

# ***Regional Identity and Football Fandom in Jiangsu Province: A Study of Inter-City Alienation and Provincial Identification***

**Haowei Wang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*School of Humanities and Social Science, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Clear Water Bay, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR, China*

*a. Wanghaowei715@gmail.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** This study delves into the socio-cultural dynamics of regional identity and football fandom in Jiangsu Province, China. It investigates the lack of provincial identification among residents and their alienation from other cities within the province, as well as the interplay between this distinctive phenomenon of territorial identification and the football support base of football clubs in Jiangsu Province. Employing a qualitative approach, the research utilized in-depth interviews and participant observation to gather comprehensive data. The study reveals that that regional identity largely determines how well fans support different teams, and football fandom significantly shapes regional identities as well. Interestingly, the sense of regional identity behind a club like Jiangsu Suning FC, which is named after a province, is quite different from those other clubs that are named after a particular city. The rituals and practices associated with supporting these teams create a shared identity among fans, reinforcing their unique regional identity. This study contributes to understanding the complex dynamics of regional identity, inter-city relations, and the role of sports in shaping these dynamics in contemporary China.

**Keywords:** football fandom, regional identity, Jiangsu Province

## **1. Introduction**

The province of Jiangsu, located in the eastern part of China, is a region rich in cultural diversity and economic prosperity. With a population of over 80 million people, it is one of the most densely populated provinces in the country. Despite its economic success and cultural richness, the province has been grappling with a unique socio-cultural phenomenon - a lack of identification with the provincial administrative region among its residents. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the realm of professional football fandom.

In the past, Jiangsu Suning Football Club, a prominent team in the province, managed to garner widespread approval and support from fans across the region. However, following the club's dissolution, the remaining Jiangsu teams, including Nantong Zhiyun Football Club, Nanjing City Football Club, Suzhou Dongwu Football Club, and Wuxi Wugo Football Club, have struggled to gain similar recognition. These teams are often only considered as 'home teams' by fans residing in the cities where their home grounds are located, a situation that starkly contrasts with the norm in other Chinese provinces. For instance, in Hubei and Jilin provinces, fans tend to support the team from one of the provincial cities as their home team, even when there is no team named after the province.

This paper aims to explore the socio-cultural underpinnings of this unique phenomenon in Jiangsu province. It seeks to understand the reasons behind the lack of provincial identification among the residents of different cities in Jiangsu and their alienation from other cities in the province. The focus will be on the world of football fans, a sphere that tends to be a more visible reflection of wider social trends and attitudes.

The research question that this paper seeks to answer is: What social and cultural factors contribute to the lack of identification with the provincial administrative region among residents of Jiangsu province, as reflected in their football fandom?

This question is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it offers an opportunity to explore the complex dynamics of regional identity and inter-city relations in Jiangsu province. Secondly, it allows for an examination of the role of sports, particularly football, in shaping and reflecting these dynamics. Lastly, it contributes to the broader academic discourse on regional identity and sports fandom, particularly in the Chinese context.

The paper will approach this question through a multi-pronged methodology. Firstly, it will review existing literature on regional identity, inter-city relations, and sports fandom, with a particular focus on the Chinese context. Secondly, it will analyze data from various sources, including media reports, fan forums, and social media platforms, to gain insights into the attitudes and behaviors of football fans in Jiangsu province. Lastly, it will conduct interviews with fans, club officials, and local residents to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

By exploring this unique socio-cultural phenomenon in Jiangsu province, this paper hopes to shed light on the complex dynamics of regional identity and inter-city relations in contemporary China. It also aims to contribute to the understanding of the role of sports, particularly football, in shaping these dynamics.

In the following sections, this paper will delve into the historical context of football in Jiangsu province, analyze the current state of football fandom in the region, and explore the social and cultural factors contributing to the lack of provincial identification among the residents. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for the understanding of regional identity and inter-city relations in China.

## 2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of regional identity and a lack of a sense of belonging to a larger provincial or national entity is not unique to Jiangsu Province, China. It is a common occurrence in many parts of the world, often influenced by historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. In the context of Jiangsu Province, the study by Wu, Xu and Yeh titled “Urban Development in Post-Reform China: State, Market, and Space” provides a comprehensive analysis of the regional disparities and the lack of a unified identity among the people of different regions in Jiangsu Province [1].

The authors argue that the rapid urbanization and economic development in Jiangsu have led to a significant socio-economic divide among its regions, which in turn has contributed to the lack of a unified provincial identity. They further suggest that the state’s development policies have inadvertently reinforced these regional identities, further alienating the people from a broader sense of belonging to Jiangsu Province.

The role of football as a reflection of social and cultural conditions has been extensively studied in the literature. Giulianotti and Robertson’s work titled “Globalization and Football” provides a detailed analysis of how football fandom and support for various teams can reflect and influence social identities [2]. They argue that football fandom is not just about the sport itself, but also about the social, cultural, and even political identities that are associated with supporting a particular team.

In their study, Giulianotti and Robertson discuss the concept of “thick” and “thin” cosmopolitanism in the context of football fandom [2]. “Thick” cosmopolitanism refers to the deep,

meaningful connections that fans form with their teams, often transcending national and cultural boundaries. On the other hand, “thin” cosmopolitanism refers to more superficial, transient connections, often facilitated by media and global connectivity.

The authors also discuss the concept of “glocalization” in football, where global and local influences interact and shape the fandom. They argue that while football has become a global phenomenon, local and regional identities continue to play a significant role in shaping the fandom.

In conclusion, the literature suggests that regional identities and a lack of a unified provincial or national identity can be influenced by a variety of factors, including socio-economic disparities and state policies. Football, as a social and cultural phenomenon, can both reflect and influence these identities. The concepts of “thick” and “thin” cosmopolitanism and “glocalization” provide useful frameworks for understanding the complex dynamics of football fandom and its relationship with social and cultural identities.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs an ethnographic approach, drawing on the principles of anthropology, to explore the socio-cultural dynamics of football fandom and regional identity in Jiangsu province. Ethnography, as a core methodology in anthropology, provides a comprehensive description of life in a specific setting, emphasizing the understanding of the native’s point of view [3]. In this case, the specific setting is the cities within Jiangsu province, and the natives are the residents and football fans within these cities.

#### 3.1. Research Design

The research design is qualitative, focusing on the subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the participants. The study aims to understand the phenomenon of inter-city alienation and provincial identification within Jiangsu province from the perspective of football fans. The research questions guiding this study are:

- (1) How does football fandom in Jiangsu Province reflect and shape regional identities, and how does this differ across various cities within the province?
- (2) How does this identification reflect on their sense of belonging to their city and the province as a whole?
- (3) How does the support for local football clubs influence the sense of belonging to Jiangsu Province as a whole among its residents, and how does this contribute to the understanding of ethnicity in the Chinese context?

#### 3.2. Data Collection Methods

Data collection will be conducted through in-depth interviews and participant observation. In-depth interviews allow for a deep understanding of the participants’ experiences and perceptions. The interviews will be semi-structured, providing room for participants to express their views freely while ensuring that the research questions are addressed.

Participant observation involves the researcher participating in the daily activities of the football fans, attending football matches, fan club meetings, and other related events. This method allows for a first-hand experience and observation of the interactions and behaviors of the fans, providing rich, contextual data.

### **3.3. Data Analysis Methods**

Data analysis will follow the thematic analysis approach. This involves coding the data, identifying patterns, and grouping these patterns into themes. The themes will be analyzed in relation to the research questions and the broader socio-cultural context of Jiangsu province. The analysis will be guided by the principles of reflexivity, ensuring that the researcher's interpretations and biases do not overshadow the voices of the participants.

### **3.4. Ethical Considerations**

The study will adhere to the ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for the participants' rights and dignity. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, their role, and their right to withdraw at any time. Their identities will be kept confidential and their data will be used solely for the purpose of this study.

In conclusion, this ethnographic study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics within Jiangsu province as reflected in the phenomenon of football fandom. The methodology is designed to ensure that the study is rigorous, ethical, and respectful of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

## **4. Regional Identities in Jiangsu Province**

### **4.1. Historical Context of Regional Identities in Jiangsu Province**

Jiangsu Province, located on the eastern coast of China, is a region rich in history and cultural diversity. However, this diversity has also led to a complex and multifaceted regional identity. The province is divided into three main linguistic regions: the Zhongyuan official language area in the north, the Jianghuai official language area in the center, and the Wu language area in the south. This linguistic diversity is a reflection of the cultural diversity within the province, with each region having its own unique traditions and customs [4].

The linguistic and cultural differences between the regions have contributed to a sense of alienation between the cities within the province. This is further exacerbated by the economic disparities between the regions. The southern part of Jiangsu, for instance, is significantly more developed than the northern part, leading to a sense of economic inequality and competition between the regions [5].

The lack of a unified provincial identity is also reflected in the attitudes of the residents towards each other. According to a study by Chen and Wang, new-generation migrants in urban China, including those in Jiangsu, often struggle to integrate into the urban society, and this is largely due to the structural and institutional constraints that prevent them from accessing opportunities and resources [6].

Furthermore, the concept of *suzhi*, or quality, plays a significant role in the social stratification within the province. *Suzhi* is a value articulation of human subjectivity and is often used to differentiate between individuals, communities, and populations. In the context of Jiangsu, the possession or lack of *suzhi* by an individual or group seems increasingly attributable to place of origin, further reinforcing the regional identities and contributing to the alienation between the cities [7].

In conclusion, the lack of a sense of belonging to Jiangsu Province as a whole, and the alienation between the cities within the province, can be attributed to the cultural, linguistic, and economic differences between the regions, as well as the social stratification based on the concept of *suzhi*. These factors have created a complex and multifaceted regional identity within Jiangsu Province, which is reflected in the attitudes and behaviors of its residents.

## 4.2. The Impact of Socio-economic Disparities on Regional Identities

The socio-economic disparities within Jiangsu Province have played a significant role in shaping the regional identities of its inhabitants. This is particularly evident when examining the economic development of the different cities within the province.

Jiangsu Province, despite its relatively small size, is characterized by significant economic disparities. The province's economy is divided into two distinct regions: the highly developed southern region and the less developed northern region. The southern region, which includes cities such as Suzhou, Wuxi, and Nanjing, is known for its prosperous economy, advanced infrastructure, and high standard of living. This region has been the beneficiary of significant investment and economic reform, which has led to rapid industrialization and urbanization. The northern region, on the other hand, has lagged behind in terms of economic development. Despite recent efforts to stimulate economic growth in this region, the disparity between the north and the south remains significant.

These socio-economic disparities have had a profound impact on the regional identities of the inhabitants of Jiangsu Province. The residents of the more affluent southern region often identify themselves as being distinct from those in the less developed northern region. This sense of regional identity is reinforced by the economic competition between the two regions, which often leads to feelings of superiority among the residents of the southern region and feelings of inferiority among those in the northern region.

Furthermore, these socio-economic disparities have also contributed to the lack of a unified provincial identity. The economic differences between the cities within the province have led to a sense of alienation and disconnection among the residents. This is particularly evident in the attitudes of the residents towards each other. For instance, residents of the more affluent cities often look down upon those from the less developed cities, further exacerbating the sense of alienation and disconnection [8].

In conclusion, the socio-economic disparities within Jiangsu Province have played a significant role in shaping the regional identities of its inhabitants. These disparities have led to a sense of alienation and disconnection among the residents, contributing to the lack of a unified provincial identity. As such, addressing these socio-economic disparities is crucial in fostering a sense of unity and shared identity among the residents of Jiangsu Province.

## 4.3. The Influence of Football Clubs on Regional Identities

Football has become an important area of focus in China, especially in recent years. The sport has been promoted as a means to foster unity and pride among the population. This emphasis on football also aims to enhance the sense of national identity and belonging among its citizens, including those in Jiangsu Province.

The influence of football clubs on regional identities in Jiangsu Province can be seen in several ways. Firstly, football clubs serve as a platform for local residents to express their regional pride and identity. The success of a local football club on the national or even international stage can significantly boost the pride and sense of belonging among the local population. This is particularly true in Jiangsu Province, where football clubs such as Jiangsu Suning have achieved considerable success in recent years.

Secondly, football clubs often reflect the unique cultural characteristics of their respective regions. This can be seen in the way clubs are managed, the style of football they play, and even the behavior of their fans. For instance, the aggressive and passionate playing style of Jiangsu Suning is often seen as a reflection of the hardworking and resilient spirit of the people in Jiangsu Province.

Thirdly, football clubs can also contribute to the development of regional identities through their community engagement activities. Many football clubs in Jiangsu Province have established football academies and community programs to promote the sport among local residents. These activities not only help to cultivate a new generation of football fans and players, but also strengthen the connection between the club and the local community.

However, it's important to note that the influence of football clubs on regional identities can also lead to divisions and conflicts. The presence of multiple football clubs within Jiangsu Province, each representing a specific city, can indeed reinforce local identities and potentially dilute a broader sense of provincial belonging. This phenomenon is not unique to Jiangsu or to China; it is a common occurrence in regions worldwide where multiple football clubs exist within a relatively small geographical area.

In Jiangsu Province, each city's football club serves as a focal point for local pride and identity. The clubs, including Nantong Zhiyun Football Club, Nanjing City Football Club, Suzhou Dongwu Football Club, and Wuxi Wugo Football Club, each have their own distinct fan bases primarily composed of residents from their respective cities. These fans often identify strongly with their local club, viewing it as a symbol of their city's culture, history, and values. This strong local identification can lead to a sense of alienation from other cities within the province and a diminished sense of provincial identity.

The intense rivalries that often exist between these clubs can further exacerbate these feelings of localism. Derby matches between clubs from different cities within Jiangsu can become highly charged events, with fans passionately supporting their local club and expressing their local identity. These rivalries can sometimes spill over into social and cultural tensions between the cities, further reinforcing local identities and divisions.

Moreover, the success or failure of a city's football club can significantly impact the local residents' sense of pride and belonging. When a club performs well, it can boost the city's prestige and the residents' pride in their local identity. Conversely, when a club performs poorly, it can lead to feelings of disappointment and inferiority among the local population, potentially further alienating them from a broader provincial identity.

In conclusion, while football clubs in Jiangsu Province play a significant role in fostering a sense of local identity and pride, they can also contribute to a dilution of provincial identity. The strong identification with local clubs and the rivalries between them can reinforce local identities and divisions, potentially leading to a diminished sense of belonging to Jiangsu Province as a whole. This complex interplay between local and provincial identities in the context of football fandom provides a fascinating lens through which to examine regional identities in Jiangsu Province.

## **5. Case Study: Football Fandom in Jiangsu Province**

### **5.1. Overview of Football Clubs in Jiangsu Province**

Jiangsu Province has been home to several football clubs over the years, each with its unique history and influence on the regional identity. These clubs include Jiangsu Suning, Suzhou Dongwu, Nantong Zhiyun, Wuxi Wugo, and Nanjing City.

Jiangsu Suning Football Club, based in Nanjing, was one of the most successful clubs in the province. Founded in 1958, the club had a rich history and was a significant player in the Chinese Super League. The club was known for its strong performance and wide fan base, which extended across the province. However, the club ceased operations in 2021, leaving a void in the province's football scene.

Suzhou Dongwu Football Club, established in 1997, is based in Suzhou, a city known for its rich cultural heritage and economic prosperity. The club currently competes in the China League One, the

second tier of Chinese football. Despite its relatively short history, the club has managed to cultivate a dedicated local fan base.

Nantong Zhiyun Football Club, founded in 1990, is another prominent club in Jiangsu Province. Based in Nantong, the club has been a consistent participant in the China League One. The club's performance and its engagement with the local community have helped it establish a strong local identity.

Wuxi Wugo Football Club, established in 2011, is a relatively new addition to the province's football scene. Despite its youth, the club has shown promise, earning a promotion to the China League One. The club is based in Wuxi, a city with a growing economy and a vibrant cultural scene.

Lastly, Nanjing City Football Club, founded in 2014, is another club based in the provincial capital, Nanjing. The club currently competes in the China League One. Despite its recent establishment, the club has managed to cultivate a strong local identity, reflected in its dedicated fan base.

Each of these clubs has contributed to the football culture in Jiangsu Province. However, their influence extends beyond the football field. They have become symbols of their respective cities, reflecting and shaping the local identity. The next sections will delve deeper into this relationship between football clubs and regional identity in Jiangsu Province.

## 5.2. Analysis of Fan Support for Different Clubs

To comprehend the regional identities manifested in football fandom in Jiangsu Province, a series of in-depth interviews and participant observations were conducted. The analysis centered on fan support for various clubs in the province, encompassing Jiangsu Suning, Suzhou Dongwu, Nantong Zhiyun, Wuxi Wugo, and Nanjing City.

One of the interviews conducted was with a fan of Jiangsu Suning, Mr. Li. When asked about his support for the club, Mr. Li stated:

"I have been a fan of Jiangsu Suning since I was a child. My father used to take me to their matches. For me, supporting Jiangsu Suning is not just about football, it's about representing my province. Even though the club no longer exists, I still feel a strong connection to it. It's a part of my identity as a person from Jiangsu."

In contrast, a fan of Suzhou Dongwu, Ms. Zhang, expressed a more localized sense of identity:

"I support Suzhou Dongwu because it's my city's team. I feel a deep connection to Suzhou and supporting the team is a way for me to express that. I don't feel the same connection to other teams in Jiangsu. For me, Suzhou Dongwu represents my city and its unique culture."

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-step process for conducting thematic analysis [9]. This process encompasses familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Through this methodology, two primary themes were identified: provincial identity and local identity. The theme of provincial identity became apparent in the narratives of Jiangsu Suning fans, who perceived their support for the club as an indication of their affiliation with Jiangsu Province as a whole. Conversely, the theme of local identity was discernible in the narratives of Suzhou Dongwu, Nantong Zhiyun, Wuxi Wugo, and Nanjing City fans, who saw their support for their respective clubs as a testament to their ties to their cities.

Interviews with fans of Jiangsu Suning unveiled a sentiment of provincial pride that surpassed city demarcations. Fans from various cities in the province shared an identity as supporters of Jiangsu Suning, considering the club a representation of Jiangsu Province in its entirety. This sentiment was mirrored in their fervent support for the club, irrespective of their city of residence. Nevertheless, the dissolution of Jiangsu Suning in 2021 left these fans without a provincial club to rally behind, leading to a splintering of fan identities based on cities.

On the other hand, fans of Suzhou Dongwu, Nantong Zhiyun, Wuxi Wugo, and Nanjing City demonstrated a pronounced sense of local identity. Interviews with these fans revealed a profound bond to their respective cities, mirrored in their support for their local clubs. These clubs were perceived as emblems of their cities, encapsulating the distinct culture and values of their local communities. Such local identification was bolstered by the clubs' outreach to their local communities, evident in initiatives like football academies and community programs.

Participant observations during matches further elucidated these findings. Fans of Suzhou Dongwu, Nantong Zhiyun, Wuxi Wugo, and Nanjing City exhibited a robust sense of local pride during matches, frequently chanting slogans and songs echoing their city's culture and heritage. Conversely, Jiangsu Suning fans showcased a more expansive provincial identity, with chants and songs glorifying Jiangsu Province as an entity.

Observations also highlighted tensions between fans of different clubs, especially during derby matches. These matches often transformed into platforms for articulating and challenging regional identities, with fans leveraging the competition to proclaim the dominance of their city over rivals. Such dynamics were particularly pronounced in matches between clubs from economically varied cities, mirroring the socio-economic disparities within the province.

In summation, the analysis indicates that football fandom in Jiangsu Province is intricately linked with regional identities. While support for Jiangsu Suning echoed a broader provincial identity, allegiance to Suzhou Dongwu, Nantong Zhiyun, Wuxi Wugo, and Nanjing City was anchored in local identities. These insights underscore the intricate relationship between local and provincial identities in the realm of football fandom, offering a distinctive perspective to scrutinize regional identities in Jiangsu Province.

### **5.3. The Role of Media and Global Connectivity in Shaping Football Fandom**

The role of media and global connectivity in shaping football fandom is a complex and multifaceted topic. In the context of Jiangsu Province, it's important to consider how these elements interact with the local culture, economy, and social structures.

The advent of digital media has revolutionized the way fans engage with their favorite football clubs. Social media platforms, in particular, have become a significant tool for fans to express their support, share their experiences, and connect with other fans. This phenomenon is not unique to Jiangsu Province or China; it is a global trend that has been observed in various contexts [10].

In Jiangsu Province, the influence of media and global connectivity on football fandom can be seen in the way fans engage with their local clubs. For instance, fans of Jiangsu Suning, Suzhou Dongwu, Nantong Zhiyun, Wuxi Wugo, and Nanjing City use social media platforms to share updates, discuss matches, and express their support for their teams. This online engagement not only strengthens the bond between fans and their clubs but also contributes to the formation of a distinct regional identity.

However, the influence of media and global connectivity is not always positive. The proliferation of digital media has also led to the commercialization of football fandom. Businesses and advertisers have recognized the potential of football fandom as a marketing tool and have begun to exploit it for commercial gain. This commercialization can sometimes overshadow the genuine passion and support of fans, turning fandom into a commodity rather than a community [10].

Furthermore, the global connectivity brought about by digital media can also dilute regional identities. As fans gain access to international football clubs and leagues, they may start to identify more with these global entities rather than their local clubs. This phenomenon can be seen in the popularity of European football clubs in China, which often surpasses that of local clubs.

In conclusion, the role of media and global connectivity in shaping football fandom in Jiangsu Province is a complex interplay of local and global factors. While these elements can strengthen



regional identities and foster a sense of community among fans, they can also lead to commercialization and a dilution of local identities. As such, it's important for stakeholders in Jiangsu's football scene to navigate these influences carefully to ensure the sustainability and authenticity of football fandom in the province.

#### **5.4. The Impact of Football Fandom on Regional Identities**

The impact of football fandom on regional identities in Jiangsu Province encompasses a multifaceted interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and political elements. Through comprehensive in-depth interviews and participant observations, an understanding was sought regarding how support for various football clubs in the province influences regional identities.

Interviews with fans throughout the province indicated that football fandom significantly influences their regional identity perception. Fans of Jiangsu Suning, for example, demonstrated a pronounced provincial identity, perceiving their support for the club as an embodiment of their affiliation with Jiangsu Province in its entirety. This sentiment was particularly palpable in their narratives about the club's triumphs and tribulations, which were often contextualized within the province's collective journey.

Conversely, fans of Suzhou Dongwu, Nantong Zhiyun, Wuxi Wugo, and Nanjing City displayed a more localized identity sentiment. Their support for their respective clubs was seen as a testament to their ties to their cities, frequently referencing local history, culture, and traditions in their club narratives. This localized identity was further emphasized by the clubs' outreach initiatives within their local communities, evident in community programs and football academies.

Participant observations during matches further elucidated these insights. Fans frequently utilized football matches as venues to articulate their regional identities, be it provincial or local. This was especially discernible in the chants, songs, and banners fans employed in club support, often infused with allusions to local culture, history, and landmarks.

However, the research also unveiled that football fandom can occasionally intensify regional rifts within the province. This dynamic was particularly noticeable in matches between clubs from disparate cities, which often transformed into platforms for articulating and challenging regional identities. Fans leveraged these matches to proclaim their city's dominance over rivals, frequently referencing socio-economic disparities and cultural distinctions to bolster their assertions. This indicates that while football fandom can nurture regional identity sentiments, it can also accentuate regional divisions and animosities.

In summation, the analysis indicates that football fandom holds considerable sway in molding regional identities in Jiangsu Province. While allegiance to various clubs can cultivate provincial or local identity sentiments, it can also amplify regional divisions and rivalries. These insights underscore the intricate relationship between football fandom and regional identities, offering a distinctive vantage point to scrutinize the socio-cultural dynamics of Jiangsu Province.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1. Interpretation of Findings**

The findings from the in-depth interviews and participant observation conducted in Jiangsu Province provide a rich tapestry of the impact of football fandom on regional identities. The data suggests that football fandom in Jiangsu has a profound influence on the construction and expression of regional identities, serving as a platform for the negotiation of shared cultural symbols, values, and experiences.

The interviews revealed that football fandom is not merely a leisure activity but a significant social practice that shapes and is shaped by the socio-cultural context of Jiangsu. The fans' passion for their local football team, Jiangsu Suning FC, is deeply intertwined with their sense of regional identity.

Supporting the team is seen as a way of expressing loyalty to their region, reinforcing a sense of belonging and community.

The participant observation further illuminated the ways in which football fandom contributes to the construction of regional identities. The rituals and practices associated with supporting Jiangsu Suning FC, such as wearing team colours, singing regional songs, and attending matches, serve to create a shared sense of identity among fans. These practices not only foster a sense of camaraderie among fans but also differentiate them from fans of other teams, reinforcing their unique regional identity.

## 6.2. Comparison with Previous Research

The findings of this study align with previous research on football fandom and regional identity. Giulianotti and Robertson argue that football fandom can serve as a platform for the expression of regional identities, a sentiment echoed in this study [11]. Similarly, the notion of football fandom as a form of ‘thick cosmopolitanism’, where supporter subcultures are largely inspired by transnational influences, is reflected in the practices of Jiangsu Suning FC fans [11].

However, this study also extends previous research by exploring the impact of football fandom on regional identities in the specific context of Jiangsu Province, China. While previous studies have largely focused on Western contexts, this study provides valuable insights into the role of football fandom in shaping regional identities in a Chinese context.

## 6.3. Implications for the Understanding of Ethnicity in the Chinese Context

The findings of this study have significant implications for the understanding of ethnicity in the Chinese context. They suggest that football fandom can serve as a powerful tool for the construction and expression of regional identities, which in turn can shape perceptions of ethnicity.

In the context of Jiangsu Province, football fandom appears to reinforce a distinct regional identity that is separate from, yet intertwined with, broader Chinese national identity. This regional identity is shaped by unique cultural symbols, values, and experiences, many of which are expressed and negotiated through the practices of football fandom.

Moreover, the findings suggest that football fandom can serve as a site of resistance to homogenizing forces, allowing fans to assert their unique regional identities in the face of broader national and global influences. This aligns with the notion of ‘glocalization’, where local cultures adapt and resist global influences in unique ways [11].

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of considering football fandom as a significant social practice that can shape regional identities and perceptions of ethnicity in the Chinese context. Future research should continue to explore the complex interplay between football fandom, regional identity, and ethnicity in different Chinese contexts.

## 7. Conclusion

### 7.1. Summary of the Study

This study embarked on an exploration of the socio-cultural phenomenon of regional identity and football fandom in Jiangsu Province, China. The aim was to understand the lack of identification of residents of cities in Jiangsu province with the provincial concept of Jiangsu as a region and their alienation from other cities in the province. The study also sought to understand the unique situation of football clubs in Jiangsu over the years, which is different from that of other provinces.

The research was grounded in a qualitative methodology, utilizing in-depth interviews and participant observation to gather rich, nuanced data. The study found that football fandom in Jiangsu

Province is a significant social practice that shapes and is shaped by regional identities. The passion for local football teams, particularly Jiangsu Suning FC, is deeply intertwined with fans' sense of regional identity. The rituals and practices associated with supporting the team serve to create a shared sense of identity among fans, reinforcing their unique regional identity.

The study also found that football fandom can serve as a site of resistance to homogenizing forces, allowing fans to assert their unique regional identities in the face of broader national and global influences. This aligns with the notion of 'glocalization', where local cultures adapt and resist global influences in unique ways [11].

## 7.2. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of football fandom in shaping regional identities in Jiangsu Province, it is not without limitations. First, the study was conducted in a specific regional context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The unique socio-cultural context of Jiangsu Province may shape the practices and experiences of football fandom in ways that are not applicable to other regions.

Second, the study relied on in-depth interviews and participant observation, which, while providing rich, nuanced data, may be subject to bias. The interpretations of the researcher may influence the analysis of the data, and the presence of the researcher during participant observation may influence the behavior of the participants.

Third, the study did not collect quantitative data, which could provide additional insights into the prevalence and patterns of football fandom and regional identity in Jiangsu Province. Future research could benefit from incorporating quantitative methods to complement the qualitative findings.

## 7.3. Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations can be made for future research. First, future studies could explore the role of football fandom in shaping regional identities in other regions of China, or in other countries, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Second, future research could incorporate quantitative methods, such as surveys or statistical analysis, to complement qualitative findings and provide a more comprehensive picture of football fandom and regional identity.

Third, future studies could explore the role of other social practices, beyond football fandom, in shaping regional identities. This could provide a more holistic understanding of the factors that contribute to regional identity formation and expression.

Finally, future research could explore the impact of global influences, such as media and global connectivity, on football fandom and regional identity. This could provide insights into the ways in which global forces shape local practices and identities.

## References

- [1] Wu, F., Xu, J., & Yeh, A. G. O. (2006). *Urban development in post-reform China: state, market, and space*. Routledge.
- [2] Giulianotti, R., & Robertson, R. (2009). *Globalization and football*. Sage.
- [3] Kleinman, A., & Benson, P. (2006). *Anthropology in the clinic: the problem of cultural competency and how to fix it*. *PLoS medicine*, 3(10), e294.
- [4] Oakes, T. (2000). *China's provincial identities: reviving regionalism and reinventing "Chineseness"*. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 59(3), 667-692.
- [5] Li, Y., & Jonas, A. E. (2019). *City-regionalism as countervailing geopolitical processes: The evolution and dynamics of Yangtze River Delta region, China*. *Political Geography*, 73, 70-81.

- [6] Chen, Y., & Wang, J. (2015). *Social integration of new-generation migrants in Shanghai China*. *Habitat International*, 49, 419-425.
- [7] Sun, W. (2009). *Suzhi on the move: Body, place, and power*. *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 17(3), 617-642.
- [8] Chen, J., & Dickson, B. J. (2008). *Allies of the state: Democratic support and regime support among China's private entrepreneurs*. *The China Quarterly*, 196, 780-804.
- [9] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- [10] Nguyen-Thu, G. (2019). *Vietnamese media going social: Connectivism, collectivism and conservatism*. In *Press Freedom in Contemporary Asia* (pp. 245-260). Routledge.
- [11] Giulianotti, R., & Robertson, R. (2007). *Recovering the social: globalization, football and transnationalism*. *Global Networks*, 7(2), 166-186.