

The Production of Leisure: Understanding the Social Function of Football Development in China

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Abstract

In this article, we utilise the social theories of Antonio Gramsci and Henri Lefebvre to explore the role that leisure activities such as football play within contemporary China in relation to issues of class. We argue that the recent promotion of football in China can be viewed as a continuation of broader top-down processes of 'modernization from above' that serves as a microcosm of the wider class contradictions inherent in Chinese approaches to development since the 1980s. The issue of class has been strangely absent from the literature dealing with the development of football in China. However, given the importance of class in 20th Century Chinese society, the re-emergence of inequality and stratification in the reform era and the implicit connections between class and state discourses around the "rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation," it is clear that class is closely implicated in Xi's vision for football. We explore the major role of the middle classes as the target for the promotion of leisure activities and consumerist lifestyles patterns as part of the Party-State's effort to integrate them into a transformed historical bloc.

Keywords: China, Football, Gramsci, Lefebvre, Class

Introduction

Since the mid-1950s, sport in China has been intricately tied to political questions surrounding national identity, international legitimacy and modernisation (Xu 2006: 90-92). The current promotion of football stands within this lineage, yet signifies aspects of change within continuity, reflecting broader trends within Chinese society (Connell 2018: 9). First launched in April 2016 by the National Reform and Development Commission (*Guojia fazhan he gaige*

weiyuanhui 国家发展和改革委员会), the “Medium to Long Term Development Plan for Football, 2016-50” (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050 年),¹ is a declaration of China’s intention to create a vibrant domestic football culture, aligning with broader national aspirations such as Core Socialist Values (*Shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan* 社会主义核心价值观) (Gow, 2016) and the Chinese Dream (*Zhongguomeng* 中國夢). The Plan, in combination with a series of policy documents and associated pronouncements published since 2014, envisages football as a vehicle for constructing a strong sports industry, addressing public health concerns and promoting opportunities for economic growth through football’s links to entertainment, real estate and consumption. It is also closely tied to national pride and national rejuvenation (Liu et al, 2019; Yu et al, 2017). Such an ambitious undertaking requires the combined institutional resources of the executive, legislature and judiciary: Eleven Ministries, three State Council commissions, two State Council agencies, three government agencies, the Supreme People’s Court and Procuratorate, and the Central Bank are all directly involved. A further range of bureaus, agencies and commissions has been mobilized at the provincial and local government levels while the Propaganda Department has been charged with “nurturing football culture” (*peiyu zuqiu wenhua* 培育足球文化). China’s “football dream” is thus intrinsically political. It is a conception and product directed by the Party-State under the more robust and concentrated leadership of Xi Jinping.

Given the politicised nature of football’s development in China, the questions we seek to unravel in this article is *why football is being promoted and what social function does such a promotion serve?* To provide an answer, we use the social theories of Antonio Gramsci and Henri Lefebvre to explore what role leisure activities such as football play within a broader

¹ Available in Chinese at <http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/zcfb/zcfbtz/201604/W020160411327810242449.pdf> Accessed June 2018.

developmental milieu. Like other critical work exploring the role of sport, we are interested in the ‘collision of capitalism, politics and consumer culture’ (Newman and Giardina 2010: 1513). It has been noted, that while Gramsci had almost no interest in sport himself, the ideas that he produced have been fertile for providing a social analysis of sport (Rowe 2004: 97). Nevertheless, it is also the case that his ideas have often been appropriated and distorted, neglecting the central aspect of class relations integral to Gramscian thought (Bairner 2009: 196). We aim to correct for this neglect in our analysis.

Specifically, we examine the development of football in China as a continuation of broader top-down processes of ‘modernization from above’ led by a “strong and pro-development state capable of shaping national consensus and ensuring overall political and macroeconomic stability in which to pursue wide ranging reforms” (Zhao, 2010: 423). We argue that its intent is to further solidify middle class support via the production of spaces of leisure. Football – as just one example of the new spaces of leisure - therefore serves as a microcosm of the wider class contradictions inherent in Chinese approaches to development since the 1980s which, despite impressively elevating overall levels of prosperity, have led to the re-emergence of stark inequalities and social stratification (Goodman, 1997; Li et al, 2013; Yang, 1999).

Given the importance of class in 20th Century Chinese society, and the implicit connections between class and state discourses around the “rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴) (Wang, 2010), it is unsurprising that class should be manifest and implicated in Xi’s vision for football. At the micro-level, manifestations include the class implications of self-identifying with Chinese or international clubs, fans’ ability and mode of consuming football and the socio-economic background of professional players and those served by youth training academies (Gong, 2017; 2019). At the macro-level it is manifest in the confluence of state and corporations in the creation of a pro-

consumption environment and discourse (Sullivan et al., 2019). Although prior work on the development of football in China has tentatively explored such features, we propose a more explicit treatment of class dimensions. One focal point for the article is how leisure activities such as football relate to what we argue is the Party-State's attempt to solidify and expand its hegemony among the emergent middle-income strata. As the source of regime legitimacy turned from ideology to the delivery of economic growth and prosperity during the reform era, private entrepreneurs and emergent middle classes were incorporated through membership of the Party, Jiang Zemin's theory of the Three Represents (*Sange Daibiao* 三个代表) and the provision of various modes of consumerism, including private vehicles, private housing, consumer goods and entertainment (Zhang, 2012). Managing, professional, technical and administrative staff now make up around 20% of Party membership, while China has become one of the world's biggest markets for luxury goods and its retailers invented the most lucrative shopping event in the world, Single's Day on November 11th. Some observers note that China is "home to the world's biggest, fastest expanding, spendiest, most materially aspirational middle class" (Lanchester, 2019: 3). The consumption boom has expanded from asset and product acquisition to the adoption and promotion of leisure activities (Goodman 2016: 7), including the football industry, where the Chinese Super League saw revenues from attendance, media rights and merchandising increase from \$17 million in 2012 to US\$223 million in 2016 (Yu et al, 2017: 712). As China recalibrates its economic model away from manufacturing toward consumption and services, the connection between leisure and broader questions of development and state power observed elsewhere is becoming more evident (see Lefebvre 1947/2008: 31-40; 1976: 84). Commenting on the experience of the Western world, Lefebvre argued that 'leisure has been transformed into an industry, into a victory of neocapitalism and an extension of bourgeois hegemony to the whole of space' (1991: 384). Drawing from this

insight, we seek to highlight the social function of leisure activities, in the case of China via an exploration of the promotion of football.

Evidence from sports in the US has demonstrated the close connection between sports, consumption and (neoliberal) ideology (Andrews and Silk, 2012; Newman and Giardina, 2010; 2011). Our interest is in exploring connections between football and the hybrid form of state capitalist or market socialist political economy prevailing in China. As other, pioneering work has illustrated, sport as a spectacle has historically functioned ‘as an instrument for consent and dominion – one part transcendental validating apparatus for the dominator, one part collective compensatory affirmation for those being dominated’ (Newman and Giardina 2010: 1512). What distinguishes our analysis from the above however, is that, in the case of China it is primarily a middle-class as opposed to a working class that is the subject of interpellation (Althusser 1971). The promotion of leisure activities in China, we argue, is precisely a compensatory mechanism for a lack of meaningful political choice, replacing this with enhanced lifestyle freedoms.

Drawing from Gramsci, we posit that the emergence of football culture in China can be in part read as a reflection of a Party-state project of minimal hegemony within conditions of passive revolution that is unfolding across numerous sectors of socio-economic activity. Passive revolution (expanded on below) refers to a state-authored process of modernization and expanded capital accumulation that seeks to offset wider demands for political reform. Closely associated with passive revolution is the technique or statecraft of *trasformismo*. This refers to the specific means by which the co-optation of potentially recalcitrant elements occurs within a wider process of class and state formation. Having successfully integrated wealthy entrepreneurs and given them a stake in maintaining the system of one-Party rule (Chen and Dickson, 2010; Dickson, 2007), the political attitudes and orientation of the middle classes remained a source of substantial academic and policy debate in China (Chen, 2013; Chen and

Lu, 2011; Johnston, 2004; So, 2003; Tomba, 2009; Tsai, 2007). Among the methods the Chinese state sought to inoculate against potential agitation for reform among the increasingly widespread middle-classes was allowing private wealth and material accumulation, notably home ownership as a means to attaining “the good life and distinction after socialism” (Zhang, 2012: 3). While middle class attention and, notably, *activism*, has turned to issues like wellbeing, food safety, health and the environment (Goodman and Chen, 2013; Li, 2006; Xie, 2012) the promotion of consumerist lifestyles and cultures has accelerated, driven by the state and business, resulting in exponential growth in the e-commerce, gaming and internet services sector, a huge new tourism market, automobile and consumer electronics industries, and a self-help and wellbeing boom among many other sectors (Erisman, 2016; Kshetri, 2009; Li, 2016; Lin, 2019; Zipser et al., 2016).

The conjunction of sport and political power in China is well known (Hong and Zhouxiang 2013). However, in this article we seek to examine how football is imbricated within issues of class and development, which has received substantially less attention. Rather than exploring the cultural dimension of football to examine processes of class formation and differentiation, we are more concerned with a politicised understanding of *why* this cultural development is being promoted by the Party-State in China and what function it serves, thereby addressing the “pressing need to bring politics into the analysis of class in the PRC” (Guo, 2018: 2). As noted above, our overall approach is rooted in Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) concept of passive revolution and *trasformismo*. The notion of passive revolution has been applied to other aspects of modernization in contemporary China (Bieler and Morton, 2018: 180-83, Gray, 2010; Hui, 2017). However, the concept has been lacking in broader Gramscian analyses of sport where the focus has remained on hegemony (see Rowe 2004 for an overview). We use this framework of passive revolution and *trasformismo* to therefore offer an original framing of the role of the state in relation to Chinese class politics, and to contribute a new case study

to the emergent literature on everyday manifestations of passive revolution (see Hesketh, 2016; Morton, 2018).

The remainder of article proceeds as follows. First, we outline the broad contours of China's changing mode of development, within the context of the global political economy. This section provides the macro basis for thinking about China and passive revolution. Second, we focus on the specific rise of the middle class and the strategic role they play within the political economy of contemporary China. The efforts by the Party-State to incorporate such classes through a project of minimal hegemony is established here. This segment provides the social subject of our inquiry. We then integrate these two sections with a two-stage analysis of passive revolution and *trasformismo* linked the development of football. The third section examines the development of football in relation to expanding the realm of capital accumulation in China (an everyday passive revolution) before finally, considering the cultural value of football promotion as part of a consumerist outlet for China's middle classes (*trasformimso*).

China and the Global Political Economy: Modernization via passive revolution

The state's ambition is for China to become a "relatively well-off nation" (*xiaokang guojia* 小康國家) with a "relatively well-off society" (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社會) (Ravallion, 2009). The "world's factory" (*Shijie gongchang* 世界工厂) model that facilitated China's economic growth in the 1980s and 90s has declining currency as a sustainable growth model (Cai and Wang, 2010). Low-cost export manufacturing and outsourcing advanced economies' dirty jobs is incompatible with continuing growth, as the environment suffers earlier excesses and the labour pool shrinks due to demographics (Zhang et al., 2011). Neither do they fit China's aspirations under the aegis of the "Chinese Dream," a loose set of discourses and related policies that came to prominence during the first year of Xi Jinping's rule (2013-present) and

broadly define China as a self-confident, modern and strong nation under the leadership of the party-state (Ferdinand, 2016: 942-3). The discourse reflects the robust posture of Xi's leadership and China's increasingly confident global stature, but also seeks to address a more philosophical question: "after economic success, what now?" (Callahan, 2013).

A sustainable model of long-term growth in China requires a recalibration from low-end manufacturing to a service and consumption-based economy (Breznitz and Murphree, 2011), which is being facilitated by urbanization, migration and harnessing the creative capacity of an "innovative nation" (*Chuangxinxing de guojia* 創新性的國家). This kind of articulation backed by central policy planning is not new: successive Chinese regimes have been preoccupied with "modernization" since the traumatic encounter with aggressive western Imperialism in the mid-19th Century (Zheng, 1999) and in the reform era multiple ideological, discursive and policy questions have been subsumed under the question of what "modernization" means for China (Meisner, 1999; Soo 1989). Some scholars have spoken of "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" (Harvey 2005: 120-151; Pow, 2009). The "Chinese characteristics" is a crucial qualifier because China has resisted many elements of neoliberalism, while selectively or partially adopting and modifying others. Scholars have also used "state capitalism" (Bremmer, 2008) to capture the combination of "a predominantly market economy, emerging capital markets and large and important government owned corporations" (Naughton and Tsai, 2015: 2). Other scholars have discussed a "China Model" of state-economy relations (Ferchen, 2013), where guided by pragmatism and incrementalism the "Chinese leadership worked through existing economic and political institutions while gradually reforming them and reorienting them to serve the modernization goals" (Zhao, 2010: 423).

Irrespective of what we call China's economic model, there is evidence that some elements of the hegemonic ideology within the global political economy have been adopted,

albeit with their own geographically and culturally specific form of transition, as the concept of passive revolution entails (Hesketh 2017a). Inextricably tied to the problematic process of developmental catch-up and modernization, Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of passive revolution is a useful theoretical device referring to a state-led process of modernization that involves the reorganisation of social relations linked to the institutionalisation or expansion of capitalism. A passive revolution, or "a revolution without a 'revolution'" occurs when social relations are fundamentally reorganised, but popular initiatives are neutralised in the continuation of class domination (Gramsci 1971: 59; Fzhao 1990: 213). Gramsci first deployed passive revolution to refer to the role of the Piedmont state in Italy during the Risorgimento (and the limited form of hegemony that emerged during this time during the drive for national unification). However, Gramsci recognised that the concept of passive revolution had applications beyond the Italian case where processes of state formation could be defined as "modernization from above," i.e. state-led attempts to achieve developmental catch-up without the participation of the popular classes (Gramsci 1996: 232). Recent scholarship has pointed to the utility of passive revolution as a common feature of development in societies seeking developmental catch up, notably in peripheral spaces within the global political economy (Hesketh, 2017b; Thomas, 2006). Furthermore, several studies have illustrated the utility of the concept of passive revolution in the context of Chinese development in the reform era (Bieler and Morton, 2018: 180-183; Gray, 2010; Hui, 2017). Acknowledging the specificity of the Chinese context, these analyses situate China's *internal* development policies within the *externally shifting conditioning* of the global political economy as it moved from nationally-oriented class compromises (Keynesianism) to transnationally integrated forms of production (neoliberalism). This does not imply that China followed global trends *in toto*, nor does it deny the reality of China's emerging hybrid economic model. Rather, events in China are situated within the larger hegemonic field of force that conditions global development. As Robert Cox

1983: 171) reminds us “Hegemony at the international level is not merely an order among states. It is an order within a world economy with a dominant mode of production which penetrates into all countries and links into other subordinate means of production.” Thus, whether one describes the “China model” as “state capitalism” or “market socialism with Chinese characteristics,” it is generally agreed that China has established “in significant part, a free market economy” where labour, capital and commodity flows are increasingly free and the private sector plays an increasingly important role, while the state retains ultimate control over “strategic sectors of the economy and a large range of core industries including utilities, transportation, telecoms, finance and the media” (Zhao, 2010: 422). The Chinese model encourages business growth as a means to achieving social cohesion and using corporatism and clientelism to assure the coexistence of private interest and the political aspirations of the state. The key point is the dominant role of the state (rather than social classes) lead the process, authoring the process of modernization from above by selectively expanding capitalist social relations of production and setting the parameters of the developmental transition. In stark terms, “in the absence of an indigenous bourgeoisie, the Chinese state took upon itself the leading role in the reorganisation of social relations commensurate with a restoration of capitalism” (Gray, 2010: 456), affecting this “Piedmont-type role” by allowing a capitalist class to emerge from the ranks of the party–state bureaucracy, creating a capitalist labour market by dismantling the socialist organization of agriculture and industry and establishing property relations and new social norms (Burawoy, 1996; Gray, 2010; Tsai, 2007; Wang, 2011).

What we have established so far is the manner in which China’s modernizing development can be viewed through the lens of passive revolution. How then does this broader background on Chinese development and emergent class contradictions link to the issue of football culture and *trasformismo*? To answer this, we now need to consider the next piece of the puzzle, which is the emergence of the middle class in China that is dialectically related to

this process of development. As Lefebvre has suggestively put it, ‘People have questioned whether “passive revolutions” in the Gramscian sense do not derive from the salience of the middle class’ (1981/2008: 159). The next section therefore explores the rise of the middle class and their incorporation into a changing historical bloc within China.

China’s Middle Class

Questions about the existence of a Chinese middle-class, its size and the level of social consciousness it possesses, have prompted substantial debate (Goodman and Chen, 2013; Miao, 2017; Tsang, 2014; Zhou, 2008). Notwithstanding uncertainties in operationalization and measurement,² a middle-class society is an explicit aspiration for the Chinese state (Goodman, 2014; Tomba, 2004), where the term means “less a specific group of people than a way of thinking and foreseeing the structures of Chinese society, a part of the new social imaginary China is elaborating” (Rocca, 2016: 11). The middle classes occupy a key strategic role within China’s political economy. Extolled as an aspiration for others to follow, the state’s “discourse of the middle class, designed to encourage economic growth, consumption, and a belief in a rising standard of living” (Goodman, 2015: 6) is instrumental, not just in service of recalibrating China’s economy, but to deflect and finesse growing social inequalities. China is an aspirational society where the consuming, “desirous modern self” (Rofel, 2007: 118) has become reified as an act of patriotism through the Chinese Dream’s elision of economic power and national rejuvenation (Wang, 2014). Contemporary state narratives emphasize “progress” at all levels, and individuals deemed lagging are cajoled to become “civilized” (*wenming* 文明) and ostracized for their inferior “quality” (*suzhi* 素质) or lack of “taste” (*pinwei* 品味) (Anagnost, 2004; Jacka, 2009; Kipnis, 2006). Everyone, including the 250-million strong

² Goodman (2016: 4) claims the best estimate of what constitutes a middle class in China would put the figure at around 12%. Other studies suggest a much larger, and quickly growing, sector (Barton et al, 2013).

cohort of migrant workers at the bottom of the class pyramid (Wong et al, 2007), is exhorted to improve their own lives by becoming agents in their own governance (Jeffreys, 2009), while the “civilizing” discourse displaces responsibility for progress to individuals and masks the inequities of a class structure that is studiously avoided (Brownell, 2001). In the “civilizing narrative” low-paid urban employment is framed as an opportunity for rural migrants to receive a social education and learn the ways of urban modernity, despite their lack of urban household registration documents (*hukou* 户口) denying them access to basic provisions like education and healthcare (Pun et al., 2010; Qiu, 2009). Migrants seldom escape de facto second-class status in the cities where they work, and the most visible form of class struggle taking place in China is between migrant workers and global capital mediated by the Party-state and its private capital lieutenants (Chan, 2010; Chan and Hui, 2017).

The attempt to mould social classes through the adoption of prescribed behaviours, beliefs and lifestyles (Bakken, 2000) represents a break with former modes of class politics in China (So, 2003), which were one of the defining characteristics of PRC society in the 20th Century. Classification of the population was one of the first steps taken by the new Communist regime, and by the early 1950s everyone in China was assigned a class from a granular list of 62 descriptors. Two pieces of information, a socio-economic position and a political inclination implied by behaviour, were included on household registration documents and went a long way to determining one’s fate during successive campaigns against landlords, industrialists, intellectuals, the bourgeoisie, “rightists” and capitalists, which came to a head during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Class consciousness was ideological, political and operationalized through designations that for very large numbers of Chinese people and their offspring were a matter of life and death. Class struggle was central to Mao’s modus operandi, and led to the catastrophic Cultural Revolution. During the post-Revolutionary period, the Chinese middle class was repressed and eradicated as a political constituency, demonstrating

that these were seen as ‘antagonistic’ as opposed to ‘kindred’ social groups (Gramsci 1971: 57). Owing to Mao’s condemnation of competitive games, Chinese sport systems were significantly reduced (Tan and Houlihan 2013: 137).

After Mao’s death, ‘black’ class labels were eliminated and the judgement on Mao contained in the 1981 “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” (*Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi* 关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议) included an attempt to smooth class relations. Workers and intellectuals were said to belong to the same heterogeneous class, the possibility of class conflict under socialism was denied, and it was claimed that the bourgeoisie couldn’t possibly exist within the Party. But as Deng’s economic reforms started to deliver results, and some sectors “got rich before others”, these simplifications came under stress, from the obvious advantages that Party cadres (and later, the despised “princeling” class; *Guan/fu erdai* 官/富二代) were beginning to enjoy, and the exclusion of the large number of private and would-be entrepreneurs from the Party. New types of class relations between the Party and the people, and horizontally between different social groups emerged and the nature of class politics changed substantially as the source of Party legitimacy moved from socialist ideology to economic performance. This posed important questions of social control and ideological legitimacy (Hui, 2017: 67), which the Party has recently sought to address through anti-corruption campaigns, the re-animation of “core socialist values” and the promulgation of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (*Xi Jinping xinshidai Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi sixiang* 习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想).

As a new class of private entrepreneurs emerged, they were gradually embraced by a regime increasingly reliant on a state-corporatist approach to managing social forces (Shambaugh and Brinley, 2008; Unger and Chan, 1995). The emergence of the middle class

that resulted from China's revolution from above, or passive revolution, therefore posed the question of *trasformismo*, defined by Gramsci (1971: 58) as 'the establishment of an ever more extensive ruling class' within the framework of the established order. Opening Party membership to private entrepreneurs was a major symbol of the changing emphasis on economic activity and evolving class relations, finessed post-hoc by Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" in 2002, whereby the Party was said to represent advanced social and productive forces, advanced culture and the interests of the overwhelming majority. Although vaguely defined, these categories were a nod to the new capitalist strata of private entrepreneurs, intellectuals and technocratic elites (Gray, 2010: 457). The expansion of economic opportunities has enabled the re-emergence and expansion of the middle classes (*zhongchanjieji* 中产阶级 or the more politically palatable 'middle income stratum' *zhongchan jieceng* 中产阶层), which are framed as upwardly mobile and a force for "social stability", the Party's major preoccupation since the violent denouement of the Democracy Spring movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989 (Yang, 2017). The discourse of a Chinese middle class reinforces the notion of economic growth and rising standards of living (delivered by the CCP) and offsets a focus on stark inequalities and an emergent class of politically connected super-wealthy (Goodman, 2016: 6). While the middle class has been promoted by the state as an aspirational model, farmers and workers, formerly the bedrock of the CCP regime, have been marginalised (and in many cases, impoverished) by the declining economic importance of agriculture and the restructuring of state owned enterprises (SOEs). The redefinition of the working class as "degraded" and "signifying historical lack", has altered "the hierarchy of Chinese masculinities", which is now "constituted around consumerist power and class distinction" (Gong, 2016: 23). Meanwhile, as Solinger (2006: 178) argues, the integration of the middle-class in China signifies part of a broader "transformed regime alliance" that builds a coalition between capitalists and development officials as opposed to workers and peasants. In

Gramscian terms we can refer to this more expansively as a *transformed historical bloc*, reflecting the new combination of class forces and ideological forms that accompany this (Gramsci 1971: 377).

Despite delivering sustained growth and widespread increases in prosperity, China's economic reforms have also created a substantial floating population of migrant workers, a new urban underclass with a corresponding cohort of those "left behind" in the hollowed-out countryside (Xiang, 2007). The "social contradictions" created by spiralling inequality explains why explicit class terminology is almost absent from contemporary discourse, replaced with symbolic references to professions, education and home-ownership. With class differences exacerbated through material conditions of production, class consciousness is smothered by modernizing and nationalist discourses, where individual "ability" (*nengli* 能力) is used to explain individual successes and failures to adapt to market socialism. Rather than engaging solely in repression, the state has sought to manage class contradictions. This has, in some analyses involve a shift "from forcefully engineering the passive revolution into constructing capitalist hegemony" (Hui, 2017: 70). However, we do not agree that what is happening in China can be understood simply as a switch to classically understood hegemonic construction. Rather, we would characterise the situation as one of *minimal hegemony* within conditions of passive revolution. The difference in this position lies in the fact that, rather than the classical or integral sense of hegemony that Gramsci referred to, in which the function of leadership was provided by a social class (Morton, 2013: 21), the leadership role in (re)structuring social relations in China has been played by the state. Most salient for our argument, this minimal hegemony includes incorporating the middle strata into the historical bloc anchored by the Party-State. This is an important project, based on recognition that the major challenge to state power in the reform era came from middle class intellectuals in the form of the Democracy Spring movement, which opened a pathway to subaltern class resistance when workers joined

the protests led by the middle class. In addition, the private entrepreneurs and managerial cadre created by developmental catch-up represents a latent social force whose allegiance to the current order is pragmatic rather than ideological (Van der Pijl, 2007: 204), and whose self-interest could encourage them to seek “the reduction/restructuring of the directive state” (Van der Pijl 2006: 14). New methods therefore needed to be found to legitimate the social order, and incorporate potentially recalcitrant social classes into supporting the Party-State via the process of *trasformismo*. *This then provides our social problematic for considering the role of leisure activities such as football and the social function these activities these play within contemporary China. Let us now establish this connection more explicitly.*

Under Xi Jinping, one element of incorporation has been the “democracy of consumption [that] was encouraged in urban areas to forestall social unrest” (Harvey, 2005: 125) and the changing emphasis away from simple GDP to “quality growth” that incorporates broader measures of wellbeing (Gray, 2015: 606). The key point is that forms of consumption and economic freedom are integral to the identity of the middle class in China (Miao 2017: 10), where material wellbeing and lifestyle choices substitute for meaningful political participation. This development is consistent with the lineage of consumerist lifestyle patterns that have been used by industrial societies as a means of social control. As Marcuse put it, “the most effective and enduring form of warfare against liberation is the implanting of material and intellectual needs that perpetuate obsolete forms of struggle for existence” (2002/1964: 4), a notion that has been taken up by Chinese New Left thinkers, notably Wang Hui (2003; Wang and Karl, 1998), in their critique of neoliberalism and the trajectory of China’s reforms. Specifically, in relation to sport and leisure activities, Lefebvre (1947/2008: 36) has noted that “Sport is an activity which is seemingly incompatible with illusion, and yet in fact it confronts us with a reverse image: a compensation for everyday life.” We now seek to bring these two previous

sections dealing with passive revolution and the problem of middle class incorporation together via a consideration of one of the new leisure industries being promoted in China, that of football.

We argue that the more recent development of football culture in China can be read as a continuation of this process of passive revolution and *trasformismo*. In other words, it remains a top-down, state-authored process, designed to both restructure social relations to expand capitalist development while offsetting potential discontent via enhanced opportunities for middle-class leisure activities. It is therefore the quintessence of what Lefebvre (1947/2008: 36) referred to as ‘a great and often magnificently spectacular mise en scène devoted to competitiveness.’

The Development of football in China: everyday aspects of passive revolution

The current football development plans are the latest attempt to reform the sector. At the start of the reform era, the task facing the government in sports, media and other sectors was to affect an orderly retreat from central planning through state-led commercialization. Direct state control of football via local sports bureaux was replaced by an incremental and experimental opening up to investment by state owned enterprises, local governments and private capital. Successive reform plans were advanced for the national football infrastructure and institutional reform. With its 1993 document “Suggestions on Moving Further Ahead in Sports Reformation,” the Sports Ministry “officially announced a market economy-oriented reform policy” (Hong and Lu, 2013) that included the establishment of a new professional league, commercialization of the league’s image, marketing and naming rights, and allowing private capital investment in clubs. This ambition, and related policies initiated by the General Administration of Sport and the Chinese Football Association (CFA), were an explicit response to Deng Xiaoping committing to accelerated market reforms during his post-Tiananmen

“Southern Tour” in 1992. It resulted in the launch of the first fully professional league, sponsored by Marlboro (邁寶路甲級 A 组联赛). The CFA sold the marketing rights to the league for \$9 million over five years to the American International Management Group (IMG) (Tan et al 2016: 1639). Clubs were separated from local government ownership through the legalization of private and collectively-owned clubs ahead of the inaugural Jia-A season in 1994. Shanghai Shenhua became the first collectively-owned club in January 1994, soon followed by politically-connected entrepreneur Wang Jianlin’s (王健林) private firm purchase of the former Dalian Dockyard team. Dalian Wanda (大連萬達) went on to win seven Jia-A titles to 2004 and established Wang, a real estate developer and one of Chinese richest individuals, as a major figure in the development of Chinese soccer. The incremental professionalization of the Jia-A league included several expansions of participant clubs, lucrative title sponsors like Pepsi, regulations forcing clubs to establish independent companies with business plans and transparent ownership (1999), and to secure business licenses and meet other commercial operating standards (2002). This picture of the development of football thus concords with our broader analysis regarding the state-led reorganisation of social relations, that seek to expand capitalist development (passive revolution). As Lefebvre’s (1976: 84) complementary analysis sets out, leisure activities such as football enter the division of labour more broadly via the large-scale commercialisation of *specialised* spaces.

The transformation of Chinese football is a product of the interplay between various state actors (not always acting in unison) and private capital (Sullivan et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2017), notwithstanding the fact that the state is the ultimate arbiter of how the industry operates, sets the parameters of ongoing institutional reforms, directs implementation of the leadership’s vision and makes direct interventions through the CFA (Tan and Houlihan 2013: 147). For Chinese corporations, football and its associated revenue streams represent a commercial

opportunity and a means to generate political capital with central and local governments. Once insolvent, CSL clubs now command estimated valuations of hundreds of millions of dollars as assets, income from media deals and match attendance increased to the highest levels outside the “big 5” European leagues (Klebnikov, 2016; Schmidt et al., 2017). Investment in football also provides access to tax relief, land-use rights, and preferential policies from local government officials hoping to use football for “city branding”, attracting external investment and earning “political credits to get promoted” (Lin et al, 2017: 8). Major conglomerates like developer and mall operator Wanda, real estate firm Evergrande (恆大), real estate and investment firm Fosun (复星), e-commerce giant Alibaba (阿里巴巴) and electrical goods seller Suning (蘇寧) have all actively pursued profitable investments in football. Construction and real estate firms like China Fortune Land Development (华夏幸福) and R&F Properties (富力地产) have used investments in clubs in Hebei and Guangzhou to secure local government grants to lucrative urban land for development. These connections are not accidental in a context where entrepreneurial stakeholders collaborate with the state in a distinct form of “football-based state corporatism, one that paradoxically seeks to enable private action and state ambition” (Yu et al., 2017: 721; Tan et al., 2016). Football is a vehicle for stimulating economic development, nurturing a fit and productive workforce and mobilizing the consumer citizenship needed to build a strong and prosperous nation (Mid-Long Term Development Plan 2016-2050). Through policy documents and state media and commercial commentary, the business of football is thus “framed within the national imaginary as productive to the nation, the state, and the people therein” (Lin et al, 2017: 19).

Further evidence of the role of the state in engineering increased avenues for capital accumulation via the promotion of football in accordance with its broader passive revolutionary strategy of modernizing development can be seen in the international acquisitions of private

investors. Since receiving the signal from the authorities in 2014, private Chinese investors, pursuing their own commercial interests, at the behest of the CFA or to earn political capital with the Chinese government, have invested more than \$2 billion in the acquisition of overseas football assets (Connell, 2017: 8). Among many prominent investments, Wang Jianlin's Wanda acquired a 20% stake in Atletico Madrid and the Swiss media and marketing rights firm Infront Sports and Media, which holds the rights to the FIFA World Cup and other entertainment properties. Wang spoke of his desire to create a global entertainment axis and the sports industry's need to "integrate with business, media, tourism, and urban development." Football as an opportunity for corporate conglomeration coalescing around China's global entertainment and sporting aspirations is a model followed by other private companies like Alibaba (co-owner of the CSL's most successful club and a major FIFA and Olympic sponsor), Suning (owner of a CSL club and Inter Milan) and China Media Capital (whose investment in Manchester City was announced during Xi Jinping's state visit to the UK in 2015). Chinese investors purchased around 30 clubs, primarily in Europe, as well as investing extravagant sums in foreign playing talent for the CSL. There has been speculation about their motivations, but it is likely a combination of financial (seeking asset accumulation, moving money offshore, investment opportunity, expansion of related business interests) and political (demonstrating fealty to Xi, seeking political capital) incentives, following a distinct change in political leadership style, as the centralising and robust Xi administration replaced the collective leadership and relative laissez faire of Hu Jintao. Demonstrative of the subordinate relations between the state and business, the exuberance of private investment in football was abruptly curtailed in 2017, when the state intervened to inhibit "irrational" overseas investments (Rumsby, 2017) as part of a broader circumscription of currency outflows amid concerns a domestic liquidity crisis. Wanda was forced to divest some of its overseas acquisitions, including most of its investment in Atletico Madrid, while others like private energy firm and

Slavia Prague owner CEFC (*Huaxin Nengyuan* 华信能源) have been sanctioned by the state for over-leveraged acquisitions, capital flight, poor risk management and scattergun investments that are perceived to damage the state's policies like the National Brand Plan (*Guoji pinpai jihua* 国际品牌计划), the Belt and Road Initiative and broader ambition to project "soft power." These developments served to re-emphasise that, in China, football governance takes place in the context of a constant threat that the state will intervene should it deem an activity to be against the country's or the government's best interests, as defined by the Party-State.

The preceding section has argued that the development of football serves as an everyday manifestation of the broader passive revolutionary logic of development taking place within China. We now turn to the second social function that this promotion of leisure activities has - as a mode of *transformismo* serving as part of the consumerist lifestyle that the party-state wishes to promote to the middle classes in order to retain their support within this process of modernisation from above.

Football and Middle Class Leisure

Like continental Europe, where it was adopted by Anglophile cosmopolitan élites (Missiroli, 2002), when football was introduced to China during the Republican era in the late 1910s it was an exotic and modish form of physical exercise partaken by students on university campuses (Dong and Mangan, 2001). It did not develop roots beyond a narrow urban demographic, despite the success the Republic of China team enjoyed in Asian competition in the 1920s. Unusually then, football developed in China as a largely middle class sport (Jinxia and Managan 2001). After the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the state's interest in football was animated by the potential utility for nation-building witnessed in other

Communist states (Edelman, 1993). During the Mao era, the administration of football was incorporated into the state's central planning and football clubs were operated by state institutions representing local sports bureaux and national organizations like the army and railways. There were few opportunities for Chinese people to form attachments to clubs and the national team did not participate in organized international competition due to the PRC's withdrawal from FIFA, the Asian Football Confederation and the IOC in protest at their continued recognition of the Republic of China (Taiwan). Football fandom was underdeveloped when football became the first sport to be professionalized in the reform era and new clubs were launched as part of a "cosy government-big business agenda" (Simons, 2010). However, professionalization did provide rewards for those with a local club, transforming the football stadia into new urban spaces for participating in leisure activities.

The development of European football over the past three decades has been characterized as "gentrifying" (Williams, 2006), "rooted in consumption" (Best, 2013: 80) and a "creature of business" (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2013: 117), illustrative of broader trends in neoliberal globalization and sometimes inspiring analogies to multinational corporations like McDonalds and Disney (Dixon, 2014; Duke, 2002). As a later developer the increasing commercialization of the leisure, media, marketing, advertising and merchandising sectors that surround the football industry, have led scholars to conclude that the Chinese state is similarly looking "to culturalize football as a uniquely local consumer commodity" (Lin et al., 2017: 20), one that reproduces class divisions and reveals the contradictions of state-led development (Lim, 2017).

The football environment nurtured by the confluence of business and politics in China provides "experiences" focused around consumption and leisure, and the aspirational cosmopolitanism of vicarious participation in the global game (Bell, 2006). Empirical studies on fans finds that the Chinese "football consumer" tends male (73%), by income is likely to be

a member of the middle class, is attracted to football for excitement and drama and attaches to (mainly foreign) celebrity players rather than forming attachments to a club (Schmidt et al., 2017). Numerous surveys report a high level of football content being consumed digitally, through streaming and on social media (Gong 2016; Gundogan and Sonntag, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2017), and many international leagues and clubs have sought to exploit this entry point to access the purchasing power of the Chinese middle classes (Hayton et al., 2017). Transnational fandom is a noted feature of Chinese football, with fans citing the superior quality and star power of European leagues (Schmidt et al., 2017), for whom the connection to European (sporting) culture has the added advantage of distinguishing them socially as having good taste (Gong, 2019). The stereotype of Chinese fans as consuming, spectacle-chasing flaneurs, or “jersey-buying customers of major European football brands” (Gundogan and Sonntag, 2018: 133), neglects the genuine attachments that transnational fans form for overseas teams (Sullivan et al., forthcoming). However, it also demonstrates that, in order to attract these fans to Chinese football, the local industry has had to improve its product on and off the pitch, which it has done by investing in stadia, developing related leisure, entertainment and consumption opportunities, and by recruiting, at huge cost, star players from other leagues (Yu et al., 2017). This endeavour has succeeded in boosting attendances and various revenue streams, while reproducing class differences. For instance, attending a match may be a “weekend leisure activity among city dwellers” (Hong and Lu, 2013: 1640), but it is restricted to people in major urban areas (generally large metropolitan areas with a professional club) with sufficient resources of time and money to enjoy football consumption as leisure. Participation in the consumer citizenship of football is difficult for China’s 250 million migrant workers, with their low salaries, long working hours, weekend overtime and lack of attachment to their host city. Such class distinctions are reflected in modes of football consumption. At the micro-level it determines how matches are watched and the authenticity of merchandise bought (Gong, 2016:

26). At the macro-level it is manifest in the construction of expensive state-of-the-art venues (Lu, 2013) and the intense security measures against ultras exhibiting undesired or stability-threatening behaviours (Stride and Vandenberg, 2019). They are also evident in youth football participation, a key ambition of the current reforms underpinned by substantial investment in pitches, training for coaches, the establishment of football schools and adding football to the national PE curriculum. This ambition is partly to increase the talent pool for the national team and partly to address rapidly growing levels of obesity and associated public health issues. As such, it is a supplement to the National Fitness Program (*Quanmin jianshen jihua* 全民健身計劃) in operation since 1995. Football has not yet achieved the level of mass participation and, like the US (Andrews, 1999), modes of participation are conditioned by class. For instance, as middle class urban Chinese increasingly adopt hobbies, leisure activities and lifestyles that distinguish them as people with “quality” (*suzhi*) and “taste” (*pinwei*), youth participation in expensive training camps, some of which are joint ventures with famous European clubs, is a status marker for parents with disposable income who perceive it as an activity with aesthetic and social merit. Meanwhile, the actual talent pool for the CSL and Chinese national team is overwhelmingly made up of players from working-class backgrounds, for whom football represents social mobility rather than leisure or self-development.

When the Chinese government, in its policy documents and state media editorials, talks about the “healthy development of football” (足球健康發展) it refers to a sustainable development model, public health benefits and building a successful sports culture. But “healthy” is also a signal word for progress, orderliness, stability and modernity. On one hand, the relevance to football is to manage the disorderly passions that have led fans to riot and confront security forces (Bridges, 2008). More broadly, in the context of our central argument, the “healthy development of football” is suggestive of the broader politics of *trasformismo*,

designed to appeal to middle class sectors of society who in turn provide a model of aspiration for subaltern sectors to emulate. In Gramsci's words, football, as an element of the wider leisure complex being promoted, is designed to absorb elements of class contradictions through "molecular changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces." The social purpose here is to draw the middle classes more firmly into the transformed regime alliance, through "economiz[ing] Chinese football culture and culturaliz[ing] the logics of commercial sport" (Yu et al., 2017: 731). Just as the "systematic triangulation of sport spectatorship, consumerism and political economy" manifest in NASCAR, embeds the "conventions of a neo-liberalist hegemony" within a working class (Newman and Giardina, 2010: 1517), so the Chinese vision for football attempts to marry the ethos of state-capitalism, social control and nationalism to the emergent middle class.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that the 'Gramscian moment' for analysing sport may have passed and been outpaced with new concerns, displacing class as a category of analysis (Rowe 2004: 107). We have demonstrated in this article that such a pronouncement is premature. The article has argued that the development of football in China can be viewed fruitfully through the prism of Gramsci's concepts of passive revolution and the ancillary notion of *trasformismo* that take as their central subject of analysis the changing class composition of societies within broader patterns of state formation. To make this argument we situated the changing role of class politics in China and the state's integral role in authoring the process of modernization from above. This modernization - defined in terms of expanded capitalist development - has given rise to a newly emergent middle class. In order to forestall elements of social unrest linked to tight state control and the lack of autonomy for this class (in terms of political liberty), the Party-State has sought to construct a project of minimal hegemony by providing ever more

outlets for consumerist lifestyles in lieu of political freedoms. Drawing from Henri Lefebvre, Gramsci's arguments were therefore extended to the realm of everyday life and cultural experiences. The specific emergence of football was then examined in light of these broader assertions. Here we demonstrated both the guiding role of the state in the promotion of football culture, the role of football in providing outlets for increased capital accumulation and the enhancing of Chinese soft power abroad, but also its role as a consumerist spectacle among a middle-class audience. Football can thus be seen as proxy with this which to view, in microcosm, the changing class politics of Chinese development, most notably in the transformed regime alliance or new historical bloc which the Party-State has sought to construct. While the integration of the middle-classes can be seen as a relatively successful act of *trasformismo* on behalf of the state, the promotion of football almost exclusively to this specific demographic highlights the glaring continued exclusion of subaltern classes, most notably urban migrants. This clash between urban migrants and transnational capital is clearly the most pressing contemporary struggle and challenge for the state (Bieler and Morton 2018: 181; Gray and Yang 2015). As football contributes to the growth of celebrity culture it will also provide another visible manifestation of inequality. As well as shaping social values on behalf of the Party-State, a Gramscian analysis reminds us that hegemonic constructions are also likely to become the object of hegemonic contestations. The inclusion of the middle-class via consumerist activities therefore may prove to be a pyrrhic victory for the Party-State.

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