Nationalist Desires, State Spectacles, and Hegemonic Legacies: Retrospective Tales of Seoul’s Olympic Regime

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The 1988 Summer Games in Seoul embodied all that is good and bad about the international Olympics: national pride and prideful nationalism, global equality and national greatness, redeemed hosts and maligned absentees, open-door diplomacy and closed-door deals, new forms of détente and new forms of discord, democratic order and armed commando security, Confucian propriety and restrained militancy, record-breaking athletes and dope-aided athletics, impenetrable guests and over-exposed hosts, athletic equanimity and contested judging, great competition and wronged matches, gold-medal underdogs and defeated champions, fair play and quid pro quo, fair-use diplomacy and political usury, much-awaited free speech and broadcast monopolies, corporate sponsorship and commercial corporatism, fiduciary responsibility and Olympic profiteering, world brotherhood and athletic elitism, inclusive diversity and staged oneness, human equality and golden exceptionalism, self effacement and self congratulations, and jubilant memories and tarnished moments, or jubilant moments and tarnished memories.

Many of these same paradoxes played out again at the XXIXth Olympiad in Beijing, closely mirroring the XXIVth Olympiad on its twentieth anniversary, and lending the two Games to ready comparison. On the field and in its ceremonies, one might say Beijing outdid Seoul’s “spectacular” with its “spellbinding” pyrotechnic displays, cutting edge special effects, and massive theatrical renditions of epic culture performed by precisely choreographed and elaborately costumed armies of performers. Seoul and Beijing both projected “feel-good” iconic images of a unitary “cultural tradition,” which were embedded
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in, and juxtaposed to, “cutting-edge” technologies. But of course, Beijing’s stage was much bigger and its audience several times larger. Its 600 million domestic viewers alone equaled the total global audience for the Seoul Games.

Off stage, Chinese leaders brandished Beijing’s designation to be host as an international endorsement of the legitimacy of their regime, just as Chun Doo Hwan had done after Seoul won the Olympic bid twenty years earlier. There was little basis to deny that both had been endorsed, just as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had quite explicitly endorsed representatives of the former Axis Powers—Rome in 1960, Tokyo in 1964, and Munich in 1972—as a way of welcoming them back to the “community of nations.” The Beijing regime, like that in Seoul, suppressed political protest and expression in the name of maintaining “security.” The issue of political prisoners was raised on both occasions, but this was muted in Seoul’s case by the Cold War climate at that time. During the Games, car owners in Seoul and Beijing were restricted from driving to reduce pollution and congestion; locals were cautioned to stay clear of areas designated for sports venues and foreign guests; and certain groups who didn’t convey the right image were pressured to vacate the city, or at least get off of the streets. Likewise, new codes of hygiene were enforced and anything deemed “unsightly,” “chaotic,” or “underdeveloped” was targeted to be rooted out, all in the name of living up to “international” standards. For the sake of urban renewal, hundreds of thousands of residents of each capital were evicted by representatives of their respective states. There was considerable opposition to eviction and media coverage of it in both contexts, which took a toll on state political capital, at home and abroad.

Seoul and Beijing were both charged with “going overboard” in the Western press, but many Seoumites and Beijingers came to rationalize these strict command-and-control operations as legitimate, given the high stakes of the Games for their respective nations. No doubt, the stakes were high: success would thrust each nation into the elite circle of the few nations so anointed, but any serious mishap could bring international disgrace. National reputations and futures hung in the balance. To use a recent cliché, the Games in Seoul and Beijing were “too big to fail,” and not just for their respective hosts.

In the run up to 2008, Beijing was often likened to Seoul, especially in media speculation over developments in democratization and trade liberalization that might result from being host to the Olympics. In all of the talk of the transformative power of the Olympics, it seems that no one had taken account of Mexico City in 1968, which experienced no demonstrable political or economic benefits from the Games. Advocates of neo-liberalism and “open-door” policies in the media and elsewhere were enamored with the idea that the Seoul Olympiad had been the catalyst that brought about democratization in South Korea. After all, Tiananmen, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and democratization in the Republic of Korea (ROK) all came about within a year