



# **Produce Wu Lei: a National Icon or a Product?**

A Case Study on National Identity and Sports Media in China

**Ruihao Guo**

**Supervisor: Fredrik Schoug**

**Examiner: Gustav Persson**

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## **Abstract**

The master thesis "Produce Wu Lei: a National Icon or a Product? - A Case Study on National Identity and Sports Media in China" studies the news coverage of a Chinese professional footballer - Wu Lei, by conducting a multi-method qualitative case study to analyze the representation of him in Chinese media. This thesis aims to understand the interrelation between football, media and national identity, and the ways economic value and social value influence news production in China.

The study is theoretically informed by the notion of national identity (Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm), media semiotics and mythology (Jonathan Bignell and Roland Barthes) and sports masculinity (Garry Whannel). This thesis has filled a gap between national identity and sports in East Asian countries. It also offers an opportunity to look into the issue of sports and nationalism from an economic perspective. The thesis is positioned at a multidisciplinary crossroad of social science and political science.

The findings illustrate that football is regarded as a tool to challenge Western hegemony in Chinese society. Therefore, after Wu Lei transferred to RCD Espanyol, he has been regarded as the spokesperson of Chinese football in the world. The media mainly build identity on him in two ways. On the one hand, the media continually emphasizes his nationality attribute and creates a binary opposition between "Chinese player Wu Lei" and "other players". On the other hand, the media build national confidence by strengthening Wu Lei's masculinity and identifying him as a national myth. When it comes to social value and economic value, the representation of Wu Lei in Chinese media reflect both the good and bad power of the media. The media attract internet traffics and make profits by selling the national emotion. Nevertheless, the way media cover Wu Lei is also influenced by the new digital environment and those Chinese media are struggling to find a better way to balance the social responsibilities and economic benefits at the same time.

**Keywords:** *Wu Lei, national identity, nationalism, sports media, football, news production, consumerism, media power, myth, China*

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## **Introduction**

“Sports and nation are very much connected” (Marjoribanks and Farquharson 2012:76). When a national athlete participates in a sports match, people’s sense of belonging to this nation will be stimulated and solidified (ibid.:77). It is because nation-building can be achieved not only through politics and economy but also through culture and symbolic contexts such as sports (ibid.). Moreover, sports has become a core symbol in modern societies’ nationalism, by creating and arousing the stories about who we are as individuals of countries (Seippel 2017). However, there is another argument that globalization has essentially decayed the differences between nation-states, though the global economic, political and cultural integration is not complete (Waters 1995; Bairner 2001; Cao 2007).

When the issues come to China, according to the argument above, Li (2016) points out that the rise of nationalism in China reflects that globalization gives China a chance to self-position itself. Since the 1990s, the wave of nationalism has been growing rapidly, and one of the most significant movements is to get rid of the name of “Sick Men in East Asia” (ibid.). During the period when China was a semi-colonial society, the Chinese were once called “Sick Men in East Asia”. On the one hand, China’s economic and political power was weak at that time. On the other hand, due to the proliferation of opium, the Chinese people at that time had poor physical fitness (ibid.). It has always been a shame of the nation in Chinese history (Li, 2016; Cao, 2007). This is why China has the political policies of “the Construction of Sports Powers” and “State-run Sports”, which are trying to use the sports power to show the strength of China to the world.

Though China has become one of the most successful countries in the summer Olympic Games in the past 20 years with 172 gold medals since the 2000 Sydney Olympics; this success never appears in Chinese football. The men’s national football team of China hardly ever meets the expectation and fantasy of Chinese fans. Since the 21st century, the Chinese men’s national team has only qualified for the World Cup final tournament once. And Chinese men’s football was once regarded as a shame of the nation (Ma and Zhang 2006). There is a popular question in Chinese society: why the nation that has the largest population cannot find 11 world-class footballers? Therefore, there is an argument among the Chinese public: “more than any other sport, football ‘taps into deep Chinese insecurities that—no

matter what great leaps the country has made or grudging deference it has earned through economic or military might—China remains an inferior power” (Wan 2015, cited in Connell 2018)

“The drive to match China’s economic ascent with success on the soccer field has become emblematic of Chinese president Xi Jinping’s ambition to transform China into a great and confident power” (Buckley 2017). In 2011, Mr Xi confessed three World Cup dreams for China: participate in the World Cup; host the World Cup and to win the World Cup (Leite Junior and Rodrigues 2017). Xi also points out that “Sports is an important symbol of social development and human progress, and an important manifestation of comprehensive national strength and social civilization” (cited in Sun et al. 2019: 18). As we know, football can be regarded as the most popular sport in the world, not only because it contains excellent commercial value, but also because it entrusts the natural emotions of countless people and is a common interest of all humankind (Sun et al. 2019:8). At the same time, football, as a common language among countries around the world, is also an essential tool for promoting international exchanges and plays a significant role in international political, economic and cultural exchanges (ibid.). Moreover, football is one of the “useful arenas to examine local and national identities” (Jarvie 2006). Each country is considered to have its unique style of football, which is representing the national characteristics of those countries (Seippel 2017). Hence, Chinese football and national identity is an interesting topic to study .

Furthermore, there is no doubt that football has an intimate connection to the mass media. The media is contributing to both the dissemination of football and the construct of national identity in society. Sports journalism has a significant impact on the public’s both material life and spiritual life (Chen 2015). Yin’s study shows (2014), though Chinese national team hardly meets the expectation of Chinese fans, the image of Chinese football has been firmly connected with national emotion in past 40 years; however, Zhai (2016) points out that meanwhile the media changes their strategy to build national emotion on the local club and individual footballers because of the team’s poor performance. On 28th January 2019, RCD

Espanyol Barcelona signed Wu Lei from Shanghai SIPG FC<sup>1</sup>, and Wu Lei's transfer caused a "carnival" in China. The media began to increase the coverage of Wu Lei and tried to make him a new Chinese sports idol. Based on the primary attributes of sports, challenges and competition, successful athletes are regularly regarded as a national model of power and strength of the society (ibid.). Zhai (2016) argues that, whether China or other countries, constructing the excellent athletes of the country as national heroes is always an important way for the mass media to express the ideology of nationalism in society.

Meanwhile, there is another angle that needs to be noticed. From the perspective of marketing, mass media is not a conventional public service, and profit is a prerequisite for maintaining its own survival and development (Yu 2016). This requires that media organizations must pay great attention to the "commodity value" of their content and capture mass consumers by producing information that caters to the audience (ibid.; Zhai 2016). Therefore, analyzing the image of Chinese football media in the context of consumerism can help us better understand media communication strategies.

Based on the discussion above, sports media and national identity/nationalism are particularly worthy of discussion among the most intensely emotional issues in modern society (Bairner 2001). In order to understand the interrelation of the sports media and national identity in China and the influence of consumerism in the new media age, this thesis chooses to conduct a case study of Wu Lei who is the best footballer in China now.

### **The case of 武磊 (Wu Lei)**

Wu Lei has become the most concerned and most discussed Chinese footballer among Chinese media and fans. He is seen as "the hope for Chinese football" all the time after his transfer. During the Barcelona Derby, the media even began to compare Wu Lei with Messi, and produced a promotional slogan "There is only one king in Barcelona". As we all know, Messi is one of the best footballers in the world, and we can hardly find a player who can compare with him. What makes Wu Lei so special and popular in China?

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<sup>1</sup> SIPG FC is a professional football club that participates in the Chinese Super League, which is founded in 2005 and based in Pudong, Shanghai. According to Forbes, SIPG FC is one of the third-most valuable football clubs in China (2015).

Speaking of Wu Lei's achievements, he is the best Chinese footballer now, and he is the only Chinese footballer who is playing in the Top 5 European Football League<sup>2</sup>. Wu Lei holds almost all of the records in Chinese football history. For instance, he made his debut as a professional player at the age of 14 years and ten months on 2nd September 2006, becoming the youngest player to debut in the Chinese Super League (RCD Espanyol official website, 2019). He is the all-time top goalscorer in the Chinese Super League, an impressive feat along with a long list of other individual achievements (La Liga official website, 2019). Meanwhile, he is not only holding the record for the Chinese player to have scored the most goals in a single season in the Chinese Super League, a total of 27, but also has been awarded twice the best footballer in China (ibid.).

From the perspective of the media industry, Wu Lei is a new economic icon in Chinese sports industry that brings huge amounts of internet traffic. Wu Lei has more than 2.5 million fans on Weibo, which is the Chinese version of Twitter. Moreover, there is over millions of internet traffic discussing him on Weibo every time he scores a goal. According to Dang (2020), one of my interviewees, the internet traffic of La Liga Channel has doubled after his transfer. Meanwhile, Ge (2020) also mentioned that "we all cheered up because of his transfer, we finally found someone to replace Cristiano Ronaldo. The fans didn't pay the same level of attention to La Liga than before."

Furthermore, he is one of the economic icons of his club now. Within 30 minutes after the announcement of the transfer, the Spanish team's No. 24 Wu Lei jersey was sold out on the official e-commerce website. Within two weeks, the sales of Wu Lei jersey reached 5,000 pieces, which is equivalent to the sales of two biggest stars Borja Iglesias and Marc Roca's. Wu Lei has also become one of the most popular players in Espanyol. The "Wu Lei effect" makes the club receive more recognition in China. After Wu Lei joined, the club's top executives decided to set up a particular "Asian Business Department" to strengthen liaison with Chinese clubs (Wang and Wang 2019). After he shot a goal when playing against FC

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<sup>2</sup> According to UEFA's league coefficient (2020), the top 5 leagues in Europe are LaLiga (Spain), Premier League (England), Bundesliga (Germany), Serie A (Italy), and Ligue 1 (France).

Barcelona, the chairman of RCD Espanyol Chen Yansheng's stock rose 15%, and his personal assets increased by 100 million euros (Lin 2020).

Finally, from the perspective of the society, he is the only footballer who is representing Chinese football in European League now. As is mentioned above, there is a political and cultural trauma in Chinese society, and he is the one who is seen to break the stereotype of Chinese in western society. The public believes he is showing the masculinity of Chinese society. After Wu Lei scored a goal in the Europa League on 4th October 2019, he became the first Chinese male player to score in the European League in the past 20 years. And he is also the only Chinese footballer who broke the gate of FC Barcelona.

### **Aims and research questions**

“The nations of East Asia have moved to the centre of the global sports world”, and the sports is more controversial and political in Asia countries than other countries worldwide; however researches on national identity and media from the Asian perspective are rare in the academic area (Kelly, cited in Ren et al. 2019:1; Ren 2019:11f). As mentioned in the introduction, the Chinese society believes that the Chinese national football team should match China's economic ascending success. It seems China wants to be successful in all fields, whether it is economics, sports or other aspects. It is interesting to explore what national identity means to China. Hence, the research is going to fill the gap of the interrelationship between national identity and Chinese sports media.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction, this thesis also aims to explore the economic value of Wu Lei in the news industry, and tries to figure out the motivation behind the representation of Wu Lei by interviewing the sports news producers in China.

Based on the above aims, the research questions are formed as follows:

- A. In what ways the Chinese media build national identity on Wu Lei?
  - a. In what ways Chinese media portray Wu Lei as a national myth?
- B. In what ways social value and economic value influence the media to represent Wu Lei?

## **Literature review**

This chapter will provide a literature review of the relationship between national identity/nationalism, sports and media. In the first two parts of this section, it will have a discussion about the interrelation between national identity/nationalism, sports and media. Firstly, it will take a look at the concept of nationalism from several notable theoretical perspectives. Secondly, it will focus on specific studies on nationalism and sports. Then, it will give an overview of how the media interact with nationalism. In the third part, the literature review will have a discussion within the Chinese context, including the concepts and terms of the Chinese nation, Chinese football, orientalism and self-orientalism, and new media and consumer society. Finally, like other main concepts going to be used in this thesis, the fourth part will look into the concepts of media semiotics and myth.

## **Understanding Sports, media and national identity/nationalism**

There are no clear explanations of nation and nationalism, though they are one of the most discussed concepts in the multi-social area of studies. Hence, this part will first discuss some of the notable theoretical perspectives of nationalism. Then, it will explore how scholars connect and develop these theories in sports studies.

### ***Theories of national identity/nationalism***

Michael Billig is one of the prior scholars in researching nationalism and national identity. He (1995:63) claims that the theory of nationalism includes making hypotheses about the notion of the nation, which means “it is a theory of community, as well as a theory about the world being ‘naturally’ divided into such communities” (Billig, 1995: 63). Billig also notices that nationalism can be found and expressed at all times in our ordinary life, and we also always are reminded of our national identities through changing cultural forms. He uses the hanging national flag as an example to explain that “the metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag that is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building” (1995: 8).

Eric Hobsbawm is a fundamental theorist in the area of research on nationalism. Hobsbawm’s contribution to the study is that he points out the notion - “invented traditions”, which he defines as “being a set of practices, typically governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and

of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate specific values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1992a:1).

Hobsbawm classifies there are two types of “invented tradition”. The first are those traditions that are “actually invented, constructed and formally instituted” (ibid.) The second is “those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period[...] and establishing themselves with great rapidity” (ibid.: 46); Specifically, he points out the Royal Christmas broadcast in Britain is an example for the first type; for the second type, he links to the occurrence of traditions and improvement of the practices associated with the British Association Football Cup Final.

Benedict Anderson is another one of the most influential theorists in this area. He defines the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (1991: 6). Moreover, he maintains that “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow- members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion” (ibid.). Anderson holds another point that “the technology of communications (print) and the fatality of linguistic diversity are playing a significant role in (re)forming the community” (1997: 42). However, there are several opinions against Anderson’s theory. Hobsbawm (1992b:46) agrees that the “imagined communities” can be replaced by “the disappearance of real human communities and networks”, then why should people wish to use something to replace their national imagination? Meanwhile, Smith also argues that the approach of Anderson is too “individualistic and voluntaristic” (1998: 138).

Anthony D Smith (1998:24,187), another key theorist in this area, has identified five essential propositions of nationalism: “the world is divided into nations, each of which has its peculiar character and destiny; the nation is the source of all political power, and loyalty to it overrides all other loyalties; if they wish to be free and realise themselves, men must identify with and belong to a nation; global freedom and peace are functions of the liberty and security of all nations; nations can only be liberated and fulfilled in their own sovereign state”; however he argues that the framework can be only discussed when specific nations or communities fill it (ibid.:24). Moreover, Smith (1998:125) holds a critical review of

Hobsbawm's notion of "invented traditions". He argues that Hobsbawm has over-emphasis on state-making and ignores the social, cultural and psychological functions and range of nationalism. As Smith (1995:100) notes, "It is often assumed that the intrusion of ethnic elements and sentiments of collective belonging into the life of the nation inevitably breeds exclusiveness and intolerance, and that ethnic closure is the chief basis of many of the current national conflicts that afflict the world".

The theories above all have their advantages and limitations; however, they all inspire us how to understand our national identity from different angles. Especially the theory of "invented traditions" and "imagined community", and the following will further discuss how these theories are applied to sports and media study.

### ***Sports and national identity/nationalism***

Studies of sport and national identity have in common that there is a clear connection between sports and the construction and reproduction of national identity from both cultural and political approaches. Many scholars have been influenced by Anderson's theory of "imagined community" (1991). As Anderson (1991:7) states that "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" and the comradeship gives millions of people imagining that they voluntarily devote themselves to each other. Therefore, national athletes and teams are also seen as the representation of the nation. Guibernau (2007:169) describes how national identity is important because it allows citizens to "[...] regard as their own the accomplishments of their fellow nationals". The fans will identify themselves as part of a mass alongside their compatriots within a non-hierarchical community attentively regarding the performance of those "plenipotentiaries" competing on the nation's behalf" (Barrar 2007: 224). Hobsbawm (1992b:143) also holds a point that "the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people". A national player or team's victories or failures can be noticed as a reflection of a nation's overall health and well-being (Tuck, 2003). Sports fans of any nation will indeed delight in the sporting success of their compatriots. And sporting nationalism is also linked to the sport in which that success has been obtained (Bairner 2001:18).

Sports has often been theorised in terms of expressing the belonging of nations (Ehn 1988:60; Bairner 2001; Guibernau 2007; Griggs and Gibbons 2014). For example, Smith (1991: 17) comments: “a sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of the collective personality and its distinctive culture”. At a range of major sporting events, fans arrive waving their national flags and with their faces painted in national colours. Seldom do they favour more “transnational emblems and insignia” (Bairner 2001:2; Ding 2019; Zhai 2019). By sharing a sense of national identity through the joy and successes in sports, it can not only serve to discriminate against the country from other countries but also can trigger conceit among the citizens and consolidate a nation (Jiang 2013; Bairner 2001:18). Moreover, the achievements can easily strengthen the national identity by giving a sense of belonging, honour and pride to the people within the nation (Ding 2019; Li 2016).

Moreover, sports also be used as a political tool to show the ideology and power of a nation (Hobsbawm 1992b; Bairner 2001:xi; Chen 2015; Cronin and Mayall 2005; Ding 2019). Sport has become a mass spectacle of the global life that is transformed into “the unending succession of gladiatorial contests between persons and teams symbolising state-nations” (Hobsbawm 1992b:143). Bairner (ibid.) argues that sport is a vehicle for politicians to achieve their purposes to build, promote the nation-state, or provide power with separatist movements. (Bairner 2001:xi). Especially, mega international sports provide an opportunity for a nation to publicly in the reflected honour of national victories (Coakley 2009; Ding 2019). A nation can build a good image of itself if it can make great achievements in international sports events (Ding 2019:16). Hargreaves (1992) states that sports are frequently be used to express the various ambitions within nation-states, including “enhancing prestige, securing legitimacy, compensating for other aspects of life within their boundaries, and pursuing international rivalries by peaceful means” (cited in Bairner 2001:18). Billy Ehn’s study also shows “individual sports achievement can be transformed into a matter of national prestige” and he claims that national symbolism is definitively connected with the competitive sport (1988:58ff). Successes in sports are a comprehensive and provable symbol for showing a nation’s victory (Gorokhov 2015; ibid.). The “spillover effect” of sporting nationalism enables strength in sport to be seen as a manifestation of national power. So,

investment in top-level athletes and teams can turn into political profits and commit to nation-building (Ehn:1988).

However, there is another angle to study national identity that national identity is not fixed, but highly selective (Anderson 1991; Guibernau 2007; Hobsbawm 1983; Vincent and Kian 2014). Due to several reasons, such as wars, historical conflicts and, not all of the people in the nation will find their national identity in their national teams. Locals from Bergen, Norway recognise local football clubs much higher than the national team because of the historical territory ownership issue of Bergen (Armstrong and Hognestad 2003). Similarly, Satoshi Shimizu (2004) also finds that because there were no Urawa Reds (Local club) players played for the national team during the 2002 World Cup, the locals enjoyed supporting international teams more than their national team.

### **Sports media and national identity/nationalism**

The above has discussed the connection between sports and national identity, and the focus in this part will be the interrelation between sports media and national identity/nationalism. It will have a brief discussion of the “sport-nationalism-media troika” model (Rowe, et al. 1998: 133), and then have a look at three specific strategies in constructing national identities in sports news narrative: binary opposition, masculinity/hegemonic masculinity, and time and memory.

#### ***sport-nationalism-media troika***

The media can decide who can speak and be heard, which topics can be reported and from which standpoint, and in what ways to reproduce our social and cultural life. (Wenner 2002:173; Li and wang 2018; Yang 2018; Whannel 2002:4). Moreover, Billings (2008: xi) explained, “sports media matter because they are the way most of us consume sports.” Hence, in the context of culture is progressively media-centred, concepts of sport are implanted more in the media representation than other approaches (Whannel 2002:4). When it comes to sports media and nationalism, as Ehn (1988) argues that “without sports journalism and the rhetoric surrounding competitions, victories and defeats, this collective sentiment becomes quite incomprehensible”.

There is undoubtedly no cultural power more comparable to build an imaginary national community than the sports-media complex (Rowe et al. 1998:133). The media will use their professional ideologies and production practices to attract audiences by connecting sporting achievement and national achievement. (Whannel 2002:49; Li and wang 2018; Yu 2016) Because sports have to carry the extra responsibility of embodying and representing national dreams and ambitions, and the media enable to build the idea of nationalism and sports in audiences' mind by producing the content of nationally framed every day (Hobsbawm 1992b:142f; Billig 1995:119ff; Bairner 2001:1; Whannel 2005:46). For examples, "when the peacetime world is at its most self-consciously global — the periodic media sporting spectacles of the Olympics or the soccer World Cup — nationalist identification is probably at its most intense" (Rowe et al. 1998:133). Football has always held a special place in English national imagination as England's national sport of the masses (Griggs and Gibbons 2014). And the English national press will have a significant impact in constructing national identity. Even if the media reports the shortage of a "good" English players in the English league, it will also affect the fan's confidence in their national team's strength (ibid.). Tan (2014) has the same finding as Gibbons, and she claims that the newspaper's football column, television and online media's football reports and comments will affect the formation of fan concepts. Positive reports will make fans love the team and the club, while adverse news may cause fans to be in a negative mood.

Rowe et al. (1998:133) provides with us a stable and ongoing valuable model called "sport-nationalism-media troika". The sports media create "an uneasy junction" between the terms "audience" and "nation" (ibid. 1998: 128). They (1998: 133) describe the model as "the intersection between elite national athletes and teams, mass media, and national media audiences". They further explain that "the 'sport-nationalism-media troika' is an important arena where dominant cultural ideologies about national identities are (re)produced and challenged" (ibid.). However, because of the connection between nation and sports is not always stable, the model also shows that "The sports media are charged with the daily task of rendering nations to themselves by weighing and classifying citizens and their actions" (ibid.).

### ***Binary opposition***

As Anderson (1991:7) points out that “the nation is imagined as limited [...] No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind”. Özkirimli (2000) identifies that the discourse of nationalism has three main characteristics which are “it claims that the interests and values of the nation override all others; it regards the nation as the only form of legitimacy; it operates through binary divisions such as ‘us’ and ‘them’ or ‘friends’ and ‘foes’”. Global sport is regularly considered as “a war without weapons” (Dunning 1971, cited in Ehn 1988; Li 2016; Zhai 2019). Therefore, binary opposition becomes a typical narrative in sports media. Vincent and Kian (2014:302) argue that the binary opposite strategy is how sports reporters make use of “invented traditions” to generate “interest, unity, and patriotism” (Hobsbawm 1992). Moreover, they explain that by using pronoun binaries can make a tense and conflictive circumstance, which could render into nationalism and even xenophobia. More specifically, by using personal pronouns define “our” athletes or “our” team will give the audience thought that fighting for the nation is the fates and responsibilities of the national athletes and their “imagined communities” (ibid.).

For examples, during the 2002 FIFA World Cup, Japanese media had set a simple dichotomous schema for storytelling, like Europe/Asia, Asia/Japan and Japan / South Korea, which at the same time indicated the essentials of identity for a nation and its people (Shimizu Satoshi 2004). Shimizu Satoshi (2004) points out the counter-discourses shape the collective imagery of “our country” and “we Japanese” that helps strengthen these same boundaries. Similarly, Chinese society believes that sports performance is a clear indicator of the struggle between countries and athletes are the spokesperson of the country’s comprehensive national power in international sports events. No matter what report the sports media writes, it always compares the West as a frame of reference. Hence, we saw a natural evolution in sports reports in China that divided the sports world into “Chinese” athletes and “foreign” athletes, “Asian” athletes and “European” athletes, “Eastern” athletes and “Western” athletes.

### ***Masculinity/hegemonic masculinity***

Masculinity is another important concept in sports media study. In the case of sport, it has always been one of the stages that most clearly attend to differentiate gender issues

(Whannell 2002:69; Cao 2007; Boyle and Haynes 2009). Hobsbawm (1992b:143) points out that “[...]sport so uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feelings [...] what practically every man wants, or at one time in life has wanted, to be good at”. Obviously, sport provides a form of masculine proving ground; meanwhile, the media produces an almost exclusive concentration on men as the representatives of national character. (Barthel 1992 cited in Whannell 2002:69; Rowe et al. 1998: 122). Wenner(2002:126) argues that “[...] women are denied the status of bearers of national qualities that the media and the apparatus of the state conventionally accord to men”.

Boyle and Haynes (2009:137) state that increased attention has been placed on both the construction of male hierarchies in sport and media institutions and on the dominant discourses of men and masculinities in media representations of sporting achievement. They further argue that “male sporting subcultures, therefore, operate twin dynamics of misogynist and homophobic behaviour” (ibid.136). Moreover, the way how media report male sports stars does much to strengthen the idea that the positive and worthy value of men’s power (ibid.) For example, men’s noticeable consumption of football in Britain has proved the interrelation between men and masculinities (ibid.:137).

Football is an undeniable men-control sport, it is hard to find a professional gay player who has come out all over the world, and this is clearly connected to Connell’s theory of “hegemonic masculinity”, which can be used to reveal how and why men maintain dominant the society over women, and other gender identities (Connell 2005). Connell developed the idea of “hegemonic masculinity” from Antony Gramsci, a Marxist theorist. She (2005) also proposed alternative masculinity and counter-hegemonic masculinity, which are opposed to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (2005:832) define “hegemonic masculinity” as “[...] was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. However, it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men”. Moreover, she points out that hegemony works in part through the production of examples of masculinity, such as professional sports stars (Connell 2005:846). Furthermore, as a sports star, they should match the features, such as violence and aggression, stoicism (emotional restraint), courage,

toughness, physical strength, athleticism, risk-taking, adventure and thrill-seeking, competitiveness, and achievement and success (Donaldson 1993).

Cao (2007) argues that the “hegemonic masculinity” reflects the self-superiority of Western white men, and this idea has been expanded to non-Western countries through sports competition. Because of this, Chinese sports media will actively cater to this expression and try to define their athletes to meet the standards of “hegemonic masculinity”. And it is a way for China to win the recognition of Western society and get rid of the weak image of “Sick Men in East Asia” (ibid.).

### *Time and memory*

As introduced before, in terms of national identity, media usually draw on shared common cultural beliefs and create their own “invented traditions”, such as collective memory and epic moments. (Vincent and Kian 2014:308). The particular remembrance of history plays an important role in creating and reaffirming a shared sense of national awareness and identity (Vincent and Kian 2014:302; Billings 2008; Guibernau 2007 ). Guibernau (2007) highlights the importance of mediated accounts and images of shared history and culture from glorious bygone eras in constructing nationalism. Billings (2008:xi) noted that international “...sports bond societies and cultures in ways that nothing else can” and this is underpinned by the pivotal role of sports media in creating collective cultural memories. Ehn (1988) argues that “without sports journalism and the rhetoric surrounding competitions, victories and defeats, this collective sentiment becomes quite incomprehensible.” He describes the sports journalist acts as a kind of mediating preacher, who has taken the responsibility to translate the physical achievements into national symbolism, and national values back into sport (ibid.).

Anderson (1991) also stresses the significant role that time and media play in building the national identity. He uses the term “homogeneous, empty time” to explain how time helps building an “imagined community”. In his book (1991:25f), he uses a Balzac style novel-plot to help us to understand that abstract concept. There are four people in the story: a man (A) has a wife (B) and a mistress (C), who in turn has a lover (D). Moreover, there is a possibility that A and D will never know about each other, but how can we understand their social relationship? Anderson gives us the answer: on the one hand, they are “embedded in

‘societies’”. On the other hand, A and D are “embedded in the minds of the omniscient readers”, and the reader can know about what the four people are doing at “the same clocked, calendrical time”, like a god. When it comes to the function of media, he states that a sense of national belonging can be generated through the media such as newspapers because it can be read almost concurrently by thousands of people, and then they can know their fellow’s life though they have never met each other before (ibid. 32ff). However, Thompson (1995) argues that his theory does not specify exactly how new print forms give rise to national sentiments (cited in Barker 2008:254). Nor does he deal efficiently with the multiple ways in which different social groups use media and decode them in different ways (ibid.).

### **Contextualising football, media and Nationalism in China**

Bairner (2001:xii) notices that “it is important to remember that each case of sporting nationalism is the product of a particular cultural and historical context”. As mentioned earlier, sports is playing a vital role in constructing the Chinese national identity. Therefore, to contextualise the thesis research, it is necessary to identify the bigger picture of China, in terms of football, media and national identity, providing the background and addressing how this case study contributes both Chinese and international research on media and sports. The first two parts will focus on the definition of the modern Chinese nation, and a brief discussion of Chinese football. The third part will continue the above discussion about binary opposition narrative and use the concepts “orientalism” and “self-orientalism” to explain how western power influence Chinese sports media. The final part will go to explore how new media and consumer society affect the Chinese sports media.

#### ***The Chinese Ethnicities/nation - Zhonghua minzu (中华民族)***

“The Chinese ethnicities” is the generic name of 56 Ethnicities groups in China, which can also be addressed as the Chinese nation as mentioned before. The concept of “Zhonghua minzu” first showed in Liang Qichao’s<sup>3</sup> *On the Trend of Chinese Academic Thought Changes*, which was published in 1902 (Zhou 2015). Since then, in the context of China’s modern history, in order to resist aggression and restore national sovereignty, various ethnic groups in China have united together, which has consolidated the concept of “Zhonghua

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<sup>3</sup> Liang Qichao (1873-1929) was a Chinese historian, journalist, philosopher, revolutionary and politician who lived during the late Qing dynasty and the early Republic of China.

minzu”. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, “Zhonghua minzu” has become a political concept which has combined with both the Chinese nation and the Chinese state. (Zhou 2015, 2016).

The formation process of “Zhonghua minzu” is ruled by social constructionism. First, the birth of “Zhonghua minzu” is an inevitable result of history (Fei 1988; Zhou 2015). The history of the integration of various ethnic groups in Chinese history is an essential part of China’s development history. Though ancient China was ruled by a series of successive dynasties, the process of national integration has not stopped (Zhou 2016). After Liang Qichao put forward the concept of the Chinese nation, the condensable speed was significantly accelerated. Therefore, we can consider it as a product of the Second World War. In order to resist the invasion of Japanese imperialism and bring the Chinese people together, the Chinese nation formed by the cohesion of various ethnic groups emerged and achieved national independence and liberation (Fei 1988; Zhou 2015, 2016). Finally, the construction of the Chinese nation and the Chinese state complement each other. “Zhonghua minzu” is the product of the Chinese nation-state construction. In other words, its national attributes are given by the nation-state, after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (Zhou 2016).

Zhou (2015, 2016) points out that whether to consider the form of the “Zhonghua minzu” or its content, the Chinese nation-state is the same as those European nation-states. However, due to historical reasons, for the emerging nation-state of the People’s Republic of China, the Chinese nation is not only an essential historical and cultural heritage but also a significant and fundamental political form the basis of China’s modern state system (ibid.).

### ***Chinese football***

The development and construction of the football industry is the largest single project in the Chinese sports industry. Meanwhile, it is also an essential part of China’s “sports power” strategy (Sun et al. 2019; Wang and Wang 2019). Chinese people’s high concentration of football can be explained from the historical and cultural aspects. On the one hand, although modern football was created in the UK, the ancient Chinese sports “蹴鞠 (Cuju)” was confirmed as the origin of football by FIFA (Ma and Zhang 2016). Therefore, football is

regarded as a part of ancient Chinese culture that makes Chinese people feel a sense of belonging to it. On the other hand, China hopes to break the stereotype given by Western society and promote its international status through the policy of “sports power” (Lanham cited in Brady 2009). Because of China being excluded from the international system for much of the Cold War. Also, as a result of China’s even earlier reputation as the “Sick Men in East Asia” in the late imperial and Republican periods (ibid.).

Anthony Smith (1991: 161) notes that “the primary function of national identity is to provide a secure ‘community of history and destiny’ to save people from personal oblivion and restore collective faith. To identify with the nation is to identify with more than a cause or a collectivity. It is to be offered personal renewal and dignity in and through national regeneration”. Moreover, it corresponds to the Chinese government’s current notion of “sports power” and national rejuvenation. In March 2015 and April 2016, the State Council of China issued the *General Plan for the Reform and Development of Chinese Football* and the *Medium- and Long-Term Development Plan for Chinese Football (2016-2050)*. These two documents laid down the development goals and development paths of Chinese football at different stages, and also reflected the government’s unprecedented policy and resource support for the development of football (Sun et al. 2019:5). Leite Junior and Rodrigues (2017) believe it is a milestone in the history of not only football professionalisation but all the sports industry in China.

Football and politics are inextricably linked in China. At the end of the Beijing 2008 Olympic, the then Chinese President Hu Jintao ordered actions to be taken for the country to move forward from “a country of major sporting events to a sports world power” (Tan et al. 2016, cited in Leite Junior and Rodrigues 2017). As stated in the introduction, more than any other sport, football taps into deep Chinese insecurities. Moreover, known for his enthusiasm for football the current Chinese President Xi Jinping nurtures “three World Cup dreams”: participate in the World Cup; host the World Cup and to win the World Cup (Leite Junior and Rodrigues 2017). To meet these purposes, the Chinese state counts on the private sector support in fulfilling the plan. It is the same model to be followed since the “Guide to sports industry acceleration” was adopted. When it comes to this case study, Rastar Company, which is a Guangdong province paid about 17 million euros to buy 54% of the shares of the

Catalan club Espanyol (ibid.). It also proves Connell's view (2018) that as a measure of the emergence of capitalist structures in China, evident in costly player mobility and global investment.

### ***Orientalism and Self-Orientalism***

Edward Said is the core scholar of the Orientalism study. The notion of an Orient has played a central role in constructing European culture, and "helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (1987:1f). He explains that orientalism is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' [...] show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self". Therefore, orientalism was an idea full of practical and cultural bias that shows how the western identifies the eastern (ibid.:2f).

Although both Eastern and Western societies criticised orientalism, the East produced a phenomenon of self-orientalism in the process of resistance. Self-orientalism is a solidification and "reproduction" of orientalism, not a challenge or deconstruction, and it embodies alternative hegemonism in the eastern world (Liu and Zhang 2010). On the one hand, self-orientalism shows the firm denial of Western cultural hegemony; however, it also appears to deny the internal differences between individuals within the eastern society. On the other hand, self-orientalism in disguise recognises that the East is at a natural disadvantage compared with the West. To avoid marginalised voices, the east precisely caters to Western thinking and thus strengthens Western hegemony (Liu and Zhang 2010; Shao and Fan 2010).

China has always been regarded as a mysterious and incomprehensible "other" by Western society. Under this mode of thinking, Western society's perception of China, an ancient country in the East, is mixed with complex mentalities such as curiosity, contempt, and alertness (Liu and Zhang 2010). With the increase of China's overall national strength, many countries have also introduced the idea of "China is showing muscles" (ibid.; Shao and Fan 2010; Li 2016). As mentioned earlier, due to historical reasons and ideological opposition,

China is hoping to use the power of sports to prove that it is no longer a “Sick Men in East Asia”.

Therefore, China aspires to occupy a place in professional projects dominated by Europe and America, such as tennis, football, and basketball. This also aggravates the self-orientalism within Chinese sports media when reporting Chinese athletes (Li 2016). The self-orientalism of Chinese sports media is manifested in two aspects. On the one hand, no matter what sports athletes are playing, they will be described as warriors who play in national honour. Shaping national heroes and emphasising collectivist narratives is a binary opposition to Western encouragement of individualism. On the other hand, the media often attribute the achievements of the athletes to some of their oriental personalities, such as hard work, concentration, silence, and tenacity, without paying attention to their prominent personalities (ibid.; Shao and Fan 2010).

#### *New media age and consumer society*

Consumerism is a way of life, values, and cultural patterns that have arisen in the United States and other developed capitalist countries since the beginning of the 20th century, and it has gradually spread to the world (Yu 2016). French sociologist Baudrillard is one of the most representative scholars in consumerism study. He (1998) jumped out of the theoretical framework of Marxist political economy and proposed that people consume more of the symbolic meaning of commodities when they consume. At the same time, he also proposed that the definition of the locus of consumption should be daily life (ibid. : 35). Therefore, when we read the media, it is also a consumption behaviour. Due to the characteristics of immediacy, interactivity, anonymity, openness, the emergence of new media has changed the rules of the media industry ( Corner 2011: 7; Yu 2016; Boyle 2017: 494; Whannel 2005: 201) Moreover, one of the most significant changes is that the professionalism of news is being dispelled by consumerism, especially in sports media (Li & Wang 2018; Yu 2016; Yang 2018). Whannel (2005:201) brings out a question: "If consumption and commodification have triumphed and the consumer is sovereign, where does that leave the transcendent jouissance of the sports performance caught in that moment before it is commodified?"

In the consumer society, the consumer's relation to the commodity has changed: "he no longer relates to a particular object in its specific utility, but a set of objects in its total signification" (Baudrillard 1998:28). In the process of symbolising commodity, the specific cultural connotation of the consumer is set so that it has a uniquely symbolic value (Li & Wang 2018). Similarly, star image is a social product, the result of a set of institutional structures, production practices, representational conventions and the relations of production and consumption." (Whannel 2005: 49). As mentioned in the previous section, the media has the power to control what attributes and values are given to sports stars. " When the media is producing a star, they will also conceal his natural characteristics and only remain his symbol value (Li & Wang 2018; Baudrillard: 1998; Whannel 2005: 201ff; Yu 2016). Moreover, in the sports industry, sports stars are scarce resources than ordinary athletes, which means the excellent players will be more symbolised in our society (Li & Wang 2018).

In China, the consumerism tendency of sports news is also apparent. On the one hand, the emergence of we media has diminished the professionalism of sports news. Since these people have no resource to connect with the athletes and other agencies, they focus more on unconfirmed or attracting entertainment news (Yang 2018). At the same time, in order to compete for network traffic, professional news media also spend much capital on reporting entertainment news. On the other hand, Chinese sports stars no longer only identify themselves as a sports star but also trying to develop themselves in the entertainment industry (Yu 2016; Yang 2018).

### **Media semiotics and myth**

The above has mentioned the terms "sign" and "myth" several times. National mythmaking through sports is common across the world, and the national sporting myths can be seen as an "invented tradition" in our everyday life (Hobsbawm 1992a; Tudor 1992; An 2011). Hence, this part will mainly be inspired by Roland Barthes, and have a discussion of his mythology system and how semiotics works in media studies.

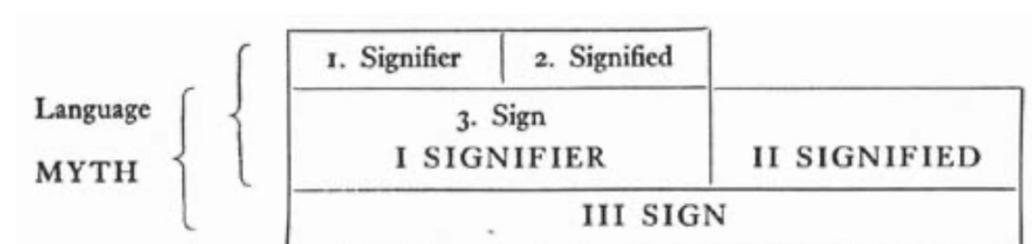
Ferdinand de Saussure is the founder of semiotics in social science studies. Saussure explained that "language was a system of signs or signals which enabled people to communicate with each other" (Howells and Negreiros 2019: 113). Moreover, his system

includes three main terms: the ‘sign’, the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’ (ibid.). “Briefly, the ‘signifier’ is something that stands for something else; the ‘signified’ is the idea of the thing it stands for, and the ‘sign’ is the union of the two”, and a sign cannot be separated from the unity of the signifier and the signified (ibid. Bignell 2002:6). For example, the sign ‘cat’ means a particular kind of furry animal; Even the signifier, letters “C-A-T” has no connection with either the sound of a cat or its visual image, the signified of “CAT” can give us the idea after reading the signifier ‘C-A-T’.

However, the sign is arbitrary and is the key point behind the semiotics system (Howells and Negreiros 2019: 114; Bignell 2002:12 ). In other words, a word can mean different things in different cultures. Moreover, “the capacity of linguistic signs to be meaningful depends on their existence in a social context, and on their conventionally accepted use in that context” (Bignell 2002:8). We are living in a world which surrounds signs, such as the clothes we are wearing. The colour, the style can pass different messages in a different context. Hence, studying the symbolic power of the sign is also a way to learn about our life and culture (ibid.:9ff). Semiotics is also a vital approach in media studies, Bignell (ibid.:1) points out that,

“Because society is so pervaded by media messages, semiotics can contribute to far more than our understanding of ‘the media’ in the narrow sense of mass media products [...] its applicability to the much wider field of meaning-making which includes, for instance, fashion, theatre, dance, literature and architecture.”

Roland Barthes developed the Saussure’s semiotics system into his mythology system, and he believes that belief that everything could be a sign, be a myth (Barthes 1991:107). As shown in the figure below, Barthes’s system is a “second-order semiological system” (ibid.:113). He restates the relationship between the signifier and the signified in the semiotics system, and the sign in the first system becomes a mere signifier in the second.



Barthes (ibid.:116f,120f) also redefines the terms of his myth system. He calls the “signifier” as “form”, the “signified” as “concept”, and the sign as “signification”. He (ibid.:137) points out “myth lends itself to history in two ways: by its form, which is only relatively motivated; by its concept, the nature of which is historical”. He (ibid.116) explains that form means what the meaning transfers to in the myth; “the concept is less reality than certain knowledge of reality; in passing from the meaning to the form, the image loses some knowledge”. Finally, the signification is “the only one which we consume in actual fact” (ibid.:120).

There is also a motivation behind a myth (ibid:17); therefore, when we are studying myth, we should focus on the social meaning and the ideologies behind the myth (Bignell 2002:20ff). As Barthes (ibid: 127) introduces, the readers of a myth can mainly into three kinds of people: the producer of myths, such as a journalist who “starts with a concept and seeks a form for it”; a mythologist, who wants to decode the myth; and someone who receive the myth without critical analyzing. Hence, it is crucial for us to study a myth and figure out how the myth is made and “showing how the myth promotes one-way thinking while seeking to alternative all the alternative ways of thinking” (Bignell 2002:23)

Barthes (1991:137f) also states that myth is serving the ideological interests of a particular group - “bourgeoisie”, which can be understood as “the class of people who own or control the industrial, commercial, and political institutions of the society” (Bignell 2002:24). Barthes (1991.:141) argues that “semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification and making contingency appear eternal”. Therefore, when studying myth is also to understand how ideologies are constructing our everyday life.

Based on the discussion in this part, this thesis is going to figure out the ideology and social meanings behind the construction of Wu Lei, by connecting to the specific Chinese context.

### **Positioning of the thesis**

This study will mainly focus on the following points to contribute to academia. First of all, the study will focus on digital media platforms, as Thompson(1995) argues, the study is going to explain how "imagined communities" are built through media in the digital age. Secondly, as mentioned in the introduction, this study is a Chinese context-based case study,

which is rare in the scholarly world. Moreover, the concept "binary opposition", "orientalism", "masculinity" can all connect to the conflict between the eastern and western world, so the analysis part will also relate to a discussion about how football power is used in China to challenge the western world. Finally, this study will use production interviewees with the news producer to figure out their motivations for the way they are producing the news. The following part will introduce how multi-methods were used to conduct the study to answer the concern above.

## **Qualitative Multi-Method Research on Wu Lei**

### **A qualitative news production case study**

As introduced in the introduction before, the research was designed into a case study. Though someone scholars questioned that a case study is not suitable for generalizing in social science because we cannot generalize from a single case, others would argue that the case study may be well suited for pilot studies but not for full-fledged research projects (Flyvbjerg 2001: 66f). However, Flyvbjerg argues that case study can allow scholars to get more “subjective and arbitrary judgement”, which provides a closer look to “real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice” (2001: 82). Moreover, a purely descriptive, phenomenological case study without any attempt to generalize can certainly be of value in this process and has often helped cut a path towards scientific innovation (Flyvbjerg 2001: 60f).

Furthermore, the case study is useful for both generating and testing of hypotheses but is not limited to these research activities alone (ibid. :66,77f). Moreover, the generalizability of case studies can be increased by the strategic selection of cases (Rosch, 1978; Ragin 1992, cited in Flyvbjerg 2001 ). As Flyvbjerg (ibid.:78) said, an extreme case is better than a general case to find out more information. Hence, the following will explain why Wu Lei is an appropriate case” for conducting this study and What kind of information does this case reveal that other cases wouldn’t have done? (ibid.:).

On the one hand, Wu Lei is not only an extreme case but also a critical case (ibid.). It is mentioned in the literature review that the honour moment of a national team can give people a sense of belonging to the nation. Compared with the performance of the Chinese national team in the Olympics, Chinese football has achieved almost nothing in the past 20 years; however, the Chinese media and public are still trying to build a national identity on Chinese football. Meanwhile, this extreme individual case also gives us a chance to study how media and nationalism interact with each other in a transnational environment since Wu Lei does not directly fight for China in La Liga. Therefore, this case can better summarize the relationship between sports, media and nationalism from the extreme. At the same time, as Flyvbjerg said, if we can find and summarize “valid” findings in Wu Lei’s case, then these findings will also be “valid” in other similar studies (ibid.:79).

On the other hand, this case also meets the standards of paradigmatic cases. A paradigmatic case needs to be able to “develop a metaphor or establish a school for the domain that the case concerns” (ibid.:79). Football is the most popular sport in the world, and football is “highly variable position in the structure of culture of ‘Different nations’” (Rowey 1998: 130; Whannel, 2002; Boyle and Haynes 2009: 205) Although there are many studies on football, media and nationalism, most of them are confined to countries with outstanding football achievements such as Europe and South America. So this case can expand the research field to China, a developing football country in the world. Flyvbjerg (2001: 72) states that social science could develop a ‘nuanced view of reality’ through case studies, as these can provide ‘concrete, context-dependent knowledge’. Besides, as mentioned in the previous section, Wu Lei’s case can also help us to develop the study into the economic field; also, Wu Lei’s popularity in China will give this case study provide more media materials to analyze and learn.

### **Design, Sampling and Conducting the Research**

From the end of the twentieth century, the spread of digital and online news media has fundamentally changed the rules of journalistic work (Hjarvard 2012:99; Whannel 2002:205; Boyle and Haynes, 2009). And online news media become the most used platform for the audience to engage with sports news in China (Sun et al. 2019). Meanwhile, the online coverage is diverse in China nowadays, including various kinds of articles, GIFs, videos and promotion posters. As Bazeley (2013:12) pointed out that “different approaches emphasize different aspects, but across them, it is possible to develop practical standards - workable across different perspectives - for judging the goodness of conclusions.” Hence, the case study decided to collect online articles and posters as empirical materials and chose the multi-methods approach to conduct the research.

### ***Semiotics visual analysis***

The visual analysis part is followed by Rose’s critical visual methodology (Rose 2016) and Hansen and Machin’s semiotics (2013). “A critical approach to visual images is needed: one that thinks about the agency of the image, considers the social practices and effects of its circulation and viewing, and reflects on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences,

including the academic critic.” (Rose 2016:22). Since the case study focuses on the production side, the audience's study was not to be included in the analysis. Hence, the analysis deconstructed the three sites mentioned above from the modalities of technological, compositional and social, and tried to answer the question mentioned in Rose’s model (Rose 2016:25).

As mentioned before, the visual analysis part is guided by the four sites of a critical visual methodology: production, the image itself, its circulation and its audiencing from Rose (2016:24ff). When it came to the image itself, I made a checklist based on Hansen and Machin and tried more concrete and detailed angles to look at the images. Just like Hansen and Machin (2013: 177) points out “before we take this step of analysis we need to first break the image down into its components and qualities in order to out more accurate observation.” I made a checklist<sup>4</sup> to combine the semiotics analysis into it. For semiotics, I also merged Barthes’s two levels of analysis: denotation and connotation.

Piloting is also essential because “it can make sure that the research design ‘works’ before embarking on the full-scale collection of what can in many cases be a large amount of data and a time- and resource-intensive endeavour” (Hansen and Machin 2013: 26). I chose two groups of photos to test the checklist and the sites. The pilot followed both deductive and inductive approaches. I made two tables to fill in the primary findings, and then I summarized the finding into categories. After completing the pilots, I analyzed the other four photos produced during the two derbies. After each analysis, I wrote down the findings and gave the finding a category or subcategory, such as masculinity, power, Chinese icon. In a separate analysis, I went through all the items in the checklist. It is worth mentioning that under the discussion of Hansen and Machin (2013), I not only look at both the different objects in the pictures to see if they can be a potent cultural symbol but also the missing objects in the picture. Then I put my findings together, summarized the categories into themes, and tried to answer our research question.

Because there is no specific or guaranteed way to interpret pictures perfectly because we have our interpretations (Rose 2016:71), for better understanding the symbolic power in the

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<sup>4</sup>See detail in the appendix

posters and figure out what are the news producers want to “sell” to the audiences, I did a production interview with the poster designer to access more information about the pictures. Moreover, it will be explained later in the production interview part.

### *Qualitative content analysis*

Though there is not a significant crossline between qualitative and quantitative content analysis, compared the two methods, the focus of qualitative content analysis is more "applied to latent and more context-dependent meaning" (Groeben and Rustemeyer 1994; Schreier, 2014:170). Moreover, Schreier (ibid.) points out it can reduce data, it is systematic, and it is flexible. As introduced in the literature review part, media semiotics is a key concept in this research, hence by using the qualitative content analysis will be more helpful to “understand the meaning and interpretation of symbolic material” (Willig 2014: 134).

The process of the analysis is mainly referring to the idea of Schreier (ibid.) and Willig (2014: 134); meanwhile, the semiotics theory form Bignell (1997). The steps of the analysis can be divided into 1. Selecting material 2. Building a coding frame 3. Pilot 4. Segmentation 4. Evaluating and modifying the coding frame. For the material selection, the analysis will choose the news articles from two of the biggest sports news portal platforms in China: Tencent Sports and Sina Sports. On the one hand, according to the survey data, 42% of the fans read football news through the portal website/sports website and is it the most used ways for fans to read the news. Moreover, Tencent Sports and Sina Sports are the two most commonly used media platforms, with usage rates exceeding 50% (Sun et al. 2019). On the other hand, because the spread of digital and online news media has changed the media system, internet platforms are the more representative news agencies of journalistic work (Whannel 2002: 205). Moreover, the period of the material was narrowed into two duration: one is from 27th March to 4th April 2019; another is 1st January to 10th January 2020. During each period, there was a Derby match between Barcelona and RCD Espanyol, which are the two peak moments of Wu Lei after his transfer<sup>5</sup>.

Then, I first followed the deductive approach to build a coding frame, including the theme "national identity" (with two categories: nationalities and national pride), "masculinity" (with

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<sup>5</sup> See the detail in the appendix 1

three categories the record, war terms, and power), and "narrative and strategy" (with three categories, metaphor, history recall and emotion expression). Then, I chose one article for examining the frame. The piloting used the same strategy in the step of the subsumption, which will be introduced later. Moreover, in case not ignore valuable information, the process is also combined with the inductive approach. When I found there is not a suitable theme for the sampling, I made a note first. After the piloting, I found another theme "media power" can be inducted from the notes<sup>6</sup>.

Concerning to make sure the qualitative content analysis can provide a good description of the material, the coding frame should combine concept-driven data-driven (Schreier 2014:176). And the Schreier's five steps process (ibid.) is a to generate comprehensive subcategories and categories. And the subsumption process is:

1. Reading the material until a relevant concept is encountered.
  2. Checking whether a subcategory that covers this concept has already been created.
  3. If so, mentally 'subsuming' this under the respective subcategory.
  4. If not, creating a new subcategory that covers this concept.
  5. Continuing to read until the next relevant concept/ passage is encountered.
- This process is continued until a point of saturation is reached; that is, until no additional new concepts can be found.

"If only few changes were made following the pilot coding, double-coding approximately one-third of the material during the main analysis is sufficient" (ibid.:180). The subsumption process ended after checking 14 articles, seven each from both platforms. After each subsumption, I rechecked the theme, category and subcategory to make sure they are all suit each other. If subcategories were very similar, then I merged them together. In total, 39 articles were coded into three themes, ten categories and thirteen subcategories.

### ***Production interview***

In order to go deeper to understand the rule of the industry, the study also combined production interviews with the other two methods. The production interview with the people who have participated into the report of the derby game is guided by Kvale and Brinkmann's (2015) seven-step model for structuring a qualitative interview research process (cited in Bruun 2015:131). We should notice that the elite (exclusive informants) interview is a

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<sup>6</sup> See the pilot process in the appendix 4.1

specialised genre of the qualitative research interview. In order to explore the practices and values of social and organisational elite, Kvale and Brinkmann's (2015) model will help us balance the power relationship between the interviewee and the researcher, and secure the validity of the research (ibid:131ff).

For “make sure that the research design ‘work’ before embarking on the full-scale collection” (Hansen and Machin, 2013: 26), one pilot interviews were conducted via voice call through Wechat because of the geographical restriction. The pilot interviewee was an in-depth sports journalist who has worked in the industry for over a decade. I had a conversation about the interview and the research topic with her after interviewees, and she also gave me some advice that I may need to cover in the interview. Therefore, I slightly revised my interview questions based on the pilot. Of all five interviewees<sup>7</sup> be interviewed later, one of them is a senior editor, three of them are a journalist working in Spain, and the last one is a visual designer who designed my visual analysis samples. As Bruhn (2012:13) and Rose (2016:3) said, paying attention to the background information behind the picture will help us to develop a broader perspective and provide more directions for thinking. And this is the reason why I conducted the designer for the interview. Even though three informants are good at English, all interviews were conducted in Mandarin. The reason why to use Mandarin is that I believe that native language could bring me much closer to the informers and informants could have a more accurate and free expression than using second language English during the interviews.

However, according to Bruun (2015), we must challenge this power relation assumption when we host interviews with exclusive informants. She (ibid.) thinks that since exclusive informants process a particular type of knowledge or even power, the relations between informants and researchers could be seen as symmetrical or even upside down, which depends on the status negotiation during the interviews. Because of my working experiences within the sports media industry in China, my interviewees and I were positioned at an equal level. And they even trust me to tell the backstage data and other inside information. So It is crucial for the researcher to “protect informants from harm in the research process” (Seale,

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<sup>7</sup> See the detail information about the interviewee in appendix 5.2

2012). Before the interviews, I gave them the consent form<sup>8</sup> and told they could be anonymous. And because of the ethical reasons, three of them will be anonymous in this thesis and I will also hide their companies information.

Face to face interview is essential, which enables me to observe informants' body language and nonverbal cues (Seale, 2012). Then three of the interviews were finished in Barcelona and Madrid, Spain. Before the interview, I had a walk outside or small talk with them in the cafe they chose to make them feel 'relaxed' and 'undisturbed' (Seale, 2012: 218). Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was vital to find a safe and comfortable place for them. Moreover, another two interviews were conducted on WeChat. 4 of the interviews are over 60 minutes. The shortest one is only over 45 mins for two reasons. One is she does not have enough working experience; another one is she was in a hurry for shooting an online program.

The interview was recorded, transcribed and open-coded, looking for descriptive and analytical codes (Bazeley 2013:125ff). "Interview statements are, in a strong sense of the word, 'data,' and they become sources of information only through analysis and interpretation" (Jensen 2002: 240). All interviews were recorded via my phone and then transcribed into Chinese transcripts. I read all the transcripts and wrote down some important points before doing coding to ensure that I have a general idea about what each informant said. All the transcripts were used to do the coding.

Moreover, the coding process and analysing empirical data in this research mainly followed Seale's instructions (2012) and was divided into three stages<sup>9</sup>: open coding, category development, and theme formation. Both deductive and inductive approach was importantly involved because "deductively determined codes to home in on the data, and inductive coding to explore this in more detail" (Rivas quoted in Seale, 2012). Bazeley (2013) points out that it is often difficult for researchers working in a second language like me to translate and interpret texts because it might cause "too much meaning is lost, and interpretation is difficult and shallow"(ibid.:77). Therefore, I chose to use the original language, which is Chinese to

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<sup>8</sup> See the consent form sample in appendix 5.4

<sup>9</sup> See the coding table and result in appendix 5.5 and 5.6

transcribe and analyse my interviews. After analysing, I translated my findings from Chinese into English as this thesis is required to be written in English.

### **Produce Wu Lei: a National Icon or a Product?**

The analysis of this thesis will be structured around four sections: A hope for the Whole “Village”; The kings of Catalunya; Wu Lei as a myth; The rules of the game. The first two sections are going to answer the first research question. It will start by combining Wu Lei with Chinese football history and a discussion about how the media use his image to construct national identity. The second section will explore how a specific strategy to report Wu lei by combining Wu Lei with Messi can give the audiences a sense of national belonging. Both of the two sections will also have discussions on how the media create “imagined community” and “invented traditions” by reporting Wu Lei.

The third section is going to answer “In what ways Chinese media portray Wu Lei as a national myth?” Inspired by Roland Barthes, this section will focus on the social meaning and ideology behind Wu Lei’s image on the media.

Finally, the last section is going to use “In what ways social value and economic value influence the media to represent Wu Lei?” from the perspective of the news producers. This section will explore the market value and social value of the news coverage of Wu Lei, and find out the motivation of news producers behind the coverage.

#### **A hope for the Whole “Village”**

This section of this chapter is going to discuss Wu Lei’s image in Chinese sports media as an overseas Chinese footballer, and then focus on the interrelation between his image and Chinese national identity. This section will first step toward the first Barcelona Derby between RCD Espanyol and FC Barcelona and then explore its significant meaning to Chinese football and football fans by combining it with Chinese football history. Subsequently, the analysis will explain how the coverage uses contrastable images of Wu Lei and Chinese football to construct national identity.

It is not usual for a Chinese footballer to play overseas nowadays. Before Wu Lei’s transfer, no Chinese footballers were playing in the European league for over three years (Tencent Sports, 2019). When Wu Lei finished his first show play against Villarreal CF it was the

Chinese player's debut in La Liga after 1130 days<sup>10</sup> (ibid.). Consequently, Chinese people longing for finding a Chinese footballer can have a chance to play on the world-class stage.

*“Chinese football and Chinese fans want the world to hear their voice. The attraction of the battle between Wu Lei and Messi has become a grand moment, which wasn't been seen in China for many years. It once again proved the obsession of Chinese football and Chinese fans: I want to talk to this world.” (TS, 31st March 2019,c)<sup>11</sup>*

According to the data collection from PP sports (2019), the first match between RCD Espanyol and FC Barcelona on 30th March 2019 became a party for Chinese spectators, and over 23.7 million people watched the live streaming of this game online. As stated before, the Derby game is one of the popular sports events in Barcelona. Though it is the most played derby in the Spanish League, it is also the most uneven, with Barcelona forcefully dominant (Ge, 2020). However, the derby has always been more meaningful to Espanyol supporters, and because of Wu Lei's transfer, the Catalan Derby also becomes a relevant game to Chinese fans (ibid.). Moreover, this is the first time for Wu Lei to play against the antagonist team in the same city. As shown in the quote above, one of the reasons why this game attracted numerous audiences is Chinese people believe the first match between RCD Espanyol and FC Barcelona is a chance for Chinese football to communicate with world-class football, and Wu Lei is the envoy of Chinese football.

Chinese football is seen as a weakness of the nation. Zhai (2019) points out that Chinese football is struggling onwards with great burdens. On the one hand, the Chinese football team consecutively occasion shameful memory of the nation. As stated in the literature review, Chinese national football has been excluded from the final tournament of the World Cup after the 2002 World Cup, and it is not a result that meets Chinese people's expectation (Sun et al. 2019:3). In the past ten years, the Chinese national team lost several matches to be seen as the shameless of the nation. Specifically, the day that the Chinese national team 5-1 loss to Thailand team in a friendly international game on 13th June 2013. After that day, Beijing News published, “1 to 5! Humiliating defeat to a Thai youth team writes a new chapter in the

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<sup>10</sup> There was a Chinese player called Zhang Chengdong, who played for Rayo Vallecano in La Liga, and he got the chance to play against Atlético Madrid on 31st December 2015. It was the first time but also the last time for Chinese player appearing at La Liga (Tencent Sports, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> All quotes have been translated by the author and the see the arrangement rule for the articles published in the same day in appendix 1

national team's 'history of shame' and defeat" (cited in Minter 2013). On the other hand, Chinese fans are still holding their hopes and confidence in Chinese football; however, there is a gap between their wishes and reality. Football is the emotional sustenance of human beings (Sun et al. 2019), "Chinese still hold the good memory of Chinese football and that feeling is the pure spirit of football" (ibid.). And Dang (2020) believes that Wu Lei's transfer and the match he played against FC Barcelona has achieved a dream of Chinese football that they want to join the competition on the world-class stage. The quote below illustrates that the idea of how Wu Lei makes millions of Chinese people's dreams come true.

*"One important reason why people feel crazy about this match is Chinese fans have an initial and direct desire that they hope to see Chinese players play against the most excellent player in the world and find our shortages and improve ourselves. While the whistle ring, it would be written in Chinese football history."* (TS, 1st April 2019,b)

Wu Lei is represented as the symbol of hope in Chinese sports media, and news producers use him to express the Chinese national feeling of football. Significant symbols are showing in picture 1. Though the subject in the slogan is missing, the slogan "Waiting for that day" corroborates the desire of Chinese football and Chinese audiences. Zhang (2020) introduced that "The golden colour, dragon pattern, and font used in the poster are showing a secure connection with Chinese culture, and the open book means they are going to write a new history record." Gold and dragon are symbols of power and strength of the royal family in Chinese culture that can firm people's belief in this match (ibid.). Furthermore, it also shows a typical design to place Wu Lei and Lionel Messi in a commercial poster, which addresses Wu Lei is a talented player as Messi. And it will be discussed in detail in the next section.



Picture 1 A poster designed by PP Sports before first Derby match

*Because of Wu Lei's transfer; because of his is covering the halo of "the hope of the whole village", this fight has been given a significant meaning.*

*(TS, 1st April 2019,a)*

*"There are around 100, 000 Chinese living in Catalunya, and their Spanish-born children can have a new idol now."*

*(SS, 4th April 2019)*

The quotes reveal the expectation of Wu Lei from the Chinese people. Athletes have to shoulder the added responsibility of embodying and representing national hopes and eagerness (Whannel 2002:46). Wu Lei is also described as the "beacon" and "signpost" of Chinese football. In order to construct Wu Lei's image, there is a contrast between the description of Wu Lei and Chinese football. As shown in the quote above, "The hope for the whole 'Village'" is one of the nicknames of Wu Lei in China, which can be explained as Chinese people's best wishes on him. There are two metaphors including in the nickname: "hope" and "village". There is a noticeable contrast between the village and China's international image. As discussed above, because of Chinese national team sometimes is

regarded as a shame of the nation (Ma and Zhang 2006), “village” is displaying a negative emotion of Chinese football team.

Another quote from the new articles (TS, 6th January 2020) after the second derby also proves news producers use the same narrative to build Wu Lei’s image. Unlike the first game, Wu Lei scored the equalizer goal in the second derby. This gave the Chinese media more space to praise Wu Lei’s achievements. And it will be explained in detail in the third part of this chapter. “Beat Maldives and Guam in the World Cup qualifiers? Or, the Football Association promulgated a new policy? These are not enough to make me happy for Chinese football, but finally, in the first weekend of 2020, Wu Lei let me find a suitable answer.” The author puts Chinese football and Wu Lei at two extremes, by degrading the achievements of Chinese football, to bring out Wu Lei’s glory.

*“But it was already a sign of “warning the tiger by shaking the mountain” during the match (a deliberate act as a warning to the opponent-shock). ”*  
*(TS, 5th Jan 2020,f)*

The coverage also by using repeatedly address Wu Lei as a Chinese warrior on the court to strengthen his power. As shown in the quote above, “warning the tiger by shaking the mountain” is a military strategy since ancient China. Other war terms also appear in the sampling, such as “Chinese overseas army”, “blitz”, “attack” “Parrot Legion (the nickname of RCD Espanyol in China)”. Soldier, army, and legion are words frequently used in Chinese football media to describe footballers and football teams. Words like these often romanticized symbolic expressions of hegemonic masculinity (Gee 2009). As Dunning (1971: 11) points out that in our current society, global sport is regularly considered as “a war without weapons” (cited in Ehn 1988).

Another example, picture 2, is a meme designed by PP Sports. We can find that Wu Lei is designed into a Kungfu master character, which is a specific symbol of Chinese culture. Moreover, every team he has shot a goal to become a loser (dead body) lying on the floor. It can be understood as Wu Lei, a Chinese warrior has conquered the European enemy. In the picture, Wu Lei is holding a confident smile on his face, which corresponds with the faith of his image in Chinese people’s minds - he can give Chinese football hopes. Hobsbawm (1992:

143f) points out that athletes on the court have become fighters without armour, and regardless of the time, space, and background of nationalists (fans), football has become a standard weapon in their hands. As can be seen from the above quote, Wu Lei has reasonably been described as a soldier with national responsibilities. Moreover, as introduced in the literature review, the poster creates a binary opposition which is “Wu Lei” and “his enemy”. Therefore, the poster shows how Chinese media uses the strategy to tell the story that Wu Lei has going to become a ruler of La Liga, a successful player who has broken the western rules in the league (Chen 2015).



*Picture 2 A meme designed by PP Sports after the second Derby*

Football is a tool to build national identity. Sport establishes a significant ritual of popular culture on contributing to the theoretical concept of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991: 6f; Barrer 2007: 223). Global sport is also a platform replete with contradictions and stresses, which enables marginal groups to possibly use it as a platform to (re) present narratives and images of a nation (Coakley 2009, cited in Vincent and Kian 2014). Though La Liga is not a mega-event, like the Olympics and the World Cup, it is also a highly competitive world-class football league. Moreover, Wu Lei’s transfer also gives Chinese football a chance to show its best side to the world. Hence, everyone can have the same goal when they watch Wu Lei’s game at the same time. The media by using Chinese cultural elements in the poster to tighten the connection within the “imagined community”

they have already built, and it allows the audiences to generate their national identities (Anderson 1991).

In recent years, China's comprehensive national power and international status have also been rapidly improved. "In 2018, (China's) Gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 6.6 percent, exceeding 90 trillion yuan, and per capita, disposable personal income grew by 6.5 percent in real terms" (Chinadaily 2019). Wu (2006, cited in Zhai 2019) believes that with the improvement of comprehensive national power and the improvement of people's living standards, Chinese people will hold a stronger sense of nationalism that China can rank first in all-area competitions (Zhai 2019; Song 2010). So, in this case, develop Chinese football has become a carrier for the Chinese to express nationalism. Zhai (2019) argues that football is a symbol of a country's comprehensive national power, and also embodies national emotions in it. Sun et al. also point out that football is an essential part of a country's "soft power" and a card for displaying the image of the country (2019: 10).

Based on the discussion above, the unbalance between the development of comprehensive national power and Chinese football caused Wu Lei to become the emotional sustenance of Chinese people's wishes. A national sports team's performance at major international sporting events can reawaken the emotions of national identity politics (Bairner 2001). Primarily in China, athletes not only represent themselves but also represent the country (An 2011). Guibernau (2007:169) outlined how national identity is crucial because it allows citizens to "[...] regard as their own the accomplishments of their fellow nationals". In this case, Wu Lei becomes representative of the whole nation, and the Chinese wish to share his success in building national identities.

Shortly, whether the media addresses Wu Lei as "the hope for Chinese football" or portrays him as a saviour, they are both an "invented tradition" created by the media. (Hobsbawm 1992b; Vincent and Kian 2014: 302). By repeatedly stressing Wu Lei's nationality and his national responsibility, Wu Lei is regarded as a Chinese who is challenging Western domination in football. Moreover, the strategy will strengthen a binary opposition between "Wu Lei" and "other players", and this will also be demonstrated in the third part of the

analysis (Li 2016). In the next section, it will mainly analyze how the media can build a national identity by showing Wu Lei's masculinity.

### **The kings of Catalunya**

“Lionel Messi or Wu Lei? Who is the king of Catalunya?” is one of the hottest topics before the first derby match on Chinese social media and some mass media. As discussed before, Messi is one of the excellent football players in the world, and Chinese media used to address him as “the king of Barca” and “the king of Catalunya”. However, when Wu Lei joined RCD Espanyol, Chinese media and football fans started to bond an (un)equal tie to Wu Lei and Messi.



*Picture 3 A group of posters designed by PP Sports to promote the first derby match*

As a promotional poster, understanding the ideology behind picture 3 will help us better grasp the symbolic meaning of the elements in it (Bignell 1997:45). As Barthes (1991) states, Eiffel tower has become a symbol of Paris (cited in Howells and Negreiros 2019:118). “For many people, a trip to Paris without seeing the Eiffel Tower would hardly be a trip to Paris at all” (ibid.). Similarly, Lionel Messi is the captain of FC Barcelona and the best player in La

Liga, and he is seen as the symbol of FC Barcelona. Therefore, Wu Lei can be also seen as the leader of his team in the poster. The picture by structuring these two shares the same space and position to address Wu Lei and Messi is enjoying the same social status in La Liga, which also meets the “need or desire” of the Chinese mass (Bignell 1997:45). Meanwhile, Messi and Wu Lei both have a firm gaze looking, and “staring is used to assert dominance” (Whannel 2002:69).



*Picture 4 A group of posters designed by PP Sports to promote the first derby match*

In picture 4, the two players are to be designed as the king character in poker cards. And the king is a sign representing power, dominance and hegemonic masculinity. The king is a symbol of “hegemonic masculinity”. The image of the king represents that men are the rulers of the world and that women must absolutely obey men. The design of Messi and Wu Lei as kings is to highlight their masculinity. As discussed earlier, consumption of masculinity is a major way of football consumption, and the world of men’s football is a world that advocates “hegemony” (Connell 2005; Boyle and Haynes, 2009: 137). Eliade (1963:41) claims that “the king becomes in a manner responsible for the stability, the fecundity and the prosperity of the

entire Cosmos”. In this case, Wu Lei has been identified as a man who takes responsibility for the team’s success.

Moreover, the mirror-style design firmly passes another message that the two players are sharing the same name. “It is a particular way for me to think about their names first when I begin to work. And I found out the first letter of both their family name and given name, ‘WL’ and ‘LM’, have some similarities” (Zhang 2020). Barthes (2012:122) highlights the name of the great players and also has great power in his work *The French Tour as an Epic*. He (ibid.) points out that “The racers’ names seem to come from a very old ethnic period that can be “read as an algebraic sign of valour, loyalty, treachery or stoicism”, such as Brankart, Geminiani, Lauredi, Therefore, in the modern football world, as one of the most brilliant and successful football players in the world, Lionel Messi’s name means marvellous. Therefore, Wu Lei is identifying the one who inherits his name and power, which breaks the power balance between Messi and Wu Lei.

Furthermore, the way to address Wu Lei as Chinese Messi shows how Chinese media and fans admire the masculine power of Western football players. Cao (2007) argues that the “hegemonic masculinity” reflects the self-superiority of Western white men, and this idea has been expanded to non-Western countries through sports competition (Connell 2005). it is a common way to address Chinese footballers by using other excellent players’ names in football rather than other sports, such as Gao-linsmann (Jürgen Klinsmann), Zhang-mos (Sergio Ramos) and Saint-Zeng Cheng (Iker Casillas)<sup>12</sup>. Though these players only have some similar football techniques or play the same position on the pitch, there are significant gaps between them. The strategy shows that Chinese media is using the western standard to examine the national players and trying to make them become masculine footballers (Cao 2019). And the portraits will give the audience a fantasy that Chinese football is catching the step of world-class level football, and the “Sick Men in East Asia” has gone(ibid.).

*“Set the time back 11 years ago. At that time, in preparation for the Beijing Olympics, the Argentine Olympic team” borrowed “several players from the Shanghai Regional*

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<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Klinsmann was one of Germany's premier strikers during the 1990s; Sergio Ramos is the captain of both Real Madrid and Spanish national team, he is widely regarded as one of the best defenders of his generation; Iker Casillas who was the captain of Spanish national team and one of the all-time best goalkeepers, and he is known as Saint Casi in China.

*Organizing Committee [...] to help the Argentina team train [...] So the picture was taken: 17-year-old Wu Lei, sitting next to 20-year-old Agüero and 21-year-old Messi [...] 11 years later, Messi is still that Messi, full of fame all over the world; however, Wu Lei is no longer the smiling little fan around him, he has finally stood on the stage of the fair competition with Messi. "(TS, 1st April 2020, a)*

The way to use the comparison between Wu Lei and Messi to construct Wu Lei's identity also can be found in the news coverages. The quote displays a story frequently mentioned in Chinese media, and it demonstrates how the media used montage writing style to build a national identity on Wu Lei. "Yang Chen, Sun Jihai and other predecessors have also achieved important milestones in different matches," "Wu Lei's 88-minute marvellous ball is still reminiscent of the raging years of Chinese football [...]", Chinese media by connecting Wu Lei with great moments of Chinese football to frame their articles, which similar as the flashback shooting technique in the film. The media can play a crucial role in place-making through representations by the media, and the historical contexts attached to specific spaces (Creswell 2009: 1f). As Monaco (2009:218) reveals, "Montage is used not only to create a continuity between shots in a scene but also to bend the timeline of a film. 'Parallel' montage allows the filmmaker to alternate between two stories that may or may not be interrelated, cross-cutting between them." For Pudovkin, montage was "the method which controls the 'psychological guidance' of the spectator" (Monaco 2009:401). In the quotes, Chinese media not only record Wu Lei himself but also use other players' stories to recall our memory. Moreover, the recall will help us build a connection to the past and have a better understanding of Wu Lei's achievements in La Liga.

*"Compared to Tamudo's goal, Wu Lei similarly shot at the same time and the same place. Thirteen years later, Wu Lei staged a 'Tamudo-style miracle' and became the new hero of Catalan Derby." (TS, 5th Jan 2020,f)*

Chinese media not only use Messi as a comparison object but also other excellent footballers. The quote above shows that Wu Lei has become a Chinese man who is sharing the achievement with Western people. After the second Derby, Chinese media described Wu Lei as an RCD Espanyol legendary player Raúl Tamudo, who used to be the captain and played for the team for 14 seasons. Tamudo holds the record for most La Liga appearances for Espanyol with 340 and top scorer in that competition with 129 goals, as per Football Espana

(Sharma 2014). In the 2006-07 season, because of Tamudo equalizer in 2007 Catalan Derby helped Real Madrid win the championship that year. Sharma (2014) highlights that “Tamudazo crushed their (Barcelona) La Liga dreams”. Thus, by successively comparing Wu Lei with legendary players and highlighting his success, he has been placed on the heroes’ stage (Barthes 2012:123).

The masculinity of athletes has a secure connection with national identity in sports. Sports celebrities being significantly constructed by concepts of both masculinity and morality (Whannel 2002:8). Meantime, “with a new competitive individualism in which the weakness was equated with weakness, competitiveness with toughness” (ibid.:69). Connell (2005) also notes that elite male athletes have become among the primary exemplars of representing hegemonic masculinity (cited in Gee 2009:581). At the same time, sports media play an essential role in persuading audiences (ibid). Traditionally, male athletes playing for their country are usually the representatives of popular national identity (Bowes 2020:94f). The successes or failures of a home country’s athletes or teams can be reported as a symbol of the nation’s overall health and well-being (Tuck 2003). Therefore, Chinese media consecutively emphasized Wu Lei’s masculinity to build his national identity (Whannel 2002:69).

Furthermore, whether the media design the slogan “waiting for that day” in picture 1, or use flashbacks to connect Wu Lei with historical moments, time is a vital role in storytelling that cannot be neglected. Anderson (1991:33f) believes print media can build an imagined community in two ways. Firstly, it “provides the essential connection — the steady onward clocking of homogeneous, empty time”. Anderson (ibid:33f) further explains that when we are reading newspapers, we are not only sharing the same time with other readers but also build a connection with the people in the story. “Homogeneous, empty time,” a concept Anderson (ibid:26f) borrows from Walter Benjamin, shows how the past and future can cross in instantaneous time. Secondly, the print media’s connection with the market can create a ritual that people can consume the same news at the same time (ibid.33f).

Picture 1 illustrates the point clearly that media audiences can feel their national identity when they are reading news about Wu Lei. The derby day has not only become a special time for football fans can be enjoyed together but also be created as a ritual for the Chinese public.

Billings (2008: xi) maintains, “sports media matter because they are the way most of us consume sports.” Moreover, time is a crucial component in sporting consumption (Whannel 2002:53). Whannel (ibid.) notes that time in sports can be understood “as ‘moment,’ as ‘period,’ as ‘memory,’ as ‘scarce commodity,’ and as ‘era.’” Meanwhile, Anthony Smith (1991: 14) classifies the central features of national identity as “a historic territory or homeland; common myths and historical memories; a common, mass public culture; common legal rights and duties; and a common economy with territorial mobility for its members”. Hence, either Wu Lei’s story with Messi or “that day” will be the moment and memory that exists in public culture.

Above, it has been explained how sports journalism uses both news content and narrative to build the national identity on Wu Lei, and the following will further discuss how these representations of Wu Lei make him become a myth in China.

### **Wu Lei as a myth**

Based on the analysis before, the Chinese media mainly use two ways to build the national identity of Wu Lei. On the one hand, they directly stress Wu Lei’s Chinese nationality. On the other hand, the coverage strengthens the masculinity of Wu Lei. Both of the ways emphasize Wu Lei’s individual heroic achievements to make the Chinese public feel pride in him. However, there is a notable change after the second match, Wu Lei’s name disappears in some articles and is replaced by “Chinese footballer/pride” after the match. The narrative of heroism adds a symbolic-allegorical charge to sports (Bifulco and Tirino 2018:15). To better understand how the media reinforce the symbolic power of Wu Lei to build the national identity, the following will first figure out the connection between signs and connotations in Wu Lei’s image in the media. Then, explore the social meanings and ideology behind the image.



*Picture 5 A poster designed by PP Sports after the second Derby match*

After the match, Wu Lei once again became the spotlight because he scored an important goal. As presented in Picture 5, Wu Lei is designed as an astronaut. And the background of the poster is the moon with the slogan “The pride of China.” As introduced in the literature review, Barthes (1991:113, 127) states that “myth is a second-order semiological system”, and it has consisted of form, concept and signification. The form of this poster is mainly constructed by images of Wu Lei, slogans, and the moon in the background. The concept is that Wu Lei is a brave and outstanding man as a lunarnaut. Then, the signification is that Wu Lei Chinese football has made a great achievement for himself and Chinese football. More specifically, as we know, Neil Alden Armstrong was the first person to walk on the moon. Because he is one of the most famous astronauts in the world, it is easy to link him with the topic of lunarnaut. Armstrong famously stated: “That is one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind.” Notably, in the poster, Wu Lei’s name only shows in the sub-slogan, and it is not easy to be seen because the colour of the font is close to the background. Figuratively, the moon and the main slogan in the poster give the audience the view to associate that Wu Lei’s goal is not only a small step for him but also a magnificent step for Chinese football. Hence, Wu Lei has become a myth in Chinese society.

“Myth is a type of speech”, and its function is to make particular ideas become nature (Barthes 1991:109,128). “Chinese XX” becomes the frequently used phrase to address Wu Lei after the second Derby, for instance, “Chinese striker who helped the Spaniard equalize at

the last moment,” “China’s best player broke out,” “The first Chinese who broke the gate of Barca! Wu Lei set a new standard for overseas players”. It is a common way to address the most excellent athletes and sports teams in China. For example, “Great Wall of China” is the alternative name of Yao Ming, and “golden flower of China” is the way to address Chinese female tennis players. Moreover, Zhai’s research (2016) shows Evergrande F.C.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it is only a football club in Chinese Super League, the media used “the team fight for Chinese football” to describe it during the Asian League Championship. And Zhai points out that it is a way by using the honour of Evergrande F.C. to cover the failures of Chinese football. Consequently, the storytelling will give Chinese fans confidence in Chinese football and enhance their national identity (ibid.).

A myth will only remain part of the meaning of a sign and give the readers a new direction to understand its signification (Barthes 1991:127f; Bignell 1997:22). Though there are different ways to read the social meaning of a mythical image, for ordinary audiences, they “would simply receive the mythic signification as an unremarkable and natural fact” (Barthes 1991:128; Bignell 1997:23). Bignell (ibid.) argues that the way how the media constructs myth will give the readers only one way to understand it. In Wu Lei’s case, the way how media represents him will lead the audience to consider more about his contribution to Chinese football, and ignore his achievement as an individual footballer.

*“And now in the most difficult situation, he has begun to face the biggest challenge [...]”  
“He is not arrogant, not high-profile, restrained and calm [...] diligent and focused, and has  
a firm belief [...]”  
(SS 10th January 2019; TS 5th January 2019, f)*

Additionally, the media also use good characters to praise Wu Lei, which corresponds to the values of Chinese society. As a global language, football provides different countries to present their “typify specific forms of football”: Spanish “tiki-taka,” German “machine football,” Italian “catenaccio” (Seippel 2017). Similarly, there is also a point of view in China that the way how Chinese national footballers fight on the ground will reflect the inner-core of Zhonghua minzu.

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<sup>13</sup>Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao Football Club is a professional Chinese football club that participates in the Chinese Super League, which has won CSL champion eight times and Asian League Championship two times.

In October 2019, the Chinese Football Association called on the national football team to learn the spirit of the women's volleyball team and strive for glory for the country. The Chinese women's volleyball team is the best-performing team sports event in China, and the spirit of the women's volleyball team is also regarded as an expression of the Chinese national spirit. The spirit of the women's volleyball team can be understood as a unique spirit of the Chinese era that is produced under the influence of national power (Bei 2019). On the one hand, it promotes the spirit of perseverance, unity and courage. On the other hand, it is also the epitome of patriotism. The spirit of the women's volleyball team has exceeded the scope of sports but is a spiritual model of the whole society (ibid.). The words used to define Wu Lei's personality are perfectly meet "industrious and brave," "never pause in the pursuit of progress," which are the two vital parts of the Chinese national spirit. Chen (2015) states that this is how media use the "self-orientalism" report form to construct national identity on athletes in China. The media is accustomed to attribute the success of Chinese athletes to their oriental characteristics and strategically ignored the unique personality within individuals (ibid.). As explained earlier in the literature review, Thus, the media has drawn a line between the Western world, which advocates individual heroism and Chinese society (ibid.).

As mentioned in the literature review, self-orientalism is a solidification and "reproduction" of orientalism. In the world of Western football, the character of football players is diverse and complex, such as David Beckham, Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar. And the western world also advocates that football should be a sport that can enrich oneself. Since Chinese football has become a shortcoming of Chinese sports, the Chinese media will use all opportunities that can be used to prove their strength. Although Wu Lei is a Chinese player overseas, the media still chose to model him as a typical Chinese player, rather than trying to highlight and discover his personalities as an individual. Today's report on Wu Lei is to create the opposition between the East and the West, to highlight that Wu Lei is a rule-abiding and down-to-earth player so that the audience has a sense of national identity.

*"Wu Lei is not absolutely perfect. However, I will not write negative news about him because I cherish him. He is the light of Chinese football [...] is the ambassador of Chinese football, we need to protect him." (Ang 2020)*

According to the discussion in this section above, the way how Chinese media report Wu Lei also reflect the ideology of nationalism in Chinese society. Barthes (1991:137) maintains that myth supplies the ideological concerns of a particular community in society. When it comes to the news industry, Bignell (1997:80) writes that “news discourse is an ideological representation of the world because it selects what will be reported”. Van Dijk also (1983: 28) points that news is not a “simply an (incomplete) description of the facts”, but it is a “specific kind of (re)construction of reality according to the norms and values of some society” (cited in Kennedy and Hills 2009:74). Although the media will choose different news reports according to their own needs, the above shows that for Wu Lei’s reports, the media purposely only reported positive news on him (ibid.:84). Moreover, the “consistent and repeated features” in news stories showing how journalists shape the meaning of the news, consciously or unconsciously (ibid.:86). Chen (2015) argues that Chinese media does not treat the individual success of athletes as an individual sporting achievement, but uses it as an excellent case example to the entire society. And this interpretation embodies a dualistic perspective of Chinese and Western, and constructs a collective imagination about “China breaks the Western rule”.

*“When I first went to the live coverage of Wu Lei’s game, I wrote an article, mainly about the fact that I finally don’t have to envy reporters from Japan and South Korea who are from the neighbourhood of China. I was finally able to report on the players of our own country in Spain. I feel really very proud. I will observe all the details about him whether he is on the arena or not, including him and his teammates, technique issues or emotions.”*  
(Fei 2020)

This is another example that shows how nationalism affects the audiences to engage with matches of Wu Lei. When it comes to Wu Lei, once he shows and fights on the field, the pride of Wu Lei will control the emotion of the audiences. For the Chinese public and media, Wu Lei’s appearance in La Liga is the most meaningful issue for them, and the successes he has achieved are value-added. And Wu Lei’s match is like a wrestling show, especially as the game between FC Barcelona and RCD Espanyol. “Mythic power is to be found in more focused form at the junction of time and place”, because Barcelona is one of the most famous football cities in the world, it also consolidates the mythical power of both the match and Wu Lei (Whannel 2002:53). Even though the public already know what the result of the

match will be, they are still willing to cheer for Wu Lei. And they will not feel disappointed with him. Oppositely, if Wu Lei can perform a fantastic match, such as the second derby, the public will feel crazy for him. As Barthes (1991:20) writes that in wrestling “the pattern of justice” is much more matter than “its content”. He argues that the result is not the most important thing of the game. Instead, the wrestlers have to try their best to accomplish public expectation by using exaggerated performance. “The spectator is not interested in the rise and fall of fortunes; he expects the transient image of certain passions” (Barthes 1991:14).

*“It is stupid to compare Wu Lei with Messi [...] The result of this match proved RCD Espanyol is not as good as FC Barcelona, and Wu Lei is also not as powerful as Messi. Neither the team nor the players are on the same level.”*  
(SS, 1st April 2019,a)

This section has explored how Wu Lei become a myth in Chinese society and how his social meaning and ideology behind the myth contribute to building the national identity. However, myth is not stable, and it can be destroyed or recreated. The quote above shows how Chinese media destroyed the myth of Wu Lei after the first derby, even though it is extremely opposite to their point of views before. Interestingly, the media will easily shift their attitude based on the result of Wu Lei’s games. Is Wu Lei a normal football player or a hero? As Whannel (2002:173) states that “media representation is the product of sets of production practices, framed by professional ideologies, within the context of institutional structures.” In the previous sections have discussed how the football culture in China affects the news productions. Hence, to better understand the case, the following section will focus on the economic perspective to figure out the power relationship behind the media production and how news producers reflect on the way they represent Wu Lei.

### **The rules of the game**

The above has discussed how Wu Lei is formed as a national myth. As Barthes (1991:142) argues, “semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification and making contingency appear eternal”, which means the only meaning a myth can remain is its signification. Similarly, Baudrillard (2016:35) holds the point in his book *The Consumer Society* that “[...] therefore, of our ‘consumer society’. This is the denial of the real on the basis of an avid and repeated apprehending of its signs.” Furthermore, this

section is going to answer the third research question: In what ways social value and economic value influence the media to represent Wu Lei? The debate below will be helpful for the analysis.

There is an ongoing debate: who determines the identity of media products, whether the market or social value? (Corner 2011:41). After the 1990s, the ideology of consumerism has spread in the Chinese media market, and the commercial media identify themselves as “salesmen” rather than the information communicator (Hao 2015). Moreover, Boyle states that the commodification of sport depends massively on the construction of sports celebrities, sporting narratives and their connection with domestic mass. (Boyle 2009:87). In the previous discussion, we have analyzed how the media represent Wu Lei and structure the narrative. For trying to find an answer to the debate, it is crucial to figure out how the news workers understand the economic logic behind the news. Hence, the following will explore the motivations of agenda-setting, the commercial strategies, and the reflection from the insiders’ standpoint.

*“It is not what we want audiences to read, but what editors or the Chinese media market want them to read. [...] Most of the time, they only read the title, and they don’t really care how objective you are.” (Ang 2020)*

*“When they (editors) write the title for me, they will try to exaggerate as much as possible. I do not actually want to be too exaggerated, I hope to try to restore it objectively, but they (editors) hope you exaggerate.” (Fei 2020)*

*“There are two specific kinds of topics that will have the most viewing: one is Wu Lei really make some big moments in the game, or the poor him has sat on the bench for several matches.” (Serigo, 2020)*

Nowadays, the media give rising attention to a football star because of economic interests (Corner 2011: 38). Chinese media prefer to use exaggerated headlines to attract audiences. The quote above shows conflictual opinions between the reporter and editors. All of the reporter informants complained that editors revised the headlines which twisted their main concept of the articles in purpose. “Real Madrid should thank Wu Lei's goal”, “Our life is on fire because we have Wu Lei”, “Wu Lei made history once again!”, as mentioned before, Chinese media address Wu Lei as the hope for Chinese football and they will highlight Wu Lei's performance in each match. These headlines are typical “popular newspaper” headlines

(Bignell 1997:88), the editors choose to organize the headlines from the perspective of readers, and use “oral-based discourse” to make the headline more “familiarity, camaraderie and entertainingness” (ibid.:89). For example, the deixis word “we”, the modality word “should”, both can imply and guide the audiences on how to engage with the news (ibid.:89f). When the media coverage incorporates nationalism, the audience will emotionally and excitedly engage with the news (Zhai 2016).

*“We do not need to take this problem too seriously. As a media worker, we are now more concerned about socialization, because we do news more on social media platforms nowadays. Therefore, after Wu Lei scored, the fans would subconsciously feel that he was invincible, so we called him THE KING in the title [...], and since then we media has affected the reading habits of users, for the internet traffic, we will tend to use we media standard to write the headlines.” (Dang, 2020)*

Dang (2020) explained why they choose to use exaggerated headlines. On the one hand, the principal motivation of the commercial news portals is to make profits, and the news about Wu Lei is their products. Dang (2020) tells that after Wu Lei transferred to La Liga, he became the person who holds four-fifth of internet traffic of the La Liga channel. And the first derby's viewing on the news app reaches over 2 million unique visitors (UV) per day which is even more popular than the match between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona.

As Yu (2016) said, nationalism is an important force influencing China's modern political transformation. When the media and audience are both influenced by nationalism when watching Chinese football games, it is inevitable that excessive nationalism will be consumed. Studies have shown that “fans react better, and are more emotionally involved if aggressive hostility is present” (Hitchcock 1997:75 cited in Lawrence 2002:129). Baudrillard (2016.:35) states that "what mass communications give us is not reality, but the dizzying whirl of reality". In this case, the media build the fantasy of Wu Lei for the audiences, and the positive news of him will have a significant impact in constructing national identity (Tan 2014; Griggs and Gibbons 2014). And the ideology of nationalism is a particular way to build conflict between different nations. When the media consecutively emphasize Wu Lei's nationality and masculinity, they will make more profit because of the audiences' engagement. Oppositely, Baudrillard (2016:34f) points out that when we consume news, we are consuming signs defined by the media, and the function of the sign is "always a

conjuring. Moreover, there are two ways to consume the conjuring: conjuring up and conjuring away (ibid.). As explained in the previous section, the media can build the myth of Wu Lei or destroy the myth; however, the media will both make profits from both sides.

On the other hand, the socialized media market needs platforms to be concerned about the interaction between the media and the audience. Corner (2011:7) points out that the appearance of the “newer technologies, applications and contexts “has changed the media environment. Mossberg (2003) argues that new media is a fresh way of journalism and it is not “tightly confined by the traditions and standards adhered to by the traditional profession” (cited in Bowman and Willis 2003). And how does it affect the “old media” to report and write the news will be discussed in detail later in this section.

*“I totally understand why the editor will think he (Wu Lei) has reached that height, he should bear the pressure now [...] Maybe the media has exaggerated and boasted his achievements, but this is part of the rules of the game, he (Wu Lei) can gain fame, while the media gains commercial interests.” (Ge 2020)*

In the media market, the media has the power to make the rules. Corner (2011:24) argues that “elite dominance” is one of the structural deficits of the media. Because the media rely on the substantial market circumstances more, they no longer have a strong sense of responsibility towards the audiences than before (Corner 2011:41). Though football is one of the representations of popular culture, the people who have access to report football is limited. Hence, there is still a boundary between sports media and sports fans. Under the elite control, the media can choose and form the information in their own ways, and hide the information unfavourable (Corner 2011:26).

Moreover, the media is progressively providing “the commodity value of their products at the lowest possible production cost” (ibid.). Wu Lei (2019) clarifies that he is not the “king” and he dislikes people to address him like this; however, the media is not taking his words. Baudrillard (2016:113) writes that “the gadget is indeed the truth of the object in a consumer society”, which means the object loses its object function because of its sign function. As mentioned before, construct the athletes’ images as the warrior who is fighting for China is the typical way in China. Meanwhile, merging the ideology of nationalism into the coverage

is a way to strengthen the stickiness between media and audiences. In Wu Lei's case, his image can be seen as a gadget, which the media is consecutively producing and selling the same image of athletes all the time.

*“Before the Derby, the Spanish media specifically interviewed our reporters [...] We have become one of the most trusted windows for foreign media to understand Wu Lei [...] reporters have made for Wu Lei For this comprehensive report, for this match, we not only interviewed Wu Lei but also conducted exclusive interviews with related personnel around Wu Lei [...]” (March 2019)*

Dang (2020) also points out that Wu Lei can be seen as a tool for them. As the quote shows above, they are not only directly using Wu Lei to earn internet traffic, but also promoting their work to build company brands and the public relationship. Since Dang's company does not have the copyright of the live broadcast of the La Liga game, they will try to attract the audience through other ways. The above quotes reveal that although they are at a disadvantage in live broadcasting, they have more resources to obtain and report Wu Lei's news. At the same time, the Spanish media's attention to them can also indirectly prove their authority in news reporting. Above has discussed how the media are focusing on using the framework of celebrity journalism to report Wu Lei to make economic benefits. Moreover, they also have a clear line; they will hardly touch. Though they have exaggerated the story of Wu Lei sometimes, they hardly write news about Wu Lei negatively. On the one hand, Wu Lei is the player whom they cherish, the media willing to build a positive image of Wu Lei. On the other hand, Seldom does sports media risk their profit to do reports because they need athletes and their teams to provide information (Trujillo and Ekdom 1985: 265, cited in Kennedy and Hills 2009:74).

The above shows the media use its “bad power” of media to make benefits to make advantages. “Nearly all ideas of ‘bad’ power have their grounding in perceptions about the distortion to either knowledge or values, or both”, in Wu Lei's case, the media consciously insert nationalism into the storytelling and use fans emotional engagement for the economic benefits (Corner 2011 : 23). Nonetheless, does it mean the market value is more important than the social value? The following is going to explore the good media power within the media.

*“The audience is inquisitive about what Wu Lei looks like in this life, what he eats every day, how to get to the stadium, is he adapted to Barcelona’s life? So we planned a Vlog project to tell everyone about life in Spain. At the same time, we also interviewed local fans in Spain, as well as the people of Wu Lei’s team, to tell you from different angles Wu Lei’s life here.”*  
(Ge 2020)

In a networked world, “media whose primary value lies in its ability to connect people will win” (Bowman and Willis 2003:52). As mentioned before, social function is one of the main issues that news producers consider a lot nowadays. Although the media have the power to control the rules, the sports news cannot exist by excluding the athlete and audience. They cannot change that sports stars are the key role of the sports stories, and they also need to interact with audiences at the same time (Whannel 2002:54). The way how Chinese media reports meets the needs of the audiences to some extent. As Bowman and Willis (2003:52) state that the media company needs to consider how their platforms can support the social interaction between their products and audiences. The audience has “a propensity to seek the ‘truth’ about these stars or heroes” (Schoug 1997:115). Moreover, they would like to find out about their “true selves” and get to know the authenticity “behind” the public performance (ibid.). And even though Wu Lei was not the main character of the Vlog, the media restore the life what Wu Lei is living now, which meet the curiosity of the audiences.

Also, Chinese sports media value the function of field notes in sports reporting. “We take the field note really seriously. Because the article we write, the video we shoot in the stadium is what the audience can not see from the screen” (Ang 2020). As Boyles states that, the Youtubers who watch the game in the stadium become popular because the view from the stadium may not offer any real insight into the action on the field of play, but they do “reveal the social experience of many who watch live sport” (Boyle 2009:218). Moreover, this is also the reason why the broadcast will change different angles during the match. Because it will provide us with the authenticity of the match, even if we are not there. The field note they write is focusing on how local fans cherish Wu Lei and everything they notice about Wu Lei, which will help the reader build their connection with Wu Lei. (Ang 2020; Ge 2020; Fei 2020)

*“I divided the posters into groups, you can choose either Wu Lei of Messi to share on your social media. The audiences have the right to choose what they want.” (Zhang 2020)*

The media also apply a chance for the audience to communicate between themselves. The popularization of new media has changed the way mass communicate with each other (Hao 2015). Personalized media content is one of the main functions that media provide audiences nowadays. When we look back into picture 3 and 4, no matter if the audience is a fan of Wu Lei or Messi, we can choose one of them to post it on their social media to express their standpoint. Moreover, Dang (2020) explained more why they highlighted Wu Lei VS. Messi. “Because it was the popular topic during that time, we have to cover this case to help the mass to communicate with others in their lives”. He points out that people cannot live without a social life, and the news platform has to take the responsibility to gather information from news apps or platforms to communicate with others. As mentioned before, over 23.7 million people watched the live streaming of the first derby online and over millions of people discussed the match on social media, The Barcelona Derby is not only a simple football match in China but also a social issue. In order to get more information about Wu Lei and the match, use the media as a tool is the best choice for them.

*“For example, the Japanese media [...] did a very professional job, right? When Japanese do their own table tennis comparison, they also put Chinese players alongside Japanese players, you will accept it and enjoy it. When it comes to the Chinese media [...] we might not be very good at balancing the various aspects, and also a bit too biased when creating comparison, which caused some misunderstanding as a result.” (Dang 2020)*



*Picture 6 A picture designed by Japanese media during the 2017 Table tennis world  
Championship*

As shown in picture 6<sup>14</sup>, it is a creative idea from a Japanese TV to present Chinese table tennis player Ma Long during the World Championship, and they also address him as a “Hexagon Warrior”. It was once a hot topic on Chinese social media. From the quotes of Dang, we can notice that the concern of the users is also a reason for the media to construct Wu Lei’s image; however, they do not figure out the right way yet. Entertainment has become a phenomenon in the Chinese sports industry (Yang 2018). On the one hand, it is challenging the authority of the serious news; on the other hand, it is a new approach for the media to produce their new products (Yang 2018). Dang’s reflection also shows the dilemma of the media people. On the one hand, they want to get rid of the stereotype of the audience’s profitability. On the one hand, they have not found the best way to communicate with the audience.

This section has discussed the ideology behind the news product from the perspective of the news producers. The way they portray Wu Lei is not only simply decided by the economic value but also social value. Back to the debate at the beginning of this section: "Who determines the identity of media products, whether the market or social value?". On the one hand, media producers consider themselves as rule-makers, and they try to gain Internet traffic by selling national emotions. This is a disadvantage of the "elite dominion" media. The news producers exaggerated Wu Lei's performance to consume the user's emotions. Also, the media considered athletes as the tools, using their exclusive coverages to build prestige and promote their brand.

On the other hand, the media's coverage of Wu Lei meets the daily social needs of the audience. First of all, the on-site reporting can allow the audience to see what they cannot see on the screen. And the audience has a great demand for knowing more about outside of the screen. Secondly, the entertainment of sports news is already the development trend of Chinese sports news. In a game similar to Barcelona Derby, it targets not only fans but the whole society. And the media reports provide them with social networking material they need. Finally, Dang 's reflection allows us to see that the media is also trying to fulfil their

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<sup>14</sup> The six angels are strength, speed, experience, defend, technique and serve.

social responsibilities, but they have not yet found their own position. Therefore, the news report to Wu Lei does show that the media report is tilting towards the market, but it is still difficult to answer the John Corner debate. However, we can find that the media may achieve a win-win situation between obtaining economic benefits and social values if they can find a balance between them.

## **Conclusion**

Football has never been a simple sport, and it is always full of cultural and social and political symbols. In 1983, Blackburn Olympic defeated the defined Old Etonians and won the Football Association Challenge Cup (FA Cup). It represented the equal rights of the working class and the noble class, and modern football genuinely became a popular sport for everyone after that final. When the 2010 World Cup was officially hosted in South Africa, the world's most crucial sporting game landed in Africa for the first time. It symbolises an intimate contact between Africa and the world. And in this case study, we find out the importance of football also playing an important role in constructing China's national identity.

This thesis examines the interrelationship between sports media and national identity in consumerism society through conducting a case study of Wu Lei, using visual analysis, qualitative content analysis and production interviews. As the thesis has shown, through the multi-method approach, we can have an in-depth understanding of diverse media coverages and the sports media industry. Firstly, by analysing the news coverage, the strategies of how Chinese sports media construct national identity on an overseas national player have been found. Then, guiding by Barthes (1991) and Bignell (1997), we have decoded the social meaning and ideology behind the myth of Wu Lei. Finally, the interviews helped us find out the motivation of the news producers and a critical reflection of consumerism in the news industry.

And the concluding chapter will present key findings and answer the research questions in detail.

### **A. In what ways the Chinese media build national identity on Wu Lei?**

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to have a background in Chinese football history. The Chinese men's national football team is a third-tier football team in Asia, which has only appeared in the final tournament of the World Cup once. Moreover, it shows the weakness of China. On the one hand, it triggers the fans' national memories of shame. Chinese people used to be addressed as "Sick Men in East Asia", and both the public and the nation want to get rid of the name by showing the sports power of China. On the other hand,

it does not suit China's image of the world's second-largest economy. Consequently, Wu Lei's transfer lighted up the hope of Chinese football.

There are mainly two strategies that Chinese media use to construct national identity on Wu Lei. The first way is to use Wu Lei to create a binary opposition between China and other nations, which is a typical way to organize the narrative in sports media national athletes and teams. The media stresses Wu Lei's national attribution by addressing him as "the hope for the whole village". This metaphor shows a significant contrast between the image of Wu Lei and China. As stated before, China's comprehensive national power and international status have also been rapidly improved in recent years, and "village" can be seen as an irony of Chinese football. The media puts Chinese football and Wu Lei at two extremes, to emphasize Wu Lei's achievements.

Meanwhile, the Chinese media describes Wu Lei as an overseas national warrior. Though Wu Lei is playing for a team in the Spanish League, by highlighting his nationality can easily help the audiences build a connection with him. And the war terms in the coverage often romanticized symbolic expressions of "hegemonic masculinity", which reflects the construction of male athletes in the global context (Connell 2005).

"The members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" is one of the most quoted sentences in Anderson's book (1991:6). He also states that "No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind" (ibid.:7). By forming the binary opposition can construct an image that China is breaking the ruling of European football, and then help build an "imagined community" of China's nation (Anderson 1991).

The second strategy is to strengthen Wu Lei's masculinity and power by comparing Wu Lei with Lionel Messi and other excellent footballers in La Liga. "Who is the king of Catalunya?" is one of the most popular topics during the first derby game. And in a promotion poster, Wu Lei and Messi both are designated as a king in a poker card. Moreover, in that poster, the designer also used mirror-style design to stress that Wu Lei (WL) and Messi (LM) are sharing the same name. As Barthes (2012:122) states in his article *The*

*French Tour as an Epic*, “the racers’ names seem to come from a very old ethnic period that can be “read as algebraic signs of valour, loyalty, treachery or stoicism”, such as Brankart, Geminiani, Lauredi. Similarly, Lionel Messi can be seen as the perfect name in the world of football. Though there is a distinct gap between Wu Lei and Messi, the Chinese media are trying to portray Wu Lei as the one who will inherit Messi’s name and status, and break the power balance between Messi and Wu Lei.

Meanwhile, the media also tries to create their own “invented traditions” by marking the milestone time between Wu Lei and Messi (Hobsbawm 1992:1). The story of Wu Lei used to work as Messi’s caddy has been repeatedly mentioned in Chinese media. The media continues to give special meaning to some junctures, such as Wu Lei’s inspirational story from caddy to star. It will affect the audience’s engagement with news reading, thereby enhancing their sense of identity with Wu Lei.

To sum up, the successes or failures of a home country’s athletes or teams can be reported as a symbol of the nation’s overall health and well-being (Tuck 2003). Therefore, Chinese media consecutively emphasized Wu Lei’s masculinity to build his national identity (Whannel 2002:69).

**a. In what ways Chinese media portray Wu Lei as a national myth?**

“Myth has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal” and “it is always in part motivated” (Barthes 1991:124,142). To understand a myth, we should explore the social meaning and ideology behind it. The previous discussion has shown the symbolic power of Wu Lei; however, after the second derby, there was a notable change in his representation. Wu Lei’s name disappeared in some articles and was replaced by “Chinese footballer/pride” after the match.

Myth is a “second-order semiological system” (Barthes 1991:113). When Wu Lei was designed as a lunarnaut as Neil Alden Armstrong, he no longer represented himself, but China’s nation. Any achievements he makes will become a step for Chinese football. Bignell (1997:23) argues that the way how the media constructs myth will give the readers only one way to understand it. In Wu Lei’s case, the way how media represents him will lead the

audience to consider more about his contribution to Chinese football, and ignore his achievement as an individual footballer.

Meanwhile, the way how media represent Wu Lei also reflect on the ideology of nationalism within Chinese media. It shows how media use the “self-orientalism” narrative to construct national identity on athletes in China. The media is accustomed to attribute the success of Chinese athletes to their oriental characteristics and strategically ignored the unique personality within individuals. And it is another way for Chinese media to challenge the authority of western sports. And in order to protect the myth they create, the media will use selective materials to report Wu Lei. As the informants said, because Wu Lei has become a national symbol in La Liga, they will only report good news about him.

Another interesting finding is that the game between Wu Lei and Messi is just like a wrestling game, as Barthes (1991:20) writes that “the pattern of justice” is much more important than “its content” in wrestling. He argues that the result is not the most important thing of the game. Moreover, in Wu Lei’s game, Wu Lei’s appearance in La Liga is the most meaningful issue for them, and the successes he has achieved are value-added.

### **B. In what ways social value and economic value influence the media to represent Wu Lei?**

The answer of the final question will be centred on the debates: “who determines the identity of media products, whether the market or social value?” (Corner 2011:41).

According to the previous analysis, news producers will only choose good or neutral materials of Wu Lei when they report him. So what are the motivations of the news producers? Because of “elite dominance” in the media industry, the news producers believe they are the rule makers of the industry, and they had the right to choose what can be represented to the audiences (Corner 2011:24ff). Due to the characteristics of immediacy, interactivity, anonymity, and openness, the internet seems to be more affected by consumerism in various types of media, and its consumerism tendency is more obvious than traditional media. Moreover, internet traffic is one of the key elements that influence news producing. Baudrillard (2016:34f) points out that when we consume news, we are consuming

signs defined by the media. And nationalism is a selling point of the media. As discussed before, whether the metaphors in the article and the picture of Wu Lei is made into a myth, they both contain national emotions. As Yu (2016) said, nationalism is an important force influencing China's modern political transformation. When the media and audience are both influenced by nationalism when watching Chinese football games, it is inevitable that excessive nationalism will be consumed. Studies have shown that "fans react better, and are more emotionally involved if aggressive hostility is present" (Hitchcock 1997:75 cited in Lawrence 2002:129). Meanwhile, they are also by conducting an exclusive interview with Wu Lei's teammates, coach to build their media authority and promote their work and company brands.

The above has discussed the economic value of the news of Wu Lei. From the perspective of marketing, if the mass media want to make profits, they need to produce news that the masses like. However, catering to the audience can also be seen as part of the media's fulfilment of their social responsibilities. The primary value of the media lies in its ability to connect people nowadays. Dang (2020) points out that the way how they present Wu Lei is also influenced by the socialised media context. The diverse coverage of Wu Lei provides us with the knowledge and abilities to communicate with others about him. At the same time, the media coverages also meet the curiosity of the audiences to know about the real-life of celebrities. Nonetheless, Dang admits that they do have limits and disadvantages of their method, and that is also what they need to improve in the future.

Based on the discussion above, the social value and economic value of media products cannot be discussed under the binary opposition, because they will influence and promote each other. While the media gains benefits, they can also meet the needs of users. However, this cannot be used as the sole criterion for measuring the social value of media products because what users need is not necessarily beneficial to society. Therefore, this requires journalists to master the scales at work to balance the social value and economic value of news products. In Wu Lei's case, what the media needs to do is to report Wu Lei's games objectively and truthfully, and not to attract audiences by rendering emotions in the first place. This may be profitable for a while, but every game is full of unknowns, and excessive consumption of audience emotions is obviously not the best strategy.

### *Further discussion*

Is Wu Lei a national icon or a product? According to the discussion above, I prefer him to be a product of nationalism. Nationalism is an important force influencing China's modern political development, which is particularly prominent in the development of sports. Whether it is the spirit of women's volleyball, ping-pong diplomacy, or the hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the world has recognized a different China. But even if sports are so powerful, does China really need a world-class football team?

Although football, or sports, is difficult to avoid mixing ideology, should we enjoy national honour in sports games? Maybe the answer is no. In his report to Wu Lei, he was deliberately described as an image representing the binary opposition between China and the West. It is undeniable that Wu Lei is a person with a strong sense of national honor. But should the media and the public let him bear the responsibility of national rejuvenation?

Even the portrayal of his characters is an old-fashioned image of Chinese athletes. Another thing worth discussing is that even if everything can be a commodity in a consumer society, must the needs of users be catered for? Should the media assume more social responsibility than try to sell national emotions?

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## Appendixes

### Appendix 1 News materials

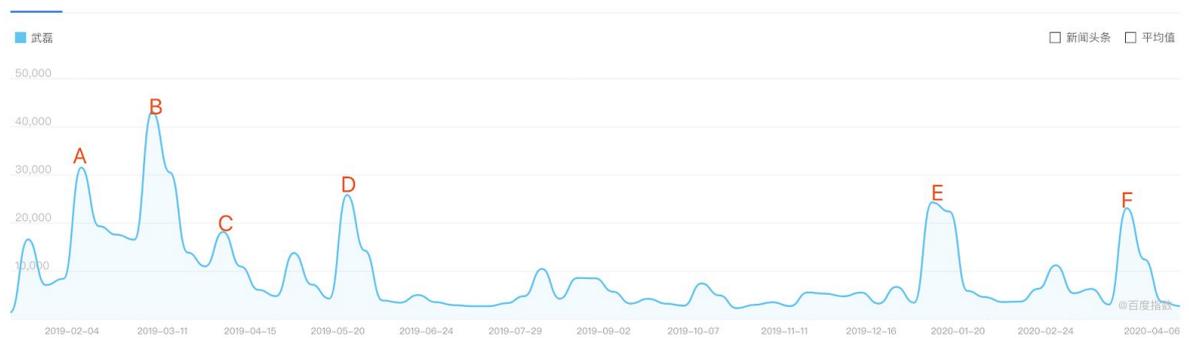
Tecent Sports (TS)

Headline	Published Date	No.
<a href="#">西班牙人踢巴萨战术曝光：武磊左边锋 防守任务重 直面梅西</a>	28/3/2019	a
<a href="#">武磊豪言胜巴萨：别的比赛都能输 但德比必须赢</a>	28/3/2019	b
<a href="#">加泰德比有多火？中国的世纪大战 西媒采访腾讯体育记者</a>	29/3/2019	a
<a href="#">巴萨喉舌封面报道梅西战武磊：中国的世纪大战 关注度超国家德比</a>	29/3/2019	b
<a href="#">西甲-梅西两球巴萨2-0西班牙人 武磊替补出战失良机</a>	31/3/2019	a
<a href="#">武磊对面站的是神！勺子任意球闻所未闻 让中国人开眼看世界</a>	31/3/2019	b
<a href="#">武磊诠释中国足球不变的渴望：现实再残酷，也矢志不移</a>	31/3/2019	c
<a href="#">武磊被现实暴击像极了人生：输给梅西不丢人 但武吹该消停了</a>	1/4/2019	a
<a href="#">手记-喧嚣后加泰德比仍是一场普通德比 而武磊仍是我们希望所在</a>	1/4/2019	b
<a href="#">武磊攻破巴萨大门引热议！外国解说：中国英雄，西班牙人的英雄</a>	5/1/2020	a
<a href="#">武磊87分钟绝平巴萨！巴萨2-2夺半程冠军 武磊西甲第五球再创历史</a>	5/1/2020	b
<a href="#">武磊又创历史！西甲第5球绝平巴萨 攻破巴萨城门中国第一人</a>	5/1/2020	c
<a href="#">西媒吹武磊绝平巴萨：他让西班牙人重获新生！日本球员做不到这点</a>	5/1/2020	d
<a href="#">武磊绝平一瞬间：门将跪了，巴萨球迷叛变，激动大吼庆祝！</a>	5/1/2020	e
<a href="#">国第一人！武磊评分压梅西缔造留洋新高度 这平局能送皇马夺冠？</a>	5/1/2020	f
<a href="#">回眸一笑的武磊，生活因你而火热</a>	6/1/2020	

## Sina Sports (SS)

Headline	Published Date	No.
<a href="#">西媒感叹武磊影响力 西人将加大中国球员引进力度</a>	26/3/2019	
<a href="#">武磊德比前放话:输谁都不能输巴萨 一起盘他!</a>	28/3/2019	
<a href="#">西媒惊叹:武磊首球影响14倍梅西 首秀千万人关注</a>	29/3/2019	a
<a href="#">巴塞罗那德比重燃战火 武磊领衔锋线挑战梅西</a>	29/3/2019	b
<a href="#">武磊获西媒正面评价:差点进球 表现比锋线头牌好</a>	31/3/2019	a
<a href="#">武磊被巴萨上一课太正常了 没机会挨打才最可怕</a>	31/3/2019	b
<a href="#">武磊三度威胁巴萨大门! 跑位真牛 悍将两救险 gif</a>	31/3/2019	c
<a href="#">主帅解释为何不让武磊首发:要摆大巴只能牺牲他</a>	31/3/2019	d
<a href="#">上观:把武磊和梅西相提并论 到底是坏还是傻?</a>	1/4/2019	a
<a href="#">武磊德比后享受巴塞罗那美景 逛著名景点散心</a>	1/4/2019	b
<a href="#">新浪vs西甲高层:西人考察了武磊2年 因实力才买他</a>	1/4/2019	c
<a href="#">西班牙人84岁球迷:本想武磊是个商品 现在知他优秀</a>	4/4/2019	
<a href="#">解析-武磊20分钟6次威胁巴萨 还是靠他的招牌武器</a>	5/1/2020	a
<a href="#">武磊对进球有预感:赛前和队友沟通过 配合真成了</a>	5/1/2020	b
<a href="#">西媒给武磊最高分! 上场能救命 状态最好就是他</a>	5/1/2020	c
<a href="#">加媒狂吹武磊:如有神助! 精准射门+奢华一脚</a>	5/1/2020	d
<a href="#">牛气! 武磊荣登各大西媒头条 让世界知道他的名字</a>	5/1/2020	e
<a href="#">今天的武磊比梅西还快! 冲刺速度排全场第一</a>	5/1/2020	f
<a href="#">曾与梅西合影的那个中国男孩 如今让梅西尝到苦涩</a>	5/1/2020	g
<a href="#">武磊征服加媒! 巴萨媒体称他为神奇进球之王</a>	5/1/2020	h
<a href="#">武磊攻破巴萨引发中国球迷狂欢 点击量达2.2亿次</a>	6/1/2020	
<a href="#">加媒观点:巴萨当初应该引进武磊 而不是买博阿滕</a>	7/1/2020	
<a href="#">武磊这点比绝平巴萨更值得吹 他在挑战最难的生活</a>	10/1/2020	

## Appendix 2 Wu Lei's Baidu Index<sup>15</sup> table (1st Jan 2019 to 15th April 2020)



- A. Wu Lei's first game in La Liga
- B. Wu Lei scored his first goal in La Liga
- C. The first Barcelona Derby
- D. Wu Lei scored a goal and RCD Espanyol got the chance to compete in Europa League
- E. The second Barcelona Derby
- F. Wu Lei tested positive for COVID-19

<sup>15</sup> Baidu index is a website like google trends, it use the popularity of top [search queries](#) in Baidu Search to study user behaviours. Moreover, Baidu Search is the biggest search engine in China, and is currently the fourth largest website in the Alexa Internet rankings.

## Appendix 3 Samples of Visual analysis

### *3.1 The checking list*

Resources: Hansen - Semiotics: Barthes

#### **Denotation:**

What an image depicts?

#### **Connotation key carriers:**

Poses - metaphoric association to what extent do they take up space or not?

- Is the body open or closed?
- Is the body aligned and controlled or liberated?
- Is there an emphasis on relaxation or intensity?
- Is there a sense of comfort or discomfort?
- Is angularity or curvature emphasised?
- Do they appear to lean/move towards or away from the viewer?

Analyzing Gaze

Objects (the objects in the pic, the objects missing, why this object not other objects)

Commutation test

Settings

- Decontextualized image used to symbolise an idea or a concept
- Color coordination (eg. a feeling of cleanness, order and simplicity)
- saturated/flattened color

Salience: van Leeuwen (2005) and Machin (2007a) - subjects of the images

- Potent cultural symbols
- Foregrounding
- Overlapping
- Size
- Colour
- Tone (This can be simply the use of brightness to attract the eye)
- Focus

### 3.2 Semiotics analysis table

Take picture 4 as an example

denotation	connotation	site of production	site of image	site of distribution
blue and red blue and white	colour of barca and espanyol	How made?	Visual effects	How circulated?
crown	power masculinity	technological modality compositional modality social modality	technological modality compositional modality social modality	technological modality compositional modality social modality
team logo	representations of the team	how made: photoshop genre:commercial poster who:media platform when:barcalone derby whofor: audiences and fans why:promate	visua efects: easy to engage meaningful color represtation serious powerful compostion crown,sword,slo gan,logo,qr code,two players,poker elemnets meaning:	hoe circulated: social media orginesed by who: PP Sports
name letters	power			
QR code	commerical			
logo	commercial			
match time	commercial			
poker	western culture			
mirror image	social engagemnet power masculinity			

## **Appendix 4 Sample of Content analysis**

### ***4.1 Sample transcription***

Title: The best Chinese footballer! Wu Lei got a higher score than Messi and He has created a new height for Chinese playing abroad The draw match may help Real Madrid win the La Liga Champion

Editor: Zhang Zhongliang

Published time: 5th Jan

Platform: sports.qq.com

Link: <https://sports.qq.com/a/20200105/011889.htm>

Wu Lei changed history today. As a substitute, his equalizer helped Espanyol's new coach Abelardo won his first point, which also disappointed Barca for losing 3 points. This goal changed the situation between Barca and Real Madrid for competing for the championship. It was Wu Lei's second goal in La Liga this season that made him become the most goal player in the team so far. He also became the first Chinese player who can score a goal when playing against Barca, which has made him set a new high standard for the Chinese players who play overseas. The legendary Espanyol player Raúl Tamudo's equalizer in the 2007 Catalunya Derby helped Real Madrid won the championship that year. Can Wu Lei's help Real Madrid win the championship again this year?

The first person who broke the gate of Barca! Wu Lei rewrites history, new heights for Chinese overseas players

After becoming the first Chinese player to score in La Liga and the UEFA Cup in history, Wu Lei once again set a new height in his career abroad, becoming the first Chinese player in history to break the Barcelona gate. The significance of this ball is obviously greater than the entire 8 goals he scored in 2019. Yang Chen, Sun Jihai and other predecessors have also achieved important milestones in different matches. However, Wu can score against the top European giants Barcelona and break through the goals of the 5th Champions League team. The importance and value that can absolutely be represented overstated. The goal might even become a beacon and pointer for other Chinese overseas players in the future.

In recent years, the performances of the Chinese overseas “army” have obviously fallen short of the peak period marked by Sun Jihai, Li Tie, and others more than 10 years ago. However, Wu Lei ’s 88-minute marvelous ball is still reminiscent of the raging years. Take Japanese players for example, seven players have at least a goal in La Liga, but only Takashi Inui and Shibusaki Gaku can break Barca’s gate. It must be known that, in playing overseas history, Japan is one of the most representative Asian countries who has really make excellent achievements in Europe. Shibusaki Gaku goaled both Real Madrid and Barca when he played against these teams. Now Wu holds the chance to become the second East Asian player who can double kill the best two teams in La Liga if he can make another goal when he fights against Real Madrid in the second half of the season.

Wu Lei came off the bench to become the wonder The 1-minute-blitz resulting in De Jong career’s first red card

Espanyol had led the game in the first half; however, they lost 2 goals in only 9 minutes in the second half. They faced a fully passive situation during that time. The new coach Avelado could only hope that surprises can appear from the sub. He successively sent Varga, Iturraspe and Wu Lei on the pitch, which has received incredible results. Less than one minute after Wu Lei joined the match, because of his active participation of the counterattack on the frontcourt, De Jong was oppressed and interfered by him. Then, Calleri got the time and chance to tackle the ball.

In order to avoided Calleri could directly organize a frontcourt counterattack, De Jong was forced to make a tactical foul. In this regard, the Dutch received his second booking during the match, which also became the first red card in his career. It was also the first Barca’s Dutch player sent off by a red card, since Davis played against Atlético Madrid in February 2004. Barca has received 4 red cards this season and the first 3 were Lenglet, Araújo, and Dembélé. This is also the first time Barca has received 4 red cards after the 2011-12 season. Furthermore, it is also the first time that four players have received red cards in the first half-season after the 2003-04 season.

Save the team at the 88 minutes, Wu Lei staged a Tamudo-style miracle, became the new hero of Catalan Derby

"After we lost one teammate, the opponent began to believe that they could tie." Just as Suarez said after the game, De Jong's red card became the turning point in the game. Espanyol had suffered beating for a long time; however, they got a chance to begin the onslaught after the red card. Especially, Wu Lei played a significant positive role in the match. He managed to score a goal with a header from Mark Rocca's middle-passing. Even though Neto saved the ball because the passing was a little bit high and he couldn't fully hit the ball. But it was already a "warning the tiger by shaking the mountain" during the match (a deliberate act as a warning to the opponent-shock). Then Wu Lei took Vargas's passing and tried to make a shovel, unfortunately, Pique has made a clear first.

Barca's defensive line has almost been destroyed under Espanyol's successively attacking, and Wu Lei give the final stab to them: Naldo passing the ball in a wide range at the 88 minutes, then Mark Roca and Javi Lopez consecutive passed at the right-wing and booted the ball to Vargas. The Argentine sent a straight-pass, just like his fellow Messi did; Meanwhile, Wu Lei's flexible running off the ball just like Suarez. He was ready to respond to the ball. Lenglet was taken aback by surprise, Wu Lei successfully used his speed and explosive power to get rid of the French, and the whole pass and movement were flawless. Wu Lei's final shooting skill was also impeccable. After adjusting on his pace, he calmly aimed the long angle and made the goal by grazing shot. After 2 minutes, Wu Lei had another long shot, but he missed.

There was a precedent that the Catalan Derby ended by equalizer at the final time, which is still an extremely important moment. In June 2007, the two teams competed in Camp Nou. Former Espanyol captain Raúl Tamudo made a goal first and then Messi scored twice that helped the defending champion beyond. One of the goals was scored by Messi's famous "God's Hand". However, Tamudo scored to equalize at the 90 minute, and Barca lost the 3 points which almost in their pockets. Camp Nou became extremely silent, because of Barca lost the control of the Championship. Tamudo, who scored twice, directly controlled the championship and gave the La Liga trophy to Real Madrid, who eventually had the same

points as Barcelona. Compared to Tamudo’s goal, Wu Lei similarly shot at the same time and the same place. Thirteen years later, Wu Lei staged a Tamudo-style miracle and became the new hero of Catalan Derby.

#### 4.2 Themes and categories

News articles coding result		
Theme	category	subcategory
National identity	national pride	
	geographical	
	nationality	
Narrative	emotion	positive
		negative
	history flashback	
	Wu Lei vs. Messi	
	Effect of Wu Lei	in China
		In Spain
		sports and entertainment
		economic value
	Wu Lei’s characteristics	personality
		skill traits
Media power	define Wu	critical comment
		compare with athletes
		compare with pop star
	media itself	quote Spanish local media
		marketing/brand (pr)

## Appendix 5 Materials of Production interviews

### 5.1 Consent form

#### 采访同意书

The Construction of National Identity in Chinese Sports Media

硕士论文

研究人员:郭睿昊, 隆德大学传媒与传播专业硕士在读硕士论文

本论文旨在研究在武磊转会西班牙人后对于武磊保持高度关注的中国体育媒体平台及其产出内容。此篇论文的目的在于研究中国体育媒体是如何通过新闻传媒构建民族认同。采访问题将主要围绕武磊留洋后媒体从业人员工作内容和关注点的变化, 以及专业人士对于民族认同, 媒体价值, 中国足球产业等问题的看法。

每个采访大概会持续一个到一个半小时的时间。在征得您的同意后, 我会使用电子设备记录我们的对话。所有的对话仅会被用于学术分析以及隆德大学传媒与交流专业的硕士论文中。在采访过程中, 您可以根据自己的想法自由地回答问题。您可以决定不回答任何问题, 也可以随时停止采访。

我向您保证, 您将在整个研究期间保持匿名。所收集的有关您的对话和材料会被安全存储, 经过您的同意后, 您的名字可能会被使用。如果您同意参加此次研究, 请在下面签上您的名字。

姓名 \_\_\_\_\_

签名 \_\_\_\_\_

日期 \_\_\_\_\_

## 5.2 Informants information

No.	Name	Occupation	working experience	Date/place
Pilot	Zhang Lei	In-depth sports news journalist and editor	10+ year	March 8th/Wechat
Informant 1	Ge	Sports reporter, La Liga host	3-4 year	March 8th/Barcelona
Informant 2	Ang	Sports reporter, Chinese teacher	1 year	March 8th/Barcelona
Informant 3	Fei	Sports reports, CCTV Madrid station reporter	3-4 year	March 10th/Madrid
Informant 4	Dang	Senior news editor	6 year	March 13th/Wechat
Informant 5	Zhang Bo	Senior desinger	8 year	March 15th/Wehat

## 5.3 Interview guide

### The interview guide (For editors and journalists):

(Basic discuss)

- **General questions:**
  - the company, job description
  - daily work
  - how familiar with Wu Lei?
  - what kind of work have you done about Wu Lei
  - how frequently do you release the news about Wu Lei?
  - Is there any information related to marketing strategies?
  
- **Wu Lei, China and Media**
  - How do you think about Wu as a football player ? sports player?
    - for Chinese football: historical, professional level
    - for fans/audiences
  - How do you understand the relationship between Wu and China?
    - compare to other sports players
    - compare to other celebrities (Chinese context)

- compare to sports player in other countries
- Asia?
- How these affect you when you doing the report about Wu ?
- How do you understand Wu's representation in Chinese media?
  - similarities and differences in different platforms
  - compare different sports
- what is your opinion of that kind of representation ?

(more detailed)

- **Transfer**

- How do you think of his transfer?
  - meaningful ? define?
- How are things changing after his transfer?
  - audiences' reaction : internet traffic (PV and UV)
  - work focus
- What did you do for his transfer? Why?
  - result
- What are the differences when you are writing Wu? (Compare to other La Liga match) Why?
- What kind of articles can receive more viewings?
- what kind of details do you highlight or amplify in the article?

- **Cata Derby**

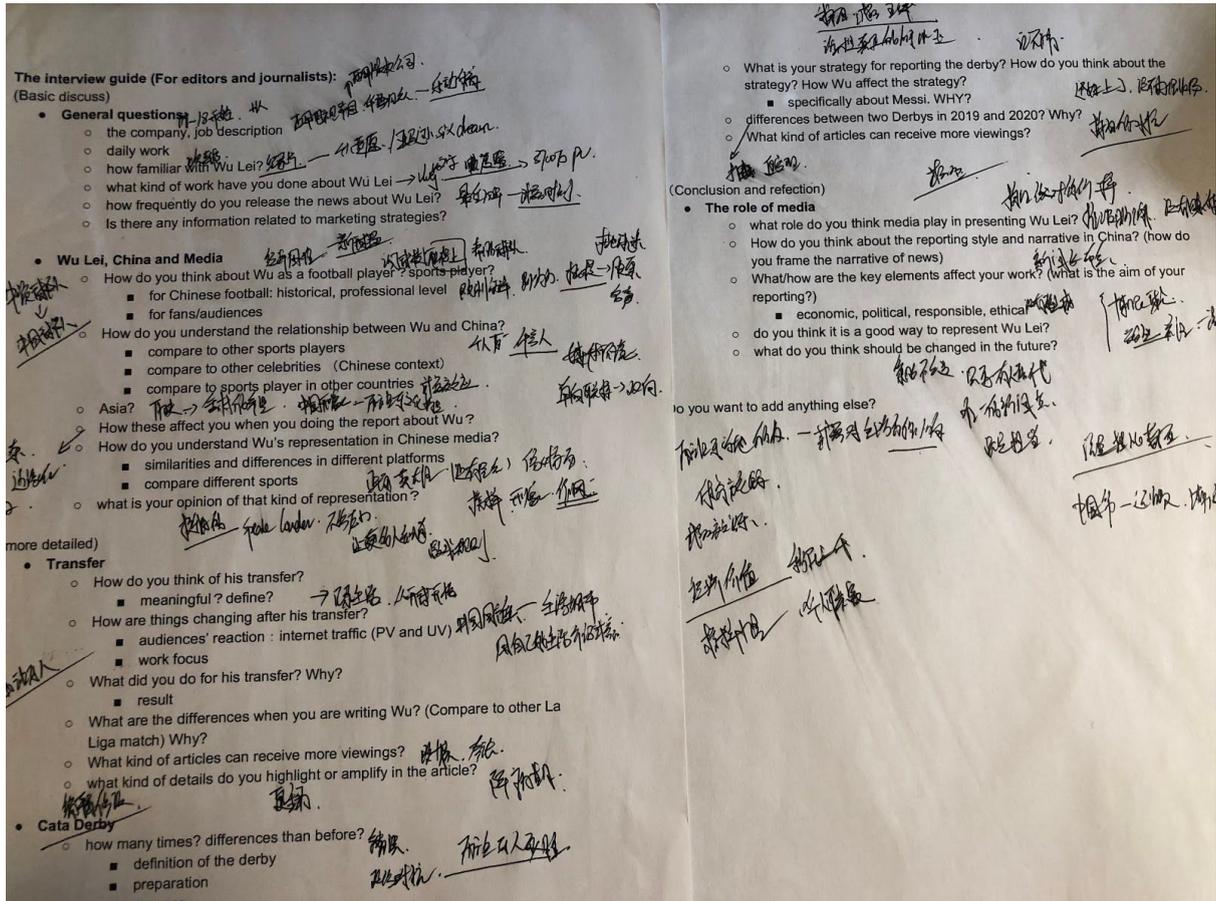
- how many times? differences than before?
  - definition of the derby
  - preparation
  - process
  - important level
  - specific work
- What is your strategy for reporting the derby? How do you think about the strategy? How Wu affect the strategy?
  - specifically about Messi. WHY?
- differences between two Derbys in 2019 and 2020? Why?
- What kind of articles can receive more viewings?

- **The role of media**

- what role do you think media play in presenting Wu Lei?
- How do you think about the reporting style and narrative in China? (how do you frame the narrative of news)
- What/how are the key elements affect your work? (what is the aim of your reporting?)
  - economic, political, responsible, ethical

- do you think it is a good way to represent Wu Lei?
- what do you think should be changed in the future?

Do you want to add anything else?



Notes taking during the interview

The interview guide (For designer):

- **General questions:**
  - the company, job description daily work (what kind of match need a poster)
  - how familiar with Wu Lei? How familiar with football?
  - how many posters have you designed for Wu Lei?
    - how many for derby? why so much?
    - distribution approach
    - reception
  - which one is your perfect? why?

- **Cata Derby Posters**
  - could you explain how did you design these posters ?
    - creative ideas (based on the coding results)
    - what do you want to emphasize?
  - how do you understand the relationship between Messi and Wu?
  - how do you understand the relationship between Wu and Espanyol?
  - do you think they were an equal and right representation of Wu?
  - what was your reaction when you found AS used your work on their website ?
  - differences between two Derbys in 2019 and 2020? Why?
  
- **Wu Lei, China and Media**
  - How do you understand your work value in sports reporting?
  - what role do you think you are playing in representing Wu?
  - what are the differences when you design the poster for Wu and the others?
  - How do you think about Wu as a football player ? sports player?
    - for Chinese football: historical, professional level
    - for fans/audiences
  - How do you understand the relationship between Wu and China?
    - compare to other sports players
    - compare to other celebrities (Chinese context)
    - compare to sports player in other countries
  - Asia?
  - How these affect you when you designing the poster ?
  - How do you understand Wu's representation in Chinese media?
    - similarities and differences in different platforms
    - compare different sports
    - do they have the same thoughts as your work?
  - what is your opinion of that kind of representation ?

Do you want to add anything else?

#### ***5.4 Sample transcription the interview***

*The sample taken half way through the interview, about 25 minutes long conversation*

Q: How has the transfer of Wu Lei affected your work? What have you done for the coverage?

Dang: The Wu Lei news started off really hot because Chinese football players hadn't played in Europe and the European Big 5 League for a long time. What's Wu Lei's role in the team? Will he become the starting player, that's the main focus for the media. So when I first participated in this coverage, we took a lot of actions, including helping to follow some

exclusive reports in the domestic source, such as when will Wu Lei sign the contract, hold the conference, and then the details of his contract, like the transfer fee.

Then we approached with the Spanish Club in advance, contacted with the reporter who will be in Spain. When Wu Lei arrives in Spain and begins to present the conference, we will do the real-time video live broadcasting, to show Wu Lei's first appearance in La Liga in our own broadcasting platform, including his speech at the conference and the shirt display. In addition, Wu Lei also did the interaction activities with fans in the stadium, such as his skill show.

Q: I noticed that you all seem to have the news comparing him to Messi. What do you think of your strategy of reporting?

Dang: People in China have always cherished a hope for Wu Lei's future development, and the clash between Wu Lei and Messi is actually more of a wish for the fans, a hope for the competition between the Chinese football and world football. In fact, the last showdown is a realization of many Chinese fans' expectations for the clash. But as the hope was raised very high, it turned out that Wu Lei was not a starting player for that match, and then there was no direct competition for him and Messi. After this game, the hope for Wu Lei more or less returned to reality, the topic was not as popular as before, and the fans in China became a little more rational.

Actually, the first wave of climax after Wu Lei's transfer news, was his first goal in La Liga, the traffic figure of views showed everything. Then the second climax was his comparison with Messi before that game, but there was no highlights for Wu Lei in the match. All the fans should release their sentiments, when they do not have an exact carrier, their thirst will not be fulfilled, gradually Wu Lei and the media will lose their attention. The transfer for Wu Lei is quite a hot topic, but you need to make continuous exciting news, so that people will follow closely with your coverage and everything.

Q: You just talked about fans' attention, in addition to this match with Messi, after Wu Lei's transfer, what do you think is the change for the attention of La Liga?

Dang: Actually the third wave of climax was when Wu Lei scored a huge goal, to send the Spaniards into the UEFA Europa League. After the match, all Spanish fans rushed into the field, and a crazy fan lifted Wu Lei over his head, let him ride on his neck, that scene was quite shocking, the Chinese fans felt that our players can also play in this football culture and atmosphere, that Wu Lei was really part of the show. Those were the three peak points for Wu Lei, when the second season came, his topic declined a little bit. There were still be a traffic wave when he scored, but it was not as huge as the first year, and during the first half of the season, the club played very badly, there was not too much highlights for the team and Wu Lei, his role was between the starting player and the substitution.

Q: Will there be any change for the coverage?

Dang: Basically there is no special coverage in the second season, there is only one separate column for Wu Lei, we will continue to follow, all kinds of details for his on court and off court news, but it's not like the first season any more, no more packaging coverage for Wu Lei.

Q: What about the traffic figure?

Dang: When Wu Lei scored, the traffic views basically would hit from two million to eight million. Normally the traffic views for the channel stabled around half million without Wu Lei's news, so Wu Lei's news would generate 1.5 million views for the channel in average.

The magnitude is hard to tell, and it may be around two million, normally Wu Lei's news stands for 80% of the figure for international football channel.

Q: How does it compare to Real Madrid and Barcelona?

Dang: When Wu Lei scores, it will be higher than Barcelona and Real Madrid. If he doesn't score, then the Barcelona and Real Madrid match reports will be higher. The two million views I mentioned was when Wu Lei scored, and when Wu Lei did not score, it was around one million.

Q: What is the average figure for Real Madrid and Barcelona?

Dang: It should be from 100,000 to 200,000, the match report would be more than 200,000.

Q: I know when you are covering important athletes and events, you usually have a schedule. Is it the same when reporting Wu Lei?

Dang: We usually have a discussion after the match. That is to say, if there is a particularly good point, we can talk about it before the match. But more often than not, it is difficult to plan in advance because so many things can happen during a football match. Will it become a focus? And when? Is there a better topic? It's really hard to say.

For example, I don't think you have as many opportunities as you want to speak with Wu Lei, right? Normally, it is impossible for you to keep a close communication with him as I do. If you're unable to do this before each game, it's really hard to learn the details of him. If you don't have these details, the only source you can refer to is the game itself. How's the match going? Is he in the starting lineup? How long does he play? Whether the head coach trusts him or not? Some of these topics are derived from the game, then you expand them in your report. Therefore, most of your work can only be done after the match. You discuss key issues, make in-depth analysis on important topics, and find out why certain perspectives are selected.

Our daily report on Wu Lei is mainly based on his matches. This is our starting point. Wu Lei has a public account on WeChat called "Micro Diary", and we used to forward each article,

but the effect is not ideal. How so? One possible reason could be that the content is too plain, without much focus. The other is that Wu Lei's impact is not as big as people imagine, unlike Yao Ming, Liu Xiang, Li Na, right?

Q: What impacted his influences, in your opinion?

Dang: Wu Lei is pretty extroverted. First of all, if you look at all his interviews, including the videos of some interviews he did when he was a child, you will find that Wu Lei is actually very cautious when he talks. With this personality, when facing difficulties or breakthroughs, his style is to endure, enduring and then slowly accumulates experience. There will be a breakthrough one day. He is not like Cristiano Ronaldo, for that kind of player, he would be like, if I encounter difficulties, I will speak out first, I will express my attitude first. Wu Lei will not express his attitude first, but of course I believe he's a dreamer. By looking at what he said in Wu Lei's Diary and in his interview, he is someone who has the feelings of home and country. I think the observing Wu Lei's words rationally, he is a hero, but he can not become a national idol.

So the two prominent points I want to say are actually contradictory. I think his character of an ordinary person, coupled with his current feelings of home and country, these two personal characters can not compliment each other, so that he can not become a more successful person, that is, become like Yao Ming or Liu Xiang.

Q: But when covering his news, it seems that you have already regarded him as a super star like Liu Xiang and Yao Ming. Do you describe him as the hope of the whole country and the king of Catalonia?

Dang: You know, in fact he earned less after playing abroad. What else risk does he take? I'm sure that I will have more opportunities when playing overseas, but at the same time I will take more risks. Leaving the comfort zone is a double-edged sword. Wu Lei's first season is amazing. When Chinese players went to abroad in the past several years, they rarely had the chances to play, so Wu Lei's performance is surprising. However, he lacks self-confidence and fortitude like Yao Ming or Li Na. In result, I think Wu Lei is the whole country's hope, not the whole country's pride. You can regard him as an oasis in the desert of Chinese soccer.

Q: You also mentioned that he is a "lighthouse" and "guide" of Chinese football in your reporting. The reporting of Wu Lei news are positive. But when I did interviews in Spain, I learned that he is not perfect player, right?

Dang: Yes. On the one hand, we need establish a comprehensive and positive impression for Wu Lei, because he is the whole country's hope. Here I can share a story with you. Once he was substituted in advance in a match, a reporter asked the coach why he substituted a player who had one assist in press conference. Wu Lei learned it and then sent a message to Chinese reporters questioning the reason for hurting the Chinese players.

I think it's a part of his personality. He dislikes conflicts. He dislikes to be sharp. Because he doesn't trust media. He feels that both foreign and Chinese media are not reliable.

Q: Are you going to ask questions at the press conference afterwards?

Dang: Yes, of course. but no longer to ask the direct mention of Wu Lei, we will change another way for some questions.

Q: So is this a way for you to maintain the relationship with him?

Dang: Yes. After that, we actually considered the impact on him and we wanted to take care of his feelings first. It can be regarded as maintaining the relationship, but the benefits are very small, I think you really need the relationship, because he has contacted you first, you have to take care of his feelings. But how much benefits do you get? Not too much.

Q: Let's return to his nickname in the Chinese media reports, you called him the King of the World? From the overpoint of reporting strategy, is this an exaggeration or a fact?

Dang: I don't think this is a click bait, it's quite normal in nowadays media, they are converting information to various communities or on social media. The King of the World for Wu Lei is actually a code name, you can call him that and it's not a clickbait at first. Maybe this is not perfect match with his real strength, but the Chinese media was waiting for such a big breakthrough for a long time, and the best football players in China rarely get the chance to play overseas, or they don't have the choice to go abroad. So at that time, in that Chinese football environment, Wu Lei's transfer was really a novel story.

Of course, the traffic views is something we have to concern, but the nickname of the King of the World is mainly a topic for fans to discuss, we can not coverage news without the social communication or social media, so we have to consider their feelings and thoughts, right?

Q: You mentioned the social media. Can you talk a little bit more of it?

Dang: And now people can not function without socialising, if your content is not sociable , you will lose a lot of young users, that means you can only support the old users, and old users will eventually mean no users, because the old users will slowly disappear. When you lose these old users (and not adding new users), this is not sustainable, this thing. What can I say? There will certainly be some generation gap between your old users and new users, so you have to find that balance spot. For Sports News nowadays, you have to aim for producing something that is customised for each generation group, learn from our competitive media, such as bilibili and Hupu Sport.

If you leave the same coverage for Japanese media, if they don't have an overseas player for a long time, in fact, they will certainly reports better than China. I think you are being scolded for the coverage you do, like the aspects you came up when comparing, maybe you left out those interesting or professional aspects. For example, the Japanese media often make some table tennis show, they actually did a very professional job, right? When Japanese does their own table tennis comparison, they are also put Chinese players alongside Japanese players, you will accept it and enjoy it.

When it comes to the Chinese media, we can portrait Messi as the Ultimate Hero, but we might not be very good at balancing the various aspects, and also a bit too biased when creating comparison, which caused some misunderstanding as a result. I still believe it is ok to put them together, I am not saying this idea should be abandoned. you want to satisfy everyone, but when you try to do this, there may be some aspects that make certain people displeased.

### 5.5 Coding table examples

Quotes	descriptive codes	analytical codes	categories
“Internet traffic must rely on an attractive moment. If we don’t provide a platform to carry the traffic or consume one case too much, the audiences’ needs won’t be able to satisfy in both situations. In the end, because of Wu Lei’s performance is not stable and he can’t provide consecutive stimulation, people will lose Interest of him.”	internet traffic concern about the match user needs	profits report strategy	economic value strategy
“Take the first derby as an example, “who is the king of Catalunya?” is the most popular topic between users, the news we need to produce cannot break away from audiences. We tried to make the thing interesting. If we cannot do our job well, people will feel uncomfortable. entertainment can be professional like the Japanese media has made a chart to compare Chinese and Japanese table tennis player. That one was interesting and successful. We haven’t found our way to do this.”	derby slogan attract audience japanese media	communcation strategy entertainment refelction	report strategy sport and entertainment
In the Chinese context, it’s understandable that all the media want to combine sports with entertainment to attract more audiences. In this era, if the media only want to do sports under the vertical field, it is hard for them to get more users.	chinese context entertaining media context	reflection	report strategy sport and entertainment
Media should act a role to speak louder. If we don’t speak louder, how can we make everyone know about him? Even sometimes we may do some exaggerated news, but he should be able to handle the side effect. He is a professional player, doesn’t he? This is the rule of the game.	exaggerated style profession player rule	report strategy responsibility of players	meidi power reflect on Wu Lei
The news is not serious anymore, the content needs to be socialised, entertaining. This is what our user like nowadays. If we don’t do this, we will lose young users. We have to take care of them.	unserious entertaining user needs	refelction	meidia power

### 5.6 Themes and category

Interviews coding result		
Theme	category	subcategory
personal information	occupation	
	work on Wu	
media power	report strategy	method
		content
	reflect the role of media	sport and socialised media
		sport and entertainment
		economic value
national identity	different football culture	
	different football industry	
reflection of Chinese football	Wu Lei	
	other footballers	
	industry	
Catalunya derby	works/content	strategy
		narrative
	reflection	report strategy
	effect	internet traffic
		media itself
	differences between the two derby matches	

