

Japanese Colonialism, National Memory and Korean Football

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By Guy Podoler

In February and in June 2005 the national football teams of Japan and North Korea met in World Cup qualifiers. These highly emotionally and politically charged matches have highlighted the familiar global issue of the nexus between sport and politics, and have provided a rich arena with which to explore political aspects of postcolonial Korean football and Korea-Japan conflict, as well as to reflect on the uses of the past in present South and North Korea.

Football, Valor, and Legitimacy in South Korea

The politics-football nexus first emerged in South Korea under President Syngman Rhee (1948 – 1960). Congruent with Rhee’s continuing display

of animosity to Japan was his decision pertaining to South Korea-Japan football matches scheduled for 1954. The two national teams were supposed to play on a home-and-away basis to determine the qualifier for the Swiss World Cup. Rhee refused, however, to let the former colonizer’s team to enter his country. Both matches were then held in Japan, with Rhee, as the story has it, “advising” his players to return as winners or else “drown themselves in the East Sea” [1]. And, indeed, winners and national heroes they became after a 5-1 win in the first match and a 2-2 draw in the second. But it is the 2002 Korea-Japan World Cup that best reveals the playing out of Korea-Japan sports politics on the global stage [2].



"Statue of Indomitable Koreans", Independence Hall (photograph by Guy Podoler)

During the World Cup, images of South Korea's "Red Devils"—the nickname for the fans of the national team—with their colored faces and red T-shirts, were projected in both local and international media. School textbooks even featured them after the games [3]. In the summer of 2002, Independence Hall—the monumental site that commemorates the colonial past—displayed a huge poster depicting a group of enthusiastic "Red Devils" cheering on their team. The poster was hung on a wall of the

imposing 126-meter long and forty-five-meter high "Grand Hall of the Nation," overlooking the fifteen-meter high "Statue of Indomitable Koreans," which is one of the most iconic objects of Independence Hall. Thus, the image of the inseparability of the 2002 sports-related nationalist pride from anti-colonial valor is conveyed, and, concomitantly, the South represents itself as the heir of a pre-divided Korea.



"Red Devils" poster, Independence Hall (photograph by Guy Podoler)

North Korea: "Japanese Reactionaries," Past and Present

In turning to North Korea, two main points stand out: first, that the dominant historical narrative of modern Japanese aggression leaves little scope for events and figures that are not related to the "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung and his family; and, second, is the basic nature of North Korean sport. Naturally, the North has adopted the communist model of "physical culture" and its utilitarian role in nation-building, including the systematic

use of sport to raise group consciousness and solidarity [4]. This policy is recurrently highlighted by the North's signature mass sport performances designated to consolidate the people around the system and the leader.

The North commonly uses an aggressive narrative towards “Japan,” “Japanese reactionaries” being one of the most common expressions [5]. Also, the issue of the Japanese abductees has recently exacerbated the historically tense relationship between the two countries [6]. Against this background, the national football teams of these countries played each other in a qualifying group for the 2006 Germany World Cup. To maintain security at the first match, which took place in Saitama, the Japan Football Association had 1,400 security guards—1.5 times the usual number—join a 2,000-strong police force [7]. Also, fans of the two teams entered the stadium by separate entrances, and a buffer of 1,000 seats prevented the North Korean fans from coming into contact with the Japanese fans.



"Red Devils" fan cheering

Japan won this game 2-1. Passions ran high between the two matches as FIFA (International Football Federation) was considering punishing North Korea due to the behavior of its fans at the home game against Iran—another contender in the group. Finally, FIFA decided that instead of taking place in Pyongyang, the second game with Japan was to be played at a neutral venue (Bangkok) with no crowd. Interestingly, the South showed support for its sister to the north and tried, without success, to dissuade FIFA from its decision. . Japan won the return match as well 2-0.

In any case, North Korea saw its double defeat to Japan as a result of continuing discrimination. The North represented itself as victim, first, of the biased Syrian referee at the match against Iran, and second, of FIFA, whose decision deprived it from the chance to play Japan under favorable conditions at Kim Il Sung Stadium. In order to shed further light on one more aspect pertinent to North Korean sports nationalism, it is instructive to examine another recent sports story.

The soccer defeat by Japan was a bitter disappointment not only for the North Korean state, but also to its external base of support: *zainichi* Koreans (Korean residents in Japan). Some 5,000 North Korean fans from the Korean community in Japan had attended the Saitama match. Of the nearly 650,000 Koreans living in Japan, estimates put the number of those

considered “pro-North” at 200,000-250,000 [8], and this pro-North group has “maintained a network of schools and other institutions, which have stressed the need for loyalty to the North Korean leadership” [9]. Among this community is boxer Hong Chang Su.



Boxer Hong Chang Su

A graduate of Tokyo Korean High School, Hong won the super-fly weight title of the World Boxing Council in 2000, and defended it the following year. In a ceremony in Tokyo in November 2000, which took place under the aegis of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon), he was awarded with the prestigious “Title of People’s Sportsman of the DPRK.” In June 2001 Hong received a warm welcoming reception attended by local dignitaries when he visited the North. The following is a segment from the story published by the KCNA:

Hong Chang Su, the first Korean world pro-boxing champion in Japan, arrived here today... Despite the Japanese reactionaries’ moves to assimilate Koreans in Japan to Japanese, he has

taken part in matches by a full Korean name with a flag of the DPRK in his hand, thus demonstrating the spirit of the Korean nation before the world [10].

In light of the ebbing influence of Chongryon—demonstrated by declining sums of money sent to the North since the mid-1990s, by the drop in the number of active members [11], and by lower enrollment in Chongryon-run schools [12]—embracing athlete Hong is part of the general attempt to preserve this connection between North Korea and its Japan-based supporters.

More importantly for our discussion, the KCNA’s text alludes to the final years of Japanese colonialism in Korea, to the “*naisen ittai* period” of forced assimilation. It thus attempts to kill two birds with one stone. First, the declining power of Chongryon is indicative of the deep changes the pro-North community in Japan is experiencing. The text frames the trend of *zainichi* Koreans taking Japanese citizenship, marrying Japanese spouses, and attempting to blend in society by framing the phenomenon in familiar anticolonial terminology. Second, the report portrays boxer Hong’s success as a struggle against assimilation—his triumph bringing together the Korean effort to preserve identity and culture in an environment that seeks to obliterate them.

When the former colonized emerges triumphant,

the pains of the past are somewhat mollified, and the colonial period can be fitted into a narrative that is based on a historical continuum of valor and stamina. This is important for each of the two states vying over legitimacy on the Korean peninsula. It also can serve as a basis for strengthening inter-Korean ties. Thus, in August 2005—a few of months after the South’s show-of-support to the North during the dispute with FIFA—the national football teams of the sister-adversaries met in a friendly match in Seoul as part of the events commemorating sixty years to the end of Japanese occupation. The cheering fans in this game were instructed to wave only the “unification flag” and not their respective national flags.



Fans at the North-South friendly match, August 2005

Endnotes

[1] Park Song-wu, “Football History: From Archrivals to World Cup Co-hosts,” *Korea Times* (Online; 14 April 2003).

[2] For a good collection of articles on political, economical, and societal aspects of the Korea-

Japan World Cup, see John Horne and Wolfram Manzenreiter (eds.), *Japan, Korea and the 2002 World Cup* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

[3] John Horne and Wolfram Manzenreiter, “Accounting for Mega-Events: Forecast and Actual Impacts of the 2002 Football World Cup Finals on the Host Countries Japan/Korea,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 39, no. 2 (June 2004), p. 195.

[4] For this communist model see James Riordan, “The Impact of Communism on Sport,” in *The International Politics of Sport in the Twentieth Century*, eds. James Riordan and Arnd Krüger (London and New York: E and FN Spon, 1999), pp. 48-66. Although Riordan does not focus on North Korea, the model nevertheless fits the North as well.

[5] See most Japan-related news items produced by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

[6] For an illuminating discussion on this issue see Patricia G. Steinhoff, “Kidnapped Japanese in North Korea: The New Left Connection,” *Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2004), pp. 123-142

[7] *Japan Times* (Online; 10 February 2005).

[8] Aidan Foster Carter contends that “at most 150,000 now have any link to *Chongryun*” (in “‘North Koreans’ in Japan: a dying breed?” *Asia*

TimesOnline; 17 March 2001). (Chongryon is the pro-North General Association of Korean Residents in Japan.)

[9] J.E. Hoare and Susan Pares, *North Korea in the 21st Century: An Interpretative Guide* (Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 2005), p. 134.

[10] KCNA (Online; 19 June 2001).

[11] See Kangdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, who draw from a variety of sources, in *North Korea through the Looking Glass* (Washington D.C.: The

Brookings Institute, 2000), pp. 179-180.

[12] See report by Hans Greimel, "Japan's North Korean schools find 'workers' paradise' doesn't add up," *Chicago Tribune* (Online; 30 December 2005).

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