Liancourt Rocks: Media Dynamics of Nationalism at the 2012 Summer Olympic Games

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Background and Introduction

On August 11, 2012, the South Korean men’s soccer team beat their Japanese counterpart in the bronze medal match at the 2012 London Olympics. In the post-match celebration, midfielder Park Jong-woo took a banner from a fan in the crowd, then ran around the field victoriously with the banner that displayed “Dokdo is our land”. The scene was received by Korean fans cheering wildly, which was caught on video and still images and was widely circulated by the media.

“Dokdo” is also called Liancourt Island, which is composed of a group of small islets spread across the strait between Japan and Korea are known as “Takeshima” in Japan, and “Dokdo” in South Korea. The 2012 Summer Olympics witnessed a moment of territorial dispute over-spilling into the discourse of sport. Many have commented the Olympic Games as “fiercely nationalistic” (e.g., Maguire et al., 2008), for it is the ultimate forum for fans, players, and audiences alike to join together through powerful and exclusive social interactions that shape the imagined community of nation (e.g., Durkheim, 1964). In fact, the disputed ownership of Liancourt Rocks not only constitutes a part of the ongoing political tension between Japan and Korea, but also points deeply to competing memories towards World War II, a consistent theme that serves as a focal point in both nations’ identity narration (He, 2007).

It is with this specific context and background knowledge that this paper seeks to analyze both Japanese and Korean sport media’s coverage on the incident as well as the ensuing discussion placed in media. The research questions are two-fold: a).what different nationalistic dynamics were initiated and engaged through sport media’s portrayal; b) how sport, as an affective communicative forum, has constituted a part of ongoing struggles of nation and identity.

Literature Review

The ideology of nation-state is ubiquitous and mighty in the language of sport (Bairner, 2001; Jarvie, 2003; Morgan, 2000). The concept of “nation” is imagined (Anderson, 1991), which embodies a moral force that supersedes temporal and spatial limits, creating powerful and often pathological allegiances to a cultural ideal (Appadurai, 1986; Hall, 1996).

Precisely because of its conceptuality aspect, the idea of nation relies on a constant process of social construction through symbols, forms, and media representations that have been generally accepted as the bedrock of social realities (Billig, 1995). It is in this context that mega sporting events like the Olympics have become an extremely powerful spectacle that sutures vectors of national identity, political significance, and cultural consumption (Andrews, 2006; Silk, 2011).

In the meantime, the Olympic Games also exist as a site of international political contention, where power is frequently exercised by states as well as a range of actors at different levels of global society to demonstrate disapproval and/or to convince or coerce others (Cottrell & Nelson, 2010). Any factor that imperil the coherent sovereignty of nation-state may serve as a mobilizing force for contentions: territorial disputes, racial inequalities, economic disparities, and so forth. In the meantime, each contentious scene is situated in specific socio-historical context that reveals different struggles for power. Analysis is, in this sense, to “remake the context where context is always understood as a structure of power” (Grossberg, 1997; p.261).

Methodology

Nationally prominent newspapers play an important role in disseminating and articulating messages that help to produce ideology and culture within a nation (Anderson, 1991). Even with the increasing popularity of social media, the traditional media in particular, with their dissemination to large audiences, enhance the constitutive effect of discourse (Mautner, 2008). With such perception, this study employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the coverage of the Olympic bronze medal soccer game as well as its ensuing discussion published in major
newspapers in Japan and Korea, including: “The Korea Times”, “Daily Yomiuri”, and “Nikkansports”. Specific texts are collected dating from the beginning of the Olympic Games, all the way through to the end of the 2012 calendar year.

CDA is founded upon the idea of understanding power dynamics by identifying the relationship between particular communicative practices and the larger social contexts in which they are produced, circulated, and consumed (Parker, 1990). In particular, the implementation of CDA is to specifically focus on the interplays between specific linguistic expressions, rhetoric, and intertextuality that have woven together the discourse (Fairclough, 2003). By grounding the textual analysis into historical and on-going socio-political context, it seeks to understand how this after-game celebration was engaged in entirely different communicative patterns among the public, generating different understandings nationalistic dynamics in each country.

Findings and Conclusion

The Korean media portrayed an overwhelming support for Park. In particular, interactions between the athlete and fans were consistently emphasized in a matter of spontaneity. The sanctions on Park was perceived as denying fans in showing mutual bondage with the athlete and, more importantly, a matter of disapproving the brief communion of Korean nation. On the other hand, the justification for Park’s behavior was by denying the political and controversial nature of the banner statement. The contestation of Liancourt was entirely avoided where a historical hegemony was assumed. Meanwhile, as the event further developed, the personal body of Park was turned into an extended symbol for the Korean nation. As a result, the outline of Park’s sporting career has thus become the formation of a political subject, the discursive construction of the nation.

In the meantime, the Japanese media persisted in an interesting silence: nothing about the territorial dispute was reported. One cannot stop relating such silence to a wider historical attitude, where the Japanese government has remained uncritical, monolithic, without showing remorse for countries Japan revealed aggression in WWII (Bukh, 2007). To date, divided interpretations over the war-history remains to be the foreground of social conflicts central to Japan’s national identity. In the end, whether the silence should be interpreted as Japanese media collectively shunning away from nationalistic sentiments perpetuated in the after-game scenery, or as a matter of denying the controversial ownership of Liancourt Island is discussed.

In conclusion, this research finds that Japan and South Korea have displayed very different political dynamics in dealing with this incident at the 2012 Olympic Games. The implications of this research are far reaching in regards to understanding the importance of sport media in developing and promoting nation-state ideology and practice. Additionally, this research highlights the importance of managing sport media narratives in a global context, as they can hold important roles in politics.