

# Sport, History and Asian Societies

Despite a problematic history, Japan and South Korea host the 2002 World Cup together. A Tibetan lama, Khyentse Norbu, makes a film about football-mad Buddhist monks that becomes an international hit at Cannes in 1999. Approximately 130,000 Bengalis attend the 1997 Federation Cup semi-final at Calcutta's Salt Lake Stadium to witness a clash between the city's two great rivals, Mohun Bagan FC and East Bengal FC. In 2002, the team from marginal Manipur wins the Women's National Football Championship in India for the eighth time in ten years without conceding a goal. What on earth is all this about? The answer, of course, is that all this is about Asia.

Research >  
Asia

By James Mills

Even at a glance, it is obvious that these few football stories contain within them elements of religion, gender, class, colonialism, international relations, modernization, and globalization. Importantly, the stories hint both at history and at processes of change. Japan and South Korea, two nations with a complex past of cultural and political colonialism, united to exploit the opportunities presented by the World Cup cabaret. The monks of Tibet have a history of fascination with football that stretches back to the beginning of the twentieth century and the film hints at the necessity of approaching Tibet, even of approaching its religious institutions, with fresh perspectives. Calcutta has been India's football capital for over a century, during which time the game and the local clubs have been transformed into institutions that reflect and indeed exacerbate the city's tensions and divisions. The women of Manipur draw on a fascinating history of both sporting activity and of political action to participate in a game that allows them to reverse the relationship between their state and the Indian Union and to assert, on a national stage, the unusual power of females in their region.

Examining sports in these contexts reveals that local societies have shaped sporting activity. But the reverse might also be said, as sports has been central to the processes of

change and of conflict that have shaped local societies. The physical intensity of participation in a sporting moment, either as a player or as a supporter, can give an immediacy and a charge to whatever meanings are attached to that particular instant. As such, the importance of sports in processes of social change can be explained by the fact that the alliance of sports to political, social or cultural vehicles gives a powerful, and perhaps unique, energy to such movements or processes.

It is therefore surprising that sports has not been a more important tool of analysis for those interested in Asian societies. While scholars working with this region have been the source of important new perspectives in the last two decades, the Subaltern Studies School is just one example of this - sports has remained a seldom examined realm of activity. Indeed, academics that ought to know better have gone as far as to dismiss the realm as unimportant: Suranjan Das, for example, described a football match as trivial despite the fact that it was the site and the occasion for the communal riot that he was examining. This neglect is all the more curious as it seems to reproduce the Orientalist assumptions of European colonizers who preferred to represent sports as 'un-Asian' and to see Asians as morally unprepared for, and spiritually unconcerned by, organized games and competition. One suspects that sport has been neglected as it often fails to fit easily within the tried and trusted categories preferred by Asian scholars - caste, economics, politics, agriculture, land tenure, marriage, kinship, ritual, and religion. Thus Joseph Alter found it necessary to abandon in his attempts to understand wrestling in Banaras: 'Wrestling transcends the categories

that anthropologists and others have traditionally used to interpret Indian society and culture'.<sup>1</sup>

Recent scholarship has begun to correct this neglect. Indeed, there is plenty to work with as Asian societies have a long and a complex history of devising and organizing sporting activities and also have, more recently, a vigorous record of co-opting Western games and sports. Work to date has taken two approaches to the history of sports in the region. The first has been to examine discourses about sports, Asia, and Asians, and to explore the ways in which games and physical activities have been used by all manner of groups to construct different identities and to assert or to challenge stereotypes. The second has been to focus on sports and power, and to show how sporting moments and activities have been implicated in the formulation of, and important in the challenges to, the region's political and social systems.

The conclusion of this scholarship, as can be seen in the range of articles accompanying this one in this newsletter, is that sports has often been central to the construction of the identities and structures that shape Asia today. But, as Alter suggests in the above quotation, sporting activities have just as crucially offered opportunities to challenge and transcend those identities and structures. The Koreans busily selling fake football shirts to tourists, the monks escaping from Buddhist monasteries for a glimpse of Beckham's right boot, the East Bengal fans taunting their wealthy neighbours, and the Manipuri women drubbing all comers from the Indian Union are all, however briefly, challenging the status conferred upon them, and conferred upon sport, by others that claim power over them. This is perhaps the most important of the many reasons that it is time for Asian scholars to begin watching sports more seriously. <

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Note >

<sup>1</sup> Alter, J. *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1992).

## Sports in Korea

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Korea

Unlike sports in many European countries, Korean sports do not have their roots in a club system. For youth the schools are the primary area for their physical activities and students can experience and learn various sports throughout their school life. Schools, however, merely provide Physical Education classes and extracurricular physical activities. After graduation, Koreans have even less opportunities to become involved in sports and accordingly 67 per cent of Koreans do not participate in any kind of sports. Those who want to participate in sports either attend a private sports centre or join a Korean style sports club called 'Dong Ho In'.

By Ahn Min-Seok

In contrast to school sports and community sports, which are on the developing stage, so-called elite sports have demonstrated a remarkable record at the world level over the past twenty years. These results have been fostered by successive governments maintaining an elite sports oriented policy. Illustrative of this is the fact that athletes who win a medal at the international level, such as the Olympics, are assured of a lifetime pension. The Korean Sports Promotion Law states that athletes winning Olympic gold are granted one million Korean won, which is equivalent to approximately USD 800.

A major distinctive feature of Korean sports is an elite-dominant paradigm. Grassroots sports have clearly suffered

from the serious imbalance in comparison with elite sports in terms of the number of athletes allotted for various competitions. By means of the central government's sports promotion fund elite sports and grassroots sports have respectively been granted USD 0.9 billion and USD 0.5 billion, during the period 1998-2002.

Four major reasons can be found for elite sports to have dominated the public sector in Korea. First of all, a high value is placed on receiving international prestige through sports. As Korea is not well known and as international sports enjoy high visibility, sportive victories over other countries are a good means to gain worldwide recognition. Second, sports are believed to further the desired sense of national unity. Under the military regime, sports

played a complimentary and supportive role to integrate people. The competition of athletes can provide temporary emotional surges of national unity. It was the military regime then, which created the Foundation of Professional Baseball in 1982. Third, elite sports are used for propaganda and for ideological purposes. Sport results were often interpreted as the outcome of a competition between political rather than athletic adversaries. During the Cold War, competition in sports between North and South Korea was likened to 'war without weapons'. For South Korea, an athletic victory against North Korea could be interpreted as a victory of its own political and economic systems. Fourth, elite sports are suited for achievement oriented policy. While the investment for grassroots sports take a long time to be effective, elite sports bring about immediate results by means of only a reasonable budget. Thus, government financially supports national teams and athletes and accommodates them at the Olympic Training Center throughout the year. Hence also, government finds it attractive to award pensions to athletes who obtain a medal at an international competition.

These days, however, the poor conditions of sports facilities within civil society have often been criticized. For one of the most popular sports in

Korea, football, ironically, there are only a limited number of public fields available, and a club system has yet to be properly established. The total number of public gyms in Korea stands at 285, and there are only 90 public swimming pools nationwide. Whereas in Japan, 20.8 per cent of sports facilities are publicly owned, only 4 per cent of such facilities are publicly owned in Korea. As a result of the limited number of sports facilities, just 32 per cent of Koreans regularly participate in any kind of sporting activities

The 2002 World Cup is without questions an opportunity to expand and promote grassroots sports including football to improve the quality of life for Korean youth and citizens. The development of grassroots sports is one of the most central significant changes for Koreans that the World Cup potentially will bring into civil society. Unfortunately, the elite sports paradigm still dominates, perpetuating the status quo. The number of youth football teams may have grown slightly since 1996, the number of spectators going to professional matches has not seen a significant increase. The 2002 World Cup seems to have failed to reform the Korean football system in advance. While hosting the World Cup, Korean football has thus lost an excellent opportunity to improve the underdeveloped football structure.

On the other hand, the rapid increase of the number of 'Dong Ho In' over the last few years evidently indicates that the Korean football boom has just started. In addition, professional teams have begun to support youth teams last year, and the football lottery has been intro-

In many parts of South Korea, senior citizens can be observed in their early morning exercises.



Photo provided by Ahn Min-Seok

duced in 2001. Ten new stadiums will contribute to developing football culture in spite of concerns regarding stadium remaining idle after the World Cup. Had Korea not hosted the World Cup, these things could not even have been imagined.

In conclusion, elite sports clearly maintain their dominance over grassroots sports in spite of Korea co-hosting the 2002 World Cup, and the country has lost a golden opportunity to introduce an advanced football culture based on a club system. But, as Korean football may well change after the World Cup, an evaluation on how the event influences Korean football and other sports should definitely be evaluated in the long term.

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Also in Korea, basketball has proved increasingly popular, particularly among young urban Koreans.

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