Looking through the 2018 Winter Olympics: The Complexity of Contemporary Korean Nationalism and National Identity Politics

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Due to the Japanese colonialism, the Korean War and the partition of the nation, the nature of Korean national identity becomes complicated and often incurs a political dispute. The 2018 Winter Olympic Games offers a useful occasion through which this complexity of Korean nationalism can be examined. I observed at least four distinctive discourses on Korean identity being displayed via the winter sporting competition: pan Korean ethno-nationalism, South Korean state patriotism, post-colonialism, and cosmopolitanism. Some of these nationalist views are mutually exclusive, and this situation gave rise to the tensions and divisions between political parties and pressure groups in South Korea during the sports mega-event. This indicates that the characteristics of Korean nationalism are constantly in flux, and each nationalist ideology is continually campaigning for securing a dominant position in Korean culture and politics. This also suggests that it is necessary to consider the intersection between primordialism and constructionism, and between civic and organic national identities in order to draw a more accurate picture of the spectrum of Korean nationalism today. It that sense, I argue that sport is not simply a physical contest between athletes but more importantly is a field of the hegemonic struggle between adherents of different nationalism.

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