

A Research on Strategic Narratives of Chinese Naturalized Soccer Athletes: How Chinese, English & Japanese Mainstream Media Say?

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Abstract: *The purpose of this research is to explore the differences among the coverage on “Chinese Naturalized Soccer Athletes” from Chinese, English & Japanese media. By examining 93 multi-type pieces of news within the frame constituting “policy narrative” “system narrative” and “identity narrative”, our research finds that a) news from Chinese, English, and Japanese media differentiates from content, genres and conflicts, b) common ground of the three types of reports is based on the “stable consensus” of grades and performance as the main index, c) strategic communication on sports should be constructed systematically by actors in this field. This study highlights how social institutions (government, policy, regulation, etc.), media, newsroom and readers construct the image of “Naturalized Athletes” while contribute to “strategic communication” by the analysis of three main dimensions. Possible explanations and discussions are shown as followed.*

Keywords: *Naturalized athletes, Strategic communication, Trans-cultural communication, Sports globalization, Sport diplomacy*

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, with the rapid development of globalization, SPORT, as a sub-system of social system, also reflects the characteristics of globalization. The globalization in the field of sports is mainly reflected in the transformation of events from the “Amateur Era” dominated by public welfare undertakings to the “Market Era” while commercialization has become the main feature of modern sports. The economic function of sports is gradually emerging, mainly reflected in three aspects: the commercialization of competitive sports products, the professionalization of athletes and the globalization of resource operation. Athlete, as one of the elements of athletic sports, also exists as a resource, whose competitive level, off-site performance, and social influence all serve as social symbols, affects their accomplishments and reputations.

With the increasing movement of athletes internationally, the term “naturalized athletes” (**abbr. NA**) has “grasped” the public. Apart from the stereotype when analyzing players who compete for their homeland (legal nationality), many of them have “fled” to another country. Those who play for other countries rather than their motherland are called NA, as this paper’s definition. As a kind of sports resources, are not only reflect the in-depth development of sports globalization, NA also evokes the theoretical and practical problems of all walks of life, including the media. Thus, we will proceed on “which institution plays an important role in constructing and decoding the term”, in other words, where to find such chaos in perception of NA, this new-born baby.

Narrative interfaces self and society, constituting a crucial resource for socializing emotions, attitudes, and identities, developing interpersonal relationships, and constituting membership in a community^[1]. This paper introduced “strategic narrative” as a mediated factor to interconnect NA, society, as well as states’ perception and their actions. This paper attempts to raise the research on NA from phenomenon description to conceptual analysis, liberate the naturalization phenomenon from the sports field, incorporated as a component into the broader political practice, and analyze NA from an inter-disciplinary perspective.

2. Literature Review

Sport plays a major part in the International Relations (abbr. IR) between states, non-state actors and

people all over the world, while builds bridges between disparate nations and their publics through a mutual affection for physical exercises, competition and games^[2]. Historical precedents could be dug out which defined sport as part of politics, even warfare, according to what Orwell, and Coubertin uttered^[3]. Scholars afterwards investigated “closely at international sporting organizations and ‘the multifaceted contacts between a diverse cast of actors that make international sports possible’” to make out how sports can contribute to diplomacy, conflict resolution and cultural understanding^[4]. Apparently, sport is not only the case itself, especially for politicians, who are unwilling to dispose this creative hand.

Sports diplomacy is shifting from emergence as a concept, toward empirical legitimacy, due to the outbreak of pandemic, which led Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics delayed till 2021^[5]. Sports diplomacy is also growing in practice. In the globalized, inter-connected and very public twenty-first century, many nations are experimenting with sports diplomacy. In post-pandemic era, sports diplomacy will play a part in constructing a multi-dimensional model, where to provide attractive soft power tools for governments to achieve public diplomacy goals, including “Sports Events,” “Sports Human Capitals,” “Sports Products,” and even far more from those^[6]. Sport does not act only as a mean to resolve the conflict or evoke it, but also an intangible platform where “competitors” realize their goals, far more than grades.

2.1 Strategic Communication

SC can refer to multi-party communication of concepts, processes or data to meet the organization's long-term strategic goals and promote its rational planning, usually opts international telecommunications or dedicated global network assets to coordinate important commercial, non-commercial and military operations. It can also refer to a relevant function within an organization through both internal and external processes. Moreover, SC can also be used in political warfare.

Toledano discussed Martin Buber's use of SC in public relations, believing that the public relations practice of morality depends on transparency, honesty, openness and respect in ways of SC^[7]. Henderson profiled the role of employee identity and organizational identity formation in SC and management of organizational issues about controversial public policies^[8]. Diplomacy, the concept itself seemed to broad to depict intricate IR, which functioned as negotiations, by multi-dimensional ways to compromise, including treaties, conventions, alliances, accords. In essence, effective communications are necessary when resolving the conflicts and building mutual trust, whatever the tool we use. Sport was a sort of social institutions, where values were transmitted, orders are maintained^[9]. With this point mentioned, we lead SC into our study to explore more possibilities when referring to sport diplomacy, so the introduction of “SC” can be regarded as one of the innovations rewarded.

2.2 Chinese Naturalized Soccer Athlete

Tracing back to politics study, such activities are not so scarce to be ignored, alongside with the thriving of globalization. Besides from act of GOD, changing one's UPOR (usual place of residence), or even swearing an oath to the constitution of which country you will legally become one of its civils after the rite, is often reckoned as the transformation and accumulation of social capital, as a Bourdieu-er thought^[10].

Strictly speaking, every individual, group, or social site has as many identities as it has relations with other individuals, groups, or social sites, while the same individuals, groups, and social sites shift from identity to identity as they shift relations^[11]. Tilly presented us a “relationship-boundary” model to explain how the fluidity of identity be taken into account by inequality, especially in political process.

NA, as a citizen of a country legally, holds nationality from his birthplace. After World War II, the “nation-state” system gradually matured, nation became the “imagined community” of a national citizen to its own nation^[12]. In case of the conflict between identities from nationality and nation respectively, as specific migrants, obtaining of “legal status” has become a key step to skip these barriers.

Yung Sheung and his colleagues are interested in the “nationalism” and “national identity” behind the naturalized athletes^[13]. They interviewed 24 informants (fans, players, coaches, etc.) in Hong Kong about the perception of naturalized players when it came to nationalism, who uttered those stakeholders articulated an ‘instrumental-plus’ discourse about these players, and a ‘civic-plus’ conception of nationality.

There are also some counterparts making a horizontal comparison of the status quo of naturalized athletes among different countries. Juzan Cho and others analyze the phenomenon of naturalized athletes in China, Japan and South Korea from the unique perspective of “bringing in and going out”^[14]. Danyl noted the lack of research on “transfer of nationality” in the academic literature on citizenship and elite sports, thus comparing the similarities and differences between the naturalized policies of Qatar and Turkey, ranging from athletes and official agencies, including Governments, International Federations, International Olympic Committee, to clarify the alienization of naturalized athletes^[15].

For NA and even the naturalized group, what matters most is to construct relativity between their individuality and the nationality, which countries give them, so that they can compete for their new “home”^[16]. Up to theoretical dialogue, the urging for “global anthropology” against “Euro-American academic hegemony” which failed to address this essentializing tendency remain inadequate.

As a new component added, NA can be rewarded as cultural ambassadors to enhance the relationship between the countries they belonged and belongs to. In contrast, the cognitive unbalance of their national identity could become a two-edged sword which would produce confusions which may contradict original cognition, influencing players, media, and audiences.

NA was first introduced into Chinese soccer in 2015, in the form of an initiative, which someone called it demand, because such plan was published by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China. Hou (John Hou Sæter) was born in Norway, played as a substitute for Chinese Super League (CSL) team Beijing GuoAn in 2019, representing the opening of the door to naturalization in Chinese soccer. Hou became the first naturalized player in Chinese history, with Li Ke (Nicholas Yennaris), who was born in 1993 as the club teammate with Hou.

Afterwards, other nine players became Chinese legally, but some of them were not qualified to be involved in Team China, as FIFA and CFA (Chinese Football Association) made international transfer within strict rule. Some were successfully awarded as a member of Team China, but some finally gave up his Chinese nationality, back to motherland.

3. Methods

To examine these questions, this paper applied text analysis and content analysis to examine 93 pieces of coverage posted on the mainstream media, which accounted of “Chinese soccer naturalized athletes”(abbr. CFNA) from Chinese, English, and Japanese media distinguished from three languages.

Text analysis refers to the research method that connects specific texts or finds common places in different texts and excavates the theoretical meaning behind them. It should be suggested that, as computer technology is applied to research, the terms “text mining” and “text analysis” are often used interchangeably to account for the same process of obtaining data through statistical model learning. In text analysis, a commonly used theory is narratology, in which post-classical narratology focuses on the interaction between author, text, reader and social and historical context. This paper will critically analyze the relationship between soccer & society and individual & society behind the text, with the basis of clarifying the social and historical background of the three countries in order to contribute to the construction of the category system.

Content analysis, as a research method, first appeared in the 1920s, while the modern type emerged after World War II. American scholars Harold D. Lasswell and Bernard Berelson, as representatives, had enriched and deepened the meaning of content analysis. In his book *Content Analysis in Communication Research*, published in 1952, Berelson argued that “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication”.

3.1 Selection of Media

Mainstream media, as officially announcing platform that represents intention of state-owned organizations, accounts for several reasons for being selected. Media messages (newspapers, magazine articles, videos) often have biased insight when broadcasting news happened abroad due to institutional discrepancy. Some material is designed to provide information and to attempt to accurately and fairly care for all aspects of a problem, but other types, such as propaganda, are deliberately biased or misleading and created for the promotion of a particular view, usually biased. Coverage of Chinese soccer naturalized players, from Chinese, English and Japanese mainstream media were included.

3.2 Framework & Sample size

93 pieces of news had been selected after filtering out irrelevant words. Materials were chosen from websites, with the aid of internal search engine, by entering keywords including “naturalized athletes”, “Chinese soccer”, and some other naturalized athletes’ names into the box, all of which were searched by three languages: Chinese, English, and Japanese.

Based on Miskimmon’s model of strategic narratives^[17], 93 pieces of coverage from three languages had been categorized into four cases, including twelve sub-categories. Thanks to previous researchers^[18], we are more convenient to build up the structure, which consists of “Policy narrative”, “System Narrative”, and “Identity narrative”, each of which possesses 2 to 4 sub-categories.

Policy Narrative Framework divides “policy narrative” into three levels: macro, meso and micro^[19]. The macro level is to examine the narrative in a broad cultural and institutional context; the meso level is related to the inter-organizational alliance (coalition) research, focusing on describing the policy narrative of the alliance and shaping the composition of the alliance; at the micro level, the framework focuses on the dissemination of narratives related to external factors in society, and shapes the personal views and views related to public policy. This paper is to examine the role of policy narrative in shaping and optimizing the report of “Chinese soccer naturalized athletes”, so we use macro dimension when operating. Due to the existence of “nationality-membership”, by which identity of the sportsman be confirmed, “sports discourse” and “political discourse” should be discussed.

“Systematic Narrative” was inclined to describe the basic logics which Chinese soccer, and even Chinese sports had adhered to, including globalization, politicalization, commercialization, which were reckoned as three main trends according to prior descriptions. A piece of news was meant to be value-free when marked as “none”.

“Identity Narrative” was directed to the definition and construction of the political actor’s identity in a process of constant negotiation and dispute in international affairs. As political leaders, they must be very clear about how to reconcile already existing identity narratives with new system narratives, although this may be difficult. In addition, social events or strategically developed policy narratives may support or undermine new system narratives, requiring those in power to adjust established identity narratives to accommodate policy narratives and system narratives in a state of flux in a timely manner. Even when sports was not overtly used by politicians, it was often seen as a metaphor for politics itself, so that sports and politics had some distinctive features: they involved contests that usually produced “winners” and “losers”.

4. Results

After testing the sample (N=93), the author found that there was no significant difference in the attitude of the three types of media about “whether the naturalized athletes can contribute to the healthy development of Chinese soccer” (p-value=0.18 > 0.05), English media regarded the naturalized athletes as therapy; while 48 of 62 (77%) reports that naturalized athletes can do things beyond the “game”. It can be seen that Chinese sports institutions regard the introduction of naturalized athletes as an organic part of the systematic project to promote the development of Chinese soccer.

Moreover, discourse types reported by the naturalized athletes were significantly different in the three types of media (p-value=0.014 < 0.05). Among them, the Chinese and Japanese reports show the pattern of “more sports and less politics”, while the English reports are reversed: 77% of the English reports focus on the political dimension of naturalized athletes, 71.4% of Japanese reports describe the description of naturalized athletes in the sports field; nearly 60% (62.9%) report the performance of the field. As native speaker, Chinese media pay more attention on TEAM CHINA, especially of the games which will be qualified the World Cup.

Although business elements behind the naturalized athletes in some reports are mentioned to some extent, this is not the focus of the systematic narrative. In addition to emphasizing that Chinese soccer is actively internationalizing, how naturalized athletes take effects on increasing China’s sports management system, that’s what intrigued the media.

The identity narrative of Chinese soccer varies significantly. Among them, Chinese media thought that introduction of naturalized athletes was in aid of “immature system of organization”. English and Japanese reports were relatively balanced, in which English often regard Chinese soccer as the “backward” and pay more attention to the level and countermeasures of Chinese soccer, 12 articles

involved. Japanese reports were more evenly distributed, with all-directional and multi-level attention. As mentioned above, Japan had a more comprehensive understanding of China as a direct competitor, and its motives and needs were more realistic than the English media.

5. Discussion

The concept of “news value” emerged in the 1830s during the “popular press” period. Due to the contradiction between insufficient affordance of information and limited capacity of communication, journalists had to form the news value by which to measure and choose facts. News value is a judgment on the newly occurred facts, an aggregation of the elements that facts have to meet the needs of society and the public, mainly including curiosity, importance, prominence, proximity and interest. In terms of the content, what media focused on differs between Chinese, English and Japanese media.

Coverage from Chinese media was distinctly local, with a wide range, focusing on the event, including but not limited to, pre-match preparation, match follow-up, post-match analysis, future outlook. Richness in genres were in an attempt to depict Chinese Team on-field & off-field.

The English-language media paid less attention to Chinese soccer itself, but were more interested in the “sports system” and even the “political system”. Type of coverage is mainly occupied by comments, with analysis and criticism in the context of China's current system. Being in a developed region when it came to soccer, English-language media focused on their effects on Chinese soccer. Migration was a global “landscape”, where English media covered more conflicts between naturalized players and Chinese soccer, Chinese fans, to analyze the sense of the group's identity after naturalization, from a perspective of “individual-organization-society”.

Geographical adjacency, social similarity, cultural proximity between them have led China and Japan to “unconscious competition” from different dimensions, from soccer to society, from sports policy to national policy. China was often portrayed as “competitor” in Japanese media, even the rival. In all, as far as Japan’s concerns, all attention towards China only served for one goal: to beat it.

“Cultural proximity” was first introduced by Joseph Straubhaar^[20]. The degree of cultural acceptance of each other is higher in the same cultural sphere than in the more culturally diverse regions. For a long time, Japan studied Chinese artifacts, systems, and culture for self-improvement, before “Kuroshio” incident. As a leader in soccer, Japan is both an object of learning for China and capable of elaborating “understandable” and “workable” ideas and methods for the relatively backward status of Chinese soccer. On the contrary, Japan can also use “Chinese experience” to mirror its own shortcomings.

Moreover, the elements within the system were interrelated, forming an organic whole. As a sub-system, sports is influenced by a series of policies of the General Administration of Sports and even the State Council will directly affect details, and the socio-economic conditions will also have an indirect impact on sports. Reform and Development of Chinese Soccer set out the direction of soccer reform efforts. Media coverage, as a mapping of the reality of the public opinion system, was a response to different elements of the same system.

As the institutional guarantee and core force for the development of competitive sports in China, the national system has the significant advantages of integrating national will, mobilization, resource, aiming to achieve breakthrough, which could fully mobilize the enthusiasm of stakeholders at all levels and provide a strong guarantee for the development of competitive sports. Rights and responsibilities were relative, and government intervention necessarily required it to be in charge of. Public blamed it on the government's poor management, taken it for granted, when facing the bad performances.

6. Suggestions

First, at the media level, local media need to gradually determine their own reporting style in the fragmented coverage, and the mainstream media should take the lead in building their own international communication discourse system. Due to the periodicity, uncertainty, and discontinuity of sports, coverage on the subject has shown discontinuity in both time and space. The coverage in the past five years has been concentrated on match days of national team, specifically World Cup Asian qualifiers. Therefore, when reporting, the media needs to achieve “inter-temporal dialogue”, i.e., while adhering to the characteristics of the times, they should reflect a consistent reporting style and construct a mature discourse system behind them, and continuously improve the international communication

system on Chinese characteristics while grasping the pulse of the times.

Furthermore, at the government level, administrations should communicate with the mainstream media in a timely manner, perceive the development of IC home and abroad, and help the media dynamically adjust their reporting strategies, so that official policies and views can be disseminated in time. In order to reconstruct the order of the international communication, China should be precisely positioned based on native cultural characteristics and complex attributes, as sports is no exception. Matched with the growing power, China needs to actively use a generalizable narrative to build a broad consensus in the world and form the largest number of conventions in order to tell the Chinese story well.

Finally, athletes themselves should actively cooperate with the media in order to help them be exposed to the public as much as possible. Mainstream media can take advantage of their resources and influence to interact with famous athletes and naturally integrate the framework of “individual-society-nation” in their narratives. NAs need to go through stereotypes in order to achieve identity confirmation, the psychological adaptation of “seeking commonality”. It is a challenge for the media to go beyond when reporting on issues related to NA, and it is also the social responsibility of the media to make NA share the identity as “Chinese” with the audience.

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