

## Between Developmentalism and Nationalism: The 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics

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Fig. 1: The Unified Team of Korea during the entrance ceremony at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. (Photo courtesy of the Korean Culture and Information Service via [Wikimedia Commons](#), reprinted here under [Creative Commons](#) license)

Since the 2010s, Asia has become the region hosting the most mega-events. Previously, since their inception in the middle of the 19th century, mega-events had primarily been used to showcase the prosperity of cities and countries of the Western world. However, the following events have been or soon will be hosted in Asia during the decade from 2015 to 2025: three Olympics (Pyeongchang 2018, Tokyo 2020, Beijing 2022), one FIFA World Cup (Qatar 2022), and two World Expos (Dubai 2020 and Osaka 2025). The 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics was the event that ushered in the era of mega-events in Asia. Recording the largest number of countries and participants among any Winter Olympics held thus far, the event was held in three cities (Pyeongchang, Jeongseon, and Gangneung) of Gangwon-do Province, a northeastern province of South Korea.

Mega-events refer to events that have tens of thousands of visitors and billions of viewers, such as the Summer Olympics, Winter Olympics, FIFA World Cup, and World Expositions. Because this means that the venue of such a mega-event is broadcast to billions of people, at least ten billion US dollars are invested over several years for the massive renewal of a host city, the impact of which lasts for decades. As such, host cities and countries formulate grand plans upon which they decide what to display through that mega-event. What was the grand plan behind the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics? What was intended to be displayed through the event? A brief introduction of the history of mega-events is required before we figure out the answer to these questions.

Mega-events have been associated with various ideologies. The most popular expositions held in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were closely related to nationalism and imperialism. Western cities, such as London, Paris, and Chicago, wanted to display the industrial developments achieved by their respective countries, in addition to how well they had civilized their colonies. After World War II, mega-events came to be combined with

the Cold War. The Olympics (the mega-event that received more attention than expositions from this period onwards) was used as a stage where the prosperity of the Western world, led by the United States, was displayed. The stage was also used to convey the message that Italy, Japan, and West Germany had transformed from former Axis powers into responsible members of the international community.

Since the 1990s, mega-events have come to be combined with the ideologies of neoliberalism and urban entrepreneurialism. From the mid-1970s, the cities of the West were faced with the need to find new engines of urban growth to replace manufacturing, and they turned towards finance, logistics, tourism, and cultural industries. In addition, perspectives on the role of the city have changed from "urban managerialism," which focuses on distributing public resources and facilities for residents, to "urban entrepreneurialism," which actively aims to attract businesses, business elites, and tourists to promote urban growth. The Olympics provided an opportunity for such cities to publicize their new images to the world through hotels, skyscrapers, and middle-class apartments. Prime examples include the Olympics held in Barcelona in 1992, Atlanta in 1996, Beijing in 2008, and London in 2012, as well as the Dubai Expo 2020 and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar 2022.

The ideology behind the Pyeongchang Olympics was developmentalism. In developmental states, central government bureaucrats make plans for rapid economic growth and implement such plans by mobilizing conglomerates. Industrial cities that will become the engines of rapid economic growth are determined by the state. Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China are countries that share such practices of top-down developmentalism. In addition, these countries can also be seen to share bottom-up developmentalism. This is because the local governments in these countries, witnessing the rapid growth of certain cities due to the central government's plans, actively request that the central government distribute resources to them as well. This is

why the central governments in East Asia allocated the right to host the Olympics, Expos, and Asian Games to several cities, whereas in the west, it was mostly local governments, such as London and Paris, that singlehandedly made bids for the mega-events.

Gangwon-do Province, one of the least developed regions in South Korea, had previously witnessed how the central government provided a large amount of budgetary support to Daejeon when the Expo was held there in 1993. Subsequently, Gangwon-do made efforts to become a host city of the FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan. Unfortunately, Gangwon-do became the only province not to host a FIFA World Cup game in 2002. Attempts began in the early 2000s to host the 2010 Winter Olympics, but Gangwon-do had to wait until the 2018 Winter Olympics to finally host the event, after three bids. For over a dozen years, Gangwon-do insisted that, because the province was alienated from the central government's distribution of resources and had no developed industries, the hosting of the Pyeongchang Olympics required much support from the central government. The cost of building the necessary facilities and holding the event itself was 1.9 billion USD, but the amount of social infrastructure investments required in the wake of the Olympics reached 11 billion USD.

For South Korea's central government, on the other hand, the message that was intended to be displayed by hosting the Pyeongchang Olympics was closely related to nationalism. In 1988, when South Korea first hosted the Summer Olympics in Seoul, the majority of Korea's progressive civic activists campaigned against it. The reason was not to do with hosting the Olympics itself; rather, it had to do with the fact that the hosting of the Olympics in Seoul would promote the image of a divided Korea to the world. The argument made was that the Olympics should be held in both Seoul and Pyeongyang in order to demonstrate the peninsula's commitment towards unification. Their idea was realized as athletes from the two Koreas jointly entered the Olympics

from 2000 to 2006, holding one flag (bearing the image of the Korean Peninsula). The political party with close links with the progressive civic activists re-gained power in 2017, and attempts were made once again during the Pyeongchang Olympics to display to the world a will to improve relations between the two Koreas and achieve unification. This was done through the joint entrance of athletes during the opening ceremony [Fig. 1], as well as through the creation of a "unified" women's ice hockey team.

In this sense, the Pyeongchang Olympics can be interpreted as a nationalist performance on a stage created by developmentalism. A clear and coherent strategy and vision was not present in hosting the event. For the local government, obtaining resources from the central government was the most important goal, but they were not able to establish specific plans for the utilization of these resources. The central government's plan was also unsuccessful. The creation of a "unified" women's ice hockey team meant that several of the South Korean athletes who had been preparing for the Olympics for a long time had to be left out. The decision was subject to much criticism, and the "unified" team did not receive much support from inside or outside South Korea.

In South Korea today, the multiple imbalances that exist between the Seoul metropolitan area and other provinces, as well as the decline facing the provinces outside the central area, have become important social problems. Despite previous, unsuccessful experiences, local governments are still trying to revitalize their local communities by hosting mega-events. This is because mega-events continue to provide justification for receiving resources from the central government. In this way, developmentalism and the politics of distribution around mega-events in Korean society cannot be separated, like two sides of a coin.

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