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## Book Review

**Global Sports Fandom in South Korea: American Major League Baseball and Its Fans in the Online Community** authored by Younghan Cho, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 238 pp., £79.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-981-15-3195-8, £31.99n (e-book), ISBN 978-981-15-3196-5

In the late 1990s, the East Asian financial crisis severely hit South Korea, and its people had to endure painful economic difficulties. It was also the time when Chan Ho Park, the first Korean Major Leaguer, displayed outstanding pitching on baseball stadiums in the US. His fastball that suppressed bulky American sluggers was one of the few joys that solaced many Koreans who felt weary and worn due to harsh austerity measures caused by the IMF bailout. Because of the cathartic feeling that the Korean pitcher aroused, people's demand for Major League Baseball (MLB hereafter) on TV soared, and several MLB fan communities, largely following Chan Ho Park, began to emerge in Korea. This subsequently made American professional baseball a valuable cultural commodity in the Korean media industry. Younghan Cho's monograph vividly illustrates the arrival of MLB in the country amidst the economic turmoil and lucidly demonstrates the implications of the penetration of this foreign sport media product into Korean society.

The title of this book appears to set the parameter of this research monograph, but such perception is partly correct. Surely, this book is about South Korean fans of Major League Baseball. However, what the author attempts to achieve is not simply to provide an ethnographic account of online baseball fandom in this country but to present a theoretical analysis of the diffusion of the American professional sport as a form of the global media product in the context of neoliberal globalisation. In this respect, this book deals with a range

of academic topics such as the global-local nexus, nationalism, Americanisation, migration, celebrity, digital media, and sport fandom. The development of a virtual MLB fan culture in South Korea offers authentic episodes through which the intersection between these multiple subjects be explored simultaneously. Cho thoroughly examined this Korean case study in order to advance an academic debate on the transnational circulation of Western sporting commodities and the impact of the consumption of such products on local communities.

This book consists of two major parts which contain three essays each plus the introduction and the postscript. The introduction spells out the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of Cho's research into Korean MLB fandom. Here, the author critically considers the notions of cultural globalisation, post-colonialism, and Western nationalism and problematises the adoption of these theoretical lenses without taking account of the distinctive historical and socio-economic contexts of East Asia. He also explicates methodological justification for internet ethnography to investigate online MLB fan communities as part of audience research. For those who are interested in media and cultural studies, this introductory chapter can be read as a standalone piece. Not only does this essay offer an excellent summary of some of the key theories in this discipline, but it also gives an instructive account of digital ethnography which is benevolently pedagogical.

The first major part of the book concerns the influx of Major League Baseball into the South Korean cultural landscape. The author eschewed a monocausal Americanisation thesis but espoused a multi-modal approach, namely "*glocalization* from above and below". This is a smart theoretical synthesis that Cho formulates. Conventionally, glocalization refers to the interface between the global (a top-down flow) and the local (a bottom-up current), but he rightly notes that the interaction between global impetus and local response occurs on both top-down and bottom-up sides of globalisation. Korean national identity politics displayed through the circulation and consumption of MLB programmes showed these multi-modal

processes. While MLB matches were foreign media products, the television coverage of the ball games focused primarily on Korean Major Leaguers, most notably on a LA Dodgers pitcher, Chan Ho Park. This amalgamation of Korean identity with America's pastime in the mass media reports exemplifies cultural glocalization from above. The appearance of virtual MLB fan communities in Korea is indicative of glocalization from below. On the web, fans freely shared their opinion on a particular player and game often being filtered through a local prism.

The second part of the book probes the culture of online MLB fan communities. Here, Cho paid attention to the way in which Korean fans perceive different types of Korean national identity being constructed and contested through Korean MLB players. In the virtual MLB fandom in Korea, he identified the co-existence of various forms of Korean-ness which include ethnic, civic, diasporic, developmental, post-colonial, transnational, and neoliberal variants of nationalism. Moreover, Korean MLB followers debated the cultural and political conditions for being accepted as a national player with reference to these multiple but occasionally incompatible types of Korean identity. Cho's most plausible argument in this part is the emergence of individuated nationalism in Korea which largely reflects neoliberalist ideology which highlights self-governing, materialistic, and highly performative individuality. Chan Ho Park, the most successful Korean Major Leaguer to date, encapsulates this individuated Korean nationalism. In that sense, while the online MLB fandom was mainly created for its members' interest in the American professional sport, this space also worked as the virtual public sphere where a fierce discussion on the legitimacy of various forms of Korean sporting nationalism frequently took place.

The postscript contains a brief survey of a few more contemporary cases with the author's critical contemplation on transnational sport fandom in Asia. I must confess that in this review I intentionally chose to write about Cho's analysis of Korean nationalism in the

localised MLB contents because this meets my research interest. As I mentioned earlier, this monograph encompasses in-depth theoretical discussions on various sociological subjects. I was simply unable to include all these conceptual arguments underpinned by convincing ethnographic accounts in this short piece. Hence, my decision to look at the theme of nationalism was rather strategic lest I overly simplify Younghan Cho's extensive study. That said, the merit of this monograph lies in the fact that it is compellingly theoretically reasoned sociological literature on sport in Asia. Scholars and students whose academic interests lie in sport media and communication, the global sport industry, and Asian/ Korean studies would find this book particularly interesting.

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