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Global Events and Soft Power Dreams in East Asia

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Introduction

Mega-events, which Roche (2000:1) famously defined as large-scale cultural events of international significance and mass popular appeal, have also been assessed and praised as hallmarks of modernity. Their design, structure and organization largely resonate with key issues of modernity, providing host cities with unique opportunities for place-making and place-branding. Unlike any other global event, sport mega-events also offer the opportunity for an enormous cultural celebration. They bring the nations of the world together to compete in sports under commonly agreed rules and regulations. And as far as television spectacles go, there is nothing that can rival the Olympic Games or the Football World Cup. But these mega-events take place within fractured social structures and amid enormous inequalities that persist and develop over time (Horne and Manzenreiter 2006).

The next five years will see an 'East Asian Era' unfold in the hosting of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Pyeongchang (South Korea), Tokyo (Japan), and Beijing (China) prepare to act as hosts for the next three Winter and Summer Games between 2018 and 2022. This spatial concentration in East Asia is historically unique and interesting in itself, particularly as it occurs at a time when hosting sport mega-events seems to have lost much of its glamour and appeal among publics in other parts of the world. This article is concerned with the seemingly unbroken zealotry for hosting sport spectacles among East Asian governments and tries to explain this phenomenon by linking the idea of hosting sport mega-events with notions of branding the nation-state and the role of national media systems. This combination continues to be salient in this part of the world while it is heavily contested in many others. We argue here that the main attraction catching the attention of decision-makers in East Asia is the supposed "soft power" benefits of hosting what MacAloon (1984) famously coined as "global spectacles" (see also Tomlinson and Young 2006). However, we also advise caution with this view for two main reasons. Firstly, expectations that a sports event can alter the perception of a country are excessively overrated. Secondly, East Asian hosts of sports mega-events (and other subaltern hosts) have little or no chance in a contest for meaning-making abroad which the global media usually wins hands down.

The uncertain power of soft power

Soft power in general refers to the culture and values of political or social entities that their representatives can efficiently employ in order to pursue their interests in outward relations or to alter the attitudes and behaviour of other actors. The term, which was added to the vocabulary of political science by Joseph S. Nye (1990) twenty years ago, closely resonates with fairly older attempts of international actors to advance foreign policy by engaging foreign publics. Public diplomats therefore monitor foreign publics and adjust their policy accordingly; they engage in practices to build good feeling abroad; and they make use of communication channels like the international media to provide news to foreign publics (Cull 2008:117). Talk of soft power leads us to be concerned with the way images are crafted and perceptions are shaped, reproduced or transformed in global society – those cultural intermediaries who are in charge of steering national images, or at least responsible for the proliferation of discourses on “nation branding”.

Sports mega-events like the Olympic Games seem to be an appropriate occasion to enhance the soft power of their hosting nations, particularly because of the easy association with positive images of excellence, fairness, universal friendship and mutual exchange (on the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and China’s attempts to use them for public diplomacy see Manzenreiter 2010). Their global significance turns a sport mega-event into a powerful platform for the transmission of information and representations. However, these platforms are extremely difficult to control. Since sports has turned into a leading content for globalizing media markets, sports mega-events are not only employed by political elites, but also by global capital and quite different lobbyists for their particular needs. New forces such as transnational civic movements and partisan interest groups, which challenge political and economic elites, have joined the circle of forces competing for access to the network of ‘primary definers’, whose material and ideological relevance to the sports mega-events has a direct bearing on the shaping of narratives as well as the production of the events and their regulation (Manzenreiter 2008b).

As an extensive body of media research demonstrates, hosting in general produces little new knowledge about the place in question; but the mediated correlation of a place with a significant event promotes lasting impressions and associations that audiences make with cities and nations (Moragás, Rivenburgh and Larson 1995; Müller 2015). As much as Olympic discourses of a certain event are inexorably linked with the specific historic constellations in which they are embedded, questions of representation and signification are ultimately tied to the geography of social relations that constitute the world system of sports, on the one hand, and the comparative standing of cultures and civilizations on the other hand. In this regard, markers of advanced and advancing, or developed and under-developed, gain in significance for the relational positioning of nations. In

between competing ideologies and identity politics, sport mega-events were employed as seemingly apolitical and neutral venues for the display of universal and humanist achievements, albeit always of a deeply locally entrenched variation.

Sports mega-events in the global spotlight

Any mega-event, standing in the spotlight of the media, focuses the world's attention on a particular place and a nation and the success thereof, in either hosting or performing well in the event. In terms of global reach, the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup are probably the only examples that truly deserve the label of mega-event in front of the background of an increasingly connected, condensed and compressed globality. Sport mega-events have always provided a stage for the symbolic contestation of modernity between elites and the masses, as well as between different models of development. Their monopolistic position within the symbolic contestation of nations secured their international significance, while the border-crossing appeal of sports guaranteed their mass appeal. Technological innovations of mass communication, particularly the development of satellite and broadband television, created the premises of transmitting promotional messages to billions of people. As the Cold War rivalry between the Soviet bloc and the "Free World" has shown both in sport competitions and in hosting them, particularly in the latter decades of the 20th century sport mega-events were assigned high significance for "official" versions of public culture, and they served as points of reference for the collective orientation of national societies toward international audiences.

To be accurate, it is a city and not a nation or state that in a strict sense of the word is designated as Olympic host. However, the local and the national level are usually combined in the public discourse on the Olympics. As in most instances a capital city is staging the Games, more often than not the name of the Olympic City serves as a well-established metonymic reference to the hosting nation state. In practice candidate city and nation-state are impossible to separate, for any Olympic bid without the explicit support from national government would not be successful - and could not be so because of the very application rules stipulated by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The IOC that eventually bestows hosting rights on the successful bid city also insists on proof of popular excitement about the future event (for a succinct description of IOC demands, the bidding process and host city selection, see Horne and Whannel 2016:69-70).

The representational usage or function of mega-events has gained in weight since cities and regions have replaced states as competitors for international investments and tourist flows. Within an increasingly global competition for capital, people and attraction, sport mega-events emerged as one

of the means by which metropolitan areas attempt to achieve prestige and growth through urban regeneration and place branding strategies (Hall 2006:59). The idea was that by putting the host city up in lights in front of both a broader domestic and global audience, such events could bring more direct investment and more tourists (along with the revenue they generate). Sporting mega-events, particularly the Olympic Games, acquired central status for urban development agendas especially after the 1984 Los Angeles Games suggested for the first time that a sport mega-event would not leave a financial disaster and burden for future generations (as in Montreal 1976) but possibly produce an economic surplus for the host region (Andranovich, Burbank and Heying 2001:124). For 20 years from the early 1980s to early 2000s, the attractiveness of, and expansion in, hosting the Olympics and other sports events had been underpinned by three social developments: technological, economic, and political. Firstly, sport mega-events eventually came to reach a global audience as a result of technological innovation in mass media and communication technologies. The spread of the internet that followed thereafter and the even more recent growth of its so-called social media have not (yet) dislodged TV as the main way of consuming the Olympics, which continues to guarantee broadcasting as valuable source of revenue for the IOC: For the period 2009-2012, the IOC Marketing Fact File 2015 reports a total income of USD 8 billion, of which nearly 50% (USD 3.9 billion) came from television rights (Horne and Whannel 2016:82). Secondly, the related formation of a sport-media-business alliance transformed sport mega-events and professional sport generally in the late 20th century. The idea of packaging, via the tri-partite model of sponsorship rights, exclusive broadcasting rights and merchandising, attracted potent sponsors willing to invest many millions in the Olympics in exchange for the positive association with sports and the vast global audience exposure that the events provide. Thirdly, political interest in hosting sport mega-events grew as they became seen as valuable promotional opportunities for cities and regions. With the emergence of the “entrepreneurial city”, sport mega-events have come to capture first and foremost the desires and dreams of power alliances combining corporate interest with those of urban government with respect to place-making, both in a symbolically and a very “concrete” sense of the word.

Investments into sport events and sport facilities have captured a leading position in consumption-based economic development politics, even though virtually all case studies of the economic impact of hosting sport mega-events have indicated that they are not the magic growth engine they purport to be (eg. Schimmel 2001; Szymanski 2002; Manzenreiter 2008a). Notwithstanding the lack of hard evidence, promises of direct revenues and indirect returns on investment continue to feature as dominant arguments in favour of subsidizing sports mega-events with public money. Mainstream media have only recently come to acknowledge the empirical pauperism of the growth hypothesis. Wishing to avoid negative media crossfire, politicians are therefore now more likely to accentuate

the immaterial benefits accruing from hosting sports mega-events: forging regional solidarity, providing first class entertainment, enriching the festival calendar, gaining world class status, or branding the region.

Conclusions

By 2020 only 23 different cities will ever have hosted the 32 Summer Olympic Games that have occurred since 1896. Leading the field are London with three and Athens, Los Angeles, Paris and Tokyo with two. Hence in an era when “world class city” status has been seen as a vital asset in attracting and redirecting flows of capital, investment, and people, the fame and celebrity thought to accompany being one of a small number of Olympic host cities remains a heady brew. Yet at the same time the rising costs of hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo in 2020, announced again and again after the bid was secured, and Rome city council’s vote against supporting a bid for the 2024 Games, suggest that disenchantment with sports mega-events, that cost a lot to put on but fail to deliver on the promises of legacies, which are used to win public support for bids, is growing. The allure of hosting the Olympics started to lose its shine a decade ago, partly but not wholly, due to the credit crunch and recession of the mid to late 2000s. Since then, local electorates and media in many European and North American regions have shown themselves increasingly unwilling to support the ambitions of governments bidding for the flagship events of world sport. Then why are East Asian nation-states still eager to win Olympic bids despite the price tag?

The Olympic Movement’s claim of universalism and moral superiority has effectively been flushed away by the paradoxical ease with which it has found itself co-opted by authoritarian regimes and paired with exploitative capitalist corporations in the past (Horne 2010). The ambivalence of Olympic universalism, which is actually deeply tainted by Eurocentric appropriations of human rights and modernity, is paired by another Olympic paradox. Participation rights are based on national membership to the IOC and citizenship of the athletes, even though many of them exemplify the archetype of the cosmopolitan nomad, for whom place of residence, tax obligations, training opportunities and work place are far from being confined to the country of their citizenship. The retro-futuristic design of the Olympic principle of one nation, one representation is rooted in the political landscape of the late 19th century. This mode of representation has accompanied more than a century of world sports without any changes that would have assigned agency, voice and representation to ethnic or cultural minorities or stateless nations.

The suppression of alternative conceptions of humanism and body cultures has been aggravated by the transformation of the sports festival into a global spectacle of mediated consumption which amplifies the reliance of their principal agents on financial and technological assistance by multinational corporations. Pursuing their own interests, these agents devised the “domesticating techniques” of the media which deliver customer-tailored media productions of the global event to national audiences and localized consumer markets. The professional class of public relations specialists, advertisement agencies and consulting experts that captures central position in an attention economy where “a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention” (Herbert Simon, quoted in Aronczyk 2008:42), switches back- and forward between corporations, cities, states and other dissimilar clients. While they may be less effective in changing or making the national image, they have certainly been successful in winning the media and popular belief over to the claim that hosting the Games will benefit the image of the nation abroad. We can infer from continuing and sustained East Asian interest in hosting sport mega-events that this idea has found fruitful reception in that part of the world; still haunted by the relics of Cold War partition, and in a larger time frame, of the colonial period (Collins 2008; De Kloet et al. 2008; Horne and Whannel 2010; Kelly 2011), national unity remains a contested issue to be addressed in ritual and discourse. This is why the process of nation-building is still ongoing among East Asia’s divided nations Korea and China; while the issue of national identity has always been highly controversial in Japan. Issues of national sovereignty, collective identity and self-assurance not only in face of the Western powers, but also towards domestic audiences, neighbouring countries, former colonizers, and rival ideological systems, are therefore of much greater popular interest and political weight.

Meaning is never uncontested, but with hired experts, free-riders and interlopers striving to seize the opportunity to perform in a global theatre of representation, soft power can only be effectively realized in cases where autonomy of the media and its critical role as observer of the political sphere are severely curtailed. While most national media systems in East Asia are far from being totally controlled by a dominant state (with the exception of North Korea and China, of course), in some they are too often willing to sacrifice neutrality and critical reporting for the privilege of staying in contact with political elites. As common sense would have it that years of stereotyped views about a country are hardly going to disappear overnight, it appears that such an environment has contributed to the proliferation of the myth that nation-making and nation branding can be achieved through hosting global events.

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