong Kong!”. In addition, given that Hong Kong athletes failed to win a single Olympic medal, it was also understandable that Hongkongers became enthusiastic about mainland Chinese athletes’

medal successes.

In the aftermath of the Olympics, however, the HKSAR government and the local population may have drawn different lessons. Coverage in the local media of the controversy over the young girl's fake singing may have only marginally marred Hongkongers' pride in the dramatic opening ceremony, but the revelations of the tainted food scandals (which had been deliberately hushed up during the Olympic period) did cause Hongkongers to again wish to distance themselves from being Chinese. The SAR government, however, drew positive lessons, namely that through the equestrian events not only had Hong Kong demonstrated to the world its ability to host such an important sporting event but also that Hongkongers had shown their patriotism towards China (Ho and Bairner, 2013).

#### **4. East Asian Games**

The December 2009 East Asian Games (EAG) held in Hong Kong were more problematic than the Olympics in terms of public enthusiasm. Held regularly every 4 years since 1993, the EAG had nonetheless remained a fairly low profile multi-sports event in the region. Taipei had been the only rival bidder to Hong Kong and no doubt China's lobbying behind the scenes had helped to ensure that Hong Kong won out as the host (Chu, 2016). The Hong Kong EAG was the largest ever, featuring over 2,100 athletes competing in 262 events in 22 sports (two of which were exhibition sports). The chosen slogan for the Hong Kong EAG was "Be the Legend", implying that athletes could become a legend in their lifetime by performing well in the games. The opening ceremony adopted a unique approach, forswearing the traditional march of athletes into a stadium, and instead utilising nine large fishing boats, one for each team, rigged out with LED lights to sail across the Hong Kong harbour,

while strobe lights and laser beams swept the scene (*Sunday Morning Post*, 6th December 2009).

1st October 2009 marked the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC and that event was specifically tied in with the hosting of the EAG, at least in terms of the messages put out in the first three-quarters of 2009<sup>4</sup>. As could be seen during the 2008 Olympic torch relay, so too during the EAG preparations, the paradox of using a transnational event to promote national identity was clear (Ho and Bridges, 2014: 286). However, once the October anniversary date was passed the HKSAR government switched its emphasis to Hong Kong alone. The opening ceremony themes and the congratulatory messages given at that ceremony focused exclusively on the “beauty, efficiency and hospitality” of Hong Kong as a “perfect host city for this premier international event”, but within the context of the East Asian region.

Hong Kong’s unexpected victory in the final of the football competition before a packed stadium (the penalty shoot-out against Japan was a nerve-racking but ultimately euphoric occasion) was greeted with front-page banner headlines in the local press. Although the “legend” of the football team was a talking-point for a while, in reality the EAG brought only rather limited economic benefits to Hong Kong and significant changes in popular attitudes to sport, especially sports participation, have also been difficult to verify. Speaking soon after the EAG had finished, the Home Affairs Secretary Tsang Tak-sing said the legacy of the EAG would be “mainly about the achievement of Hong Kong athletes and the sporting culture it generated in the community” (Legislative Council Home Affairs Panel, 8th January 2010, cited in Bridges, 2012: 661). However, probably more important in reality was the extent to which hosting the EAG had promoted the image of Hong Kong as a city that could efficiently and successfully host such multi-sports events, at least within the Asian region.

#### 4. Hong Kong Sport and Hong Kong Spirit

The follow-ups to the EAG were to be rather disappointing. Utilising the hosting experience, the Sports Federation and Olympic Committee (SF&OC) of Hong Kong persuaded the Hong Kong government to support a bid to host the much larger-scale Asian Games in 2023 (*Sunday Morning Post*, 1st August 2010). In setting out the arguments to support the 2023 bid, the Hong Kong government focused on three categories of benefits which could be expected: (1) promoting sports development; (2) enhancing social cohesion; and (3) stimulating economic activity. (Home Affairs Bureau, 2010: 4-7).

Out of these 3 anticipated outcomes, the desire to enhance social cohesion was the most problematic, not least in terms of Hong Kong identity. In the context of mainland China's leadership's advocacy at that time of a "harmonious society" as a way of dealing with the stresses and strains of socio-economic transformation, the Hong Kong officials seem to have been using the term "social cohesion" in a manner that suggested that sport could help to eradicate feelings of social exclusion and minimize social conflict. 2009-10 had been marked by some sharp social conflicts within Hong Kong, particularly highlighting the so-called "post-80s" generation's dissatisfaction with both mega construction projects and the slow pace of democratization. In this situation, the government no doubt wished to promote an atmosphere in which society was less polarized and policy agendas could be promoted more smoothly.

However, by early 2011 the government was faced with the reality that public opinion was ambivalent at best, being especially concerned over the expected costs, while the local political parties gradually changed from lukewarm support to outright opposition to the hosting. Consequently, when the Legislative Council's finance committee refused

to approve funding the SF&OC's dream was over (Bridges, 2012). Since Hong Kong never proceeded as far as a formal bid, it is difficult to anticipate how it would have been marketed, but the indications from government and SF&OC officials' statements made during the domestic debates are that more emphasis would have been placed in public on the "cosmopolitan" and "international" aspects of Hong Kong rather than the China connection, but that is not to deny that there would have been an expectation that China would have been a powerful backer within the decision-making elites of the Olympic Council of Asia. Although some sports enthusiasts have continued to advocate Hong Kong putting in a future bid, and the incoming Chief Executive, Leung Chun-ying 梁振英, in 2012 did initially imply giving sporting activities greater prominence, the prospect of Hong Kong again bidding to host a major sporting event remains distant.

In his 2010 policy address, then SAR Chief Executive, Donald Tsang 曾蔭權, advocated better supporting of national and Hong Kong sports teams as part of his proposals for enhancing patriotic sentiments (Yew and Kwong, 2014: 1102). Nonetheless, generally through the 2011-2014 period sporting actions remained divorced from the political tensions. The "Occupy Central" movement also known as the "Umbrella Movement", which peaked in October-November 2014, however, indirectly caused sporting activities to become more politicised. Despite the eventual collapse of the occupations, the mainland-Hong Kong tensions have simmered and with the approach of the Legislative Council elections (立法會選舉) set for September 2016 some of the young activists associated with the "Umbrella Movement" are preparing to enter the political battle for votes by creating new parties some of which, such as the National Party, advocate independence. The Chinese government's opposition to such moves was made clear during the May 2016 visit to Hong Kong by senior Politburo member Zhang Dejiang 張

德江, who, while admitting that localism in the sense of love for one's hometown might be a natural sentiment, accused those advocating independence as promoting "separatism under the camouflage of localism" which could not be tolerated under the "one country, two systems" concept (*South China Morning Post*, 30th May 2016).

Chief Executive Leung, in his final policy address in January 2016 did at last establish a new post of Sports Commissioner, thereby belatedly fulfilling a promise to create a "sports minister" that he had made four years earlier in his election campaign (Loh, 2012; Sallay, 2013; Chan, 2016). This announcement was greeted with guarded optimism by the sporting community, not least because a bureaucrat rather than a proven sports administrator or retired athlete was appointed to the new post. Yet, drawing on the experiences of the colonial government after the 1967 Star Ferry riots when for the first time government-led initiatives in sport occurred, at least in part to encourage young people to partake of healthy and non-political activities, it is not implausible to link Leung's sudden conversion to the need for sports promotion to a perception that sport might play a role in the social integration of what he sees as disaffected youth (Bridges, 2012: 654; Zheng, 2015: 2, 14).

## **5. Conclusion**

Since the handover, the Hong Kong government and its citizens have been grappling with the dilemma of how to implement "one country, two systems" in practice and how to reconcile national identity with local identities (and with global citizenship). Backed up by the central Chinese government, the HKSAR government, without using the term nationalism, has tried to encourage its citizens to construct a new patriotic discourse and to feel pride in being part of China and so

celebrate its accomplishments, while simultaneously promoting “Asia’s world city”. But the results have not been altogether successful, since Hong Kong society has, if anything, become more polarized and divided over mainland China’s perceived political interventions and through personal interactions with individual mainland Chinese, even though so many Hongkongers have relied on and are relying on the economic benefits of closer integration. Recent events, such as the “disappearance” of dissident booksellers, certain academic appointments at Hong Kong universities, and the so-called “fishball revolution” in the Mongkok ( 旺角 ) district, have served only to reinforce these divisive perceptions.

Sport, therefore, has become one instrument through which the HKSAR government has tried to express and even strengthen this “official” dual identity under “one country, two systems”. To complement the case studies discussed earlier, the evolution of this sporting journey can perhaps be exemplified through a series of snapshots.

On 3rd July 1997, two days after the handover, I took my son to watch the HKSAR Reunification Cup match at the Hong Kong stadium. A team of FIFA World Stars defeated an AFC All-Stars Team 5-3. At the opening ceremony, the Chinese national anthem was played at what was surely the first time at a sporting occasion after the handover. There was an audible expression of surprise around the stadium, a very small amount of booing, and a few spectators refused to stand, but most did stand. Even though neither a Chinese team nor a Hong Kong team as such were playing, the authorities decided to utilise the occasion to “introduce” the custom of playing the “national” anthem at “international” sporting occasions. The spectators were certainly taken by surprise.

Five years later, in 2002, China made its first, and so far only, appearance in the football World Cup Finals. With Hong Kong knocked

out in the qualifying rounds, Hongkongers were only able to indulge their enthusiasm for top-class football action by watching through Cable TV or at sports bars – or travelling to neighbouring Macau where all World Cup games were shown live on the local terrestrial station. China's games were not available on free-to-air terrestrial television in Hong Kong, but in response to rising demand amongst the Hong Kong population to watch them “live” the SAR government arranged for giant screens to be erected at the Hong Kong stadium and the Shatin 沙田 racecourse for China's final two games before elimination. Free to enter, these stadium broadcasts resulted in large crowds, patriotically hoping for Chinese successes, even if they were ultimately disappointed as China lost both games and failed to score even a single goal (Chow and Ho, 2002; Bruning, 2002).

In 2008 for the Beijing Olympics, Hongkongers watched the local torch relay with enthusiasm, then the opening ceremony in Beijing with great admiration and finally the achievements of the Chinese athletes with pride. Tickets for the post-Olympics exhibition tour of Hong Kong by Chinese Olympic gold medallists were snapped up very quickly. Undoubtedly, the Olympic torch relay and the equestrian events were utilised by the SAR government primarily as a means to foster patriotic feeling and pride towards China. Arguably, this was the peak of Hongkongers' patriotic feeling for China.

In 2009 the EAG was initially closely linked to mainland China's major patriotic anniversary, although it was later marketed as enhancing Hong Kong's regional cosmopolitan image. Hongkongers were not as excited by these multi-sports games as they had been with the 2008 Olympics, but the football final against Japan, played in front of a capacity crowd and re-played subsequently through the media, did arouse strong feelings of support and pride for Hong Kong. At the start of the final, which I attended, the “national” anthem was played – with

no booing, though plenty of cheering afterwards – but the atmosphere was created by solidarity with “Hong Kong” not with China.

Finally, fast forward to 2015 and the series of qualifying football matches played by Hong Kong, including the vital World Cup qualifier in which they drew 0-0 with China, at which the national anthem was greeted with boos and demonstrations of varying size and ingenuity. The SAR government’s aspiration to use sport as a means of enhancing “social cohesion”, to use the phraseology adopted in the 2023 Asian Games Bid consultation document, clearly was no longer relevant in the polarized social and political atmosphere in the run up to and after “Occupy Central”.

The rise of localism within Hong Kong, however, shows that the complex nature of Hongkongers’ thinking – and sense of belonging – remains significant. Occupy Central and its socio-political aftermath demonstrate, therefore, that despite the efforts of the Hong Kong government to make use of sport in general and sporting mega-events in particular to advance certain agendas, the results have not been as clear-cut as officials might have hoped. Hongkongers continue to display and value their own particular brand of “identity” and, indeed, given the enthusiasm with which the younger generation is embracing localist thinking, such sentiments are only likely to get stronger.

## Notes

+ This article draws in part on earlier versions presented at the Conference on the Olympics and Isms, Royal Holloway, University of London, July 2012, and Working Paper 5-2013 prepared for the Centre for Public Policy Studies, Lingnan University (嶺南大學), Hong Kong, May 2013.

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1. Hong Kong was one of 12 founding members of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) in 1954; the first 4 AFC presidents were from Hong Kong. Hong Kong also launched the first professional football league in Asia in 1968 (Careem, 2016).
2. Examples include mainlanders' excessive bulk purchases of baby milk powder and certain medicines, shops giving preference to mainland customers over locals, mainland women deliberately travelling to the SAR to give birth to babies in Hong Kong hospitals to secure residency rights, mainlanders talking loudly and refusing to queue, and mainlanders buying up Hong Kong property thereby pushing prices beyond the range of young would-be home-owners.
3. One well-known local commentator, Chris Yeung, noted after the torch relay that: "The Olympic flame has fuelled patriotism – and nationalism – in Hong Kong ... a wave of nationalism is set to engulf the city." (*Sunday Morning Post*, 4th May 2008)
4. At a prominent position in the Central district of Hong Kong island two large drums celebrated both the EAG hosting and the PRC anniversary; the official "Events Calendar" publication placed the PRC anniversary logo prominently on its cover; and all the August 2009 torch relay publicity materials gave equal billing to the Hong Kong EAG logo and the PRC anniversary logo.

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