

The Varying Extent of Sports Nationalism in South Korea

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INTRODUCTION

Sports and the events surrounding them have always been a spectacle and a major event in many countries, generating millions of supporters, dollars, and engagement. Therefore, when I researched more about South Korea and the 2002 FIFA World Cup, I found that Guus Hiddink received honorary citizenship for his achievements as the head coach of the South Korea national football team. I choose to do a paper on this topic because the cases of South Korean athletes and their nationality intrigued me. With cases like honorary citizenship, naturalized athletes but lack of support from fans, “unnaturalized” athletes but still had support from fans.

Thesis

This paper argues that South Korean sports fans display a strong sense of national identity through sports in general. However, the subtle historical context within different sports and racism has caused various levels of nationalism to arise which is especially visible in non-native Korean athletes.



DISCUSSION

How does sports bring out nationalism?

Sports and nationalism are inseparable

- People from the same country, same culture, similar experiences, or same ethnicities

Use of Taekwondo as a political instrument by the Park regime

- Manipulated sense of nationalistic pride
- Taekwondo training lessons
 - Military-style order and discipline
 - Suitable for Park's regime's objectives
 - Instill national pride
 - Produce a nation with powerful and able bodies to strengthen the military

Different types of nationalism in the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics:

Unified ethnic nationalism

- aim of unifying North Korea and South Korea

Postcolonial anti-imperialist nationalism

- anti-Japanese ideas due to Japanese occupation of Korea

History of football and baseball in South Korea

Popularization in the early 20th century during the Japanese occupation. The games became a peaceful way for South Koreans to challenge imperial Japan. Therefore, football and baseball became infused with the will of independence and national pride.

The struggles of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis saw South Koreans putting their hopes and dreams into baseball player Park Chan-ho and the national football team in the 2002 FIFA World Cup. Both were vastly successful and were deemed national heroes by both the media and the people. The media used poetic and emotional language when reporting on the successes of Park Chan-ho and the national football team which is the opposite of the formal language used in news in South Korea. Both cases are a form of the traditional ethnic nationalism with fans feeling proud that Koreans are being represent as competitive and having the ability to overcome national crises on the world sporting stage.

Naturalized and “unnaturalized”

Dutch football coach Guus Hiddink coaching South Korea to the semi-finals of the 2002 FIFA World Cup earned him the first ever honorary citizenship of South Korea. Initially, he was met with a lot criticism from the media and fans for abandoning the tradition of social ties when selecting national players, opting for the players individual skill instead. His success challenged the dominant Korean cultural norms and ideas in nationalism. Some businesses adopted his method and stopped using social ties to hire staff. Changed South Korean views on foreigners.



- Effect of the media on how foreigners (Guus Hiddink) should be viewed

Cosmopolitan South Korean identity

- Challenged traditional Korean values
- Introducing foreign values into South Korea

Blue-eyed Taeguek Warriors

The South Korea ice hockey team recruit a total of 7 American and Canadian players for the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics. Because ice hockey is the most popular event at the Winter Olympics, a failure to qualify for it when you are hosting the event would be a humiliation for South Korea. The International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) suggested the recruitment of naturalized players which the South Korean media framed as a requirement by the IIHF.

- Effect of the media legitimizing the process

Cosmopolitan South Korean identity

- Introduced a multi-ethnic South Korea to sports fans



Viktor Ahn (speed skater)

- Korea → Russia
- Kept support from Korean fans and media
- Blame was directed toward the Korean Skating Union for favoritism and corruption
- Weakening of patriotic nationalism in South Korea
- Strengthening of ethnic and cosmopolitan Korean identity



Oh Joo-han (marathon runner)

- Kenya → Korea
- Met with criticism
- Fans had problems with his ethnicity, “his blackness”, lack Korean heritage and Korean fluency → racism in South Korea
- Created a Korean name to show his sincerity
- Understood and assimilated into Korean culture

CONCLUSION

Besides the traditional ethnic nationalism, South Korean nationalism is displayed through unified Korean ethnic nationalism, The rise of these four types of nationalism in South Korean sports is due to the complex history of South Korea such as the Japanese occupation of Korea and the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. This led to the varying levels of nationalism that appears in football and baseball in South Korea. The cases of the naturalization of athletes in South Korea show the various sides of nationalism as well. One common factor in the sports and naturalization cases is the media. The media greatly influenced how South Korean fans and non-fans alike react to the activities and different types of nationalism in South Korean sports. Therefore, it is very likely that this will be the case in the future of the ever-globalizing South Korea. With the craze of Son Heung-min, the football player playing in the London club Tottenham Hotspurs, in recent years, the media will surely have a hand in exaggerating or downplaying nationalism once again.

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