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Transnational Sport

GENDER, MEDIA, AND GLOBAL KOREA

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To my parents
Han Pyung Joo and Un Suk Joo

Acknowledgments

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Note on Transliteration

I follow the McCune-Reischauer system of Romanization for Korean words, except for names and places that have their own conventions (e.g., Park Chung Hee, Kim Il Sung, Seoul). In discussing Korean figures or Korean authors, I follow the Korean practice with the surname first followed by the given name. In the case of Korean (American) authors writing or published in English, I follow the standard English practice with the surname last.

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Introduction

MANUFACTURING KOREANNESS THROUGH TRANSNATIONAL SPORT

A few days after I arrived to begin fieldwork, all of South Korea seemed caught up in the frenzy of the 2002 FIFA[1] World Cup. So many people were wearing red T-shirts that televised views from news helicopters made the thoroughfares of Seoul look like a network of arteries that pooled crimson at massive digital screens. Throughout the month of June, I gathered with tens of thousands of Koreans and watched digital projections of games in stadiums, on the street, and in bars. Traveling as part of the crowd, I was in constant contact with other bodies, brushing by some and squeezing between others. The restless waiting was interrupted by kinetic cheers that each began with a single tone—a tone that generated sonic ripples and waves and quickly spread. Sometimes, stray cheers would develop into a unison chant. At other moments, the sound seemed to swell and result in a single loud boom.

Around each South Korea team match, I spent hours talking to companions and strangers about their feelings and thoughts on the events of the month and the impact of those events on their lives. I found that this month-long event was not primarily about sport per se; it was a great opportunity to celebrate with millions of others under the aegis of supporting the nation. It was a great chance for Koreans to attend the party of their lives, to brush up next to warm bodies, to inhabit collective spaces, to express emotions publicly, and to experience the intimate pleasures of mutual recognition.

After the Korean victory over Italy in the Round of Sixteen, I went to launch fireworks over the Han River with women from our *kosiwŏn* (boarding house). As we drank *soju* and snacked on *anju* (drinking snacks), Chŏng

Chi-hye, the kosiwŏn manager, explained that she was being an appropriate nationalist by partying all night. As she took a drink from her paper cup, she offered a playful invitation to the rest of the group and stated, "We must. After all, the whole world is watching!" Although there was an element of sarcasm to Chi-hye's pronouncement, all the women joined her in the toast. Into the early hours of the morning, these women expressed their excitement at being part of an event that would go into the annals of South Korean and, quite possibly, world history. They were making their own inscriptions on a historical narrative that was in the process of being constructed. They could now claim that they had participated in the spectacular street scenes, and they could later reflect on their contributions to creating this incredible global spectacle. "Will there ever be another opportunity like this in our lifetimes?" whispered Lee Mi-sŏng. The scent of her drunken breath spread across the aluminum mat, and while no one responded to her question, her words created a sense of intimate connection.

The World Cup was memorialized in national history as it unfolded. The dies of nationalist history were cast prior to the event, and the sporting results greatly exceeded the expectations of memorialists. Due to the strong sense of anticipation prior to the event, a powerful feeling of nostalgia saturated the social interactions that occurred throughout the World Cup. This "nostalgia for the present" was not an effect of a postmodern lack of historicity (see Jameson 1989); rather, it was produced through the affective memories encoded through past nationalist spectacles that unfolded over the history of South Korean national development. Nostalgia was woven into the affective field generated by the crowds, and it was expressed in the attempt to capture every moment as a personal keepsake with camera phones, video recorders, and digital cameras. The ability to record (and review and delete) every moment digitally helped create a collectively edited memory that captured the "right" feel for the time.

The "intimate publics" that came together during this event captured what Lauren Berlant refers to as the "juxtapolitical" nature of mass culture. Berlant, in *The Female Complaint* (2008), explains that the affective spheres generated by mass culture operate to produce political potentialities. Indeed, both the embodied experience of mass(ive) mediation and participation in the World Cup crowds inspired the spectacular character of the large-scale protests against the U.S. military that took place in 2002 and were also recalled in the so-called "mad cow" anti-American protests that began in May of

2008.[2] The memories of movement, of proprioception, through the hundreds of thousands of emotive bodies that filled the spaces and streets around Seoul City Hall connected these large-scale sporting and political events (Massumi 2003). Proprioception entails the physical memories of bodily movement "of contorsion and rhythm rather than visible form" (179), and these physical memories of massive collective gathering, dancing, chanting, and gesturing during the World Cup were again evoked in the explicitly politicized domains of anti-government and anti-U.S. military protests. Korean subjects felt that they had helped construct this significant moment through their physical participation in the crowds and protests. This feeling was also shaped by mass-mediated images that reinforced ideas of community and connection among Koreans both within the geographic boundaries of the nation and around the world. This book proposes that the embodied participation generated through sporting events and sporting images contributes to the making of a global Koreanness. The text demonstrates how a Korean style of globalization, or *segyehwa*, is projected through media sport, and how the debates and contests around the meanings of global Koreanness can be understood through an investigation of media sport. By media sport, I refer to competitive sports that are structured by commercial mass media and manufactured for mass consumption (Hargreaves 1986; Jhally 1989).

The women with whom I sat that evening helped craft the national images that circulated around the world. They understood the significance of those moments through their own bodily sensations and the visual reinforcement of mass media that surrounded them. They clearly expressed their own sense of place within this global event. Was this a unique opportunity to lose oneself in the thrill of the crowd, or was it an especially spectacular demonstration of the everyday forms of self-fashioning that take place in the media-saturated context of the twenty-first century? Were the expressions of intimacy that evening presenting a feeling of global connection, or were they expressing a desire for recognition within the nation and among themselves as a group of young women? I sensed that they felt they would never again experience the immense pleasure of being part of such an ecstatic event. Indeed, I often asked myself whether there would be another opportunity like this in my own lifetime. This desire to reexperience the immense power of such crowds raises important questions about the emotional intensity of the event and how it worked to expand the realm of emotional possibilities around national belonging. It is from this place of longing and desire for

another similar experience—one that tingles due to the size and intensity of the human convergence—that I approach the implications of sporting events and media spectacles from the perspective of cultural analysis and critique.

The World Cup framed my research on transnational media sport as it coincided with the beginning of an extended period of fieldwork about sport and Koreanness that informs this text. The World Cup demonstrated how hegemonic ideas of global Koreanness were generated through popular culture and how ideas of the nation were being shaped in significant ways through commercial media. Moreover, the event created dramatic social and political effects and left a powerful impact on Korean communities in both South Korea and the United States. Riding this wave of excitement, I investigated how subjective engagements with sport were woven together with the histories, political ideologies, economic circumstances, social realities, and everyday lives of South Koreans and Korean Americans. My research led to an analysis of how the social locations of subjects shaped their relation to the national discourses of media sport. The period surrounding the World Cup was used by many as an opportunity to express opinions about Koreanness and desires for representation within the national body. It brought attention to the representational practices of national subjects who were conscious of their role in shaping an idea of global Korea. It offered a framework to situate subjective responses along specific sites of global connection that cut across and intersect along local, national, transnational, and global vectors (see Tsing 2005). The subjective experiences of mass mediation and the embodied practice of crowd participation inculcated through the World Cup crowds were indeed ripe with political possibilities. Presence in these crowds shaped ideas of embodied citizenship that were later borne out in explicitly politicized terrains. Clearly, sport has played a powerful role in shaping the affective terrains of both Korean nationalism and Korean American transnationalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Global Koreanness and Transnational Media Sport

This book investigates the role of transnational media sport in producing notions of Koreanness in the contemporary global era. Media sport plays a powerful role in shaping the mass media content of urban economies around the world, and the study of sport in contemporary communities offers important insights into the cultural dimensions of globalization (Martin and Miller 1999). In this book, I focus on significant sporting events and

iconic athletes that have emerged in tandem with South Korean segyehwa (globalization) policies in order to demonstrate how media sport as an assemblage of institutions, images, and people produces ideas of global Koreanness and how these ideas of Koreanness are lived and experienced by Koreans in both Seoul and Los Angeles. Changing media technologies, the transnational expansion of sporting markets, and the processes of media globalization have expanded the role of transnational media sport in the everyday lives of Koreans in both cities.

The emergence of transnational media sport featuring Korean players and teams began in 1998 with the popular successes of professional female golfer Se Ri Pak in the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) and baseball player Chan Ho Park in Major League Baseball (MLB). Both athletes became national heroes in Korea after their spectacular and closely followed successes in U.S.-based sporting institutions. Their successes initiated the regular entry and growth of Korean players in U.S. professional sports and the subsequent development of Korean-language mass media productions of transnational sport. The number of Koreans watching baseball and golf grew rapidly, and fan cultures formed around individual players and their respective sports. The debuts of Pak and Park can be interpreted as historical markers indexing institutional transformations[3] that fostered the popularity of transnational celebrities and athletes and their continuous visibility through mass media within what is known as *Hallyu*, or the Korean wave of popular culture throughout Asia and beyond.[4] Since then, mass-mediated representations of Korean athletes performing in North American, European, and Japanese leagues have increased steadily, and they have become a substantial part of Korean popular culture in both South Korea and the United States. At the Vancouver Olympics of 2010, Kim Yuna won the first-ever gold medal for South Korea in ladies' figure skating and set off a national and commercial spectacle that brought her more money and media exposure than any Korean athlete before her. When this book was written, she represented the zenith in celebrity-athlete exposure. She was hailed as the new queen of Korean women's sport and, arguably, Korean popular culture. The growth of transnational media sport within and among Korean communities around the world offers an important context for investigating and tracking social changes in an era of neoliberalism, and it also reveals how the affective fields of mass culture offer an important context for understanding national discourses.

In tracking media sport to segyehwa policies in South Korea and to trans-

national processes in Korean America, this book details how Koreanness is evoked within the global assemblages of cultural power that shape ideas of nationhood in two specific sites, Seoul and Los Angeles. The emergence of transnational media sport featuring Korean athletes is situated within political and economic transformations in the public cultures of South Korea, including the expanding role of transnational media representations and cultural flows that shape national identities. The growing global circulation of South Korean popular culture, referred to as Hallyu, has depended on the spectacularization of individual movie stars, pop stars, and athletes as celebrities. Ideas of Koreanness in the United States are shaped, in part, by commercial mass media from South Korea, as demonstrated by the growing popularity of Hallyu stars in Korean American communities. This book offers insight into the movement of Korean people, goods, and images between Seoul and the United States. By regarding Seoul as a cosmopolitan center, this text presents an important narrative in Asian American studies that works to provincialize the United States in studies of Korean America. This text also brings attention to the narratives of nation, race, and gender that hail from mainstream U.S. institutions and shape ideas of Koreanness in the United States and South Korea. Though they may be critical of American power, investigations into the workings of U.S. hegemony in the transnational field too often focus exclusively on the United States as a defining force. I diverge from this tendency and argue that media sport exists as an important domain to demonstrate how Koreanness and Americanness are shaped in relation to each other and how these articulations of nation "look different" from different national locations.

Media sport exists as an important domain for tracking the ideologies of global Koreanness, as it highlights key components of South Korean segyehwa policies. By the summer of 1995, the government of South Korea, led by President Kim Young Sam, had developed a plan to promote globalization at all levels—politics, foreign affairs, economy, society, education, culture, and sport (S. Kim 2000a). National segyehwa policies were considered a way to promote economic liberalization and bolster a strong sense of Korean national identity. The economic aspects of liberalization eased financial regulations in the foreign ownership of banks, media companies, and other national industries; privatized many national industries; endorsed free trade over protectionism; and opened travel and a variety of consumer opportunities for everyday citizens. The state, however, wanted to emphasize the importance of national unity and a sense of national identity as a way to

dictate the nature of these changes within a nationalist context. The statement "The most Korean thing is the most global thing" was often iterated to convey a sense of national significance to the promotion of policies that would further connect South Korea to the global economy. The use of the transliterated word *segyehwa*—rather than globalization—by policymakers, and my use of it in this text, indicates the nationalist tone associated with the policies of economic liberalization; South Korea needed to globalize in order to maintain its status as a significant player in the world of industrialized nations, but in the process of globalizing, Korea's uniqueness and distinctiveness would remain intact and work to influence the rest of the world.[5]

The economic liberalization policies expanded dramatically during Kim Dae Jung's presidency (1998–2002) due to the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and structural adjustment programs instituted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Song 2009). The Kim Dae Jung presidency was also a time of expanding social freedoms. With the expansion of travel freedoms and the deregulation and privatization of mass media outlets, South Koreans were able to purchase a wider variety of non–South Korean consumer experiences. The timing of these economic, political, and social transformations coincided with the successes of Pak and Park, and they help to explain why these athletes emerged at that particular time and became such powerful symbols of Korea's globalization.

A central aspect of segyehwa policies included the attempt to highlight the significance of Korean ethnic identity across national boundaries by promoting the notion of a global Korean diaspora. The mass-mediated image of the Korean athlete operated within the context of nationalist appeals to travelers, students, workers, residents, and citizens who reside outside of South Korean territorial borders and are known as overseas Koreans. This discourse became part of the official state policy and was instituted in the founding of the Overseas Korean Foundation in 1997. Within this discourse, narratives of a shared Koreanness operate across borders to promote a focus on intra-ethnic interaction and social reproduction among Koreans who might be located in different national contexts. These discourses of national kinship pervade the arenas of athletic competition, and the notion of a blood connection among Koreans continues to shape ideas that Koreans, regardless of their country of residence, possess an innate and natural connection to one another (Shin 2006). According to this racialized blood-nation logic, overseas Koreans are expected to maintain a sense of loyalty to the South Korean nation and act on that loyalty as citizens of a global Korea. The athlete, as a

gendered subject who travels transnationally, yet functions as a symbol of the nation, is easily absorbed into the discourse of the overseas Korean. There are increasing numbers of athletes who perform on a transnational circuit and possess Korean heritage but are citizens of nations other than South Korea, are biracial/multiracial, or claim dual citizenship. Nevertheless, Korean athletes continue to be presented primarily as ethnically and racially Korean. This focus on athletes' Korean "blood" works to connect Korean players and fans in ways that tap the emotions and passions of the sporting spectacle, and it uses feelings of national kinship to intensify the feelings of intimacy and obligation directed toward the athletes and their athletic abilities.

In this book, I attempt to offer an account of the complex lived experiences of global Koreanness. In order to do so, my analysis moves back and forth between Seoul and Los Angeles to describe how subjects located in and between the two sites comprehend transnational media sport, given their particular locations in two heterogeneous global cities. Going beyond a discussion that interprets this exchange as "cultural imperialism" or Americanization, I discuss the significance of media sport as it is constituted through connectivities between these sites (see Grewal 2005). These connectivities, or "transculturations" in Koichi Iwabuchi's figuration (2002), occur within and through asymmetrical relations shaped by the power differentials of nation-states, institutions, capital flows, and gender relations. As with other global flows, the "mediascapes" analyzed here are produced through the "differences and disjunctures" that exist between the subjective practices of production and consumption in South Korea and the United States (Appadurai 1996). Practices of media making and media consumption investigated in this text are characterized by uneven circulations of mass media and inconsistent practices of viewing and spectatorship. Obviously, not everyone is a sports fan, and each fan has his or her own subjective viewing practices. Furthermore, some people who are not fans might be interested in watching sports for a number of different reasons. Nevertheless, in this text, I establish that the realm of media sport exists as a significant domain for the distribution and circulation of ideas of Koreanness between South Korea and the United States.

For Korean American immigrant populations in the United States, the popular appeal of these "homeland" narratives can be explained as a response to the marginalization and invisibility these groups feel in political, economic, and media domains. This position assumes that a goal of Koreans