

# VERONICA CHAN – THE FOOTBALL PRESIDENT AS « A VERY STRONG LADY »

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**B**arely visible behind the reflection of her 1970s aviator sunglasses, a small lady from Hong Kong melts inconspicuously into the background of a photo which portrays otherwise powerful sporting leaders who were celebrating an important institutional event. As the last stop after a trip to China, FIFA President Joao Havelange was the guest of honour at the unveiling of the inauguration plaque for the new headquarters of the Hong Kong Football Association (HKFA)<sup>1</sup>. The real focus of his trip in August 1979, Havelange had travelled to Asia on an important mission in hope of resolving the « Chinese question » between the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) in Beijing and the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan<sup>2</sup>. In the photo and to the right of the Brazilian was Henry Fok (President of the HKFA and a strong advocate for bringing Beijing into FIFA), Arnaldo Augusto de Oliveira Sales (President of the Hong Kong Olympic Committee), and Lo Chi-chung (Chairman of the HKFA). With Havelange, all four figures were already long-standing sports leaders and were continuing in positions of elected leadership both nationally and internationally. But it is the second row of partially hidden faces that reveals some surprises in sports leadership that would otherwise pass

unnoticed. This paper focuses on one face in particular.

The only woman in a sea of footballing men, Veronica Chiu-Chan stands behind the quartet of aforementioned politically inclined leaders. As the 1979 photo of Chan illustrates, it requires an effort to see beyond the obvious first row. Women in sports leadership positions were not omnipresent in what was a largely gendered space, even if there had been various examples going back to the first half of the twentieth century<sup>3</sup>. The history of women's involvement in sports leadership roles is a burgeoning field and « *women were not absent from this 'manly' world* »<sup>4</sup>. However, history often focuses on the most visible figures; in other words, those in the front row of historical pictures or the principal signatories on archival correspondence. Most such figures have been male. Yet as directors, secretary generals, or translators, women did manage sports organisations, some at the highest levels. The role of administrators such as the IOC's Monique Berlioux – a contemporary of Veronica Chan – reveals the real influence of women on sport<sup>5</sup>. Almost invisible behind Havelange is another key administrator, Helmut Käser, FIFA General Secretary, in his last few months before being dismissed. These



**Figure 1** Inauguration of the Hong Kong Football Association (HKFA) new headquarters, September 1979<sup>6</sup>.

photos reveal that administrators are often relegated – women and men – to less conspicuous roles than their politically elected superiors, or at the least, there can be tension between the illuminated elected few versus the administrative shadows. In addition, as we will see with the case of Veronica Chan as a Le Goffian *sujet globalisant*, the world of Asian football offers an intriguing perspective into women and leadership<sup>7</sup>.

Using this 1979 photograph as a biographical prism, this paper discusses leadership in Asian football during this period, particularly in three key areas where those exercising authority have been active: organisational, commercial, and political<sup>8</sup>. Despite being almost invisible in the second row, the story of Veronica Chan

illustrates how leaders navigate these three environments, specifically from the periphery to central positions of responsibility and power. Just like this photograph which demonstrates some of the most important figures in 1979, Veronica Chan – already elected president of several organisations – is striving for a role at the forefront of sporting leadership. The image is a snapshot of one female leader *en mouvement* seeking a career in the front row of a future photograph.

President Veronica Chan was anything but a second-level leader and her career spanned the three organisational, commercial, and political domains. Born in August 1923, Yiu-kam Chan (陳瑤琴) was the middle daughter in a large family from

the Fujian province on the south-eastern coast of China opposite the island of Taiwan<sup>9</sup>. After the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 and the creation of the first Republic of China, Veronica's grandfather Chan Mong-tsang, a former Qing dynasty Imperial officer, had moved to Hong Kong. During Chan's youth, the family acquired significant residential property and became part of the Hong Kong socio-economic elite with all three daughters maintaining this status<sup>10</sup>. Chan had grown up with a strong interest in football, a sport which developed significantly from the 1920s to the 1950s; Hong Kong footballers even comprised the majority of the 1936 Chinese Olympic team<sup>11</sup>. In an interview, Chan explained that her passion for the game stemmed from her youth, « *I liked to play football with my brothers* » and later grew: « *I loved women's football and I recruited the women's players in Hong Kong and more than 100 women players enrolled.* »<sup>12</sup> Indeed, under her initiative in June 1965, the Hong Kong Ladies Football Association (HKLFA) was born and early photographs of the teams and the association show Chan sitting proudly in the centre of the front row of a group of fifty women members<sup>13</sup>. This is precisely the place she continued to aim for during the subsequent decades.

Her leadership career began on the women's side but would soon expand to men's football. Within a few years Chan was running men's clubs in the newly transformed Hong Kong professional football league. The HKFA removed the amateur requirement in the 1968-1969 season making it the first professional league in Asia<sup>14</sup>. Chan's work propelled her into the largely male world of Asian football, yet she was anything but intimidated. In the second professional season, the « *grim-faced* » Yuen Long club boss – also described as an « *energetic soccer convenor* » by the Hong Kong press – contested a referee decision in front of the national federation's management committee; Chairman Chan won on appeal<sup>15</sup>. By the 1974 season, Chan was elected to at least five different HKFA commit-

tees including the Management, Selection, Disciplinary, Referees, and Professional Footballers Committees<sup>16</sup>. Having taken over Caroline Hill FC, she proceeded to sign the best South African player at the time, Lukas Moripe, and in 1977 she posed for photographers alongside her latest star signing, national legend Kwok Ka-ming<sup>17</sup>.

Not satisfied with the leadership roles in the men's game, she revived an international organisation for women's football – the Asian Ladies Football Confederation (ALFC) – of which she had been a founder in 1968. Chan chaired a body with members from all across Southeast Asia including members of various ruling royal families and heads of state. Rubbing shoulders with the elite did not intimidate Chan and by 1975 she had organised the first-ever regional tournament for the women's game with teams coming from as far away as Australia and New Zealand<sup>18</sup>. The Hong Kong-based event was the first of multiple ALFC events organised by Chan over the next decade, which laid the foundations for what she hoped would become an official world championship for women. She exercised her organisational skills in managing the Asian tournament four more times between 1977 and 1983 while launching the World Women's Invitational Football Tournament (WWIFT) hosted in Taiwan in 1978 and 1981. From Pepsi-branded airport welcome signs for the 1975 ALFC tournament to Puma advertising in the 1981 WWIFT event programme, the archives reveal how her hand was omnipresent in arranging commercial contracts, signing sponsorship and advertising deals, and even selling TV rights<sup>19</sup>. Yet Chan's leadership extended beyond the administratively focused organisational and commercial domains.

As a leader, Chan aimed for the top of the pyramid, something which required political savvy. However, it was in this domain that Chan faced challenges. Initially, the ALFC benefitted from the close links with the

male-focused Asian Football Confederation (AFC). At the time Chan organised the first women's tournament in 1975, several married couples were members of the boards of both organisations, as shown on their respective letterheads. The links included the sitting AFC President, Tunku Abdul Rahman – married to ALFC founder and honorary life-president Tun Sharifah Rodziah – as well as ALFC Vice President, Datin Teoh Chye Hin, whose husband was none other than Dato' Teoh Chye Hin (and Tunku Abdul Rahman's number two as the AFC General Secretary)<sup>20</sup>. This was the regional context in which Chan wrote to FIFA outlining her ambitions following the close of the inaugural 1975 event. Via the General Secretary, Charles Pereira, Chan's ALFC requested the governing body's « *blessing, approval and recognition of the proposed formation of the World's controlling body for women's soccer* » – named the Female Internationale de Football Federation (FIFF) – and solicited FIFA's support in publicising a « *World Cup for Ladies to be held in Hong Kong* »<sup>21</sup>. But ALFC had no such intimate family links with FIFA and global politics soon superseded marital connections. Indeed, Chan's global dreams quickly clashed with different modes of bureaucratic governance and diplomatic alignments which became unfavourable.

When Chan's ALFC was founded in 1968 and revived in 1974, its Chinese affiliate member was from the Republic of China – the nationalist Kuomintang-led KMT on the island of Taiwan, not the Communist-led People's Republic organisation based in Beijing. While she was pushing for the development of women's football, the same Taiwan regime which had supported her efforts was ejected from the AFC in a shrewd statutory manipulation at its 6<sup>th</sup> Congress, which voted to admit the Beijing-based Football Association from the People's Republic of China (FAPRC) as the sole legitimate Chinese federation<sup>22</sup>. The situation ultimately cost AFC President Abdul Rahman his position

in 1976 and within a year General Secretary Dato' Teoh had also resigned. Thus ended the close links Chan and the ALFC had with their male AFC counterpart. As such, this « Chinese question » grew to be a thorn in Chan's side over the next few years because her ALFC had no footballing links to mainland China and only liaised with the same federation that had been expelled from Asian men's football. Indeed, the Republic of China Football Association (ROCFA) in Taipei actively supported the ALFC at the turn of the 1980s, providing board members, hosting and winning the 1977 continental ALFC tournament (retaining its championship crown in the 1980 and 1981 editions), and hosting the 1978 and 1981 WWIFT events. Video archive evidence of the competition in Taipei shows how Chan led the visiting team delegations in 1977 to the national mausoleum, where they all honoured the memory of ROC leader Chiang Kai-shek<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, Veronica Chan's ALFC board included two ROC generals (General Cheng Wei Yuan and General Wang To-Nien), both high-ranking ROC military and political officers, who were named Honorary Life Presidents « *for services rendered to the ALFC* »<sup>24</sup>.

Returning to the 1979 photograph, front and centre is Henry Fok, the HKFA President, who is standing next to Havelange. Despite being just a metre or two away from Veronica Chan, Fok's diplomatic sensitivities placed him on the opposite side of the Chinese cross-strait politics from his fellow HKFA elected official. In fact, when the photo was taken, Fok had just returned from mainland China after accompanying Havelange on a negotiation trip to meet with the FAPRC in order to convince them to return to FIFA after decades of absence. Havelange had been playing football geopolitics and Fok was credited as having « *done all that was humanly possible in order to find a positive solution* »<sup>25</sup>. This put Fok – a strong supporter of relations with Beijing – clearly on the PRC side of the Chinese

question, while Chan had cultivated overt links with the ROC in her role as President of the ALFC and main driver for women's football in the region. So just ten days before this photo captured the inauguration of the new HKFA headquarters – which should have been a uniting moment for all HKFA officials – it also hides the reality of the Chinese conflict within international football.

Yet Veronica Chan was a consummate politician who was able to astutely navigate the next few years. For example, she worked to minimise the overt politicisation of women's football by requesting that the ROCFA team play not with their national team name as the Republic of China but rather as *Mulan*, the symbolic Chinese heroine<sup>26</sup>. Chan also manoeuvred the ALFC back into a relationship with the AFC resulting in a merger in 1984 and giving her the chair of the newly created AFC women's committee, as well as getting herself elected to the HKFA executive board to fill a seat left by her husband<sup>27</sup>. Her diplomatic work eventually helped contribute to the return of the ROCFA – now Chinese Taipei FA – to the AFC in 1989. Under her supervision, that year's regional Asian women's tournament (now under the AFC) saw the first ever sports meeting between mainland China and Taiwan – two countries which did not yet have full diplomatic relations. Indeed, a full three years before the «1992 Accord», a simple meeting of women's athletes became the first time

the «two Chinas» had competed face to face in international sport<sup>28</sup>. For the first time, and on neutral Hong Kong soil, the federations from Beijing and Taiwan faced off twice (once in the opening match and again in the final)<sup>29</sup>.

To conclude, let us return to the 1979 photograph and the proximity of the less visible Chan to the more conspicuous front row leaders of Havelange and Fok. As we have seen, their presidential careers ran almost in parallel. As astute political leaders aiming for the top, they may have been on opposite sides of the China question but, as in the 1979 photo, they always maintained eye contact with any potential adversaries throughout their careers. At the 1989 AFC women's tournament, the programme opened with two official welcome messages. The first was from Fok followed by Chan's on the next page, who rejoiced that for the first time «*the two coasts national teams will participate in the tournament in Hong Kong*»<sup>30</sup>. During her several decade career as a sporting *cheffe*, Veronica Chan navigated the organisational, commercial, and political domains while rising within the leadership hierarchy. As a recognition, she was awarded an MBE by the United Kingdom in 1993 becoming only the second Hong Kong citizen to receive such an award for services to football and the first ever from the women's game<sup>31</sup>. Her presidential acumen is certainly what earned her reputation, probably best described in 1983 by AFC General Secretary Peter Velappan: «*She is a very strong lady...*»<sup>32</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See also: « Nouvelles des Associations Nationales-Hong Kong », *FIFA News* 199, décembre 1979, pp. 769-771.
- <sup>2</sup> The lengthy political problem between the Communist-led People's Republic of China (PRC) from Beijing and the Kuomintang-led (KMT) nationalist Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan played out between the 1950s and 1980s. See GUOQI Xu, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008, especially pages 164-196 and HOMBURG Heidrun, « FIFA and the 'Chinese Question', 1954-1980: an exercise of statutes », *Historical Social Research*, vol. 31, n° 1, 2006, pp. 69-72. For some recent scholarship on the broader issues of Cross-Strait relations, see DITTMER Lowell (ed.), *Taiwan and China: Fitful Embrace*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2017.
- <sup>3</sup> See LEIGH Mary H., BONIN Thérèse M., « The Pioneering Role Of Madame Alice Milliat and the FSFI in Establishing International Trade and Field Competition for Women », *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 4, n° 1, 1977, pp. 72-83; PFISTER Gertrud, « Breaking bounds: Alice Profé, radical and emancipationist », in: MANGAN J. A., HONG Fan (eds.), *Freeing the Female Body. Inspirational Icons*, London, Routledge, 2001, pp. 98-119.
- <sup>4</sup> TONNERRE Quentin, SBETTI Nicola, VONNARD Philippe, « Ghost Administrators: Re-centring Marisa Bonacossa, Lydia Zanchi and Suzanne Oth Within International Sport Organizations », in: CERVIN Georgia, NICOLAS Claire (eds.), *Histories of Women's Work in Global Sport: A Man's World?*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 102.
- <sup>5</sup> DAVENPORT Joanna, « Monique Berlioux: Her Association with Three IOC Presidents », *Citius, Altius, Fortius*, vol. 4, n° 3, 1996, pp. 10-18.
- <sup>6</sup> Uncredited photograph, Folder 1.1.1973 to 31.12.1983, in: Correspondence with National Associations – Hong Kong, Box 1973-94, FIFA archives.
- <sup>7</sup> LE GOFF Jacques, *Saint Louis*, Paris, Gallimard, 2013 [1996], p. 18.
- <sup>8</sup> TUCHMAN Barbara, « Biography as a prism of history », *Practicing History*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1981, p. 80.
- <sup>9</sup> Cross-referencing sources appears to note Chan's birthday as 31 August 1923. See *AFC Circular 61/90 – Personal particulars of the AFC Standing Committee member (1990-1994)*, in: 1986 Asian Cup Ladies Football Tournament Collection, Folder Referees Appointment, Hong Kong FA archives. See also the 1965 *List of Office Bearers of Hong Kong Ladies Football Association*, in: HKRS590-1-40, Case File on Hong Kong Ladies Football Association, Public Records Office, Hong Kong.
- <sup>10</sup> The research group for the Industrial History of Hong Kong maintains a website with a vast archive of articles about many individuals and families from Hong Kong. This includes mentions to Veronica's elder sister, Dr Chan Chiu Kam (known also as Pauline or Po-lin) who married industrialist Haking Wong, younger sister, Chan May Kan who married a famous French-inspired abstract painter, Zao Wou-Ki, as well as aunt Chan King Shi and uncle Peck-Siu Lim, one of the most important industrialists in post-WWII Hong Kong. See LO York, « Hong Kong Cement Manufacturing », 6 May 2019, <https://industrialhistoryhk.org/hong-kong-cement-manufacturing> (accessed 23 August 2022).
- <sup>11</sup> HEYWOOD Vincent, « China's 1936 Olympic Football Team: Eight players were from Hong Kong », *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Hong Kong Branch* 48, 2008, pp. 7-23. For a review of Hong Kong football history see LEE Chun-Wing, « Football », in: WONG Man-Kong, KWONG Chi-Man (eds.), *Hong Kong History - Themes in Global Perspective*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 217-240.
- <sup>12</sup> Written interview with Veronica Chan, 5 October 2021. I am grateful to Chris Lau and Jimmy Chan for facilitating this.
- <sup>13</sup> See *Certificate of Registration Hong Kong Ladies Football Association, 21 June 1965* and *Information*

sheet - Society registered/exempted under the Societies Ordinance, Chap. 151 – Hong Kong Ladies Football Association, in: HKRS590-1-40, Case File on Hong Kong Ladies Football Association, Public Records Office, Hong Kong. See photos in Hong Kong Ladies Football Association, 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary booklet, and unnamed framed photograph, Veronica Chan personal collection.

<sup>14</sup> Regarding the development of Hong Kong football, see CHUN-WING Lee, «From shamateurism to pioneer of Asia's professional football: the introduction of professional football in Hong Kong», *Soccer & Society*, vol. 14, n° 5, 2013, pp. 603-614.

<sup>15</sup> PERERA Neil, «Unprecedented soccer decision», *South China Morning Post*, 26 February 1970, in: Correspondence with National Associations – Hong Kong, Folder 1.1.1969 to 31.12.1972, Box 1947-72, FIFA archives.

<sup>16</sup> *Committees elected at the 1<sup>st</sup> Council Meeting, 29 July 1974*, in: HKRS939-1-2, Case File on Hong Kong Football Association 1974-1983, Public Records Office, Hong Kong.

<sup>17</sup> See contract and correspondence regarding Lucas Moripe attached to the letter from Tam Sau Sun to Secretary of the Football Association of South Africa, 24 August 1974, in: Correspondence with National Associations – Hong Kong, Folder 1.1.1973 to 31.12.1975, Box 1973-94, FIFA archives; and «Soccer star Kwok Ka-ming (left) poses with his new boss, Caroline Hill team manager Mrs Veronica Chiu», *South China Morning Post*, 4 July 1977.

<sup>18</sup> TALLEC MARSTON Kevin, *AFC Women's Asian Cup History Book*, Kuala Lumpur, The Asian Football Confederation, 2022, pp. 5-15, pp. 27-29.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the TV contract signed by Chan with the Bangkok Broadcasting & Television Company. *Television Contract for the Fourth Asian Cup Ladies Tournament*, 6 June 1981, in: Collection on 4<sup>th</sup> Women's Asian Cup, Folder - TV Agreement Thailand, HKFA archives.

<sup>20</sup> Abdul Rahman was the first Prime Minister of Malaysia to oversee the transition period from British colonial rule to independence. Email correspondence with Phaik Lean Teoh, daughter of Datin and Dato Teoh Chye Hin, 2 November 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Letter, Charles Pereira to Helmut Käser, 15 September 1975, FIFA archives, Correspondence with Singapore, Box 1951-83, Folder 1975- 83.

<sup>22</sup> AFC 6<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Congress Minutes, in: FIFA Archives, Correspondence with AFC, Box 1971-76, Folder 1973-76. See Articles 3-5 and 8 of the FIFA Statutes, December 1972 edition.

<sup>23</sup> See the video of the competition, particularly at minute 5'04. «1977年中華女足奪冠全紀錄 | 第二

屆亞足聯女子錦標賽», [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4d6yU9l\\_IB0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4d6yU9l_IB0)

<sup>24</sup> The 1981 ALFC statutes include a several-page history of the organisation. It notes that Wei Yuan was recognised at the 1977 ALFC congress and General Wang To-Nien at the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 1978. See *ALFC Statutes*, pp. 27-29 in: HKRS590-2-456, Case File on Asian Ladies Football Confederation, Public Records Office, Hong Kong.

<sup>25</sup> *Report on the meeting FIFA / Football Association of the People's Republic of China*, 29 August 1979, p. 6, in: FIFA Archives, Box TA Korrespondenzen N.A., Folder China PR '78-'87.

<sup>26</sup> A draft letter to the Hong Kong immigration authorities for the visa authorisations for the 1981 tournament includes a handwritten note that «ROCFA has agreed to play under the name 'Mulan Taipei'». See draft letter, Veronica Chiu to Director of Immigration, no date, Collection 4<sup>th</sup> Women's Cup – Folder Other, HKFA archives.

<sup>27</sup> See *Draft Memorandum of Agreement*, Correspondence with AFC, Box 1984-86, Folder 1984-86, in the FIFA archives. Chan's husband had left his long-term spot on the board in September 1982 and her name appears on the HKFA letterhead as vice-president as early as the 1984-1985 season. See letterhead changes in: Correspondence with National Associations – Hong Kong, Folder 1.1.1984 to 31.12.1986, Box 1973-94, in FIFA archives.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the 1992 Accord, see especially p. 29-32 of JIANG Yi-huah, «Taiwan's National Identity and Cross-Strait Relations», in: DITTMER Lowell (ed.), *Taiwan and China: Fitful Embrace*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2017, pp. 19-41.

<sup>29</sup> News clippings from *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 30 December 1989, in: Collection 1989, HKFA archives.

<sup>30</sup> *Programme of the 1989 Women's Asian Championship*, Hong Kong Football Association (HKFA) archives, Hong Kong.

<sup>31</sup> Unnamed photograph, Veronica Chan personal collection. See «Diplomatic and Overseas Service», *The Times*, 31 December 1993, p. 8; HUGHES Mark, «Some surprises among long-service recipients», *South China Morning Post*, 31 December 1993, p. 6. Only famous player-coach Kwok Ka Ming (incidentally signed by Chan for Caroline Hill FC in 1977) also received a similar honour in 1978. Chan preceded Debbie Bampton who was the second woman to receive an award for football (1998).

<sup>32</sup> Letter, RE: Asian Ladies Football Confederation, Peter Velappan to JS Blatter, 25 July 1983, page 2, in: FIFA archives, Correspondence with AFC, Box 1984-86, Folder 1984-86.