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**Special Issue Title:**

**The Asia Pacific sport and social science special issue with the special section on the football industry in Asia**

**Covid-19 and Sport in the Asia Pacific region**

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**Covid-19 and Sport in the Asia Pacific region**

**The Covid-19 pandemic and the sport industry in Asia-Pacific**

Without a doubt, Coronavirus is the main keyword that defines the socio-cultural and economic climate of 2020. Few areas in the world were immune from this global pandemic, and the global sport industry has also been severely affected by this viral disease (Ruihley and Li 2020). Covid-19 hit Wuhan in China in late 2019, then in early 2020 it spread to Daegu in South Korea. More than seven hundred passengers and crews on the Diamond Princess Ferry docked on the port of Yokohama in Japan were infected by Coronavirus. East Asia was the first region that suffered from this epidemic before WHO declared it a global pandemic. The professional baseball and football leagues in this area, which normally start their new seasons in March, had delayed their opening matches until the virus is under control. Additionally, the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games was postponed until July 2021. After having severely disturbed the sporting calendar in East Asia in the first quarter of 2020, Covid-19 invaded the West. This was the moment the operation of the global sport industry from East Asia via Europe to North America stopped completely without knowing the timing of its resumption (BBC 2020).

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In late Spring, while many Western countries were under strict lockdown, a few East Asian nations, notably Taiwan and South Korea, were gradually beginning to restart its sporting life. In Taiwan, the Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL) opened its new season on 11 April after a nearly one-month delay (Aspinwall 2020). The Korean professional baseball also started its opening match on 5 May, and the new season of the K-League football kicked off on 8 May (Butler 2020). While the sporting competitions took place behind closed doors with artificial crowd noise, these matches were the only live sport available to watch in the world at that time (Duerden 2020). It should be noted that East Asian professional sport leagues are positioned in the semi-peripheral (or semi-core) zone in the global sport industry (Houlihan et al. 2010, Jiang and Lee 2016, Lee 2014, Tan and Bairner 2010). Although these leagues attracted many foreign players from every continent, their contents are largely consumed in the domestic markets. Highly skilled East Asian athletes tend to seek career opportunities in Western Europe and the United States to enhance their skills and reputation. Before the pandemic, North American and European media hardly paid attention to the sport industry in Asia.

Albeit temporally, the Covid-19 pandemic created a new niche for East Asian Sport in the West. As the Major League Baseball (MLB) postponed its 2020 season indefinitely, some American baseball fans were looking for live baseball actions elsewhere as an alternative. The CPBL was the first major baseball league in the world that has opened its regular season since the outbreak of the viral disease. With the easing restrictions, the CPBL even allowed a limited number of fans to watch the matches in the stand from early May (Russell 2020). This resumption of baseball in Taiwan attracted meaningful American media and public interest. When the Korean baseball league started in May, ESPN decided to broadcast live the selection of the Korean baseball matches regularly despite the time difference in order to satisfy the desire of baseball fans in the US to experience live matches (Huddleston 2020). Until the MLB season opener being taken place in late July, the East Asian ball games entertained North American baseball followers. This consumption of Asian baseball programmes in the sport broadcasting market in the US was one of the unexpected consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.

A similar pattern can also be observed in the European sport industry. The English Premier League was halted for three months from mid-March to early June in the middle of the 2019-2020 season (BBC 2020). At this juncture, the opening of South Korea's K-League football in May during the pandemic triggered European football fans' curiosity. BBC's flagship football programme, Match of the Day Live, aired a match between Jeonbuk Hyundai

Motors FC and Suwon Samsung Blue Wings FC (Begley 2020). It was the first time in the history that a K-League football was broadcast live in the UK. Of course, we should not overestimate the commercial value and popularity of this debut of the K-League on a British TV channel. Objectively, the Korean football was rather a filler content when the mainstream football matches were absent from the European football business. Also, it was not so clear how much this one-off K-League programme penetrated the English television sport market. Nevertheless, the BBC Match of the Day Live at least publicised a semi-peripheral football league to UK audiences, and this was a minor but not insignificant incident to which the Covid-19 pandemic gave rise.

### **Pandemic, geopolitics, and the Olympics in East Asia**

In addition to the industrial opportunity, coronavirus poses challenges also. Not only does the Covid-19 pandemic reveals the fragility of a globalised neo-liberal international system, but it also triggers the rise of nationalist politics in the world (Woods, et al. in press). Furthermore, this fluctuating international relations in (post) Covid-19 era has been worsening geopolitical tensions in the Asia Pacific region. It appears that the two Olympic Games to be held in Tokyo and Beijing will not be immune from such a political turmoil. Even during the preparation stage, the Covid-19 related geopolitical tensions and nationalistic rivalries overshadow these two global sports mega-events. The relations between Japan and South Korea have been uneasy and complicated due to their unfortunate colonial past (Lee 2015). Their relationship today is particularly cold due to the recent trade war between them (Stangarone 2020). In the midst of the escalating tensions, the Japanese government closed its border to Korean people without notice when the South Korean city of Daegu became the epicentre of coronavirus in early March (McCurry 2020). The South Korean government considered such a unilateral decision a diplomatically disrespectful gesture, and this perception stirred up a deep-seated ant-Japanism in South Korea. The circulation of nationalistic social current in this country notably intensified the tone of an anti-Tokyo 2020 campaigns which had first appeared earlier in this year because of the Korea-Japan economic dispute (Abe and Takuya 2020). Some radical nationalists even called for a boycott of the Olympic Games in Tokyo. This fierce demonstration continued until the IOC decided to delay the Olympics for one year in late March. Partly due to this postponement, the rallies against Tokyo 2020 in Korea has now mostly been subsided. Nevertheless, Covid-19 has certainly brought additional complexity to sensitive relations between Japan and South Korea, and the 2020(1) Olympic Games in (post) Covid-19 world is likely to mirror the old foe relations between the two sides.

It is probable that the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing presents a political stage where the power games between China and the West, notably the US, will be displayed. Recently, the aim of Chinese foreign policy has distinctively become more ambitious (Harris 2020). With the increasing economic and political influence of China, the US is particularly wary of their hegemony in the neoliberal world order being challenged by China (Usher 2020). At the same time, the two giant economies are fervently embracing nationalist politics in order to secure their domestic political capital in the face of the oscillating power balance in the international system (Harris 2020). The outbreak of the Covid-19 has been further worsening the US-Sino relations. President Donald Trump is blaming China for being the origin of the “Wuhan” virus whereas China once suspected the US to have covertly spread the virus in Hubei province (Myers 2020, Sevastopulo and Manson 2020). In the middle of the pandemic, President Xi Jinping sent a signal of reconciliation, saying that China has “no intention to fight either a Cold War or a hot war with any country” at his speech at the UN general assembly (Wintour and Borger 2020). Despite this, China scepticism in the West shows no sign of being abated. This situation has created a public space where Chinese human rights records and its controversial re-education centre in Xinjiang province are openly criticised by Western intellectuals and journalists. In this context, a voice against the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in China is gaining its momentum, and the British foreign secretary Dominic Rabb further commented that his country may boycott Beijing 2022 if China sustains its oppressive practice against the Uighur ethnic group (Wintour 2020). Simply put, it appears that the coronavirus pandemic has formed the alliance of Western liberal democracies against Chinese exploitative domestic regime and its expansionist foreign policy. If this trend continues, the 2022 Winter Olympic Games may take place in the coldest political climate ever.

### **The special section on the football industry in Asia**

Since the 2002 FIFA World Cup Korea and Japan, the football industry in Asia has been expanded rapidly. After this World Cup, international media begin to pay more attention to football in Asia, mainly to the two World Cup hosts, and this enabled a number of Korean and Japanese footballer to develop their athlete career in European football leagues. Manchester United midfielder Park Ji Sung and Kagawa Shinji, and a striker for Tottenham Hotspur Son Heung-min are arguably the three most famous Asian football players in Premier League. The 2002 Football World Cup also created an environment that facilitated the launch of the AFC (Asia Football Confederation) Champions League. This competition was first introduced in the 2002-2003 season, and 16 professional clubs from 11 Asian countries

participated in this inaugural tournament. At the 18<sup>th</sup> AFC Champions League in 2020, 52 clubs from 23 associations were competing for the championship but this league has now halted due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2006, Australia left the OFC (Oceania Football Confederation) and joined the AFC in order to take part in a more competitive the AFC Champions League. This increasing number of professional football clubs in this continent is indicative of burgeoning football business in Asia.

Women's football is also rapidly developing in Asia. In fact, the Asian Ladies Football Confederation organised its first championship in 1975, and this is the oldest international female football competition in the world. Six nations including Australia participated in this very first continental cup football competition. Particularly, China made a distinctive contribution to the development of women's football in Asia and in the world. This communist nation hosted the inaugural FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991. While the profile of this competition was relatively low at that time in comparison with its male counterpart, this was the first post-Cold War international sporting event taken place in China, and this event planted the seed of Chinese international football and sporting ambition in the twenty-first century (Williams, et al. 2017). This country grabbed another chance to host the 2003 Women's World Cup, but it had to be relocated to the US only a few months before the grand opening because of the outbreak of the SARS epidemic (FIFA 2003). This records the first large-scale global sporting event to have been rescheduled due to a contagious viral disease. A sporting life soon resumed in China, and it managed to stage the following FIFA World Cup in 2007. Despite China's effort to play the role of a pioneer in the world of female football (Tan, et al. 2016), the first Asian country who won the Women's FIFA World Cup in 2011 was Japan. 2011 was the year when earthquake and tsunami hit the Tohoku region in Japan which claimed more than 20,000 people in the country. Local media reported that the victory of the Japanese footballers at the World Cup brought some hope to Japanese people who were in sorrow (Masahiro 2011).

These episodes of the FIFA Women's World Cup and the development of men's football in Asia since the 2002 FIFA World Cup Korea and Japan clearly demonstrate an increasing significance of Asian football industry in a highly competitive global sport business. Reflecting this trend, we include a special section on the football industry in Asia in this year's edition of Asia Pacific Sport in Social Science special issue. We have carefully selected four essays on football in Asia. This special issue also contains six regular research papers.

In the opening article, Jae Chul Seo, Robert Turick and Daehwan Kim look at American media portrayals of Asian and Asian American figure skaters. Given that this winter sport is a conventionally white-dominant sporting field, their study critically examines how American

media perceive the invasion of Asian to a “white” cultural space. In the next essay, Yu-Hsien Tseng investigates the circulation of gendered media discourse on Taiwanese female basketball through social media platforms. This study problematises the reproduction of the established gender order in the social media accounts of women’s basketball. The third article concerns the problem of match-fixing in the Taiwanese professional baseball league. Here, Chien-Chun Tzeng, Ping-Chao Lee and Guo-Hen Tzeng explain how the conventional practice of the code of brotherhood sustains the organised manipulation of professional matches in Taiwan. The fourth essay deals with a public perception of elite sport development policy in Taiwan. Using the stakeholder theory as the main conceptual framework, Chen-Yueh Chen and Yi-Hsiu Lin shows the difference between the policymakers’ priorities and public opinion on the development of elite athletes in the Republic of China. In the following paper, Jinming Zheng and Dongfeng Liu review Japanese elite sport development policy. With reference to the multiple stream framework, this research identifies a number of key factors that help effective delivery of elite sport policy in Japan. The last regular research paper in this special issue aims to categorise the socially constructed identities of student athletes in Japan. To do so, Yuta Ono, Masanori Kaji, Hidenori Tomozoe, and Takeshi Yoshinaga investigate various media articles and government documents.

The first article in the section on the football industry in Asia is concerned with the ownership of football clubs in the Chinese football industry. Here, Hanhan Xu and her colleagues reveal the Chinese practice of *guanxi* (relationship building through gifting and reciprocity) plays a pivotal role in the formation of a network between various stakeholders in Chinese football. They also disclose the connection between political elites and private capital in the football industry in China. Next, Bárbara Marin and Chungmi Lee investigate the recent trend of Japanese companies’ investment in foreign football clubs. They find that while most Japanese investors do not gain profitable returns, the Japanese ownership of foreign football clubs can have a positive impact on the development of local football talents and community football. The third essay in this special section is about the legacy of the 2002 FIFA World Cup in South Korea and Japan. In this article, Jeongbeom Hahm, Tae-Ahn Kang and Hiroataka Matsuoka examine how the hosting of this global football mega-event affects people’s participation in football in South Korea and Japan. They reveal that people’s memory of the 2002 FIFA World Cup which was held on their home soil still positively influences people’s motivation to play football in the two nations. The final essay in this special issue is about how professional football clubs in China contribute to the construction of local identities. In this respect, Kaixiao Jiang and Alan Bairner examine the case of the Greenland Shenhua Football

Club (Shanghai) and the Sinobo Guoan Football Club (Beijing) with the aim of discovering the distinctive nature of football fandom in China.

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