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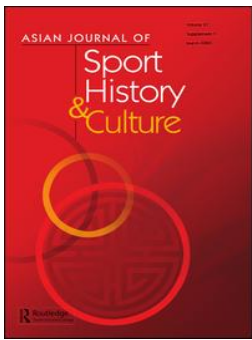
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Olympic Winter Games in Non-Western Cities: State, Sport and Cultural Diplomacy in Sochi 2014, PyeongChang 2018 and Beijing 2022

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ABSTRACT



The summer and winter Olympics share the five-ring logo. However, their social and political connotations differ. The Olympic Winter Games displays an aura of a game for the rich and powerful. A few aspiring nations intend to host this luxurious sporting festival in order to polish their international reputations as powerful actors in the global capitalist order. The cases of Sochi 2014, PyeongChang 2018 and Beijing 2022 illustrate this pattern. Wallerstein's world-system theory is a useful conceptual tool to examine the context of each Olympics, the content of the Olympic ceremonies, the nature of athletic competitions, and the post-event political environment. Although the three nations have different historical backgrounds and different diplomatic aims, the winter Olympics provided the trio with an opportunity to construct an image of major global or regional power. Russian Olympic diplomacy in Sochi was impressive but its post-event aggression undercut its soft power exercise on the ice. South Korea acquired desired political outcomes by hosting the Olympic Winter Games and its peace campaign continued after the event. China has the potential to highlight its emerging world power status at Beijing 2022. Yet, increasing China scepticism in the West may impede its winter Olympic diplomacy.

KEYWORDS

Winter Olympics;
diplomacy;
Sochi 2014;
PyeongChang 2018;
Beijing 2022

While the summer and winter Olympics are global sport mega-events that share the identical five-ring logo, the social and political connotations of the two occasions differ significantly.¹ Most notably, the global north and south divide is more clearly visible at the Olympic Winter Games than its summer counterpart because economic and cultural barriers to winter sports are higher than most summer sporting activities.² At the same time, the winter Olympics today seems to reinforce Western cultural hegemony and white privilege as North American, European and Scandinavian athletes prevail in most of the winter Olympic events.³

The winter sport mega-event awarded to non-Western cities, namely Sochi 2014, PyeongChang 2018 and Beijing 2022, involves a distinctive interplay amongst state, sport, and cultural diplomacy.⁴ Despite, or because of, the economic and cultural

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exclusivity that the winter Olympics emanates, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) enticed Russia, South Korea and China to host this winter sport mega-event. Apart from games held in Japan (1972 and 1998) and the former Yugoslavia (1984), all other winter Olympics took place in the West. Russia, South Korea, and China have attempted to utilize the elitist culture embedded in this winter sporting competition to uplift their international status. Whilst the summer Olympics functions as a coming-out party for emerging economies,⁵ the Olympic Winter Games often works as a cultural extravaganza, especially for non-Western industrial powerhouses, to demonstrate their desire to be recognized as advanced cultural economies.⁶ The decision by three non-Western cities to host the Olympic Winter Games reflects the three nations' international standing moving upward in the capitalist world order.

The hosting of the summer and winter Olympic games mirrors the diplomatic aim of the three non-Western nations in a different historical context. As newly industrialized nations, South Korea and China demonstrated their remarkable economic achievement to the world by hosting the summer Olympic games in 1988 and 2008 respectively.⁷ The growth of the South Korean and Chinese economies continued after these sporting competitions.⁸ At the height of the Cold War in 1980, the Soviet Union hosted the first Olympics in the Eastern Bloc. By staging the international sporting competition, the communist superpower intended to propagate socialist ideology to its capitalist rivals.⁹ After the demise of the Soviet Union in the late 1990s, its industrial and diplomatic capability significantly weakened. In the post-Cold War neoliberal world, and especially since 2000, Russia has regained its regional political ascendancy, China has further strengthened its economic might, and South Korea has enhanced its technological merits.¹⁰ While each nation has different diplomatic interests under different geopolitical climates, hosting the Olympic Winter Games appears to be a useful political strategy for the three nations to express their desire to be recognized as emerging major powers and to impress international audiences by showing off their cultural prominence. In the transition from an emerging economy to an aspiring regional or world power, the winter Olympics offer non-Western countries a platform to declare their international ambitions. While the summer Olympics embrace a more cosmopolitan ethos, the winter Olympics still preserve Western-centric views. An examination of three recent non-Western host cities (Sochi, PyeongChang and Beijing) demonstrates that problematic characteristics of the Olympic Winter Games engender, rather ironically, distinctive cultural capital that some aspiring nations are eager to accumulate. The aspiring trio exploits the appearance of elitist and privileged culture expressed through the winter Olympics to impress international audiences.

The Winter Olympics as a Game for the Privileged

Many academics acknowledge that staging a sport mega-event is often part of a country's foreign policy programme to improve its international status.¹¹ The opening and closing ceremonies of the summer and winter Olympics attract huge public and media attention globally,¹² and these ritualistic moments provide invaluable opportunities for each host country to display its cultural, artistic and athletic merits to world audiences.¹³ Newly industrialized nations are often willing to host a sport

mega-event to celebrate their full membership in the global economic system whereas more advanced countries tactically accumulate their soft power assets by staging major world championships on their home soils.¹⁴ Many volunteers are mobilized to welcome and assist international visitors, and such a supportive community spirit may also leave a positive image of the host country in the mind of the guests from different countries.¹⁵ International VIPs and high-level diplomats also attend a sport mega-event, and the host nation can increase its voice in the regional and global political forum by building a network with such prominent individuals at the venues.¹⁶

Not every international sporting event shares equal political weight. Political scientist David Black identifies three types of major sporting events: 1) first-order games that attract significant global attention, 2) second-order games with an international scope but lower-level participation and interest and 3) third-order games that are regional or continental competitions.¹⁷ Second and third-order events have only a limited impact on the host country's international programme. Similarly, sociologist John Horne presents three categories of international sporting competitions, distinguishing the summer Olympics as a tier-1 event and the winter Olympics as a tier-2 contest. While useful distinctions, these categorizations primarily take account of the scale and scope of an event. When it comes to the diplomatic implications of a sport mega-event, the historical, economic and political contexts in which a specific nation stages a particular competition are equally important.¹⁸

In this respect, the Olympic Winter Games offer some notable characteristics. This event is a smaller enterprise than its summer counterpart with regard to the number of participating nations, the amount of money required to deliver, and the extent of media interests it garners.¹⁹ However, the Olympic Winter Games emanate an aura of luxury and exclusivity, and a few aspiring nations desire to host this sporting event because of this glamorous outlook in order to elevate their position to an advanced and established nation in the capitalist world system.²⁰

As sociologist Richard C. King points out, the Olympic Winter Games is a cultural field where Western-centred white hegemony prevails.²¹ Generally, these sporting activities require expensive and specialized equipment. Also, getting access to winter sporting venues, particularly those associated with snow and sliding events, normally costs more than travelling to most summer sports facilities.²² Furthermore, ski and snowboarding slopes are often located in comparatively remote and luxurious holiday resorts.²³ These economic factors prevent less affluent people from taking part in winter sports. In this situation, snow and ice sports are prone to turn into cultural capital, which subsequently sets, particularly in the West, an invisible social barrier to exclude lower class people from winter sports so that the dominance of white middle-class individuals in this sporting field looks natural ideologically.²⁴ These racially and economically segregated characteristics make it difficult for many developing countries to cultivate competitive winter sport athletes because the development of winter sports requires an extensive period of training, which entails private coaching and frequent foreign travel.²⁵ Some commentators also note that non-Western athletes tend to experience prejudice against them in the winter sport arena.²⁶ This social condition gives rise to the circumstance where white athletes from developed Western countries dominate international winter sport competitions.²⁷

The overrepresentation of white athletes at the winter Olympics shows the divisive nature of this global event. In their American media content analysis of the 2002 Salt Lake City games, Billings and Eastman could not find any meaningful comments on the performance of non-white ethnic groups as the majority of competitors were predominantly and homogeneously European and North American white individuals.²⁸ At the 2010, 2014, and 2018 Olympic Winter Games, no African, South American or South Asian athletes won a medal. The underrepresentation of African athletes at these events is particularly noteworthy. In 2014, for instance, only Morocco, Togo, and Zimbabwe sent delegations to Sochi. Moreover, the appearance of just eight African nations at PyeongChang 2018 marked the largest number of African delegations ever to participate in the winter Olympics.²⁹ Despite the claim that the United States sent the most diverse American national team ever to PyeongChang, less than 10% of the US athletes were non-white ethnic members.³⁰ These figures demonstrate that the winter Olympics is a less cosmopolitan sporting event in which Western white athletes occupy the central stage. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to call this competition a game for the global north.³¹

The World-System and Cultural Politics of the Olympic Winter Games

White privilege and Western hegemony are at play in snow and ice sports including the winter Olympics. Nonetheless, a few ambitious non-Western nations are keen to imitate this Western cultural practice so that they can upgrade their international standing from an emerging economy to a major power. In their diplomatic image-making strategy, the staging of the Olympic Winter Games as an elitist and luxurious extravaganza can be an effective political project. Nations hosting the winter Olympics undergo different historical trajectories. For example, the ethnic and cultural identity of Russia as a Eurasian state with more occidental connection is significantly dissimilar to the other two East Asian nations. Yet, in the twenty-first century, the non-Western host nations since 2014 (Russia, South Korea and China) share two notable similarities: their willingness to attain a leadership position or, at least, the role of a significant player in contemporary world affairs, and their use of a sport mega-event as a means to achieve this objective. The three consecutive winter Olympics in 2014, 2018 and 2022 illustrate the distinctive features of the winter Olympics as a cultural, sport and state diplomacy tool for nations with global ambition. In this respect, Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system analysis presents a useful theoretical framework for investigating their recent economic and political empowerment in the Western-centred capitalist world order and their ambition to acquire the status of an influential major power by hosting the winter sport mega-event.³² This theory has attracted some criticism, most notably for its stratification of international zones being more or less ambiguous and arbitrary.³³ However, as a macro structural concept, world-system theory still offers a valuable theoretical lens that helps explain the trajectory of economic development that the three countries underwent, and the role that the sport mega-event played as a marker of such a historical transition over the last two decades.

Wallerstein conceptualizes the structure of three different industrial regions in the world capitalist economy, which includes core, semi-peripheral and peripheral nations.³⁴ The core countries hold the most advanced industrial technology at a particular historical juncture, thereby having a capacity to accumulate wealth more effectively. With this economic and technological power, these nations can profit most from the capitalist mode of international trade. The peripheral is the least developed part of the world whose economic development is completely dependent on more affluent and advanced nations in this international system. Between the core and the peripheral, there exists the semi-peripheral that can maintain comparatively autonomous economic relations with a sustainable domestic market. Still, a large portion of their industry is export-driven, and therefore the economic growth of semi-peripheral nations depends on their trade with the core. This economic disparity naturally gives rise to unequal power ratios between them.³⁵ Nevertheless, this structure of the world-system is not static but shifts when the economic and political environment changes.³⁶

The power shift in the world order in the early twenty-first century can be understood within the framework of this world-system analysis. Chinese and Russian economies developed remarkably from the beginning of this century, and their influence on world politics has also risen recently.³⁷ Amongst BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) emerging economies, China and Russia are the most ambitious countries, both of which have a desire to recover their past glory and plan to reposition their status as a global hegemon.³⁸ South Korea, though a much smaller country, also aspires to join the club of the leading economies in the world (the G7).³⁹ In the contemporary world-system, they are semi-peripheral or semi-core countries that strive to reach the position of the core.⁴⁰ However, sociologist Randall Collins notes that economic might is insufficient to confer a prestigious status upon an aspiring country or region.⁴¹ He further notes that the capacity to create and circulate an attractive cultural product is the essential condition to become the centre of a global civilizational network. North America and Western Europe hold cultural hegemony in the current neoliberal international order, and the ambitious nations outside these regions are eager to emulate the cultural activities of the West in an attempt to upscale their image as a prestigious countries.⁴² This way of thinking resonates with the view that soft power, or the cultural merits of a country, are equally important to be recognized as a prominent actor in the world order.⁴³ This means that these ambitious nations need to accumulate both economic and cultural capital so that they can project the image of a major power.

In this respect, the hosting of the Olympic Winter Games can be an indispensable diplomatic strategy because it has the quality of Western-centred elitism and exclusivity.⁴⁴ The cultural hegemony of the West is also reproduced through this snow and ice festival.⁴⁵ While such divisive political values attached to the winter Olympics is inherently problematic, this game for the global privileged class also functions as a platform on which a few semi-core nations promulgate their sophisticated cultural taste and luxurious leisure pursuits to the world. The winter Olympic Games are therefore a sporting spectacle mainly for the people who reside in the zone of prestige where the established cultural hegemony in a global society is exercised and preserved.⁴⁶ By contrast, those aspiring nations remain in the zone of emulation

where the cultural practice of the globally dominant class is imitated.⁴⁷ Thus, the winter Olympics can be the sport mega-event where the host nation potentially refines its cultural merits and relays the attractiveness of its heritages to the world within the paradigm of the Western-oriented capitalist order. This event also enables the host to accumulate soft power resources more efficiently which can subsequently be deployed in its cultural diplomacy campaign.⁴⁸ While this strategy of emulating Western privilege may reinforce the global north and south division, the self-interest of the nation often comes first in world politics. Hence, for aspiring and affluent semi-core nations, the winter Olympics can be seen as a tempting occasion that assists them to obtain an exclusive membership of the global core.

Sochi 2014: Rich Cultural and Sporting Spectacles Tainted by Expansionism

Russia was once a mighty empire in Europe until the end of the First World War and was, as the Soviet Union, one of the two superpowers during the Cold War. The fate of the nation was in decline since the demise of the giant communist regime in 1991. The Russian economy and its regional political influence began to revive in the early 2000s, and, as one of the BRICS economies, Russia was located in the position of the semi-core area in the world system in the 2000s. At this historical juncture, the nation's desire to restore its past glory, thereby reconstructing its identity of great power, become more manifest.⁴⁹ The staging of the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi reflects these foreign policy aspirations. Particularly, President Vladimir Putin, as an individual who projects an image of his strong political leadership by highlighting his muscular and masculine athletic character, is adept in exploiting this international sporting competition to express the vision of a new and great Russia to the world.⁵⁰ The 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi was part of Putin's New Russia initiative aimed at restoring the image of the nation as a resource-rich world power after the economic and political downturn in the 1990s.⁵¹

The opening ceremony of Sochi 2014 emphasized Russian heritage and cultural icons. This opening drama consisted of five stages that represented more than one thousand years of Russian history: the birth myth of Russia, Russia in the Middle Ages, the Russian empire, twentieth-century Russia including the Soviet years, and the future.⁵² Through this representation of the historical narratives, the Olympic host boasted its contributions to the progress and enhancement of humanity from artistic movement to technological innovation.⁵³ For instance, by the combination of cinematic and choreographic depiction, the host dramatized the power, glory and elegance of the Tsardom of Russia. The ceremony featured its Soviet-era space programme as a notable scientific achievement. The Olympic torch travelled to the International Space Station, an act which emphasized the identity of Russia as a modern and developed country. Several scholars point out that the opening ceremony of the Olympic games is a political theatre on which the host nation's imagined identity and its constructed historical episodes are presented.⁵⁴ In this respect, this performance was the parade of soft power arsenal that post-communist Russia could deploy in order to make this country culturally and technologically more attractive.

The closing ceremony was an even more lavish cultural extravaganza focussing more on Russia's artistic legacies with more subtle patriotism. This cultural spectacle had three distinctive stages – music, theatre and literature – highlighting Russian high culture including Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto, the Bolshoi Ballet, and a montage of Russian literary giants such as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.⁵⁵ This display of Russian artistic masterpieces featured Russian cultural diplomacy at its best, which reminded global audiences of Russia being a major contributor to the enrichment of modern art. The closing ceremony used Russia's historical and artistic traditions to impress the international community, especially Western audiences, given that the winter Olympics is mainly watched by them. The cultural merits of the nation account for its strategic soft power asset.⁵⁶ In that sense, the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2014 Sochi Olympics appear to be a classical example of Russia's public offensive to regain its hegemonic position in world politics today.

The achievement of the Russian national team also played a significant role in the construction of a new Russian identity and the country's sport diplomacy.⁵⁷ Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia's winter sport has gradually declined, and its sporting competence had noticeably weakened since the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympic Games. Russia was not able to effectively develop new disciplines which largely mirror Western youth culture such as snowboarding and freestyle skiing added to the Olympics. For Russian political elites, the mere three gold medals Russia won at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, were particularly frustrating, which subsequently prompted the country to thoroughly reform its sport development programme in preparation for hosting the next winter games and not being humiliated on home soil.⁵⁸

Russia actively recruited foreign-born and naturalized athletes and international coaching staff for its 2014 Olympic team.⁵⁹ The acquisition of a new nationality by elite athletes in order mainly to participate in a major international competition is not an uncommon picture of the global sport industry today.⁶⁰ Before Sochi, the appearance of immigrated Olympic athletes on Team Russia was rare, and a few limited cases were mostly individuals from Soviet successor states who were already accustomed to Russian culture and language. In preparation for this winter Olympics, Russia implemented an open-door policy to seek competitive and talented foreign athletes across the continents from South Korea to the United States in order to boost the sporting capacity of the national team at the premier winter sport event.⁶¹ This strategy resulted in the most cosmopolitan Russian Olympic team ever, and these naturalized athletes and foreign coaches brought success to Russia. The naturalized athletes won eight gold medals, and the foreign coaches helped 19 Russian athletes win medals.⁶² With the help of the imported Olympians, the host nation won the most medals and could display its athletic might to the world. At the same time, by demonstrating a cosmopolitan character of Team Russia, which symbolized its openness and diversity, the Olympic host also intended to construct a positive image of new and great Russia.⁶³

Sochi 2014 included a few signs of diplomatic success. The host nation promoted its internationally renowned artistic heritages, and its national team presented athletic energies to global audiences. Russia could harness these experiences to improve its reputation as a reliable international actor. Moreover, Sochi was due to host the

40th G8 summit in June 2014, and the Kremlin wanted to show the world leaders the legacy of the 2014 Olympic Winter Games by re-using the state-of-art social infrastructure and amenity built mainly for Sochi 2014.⁶⁴ This plan was not materialized. A few days after the winter Olympics, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula by force, and in response to this Russian aggression, not only did the leading Western countries relocate the venue for the 2014 diplomatic conference to Brussels but they also expelled Russia from the G8 permanently. Consequently, the attractive new identity constructed through the winter sport mega-event in Sochi was heavily tainted by this post-event aggression and expansionism. As a foreign policy tool, the Olympic Winter Games can open a window through which the host country conveys the images and characteristics of the core nation to the world. Responsible behaviour of the host nation after the event is crucial to maintain the diplomatic boosterism that the winter Olympics propel. Because of its military invasion of the territory of neighbouring Ukraine immediately after Sochi 2014, Russia's Olympic diplomacy to escalate its international status as a respectful major power was only a partial success. By showing excellent artistic and athletic performance at the winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia exalted itself as a cultural and sporting powerhouse. Yet, this post-event military campaign undermined the winter Olympic diplomacy effort to rebrand the Russian Federation.

PyeongChang 2018: Unity and the Korean Wave Mitigating Geopolitical Tensions

The South Korean government often utilizes major international events to revamp its image and the Olympic Winter Games in PyeongChang was no exception.⁶⁵ South Korea achieved rapid industrialization from the 1960s to the 1980s, and it demonstrated this economic success to the world by hosting the 1988 summer Olympics.⁶⁶ It also co-hosted the 2002 FIFA World Cup with Japan, and through this event, Korea showed the endurance of its economy after the East Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, South Korea also has a strong desire to be recognized as a global core country with rich cultural capital. In order to realize this aspiration, South Korea has fostered its culture industry since the early 2000s.⁶⁸ The winter Olympics in PyeongChang illustrates the cultural, sport, and state diplomacy of this aspirant nation, where South Korea showed international audiences its increasing cultural power and its growing political influence in the Northeast Asian region.⁶⁹

At PyeongChang's opening ceremony, South Korea represented its cultural heritage from the ancient historical tradition to more contemporary digital culture. Yet, with peace and unity suddenly becoming the dominant themes of this ceremony, international media paid attention to the harmony between North and South Korea at this Olympic spectacle.⁷⁰ The political climate surrounding the Korean Peninsula was unstable until shortly before the commencement of the games. However, on New Year's Day of 2018, the North Korean leader, Kim Jung-un, unexpectedly announced that his country would send a delegation to PyeongChang.⁷¹ This announcement brought warm air to the cold geopolitics in Northeast Asia, and the two Koreas even agreed to make a sporting union at the Olympics.⁷² The opening ceremony contained several rituals that symbolize unity on the Korean Peninsula,

such as a joint march and a joint torch relay between North and South Korean athletes. The recital of John Lennon's 'Imagine' by four Korean singers surrounded by dove figures reinforced the main theme of peace. In his opening speech, the IOC president, Thomas Bach, praised the athletes from the two Koreas as if their collaboration in PyeongChang demonstrated the Olympic spirit in action.⁷³ Since the early 2000s, South Korea has attempted to build an image of a peacemaker in East Asian Geopolitics.⁷⁴ This Olympic Winter Games offered the host nation a useful communication channel to signal this new Korean identity as most international media relayed this mood of peace and reconciliation to the world.⁷⁵

The closing ceremony presented an exhibition of Korean music and art, thereby highlighting its soft power resource. The cultural spectacle involved the mixture of traditional and contemporary music and dances, and the combination of the Western and Korean art forms at the ceremony exemplified a cosmopolitan Korean identity. For many participants and viewers at home, the concert of Korean pop stars, including Exo and CL, was the most memorable part of the show.⁷⁶ Korean popular music, known as K-pop, has been increasingly trendy since the early 2010s in many countries.⁷⁷ The South Korean soft power strategy involves the development and distribution of its popular culture internationally, and this effort results in the recent growing demands for Korean cultural commodities.⁷⁸ The closing ceremony of PyeongChang 2018 showcased some of the best aspects of Korean popular culture. The demonstration of such cultural products at this event was an effective cultural diplomacy campaign to facilitate the dissemination of K-pop to the world because the closing ceremony was broadcast live to more than 200 countries.⁷⁹ This extensive media reach, in turn, further publicized the merit of the contemporary Korean entertainment industry.

Athletic excellence accounts for the core aspect of sport diplomacy. Conventionally, South Korea is a competent speed skating nation. From the 1992 winter Olympics in Albertville, Korean skaters continuously won medals but only in the short-track speed skating event until Yuna Kim became an Olympic figure skating champion at Vancouver 2010. However, at PyeongChang 2018, not only did the South Korean team win the largest number of medals in its history and ranked seventh place in the Olympic medal count, but it also won medals in bobsleigh, curling and snowboarding for the first time. Even if they had enjoyed a home advantage, these records were certainly noticeable accomplishments for the Korean athletes, many of whom were racing against more experienced Western competitors. South Korea is the only non-Western nation positioned in the top ten in the Olympic medal table. This athletic achievement at the games for the global north symbolized that the East Asian nation was on an equal footing with the advanced economies in the West.

In terms of conveying a message of peace and reconciliation, the appearance of the unified Korean ice hockey team in PyeongChang was of particular importance although they did not manage to win any matches.⁸⁰ North and South Korea competed as one at this Olympics for the first time in its history, albeit only in the women's ice hockey tournament.⁸¹ Inter-Korean sporting relations mirror the political climate surrounding Northeast Asia, and the two sides often displayed their unified identity through sport whenever the tensions between them were ameliorated.⁸² At the previous Olympics, the two Koreas occasionally marched together but never

took part in athletic competition as one.⁸³ Thus, the fielding of a united Korean hockey team in PyeongChang was a remarkable development. Because of the historical and political significance, the female Korean ice hockey team attracted international media attention, and high-ranking politicians from North and South Korea, and a few IOC members including president Thomas Bach visited the Kwandong Hockey Centre to send their support to the unified team.⁸⁴ The International Ice Hockey Federation allowed Korea to organize a team of 35 players instead of 23 at this Olympics so that 12 North Koreans could join the existing Korean squad with 23 players without a competitive selection process.⁸⁵ The formation of this unified Korean team one month before the Olympics was one of the distinctive achievements of South Korean sport diplomacy that signifies a peaceful collaboration between the two Koreas. While their performance on the ice was not victorious, their presence inside the ice rink relayed a sign of peace and unity to the international community.

Peace and reconciliation are some of the most visible political legacies of the Olympic Winter Games in PyeongChang. A friendly dialogue between North and South Korea continued after the event, and Bach visited the North Korean capital of Pyongyang to discuss a constructive involvement of communist Korea in the Olympic movement in the future.⁸⁶ North and South Korea also expressed their interest in hosting the Olympic games jointly in 2032. Harnessing this political momentum, South Korean President Moon Jae-in also mediated a historic United States and North Korean summit in Singapore in June 2018.⁸⁷ Sport kept connecting the two Koreas. In July, the South Korean basketball team travelled to the North Korean capital for the first time in 15 years to play a friendly game with its northern siblings.⁸⁸ At the 2018 Jakarta/Palembang Asian Games in August and September, a unified Korean team won a gold medal in the dragon boat competition signifying the unity and harmony of the Korean nation.⁸⁹ The series of incidents occurring in the post-Olympic period indicate this winter sport mega-event functioning as a catalyst for a degree of reconciliation in Northeast Asian geopolitics. This active dissemination of a peaceful gesture from South Korea to the world enhanced the credibility of the country, which subsequently helped amplify its voice inside the global political forum.⁹⁰ This development was seen as the realization of the symbolic representation of peace in the Korean peninsula at the Olympic ceremony. With the demonstration of its rich cultural capital the ceremonial ritual, South Korea also paved the way to become a major international player.

Beijing 2022: Emerging Superpower and New Cold War Games?

China actively exploits sport mega-events as a vehicle for its foreign policy programme.⁹¹ When the IOC awarded Beijing the 2022 winter Olympics in July 2015, the Chinese capital became the first city to host both the summer and winter Olympic games. In the early 2000s, China was one of the fastest-developing economies, and this nation was eager to join the capitalist economic order. The 2008 summer Olympic games in Beijing offered a useful opportunity to celebrate its burgeoning industry demonstrating its potential to develop into a major economy.⁹² A decade later, China grew into the second-largest economy in the world, boasting its technological and military might.⁹³ China now challenges the Western or American

hegemony in the world system with the ambition to be recognized as one of the world powers.⁹⁴ The 2022 Olympic Winter Games in Beijing will take place in this political backdrop. Similar to the cases of Sochi and PyeongChang, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will seek a chance to express its desire to gain a prestigious status in the current international order by hosting the winter Olympics.

Although it is difficult to predict exactly how China will represent its identity at the opening ceremony in Beijing, the handover section within the closing ceremony at PyeongChang 2018 hinted at how this emerging superpower imagines its characteristics. In the ten-minute presentation entitled '2022 See You in Beijing', a group of Chinese dancers robotically depicted a range of winter sport disciplines while the digital illuminations on the floor represented the design of electronic circuits. Twenty-four digital televisions, which symbolized the XXIV Olympic Winter Games, were used as main stage props. The combination of the dances, illustrations and objects portrayed Chinese ambition to lead advanced computer technology. Such a depiction is closely linked to its 'Made-in-China 2025' strategy which is a government policy to revamp its image from the world factory to the global technological hub.⁹⁵

In organizing a one-year-to-go event in 2021, China also disseminated several messages to the world in an attempt to project its image as an advanced and responsible country. On this occasion, the communist nation unveiled the design of the Beijing 2022 Olympic torch. Xinhua TV in China published a video entitled 'Countdown to Beijing: Light up the torch of hope', and this short documentary portrayed China as an environmentally friendly and technologically savvy global superpower.⁹⁶ This video featured an interview with Xiangyu Wang, the deputy director of the culture and ceremony department in the Beijing 2022 organizing committee. He praised the sustainable technology applied to the Olympic torch, saying that 'using hydrogen-based fuel will allow zero emission of carbon dioxide, which underlines our commitment to staging green and high-tech Games'. Jianye Li, one of the torch designers, also commented that since the 2008 summer Olympic Games in Beijing, 'everything is thriving and moving upward [in our society]. So, we want to keep the upward flow in our final design'. At the end of this video, Mr Wang added that 'as the world is fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope the Beijing 2022 torches can bring light and hope for all humankind'.⁹⁷ This Olympic documentary reveals that the use of sustainable technology, the demonstration of China's continual progress, and the dissemination of the message of hope in a COVID-19 world may be three recurring themes at Beijing 2022. By conveying these narratives to the international community, China is trying to represent itself as a responsible world leader.

Nonetheless, communist China's winter Olympic diplomacy is facing major obstacles. While Chinese people celebrated the day marking one year before the 2022 Beijing games, the geopolitical contest between China and the West raised a pessimistic view over the staging of the winter Olympics in the communist country.⁹⁸ Recently, Chinese foreign policy has embraced an expansionist approach in order to wield its influence on South and Central Asia and Africa.⁹⁹ Its 'Belt and Road Initiative' reflects China's ambitious diplomatic aim. In response to this Chinese expansionism, the United States has introduced the Indo-Pacific strategy to contain

the power of this communist giant within Northeast Asia.¹⁰⁰ The United States also strengthened its military alliance with Australia, India, and Japan to curtail the rise of China in the region.¹⁰¹ Connected to this geopolitical tension, a trade dispute between the two giant economies broke out in 2018, and this altercation has further deepened the Sino-US conflicts. In this situation, a political campaign against the winter Olympics in China began to emerge. In October 2019, a United States senator, Rick Scott, sent a letter to the IOC noting:

Time after time, Communist China has made and broken its promises. Communist China is stealing our technology, and refuses to open their markets to foreign goods as required by their agreement to be part of the WTO.... The International Olympic Committee is now faced with an important decision. If Communist China continues breaking promises... Beijing should not be allowed to host the 2022 Winter Olympics.¹⁰²

Whilst this message from a prominent member of the Republican Party may not represent American public opinion at that time, Scott's call for the relocation of the Olympic venue was certainly symptomatic of the politicization of Beijing 2022 in the upcoming months.

Amid this political tension, Western media disclosed the human rights violation in China, particularly concerning a suspected operation of re-education camps in Xinjiang province and alleged genocide of Uyghur Muslims. This media suspicion made several civic organizations and politicians in Western countries question the legitimacy of China as the host of the next Olympic Winter Games.¹⁰³ The accusation of mishandling coronavirus in Wuhan city during the early stage of the epidemic further intensified China scepticism in the West. More than 180 human rights groups started anti-Beijing 2022 campaigns in February 2021, and a few lawmakers in the UK and Australia argued against sending their delegations to the upcoming winter Olympics in Beijing.¹⁰⁴ The British Foreign Secretary, Dominic Rabb, also suggests that his country might not take part in the winter sport mega-event if the situation in China does not improve.¹⁰⁵ Against this condemnation, the Chinese government warns that the West should not interfere with its internal affairs, claiming that such an allegation derives from the misunderstanding of Chinese culture and policy.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the *Global Times*, the Chinese state media published in English cautions: 'China is a sporting and economic power with growing political influence. If any country is encouraged by extremist forces to take concrete actions to boycott the Beijing Winter Olympics, China will definitely retaliate fiercely. China certainly has the resources and means to do that.'¹⁰⁷ This editorial shows that China considers itself as a rising superpower and that this communist country will defend forcefully against any attempt to impair its winter Olympic offensive. This commentary appears to be a precursor to Xi Jinping's statement on the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, which proclaimed that 'we will never allow anyone to bully, oppress or subjugate China.'¹⁰⁸ In theory, every country can refuse to take part in any Olympics, and it should be the IOC, not the host country, that can legitimately penalize the boycotting nation if any sanction is legally required according to the Olympic Charter. The *Global Times*' editorial warns international protesters against Beijing 2022 of the punitive action by the Chinese Government. Such an assertive gesture reveals that, for the CCP, the winter Olympics is not just a competition of

snow and ice sports but is an occasion of national pride and international prestige. This Sino-West confrontation evidences a discrepancy between China's ambition to demonstrate its would-be world power status through the winter Olympics and Western countries' perception of such a Chinese Olympic dream. If some nations in the West decide to boycott the 2022 Olympic Winter Games, this action further damages the image of China in a COVID-19 international order. The absence of major winter sporting nations from this Olympics will certainly spoil China's effort to redress its reputation by hosting the game for the privileged.

Simultaneously, the increasing influence of China on global affairs challenges Western hegemony in the world system, and the West has sought to curb China's rise in the 2020s.¹⁰⁹ The problems of human rights abuses and political repression by the authoritarian regime also existed when Beijing hosted the 2008 summer Olympics.¹¹⁰ Despite these problems, the West was willing to develop and maintain a constructive partnership with communist China because the emerging economy offered Western entrepreneurs a large lucrative market and profitable business opportunities. While non-governmental civic organizations raised their voices against China's inhumane and undemocratic policy, most state actors in the West were reluctant to address these sensitive issues at that time. In the 2020s, such economic opportunism no longer exists, and many Western nations, particularly the United States, are now wary of the empowerment of China.¹¹¹ If this tension continues, the 2022 winter Olympics can turn into a new Cold War game between China and the West. This conflict has already been tainting the Chinese government's winter Olympic diplomacy to build a responsible world power as a voice against Beijing 2022 is getting louder in the West.¹¹² Whilst China has initiated a winter Olympic diplomacy to escalate its international standing, the CCP's authoritarian policy clashes with Western democracies. This mismatch may limit the impact of cultural relations at the Olympic Winter Games in 2022.

The Olympic Winter Games and Semi-Core States' Diplomacy

The winter Olympics present a distinctive diplomatic value. As an international sporting competition with a high entry barrier both financially and culturally, relatively affluent Western countries still maintain their sporting prowess and cultural prestige in the field of winter sport. While the summer Olympics tend to be a universal and cosmopolitan event, the winter Olympics are a more exclusive and luxurious occasion. Russia, South Korea and China use this winter sporting spectacle to uplift their position from an emerging economy or mid-power country to a global superpower or a significant influencer.

The opening and closing ceremonies have been particularly important for the three non-Western winter Olympic hosts to express their aspirations. Several academics observe that the Olympic ceremonies are a cultural spectacle through which the host nation demonstrates its new identity and displays its cultural and historical legacy to the world.¹¹³ As the most-watched programme during the Olympics, these ceremonial rituals are telecast live to global audiences, and as a result, political and cultural messages attached to the ceremonies tend to have strong penetration power.¹¹⁴ At these ceremonies, Russia and South Korea magnificently orchestrated the cultural

and artistic performances inside the Olympic stadium, displaying their soft power assets dramatically. Beijing's one-year-to-go event showed the parade of its technological advance and its global ambition but the geopolitical tensions between China and the West are restricting the Chinese Olympic campaign.

Some academics have investigated how emerging states exploit a sport mega-event to declare their reposition from the peripheral area to the semi-peripheral zone in the world system.¹¹⁵ Yet, relatively less attention is paid to how more established and more ambitious countries in the semi-core region use a global sporting event to further enhance their images. These aspirant nations tend to be located in non-Western cultural zones who have experienced the transition from the peripheral to the semi-peripheral. Additionally, these countries already hosted the summer Olympics or other similar scale international events to celebrate their remarkable development before. They, however, may have not yet acquired global cultural capital to be perceived as a leading advanced country. The winter Olympics as a festival for the rich and powerful offers a valuable political opportunity for these aspiring semi-core nations to demonstrate their desire and willingness to join the hegemonic group of the global core. The winter Olympics tend to incur relatively high opportunity costs and considerable environmental damage.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, these would-be global core countries are prepared to pay such expenses to earn more cultural capital in order to attain a more prestigious status in the current international order.

In the transition from the semi-core to the global core, some problematic issues arise. This type of development process and the function of a sport mega-event as a cultural and sport diplomacy tool inherently reflects Western centrism where the developed capitalist economy is seen as the model of the global core. Moreover, cultural capital that aspiring countries attempt to accumulate through the Olympic Winter Games primarily derives from a Westernized and elitist way of life. Therefore, how these aspiring nations imagine their new status simply reproduces an orientalist or neo-colonialist mindset where the Western civilization is considered superior to that of any other region.¹¹⁷ While Russia, South Korea and China can exhibit their history and traditional cultural heritage through the sport mega-event, their Slavic and Asian cultural components being displayed at the competition either adopt a Westernized format or are easily buried under Western commercialized artefacts. Consequently, this cultural and sport diplomacy strategy at the winter games by these non-Western countries paradoxically contributes to the reproduction of the hegemony of the West.

The rise of authoritarian regimes and their use of the Olympic Winter Games exemplifies the interplay between sport and international politics. While they embrace Western practice to enhance their cultural merits, politically Russia and China are the two potential great powers that pose a threat to Western-centred liberal international order.¹¹⁸ The winter Olympics helped the two authoritarian states to establish a strategic partnership. When China's president, Xi Jinping, attended the opening ceremony of Sochi 2014, it was the first time in history that the Chinese head of state took part in an international sporting event outside his country.¹¹⁹ During his trip to Sochi, the Chinese leader also had a summit meeting with President Putin. In June 2018, when the winter Olympic preparation was actively underway in Beijing, the Russian president visited China, and the two heads of state watched a youth

ice-hockey match between Russian and Chinese teams together. On this occasion, Putin praised China's hard effort to prepare for the winter Olympics and both Xi and Putin highlighted the importance of a close diplomatic tie between Russia and China.¹²⁰ These episodes of official visits indicate a diplomatic channel that the sport mega-event magnifies. In their use of cultural diplomacy against the West, the winter Olympics enable the two authoritarian regimes who have common political interests to convene inside winter sport venues.

The Olympic Winter Games displays an aura of a game for the rich and powerful. While this image of the winter sports mega-event implies elitism, exclusivity, and inequality, a few aspiring nations intend to host this luxurious sporting festival in order to polish their international reputations as powerful actors in the global capitalist order. The cases of Sochi 2014, PyeongChang 2018 and Beijing 2022 broadly illustrate this pattern. Arguably, the winter Olympics remain a lavish sport mega-event that only a well-off country can afford to stage. To some extent, the diplomacy through this winter sporting occasion is a type of conspicuous consumption to distinguish the host from other emerging economies. By hosting the Olympic Winter Games, a few affluent aspiring nations can express their desire to attain more prestigious status in the world-system. Nonetheless, while the winter Olympics create a diplomatic window through which the host nations communicate their ambition with the world, the delivery of the event does not automatically bring a new status to the host. The behaviour of the host country in the post-Olympics period is equally important to keep the momentum of winter Olympic diplomacy.

Overall, Russian Olympic diplomacy in Sochi was impressive but the Kremlin's post-event aggression undercut its soft power exercise in the ice rink. The South Korean government acquired desired political outcomes by hosting the Olympic Winter Games. Its peace campaign continued after the event which further reinforced the diplomatic legacy of PyeongChang 2018. The Chinese Communist Party has the potential to highlight its emerging world power status at Beijing 2022. Yet, increasing China scepticism in the West may impede its winter Olympic diplomacy.

Notes

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