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Viewpoint Paper

A winter sport mega-event and its aftermath: A critical review of post-Olympic PyeongChang

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ABSTRACT

Almost two years have passed since the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, and this small rural province has now fully returned to its ordinary routine. In this viewpoint paper, I present a critical review of the aftermath of PyeongChang 2018. This short essay focuses on three areas: a) environmental damage and its restoration process, b) the construction of the sport facilities and their use after the event, and c) the sustainability of social infrastructure built for the Winter Olympics. The critical appraisal of the post-Olympic PyeongChang reveals that *first*, the winter sporting competition is more likely to degrade the natural environment surrounding the Olympic venues than its summer counterpart. *Second*, winter sporting activities such as ski jumping and bobsled are less likely to develop into community sports due to specific equipment and skills required. *Finally*, because of this comparatively high opportunity cost, the Winter Olympic Games is an excessively expensive event to host. The 2018 Winter Olympic Games may be seen as South Korean cultural diplomacy at its best. Yet, underneath this South Korean winter fantasy, symptoms of post-Olympic tensions, degeneration, and unfulfilled obligations remain.

Keywords: Winter Olympics, PyeongChang, Development, Ecology, Sport Facility, Infrastructure, Soft Power

Introduction

When the 2018 Winter Olympics raised its curtain, a political drama about peace and unity in the Korean peninsula emerged as a dominant narrative of the Games (Rowe, 2019). During the sport competition, the vortex of the inter-Korean détente sucked other controversial Olympic issues such as economically and environmentally unsustainable developments that hosting this mega-event entailed. In fact, from the year when the Olympics was awarded to PyeongChang to just a few months before the commencement of the event, a number of civic organisations in South Korea undertook an anti-Winter Olympic campaign (Kim and Chung, 2018; Lee, 2016). They raised concern that the Olympic related construction might have a detrimental effect on the local economy and ecology. These groups also demanded the relocation of some Olympic venues to different regions in South Korea and to the neighbouring countries where winter sport facilities already exist. Nevertheless, the provincial government and the Local Organising Committee of the Olympic Games decided to carry out its development projects as originally planned.

Almost two years have passed since the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, and this small rural province has now fully returned to its ordinary routine. For many Koreans, however, the Olympic Winter Games is still remembered as a catalytic moment for the inter-Korean reconciliation. While I do not dismiss the value of this political change, a lack of critical discussion on the mega-event led development in the post-Olympic period is certainly

problematic. This is especially so given that a large amount of public funds were spent on the Olympic related construction projects. Therefore, in this viewpoint paper, I intend to present a critical review of the aftermath of PyeongChang 2018. In this essay, I will focus on three areas: 1) environmental damage and its restoration process, 2) the construction of the sport facilities and their use after the event, and c) the sustainability of social infrastructure built for the Winter Olympics.

Environmental Ecology

Environmental costs for hosting sport mega-event can be high (Karamichas, 2013) and there are not always environmental guidelines for events in place (see Maguire and Hanrahan, 2016). This is particularly true for the Winter Olympics where many of its sporting contests take place in the mountainous countryside. The 2018 Olympic Winter Games was no exception. The opening of the *Jeongseon* Alpine Centre in Mount *Gariwang* was arguably the most contentious issue at the Games because more than 500 years old forests in the mountain were destroyed to create Olympic ski slopes (Yoon and Wilson, 2019). Prior to the construction of this ski resort, the Olympic organisers claimed that Mount *Gariwang* was the only place in the vicinity of PyeongChang that meets the requirements of the International Ski Federation (McCurry and Emma, 2015). However, environmental campaigners contended that alternative venues can be found elsewhere in the country (Green Korea, 2015). These activists even sent a petition to the International Olympic Committee, arguing that the plan for the deforestation to build an Olympic venue should be discarded and the ski event should be hosted in a more environmentally sustainable location (Kim and Chung, 2018). The South Korean government intervened this dispute. On the condition that the organising committee would restore the native woods after the competition, the central government approved a temporary lease of the mountain and the installation of the sport facilities to the region.

The Games is now over. Yet, the restoration process has not started. Although the central government ordered an immediate reconstruction of the forests after the event, the local authority hesitated to reintroduce plants and trees. The provincial government and a group of local residents expressed their intention to retain the Olympic facilities such as a gondola lift and huts because these can be useful amenities for the local tourism. They also submitted an additional development proposal to arrange an ecological park surrounding the ski slopes as a way to commemorate the 2018 Winter Olympics and to revitalise the local economy. The Korea Forest Service, the government office that oversees the maintenance of the natural environment in the country, rejected PyeongChang's plan and reaffirmed the prompt restoration of *Gariwang* Mountain. A group of environmentalists also criticised the local government for not fulfilling its commitment to restore the woodlands. The argument between the two sides reached an impasse, and the tensions between the local people and the environmental campaigners deepened. A series of the unproductive conversations, and at times emotive confrontations, continued for more than a year. In April 2019, the central and regional authorities agreed to organise a working group to find a remedy for this prolonged dispute. Their main role includes the cross-examination of the cost required to restore the forests and the price needed to retain the ski facilities in order to find a more sustainable option. At the time of writing, no meaningful outcome has been found.

The *Jeongseon* Alpine Centre was built primarily for the 2018 Winter Olympics/ Paralympics. First opened in 2016, this ski centre was only operated for three seasons. It has permanently closed after the Olympics; some local developers have attempted to reopen the slopes though.

It seems that PyeongChang encounters difficult social and environmental problems at the expense of hosting the less than two weeks' Olympic ski competitions. The local community has been painfully divided on this matter, and the ecosystem and biodiversity in *Gariwang* Mountain have been significantly distorted (Yoon and Wilson, 2019). The future of the Olympic ski facilities is still uncertain. It is also unclear whether the ecological damage can fully be recovered. One evident fact is that both the restoration of the natural habitat and the development of eco-tourism necessitate a significant amount of financial resources. These two possible trajectories that the Alpine Centre may undergo appear to show the tensions between conventional environmentalism and ecological modernism (Kim, 2020; Symons, 2019). Put simply, the former refers to the preservation of nature as it is whereas the latter means the creation of engineered green space to earn economic gains. One of the key consequences of the Winter Olympic is, therefore, a hegemonic battle between the conservationist protection of the biodiversity, and the neo-liberal exploitation of the ecosystem.

Sport Facilities

From indoor ice links to ski jumping hills, PyeongChang built a number of costly winter sport venues in preparation for the Olympics. There is a view that the construction of major sporting arenas can facilitate the redevelopment of a local area (Clark and Misener, 2015; Wise and Harris, 2019). However, it appears that the installation of winter sport complex is not always positively related to the local development. Rather, these seasonal sporting facilities are more likely to turn into a white elephant. The PyeongChang sliding centre is the most obvious example. This was the location where bobsleigh, luge and skeleton events took place during the 2018 Winter Olympics. Whilst the new sliding tracks were under construction, a number of civic organisations including sport management academics raised concern that this sporting structure would be difficult to sustain after the Olympics due to high maintenance costs and low accessibility and usability by the public (Green Korea, 2015). Their alarm became a reality. Since the closure of the winter sport competitions, the sliding centre was rarely opened, let alone being used sporadically. At the same time, the province was struggling to meet the upkeep fees (Kim, 2018). Unable to find a sustainable way to operate this \$1 billion worth facility, the municipal government decided to close down the sliding tracks in February 2019. PyeongChang still needs to repay the debts and interests that the construction of this Olympic venue incurred.

The Alpensia ski jump stadium is another Olympic structure that has been neglected most of the time in the post-Olympic period. It should be noted that PyeongChang bid for the 2010, 2014 and 2018 Winter Olympics consecutively, and this small rural town was only able to win the rights to host this premier winter sport event in its third attempt (Merkel and Kim, 2011). This ski jumping arena was being built mainly as part of the South Korean town's 2014 Olympic campaign, and, in the promotional video, the image of this highly visible structure was introduced as a venue for the opening and closing ceremonies. The construction of this ski jumping centre, which cost \$5 billion, was completed in 2009 (MCST, 2018). However, this was the time when the 2014 Winter Olympics was awarded to Sochi. As a result, until PyeongChang joined the next Olympic bid in 2011, this expensive structure was hardly used while the maintenance costs were constantly increasing (Green Korea, 2015). Rather than bringing a benefit to the local development, it left a huge deficit to the provincial government.

One of the most notable features of this facility includes a football stadium connected to the jumping towers. Until 2015, the opening and closing ceremonies were scheduled to take place

at the ski jumping centre, and it was on this extra football ground where the celebrational occasions were to be staged. Yet, in 2016, the Olympic organisers and the local government changed its plan and started to build a new Olympic stadium to host the opening and closing celebrations. The new PyeongChang Olympic Stadium was opened in 2017. The construction of this arena was controversial because it was built exclusively for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Winter Olympics/ Paralympics and was expected to be demolished after the events due to unsustainable maintenance costs (Associated Press, 2018). After presenting the four cultural and sporting rituals, the Olympic stadium has now been dismantled nearly completely. The total expenses for the construction and demolition of the stadium reached almost \$200 million (Park, 2018).

The budget could have been saved had the Olympic ceremonies been staged at the ski jump complex as originally planned. While the ski jumping hills still stand, and a professional football club rents the attached football ground, the management of these sport facilities still causes an annual deficit of \$1.1million (Park, 2018). The municipal government is liable to pay the bill, but it is ultimately the taxpayer's money to be spent on this loss payment. Hence, the local residents are by no means free from carrying this financial burden. This economic shortfall reveals the local government's irresponsible arrangement of the Olympic construction project. Other Olympic venues such as the ice-skating park, the ice hockey arena and the curling centre are also facing a similar fate. At this juncture, it looks apparent that the Olympic organisers allied with the provincial government built the international sporting facilities without careful considerations of the social and economic conditions of the local area.

Infrastructural Amenities

Hosting a sport mega-event also entails the construction of social infrastructure, and a local government often choose to stage a major international competition strategically to upgrade its socio-economic systems (Preuss, 2015). South Korean cities are keen to exploit this developmental opportunity that the delivery of a major sporting event provides (Joo et al., 2017). In relation to the Winter Olympic Games in PyeongChang, the two most distinctive local development projects include the construction of the Alpensia resort and the installation of a high-speed railroad. It should be noted that the Gangwon Province, where the Olympic town is located, is one of the least developed regions in the country because of its large nature reserves and its proximity to North Korea (Fujita, 2018). These geographical factors prevented the development of this province over the last few decades. When PyeongChang announced its intention to host the Winter Olympics in the early 2000s, people in Gangwon considered it as a useful chance to modernise their home towns and the surrounding areas (Lee, 2018). The central government also relaxed its greenbelt policy affecting the province, and subsequently permitted to build modern facilities and amenities associated with the Olympics in the mountain zones.

The Apensia resort was the first major development project that the provincial office initiated in 2004. Originally designed as a main Olympic village, this is now the largest holiday resort in South Korea whose amenities include five-star hotels, an international convention centre, and a concert hall. Ski slopes, a golf course and a water park are also part of the premises. Despite such attractive features, the economic potential of this resort is not fully utilised. Instead of generating incomes, it only accumulates huge debts every month. This former Olympic village was built in connection with PyeongChang's 2014 Winter Olympic bid. As the South Korean town was unable to materialise its Olympic ambition at that time, very few

guests stayed in the world-class hotels and used its amenities from its grand opening in 2006 to PyeongChang's successful Olympic bid in 2011 (Lee, 2012). Even after this period, the number of visitors did not meaningfully increase. This implies that the upkeep cost much exceeded its gains. Additionally, because the Alpensia project was mainly financed through issuing municipal bonds, paying interest on this debt alone put significant economic pressure on the provincial government, not to mention the capital repayment (Joo et al., 2017). This financial situation has not been improved, if not worsened, since the delivery of PyeongChang 2018.

A positive consequence of the Olympics should also be acknowledged. The installation of the high-speed railways from Seoul to Gangneung, the provincial capital of Gangwon, was a major improvement to which hosting the Winter Olympics gave rise. Due to the problem of the relative under-development from which this province suffered, an inter-regional transportation system that links PyeongChang to other major cities in the country was not efficiently established. Until the early 2000s, whenever Gangwon Province sought a budget for the enhancement of railroads and motorways in the region, the central government was reluctant to allocate its developmental funds to the mountainous province (Ryu and Cho, 2015). The Winter Olympic changed the situation. In order to improve the accessibility to the Olympic venues, the South Korean government invested over \$3 billion in the bullet train tracks in 2012. After nearly five years of construction, the high-speed rail finally opened and, as a result, this service connects PyeongChang to Seoul in two hours. There existed a sceptical view that this speed railway might not be economically viable after the Olympics (Green Korea, 2015). Unlike this negative anticipation, this Gangwon-Seoul line becomes one of the most popular routes in Korea (Yonhap, 2018). The number of tourists using this express train also increase. In effect, the high-speed railroad is one of the major contributors to the development of tourism in Gangwon and PyeongChang. This is arguably the most significant social legacy that the Winter Olympics created.

Conclusion

With a sensible plan, hosting a major international sporting event can engender an initiative for social and economic and development (see Wise and Harris, 2017). However, in relation to the Winter Olympics, this sport mega-event led development seems to require a more careful approach. As the case of PyeongChang 2018 reveals, the winter sporting competition degraded the natural environment surrounding the Olympic venues more seriously than its summer counterpart (Rick, 2018). Additionally, winter sporting activities such as ski jumping and bobsleigh are difficult to develop into community sports due to specific equipment and skills necessitated (Lee, 2018). Their seasonal characteristic also prevents them from being widely promoted within society. Furthermore, in consideration of its visible environmental impact and its limited contribution to sport development, an opportunity cost of the Winter Olympic Games is excessively high (Hankyoreh, 2015). Certainly, the host town can upgrade its local infrastructure through supplementary cash flow from both the public and private sectors. Yet, when considering the expenses directly related to the construction and maintenance of the winter sport facilities, the social and economic viability of the Winter Olympics is by no means optimistic. In the end, the local government and the local resident need to carry the heavy financial burden on their shoulder in the post Winter Olympic setting. A number of academics point out that the claimed economic and developmental legacies of global sports mega-events may be a myth (Horne, 2007; Müller, 2015). With regards to the Olympic Winter Games, as PyeongChang 2018 shows, this is even more likely to be so.

As this special issue concerns soft power and local economy, I intend to finish this short essay by presenting a critical review of these concepts with reference to the PyeongChang Winter Olympics. Soft power is essentially diplomatic resources of a nation-state which can be utilised to persuade its partner institutes not by force but by its merit (Nye, 2008). A number of countries attempt to enrich their soft power assets by hosting a global sport mega-event (Houlihan & Grix, 2014). While such a premier contest does not automatically generate soft power resources, it surely provides a platform through which the host nation can demonstrate its cultural, social, technological, industrial and sporting merits. These characteristics of an advanced economy may attract some diplomatic and international players to the host. Yet, in order to have a meaningful influence on foreign relations, those attractive images represented via the global event must reflect genuine social and economic conditions of the country. If these fancy imageries only display a façade, and its internal socio-economic relations contradict these manufactured appearances, then this soft power exercise through sport only damages its diplomatic muscle. The 2018 Winter Olympic Games may be seen as South Korean cultural diplomacy at its best (Lee, 2019). Yet, it appears that, underneath the South Korean winter fantasy, symptoms of post-Olympic tensions, degeneration and unfulfilled obligations remain.

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