

Sport in Korea

Culture, Politics and Policy

Edited by
Eunha Koh

Research in the
Sociology of Sport

VOL
24



SPORT IN KOREA

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT VOLUME 24

**SPORT IN KOREA:
CULTURE, POLITICS AND
POLICY**

EDITED BY

EUNHA KOH

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

About the Editor ix

About the Contributors xi

Introduction – Sport in Korea: Culture, Politics, and Policy 1
Eunha Koh

PART ONE

Chapter 1 A Glass Escalator Leading up to the Stage: The Hidden Gender Advantage for Men in the Dance World 9
Sangwoo Nam

Chapter 2 Consuming Sports as a Popular Content of Korean Reality Television Shows: Reading the Sport Media Issue Under the Umbrella of Multiple Approaches 25
Yoonso Choi

Chapter 3 Changing Meaning of Nationalism on Team Korea: Focused on the Korean National Soccer Team 43
Wanyoung Lee

PART TWO

Chapter 4 Critical Reflections on “Sport Ethics” Discourse in Korean Society 63
Hee Jin Seo and Kiwoon Kim

Chapter 5 The Role of Korean Sports Governance in Ending Sports Violence 79
Hanbeom Kim and Seami Lim

Chapter 6 Athlete Activism in South Korea: Limitations and Challenges	97
<i>Seongsik Cho</i>	

Chapter 7 Sports and the 4th Industrial Revolution	119
<i>Jungrae Lee and Sora Kim</i>	

PART THREE

Chapter 8 Development of Sport Policy in South Korea: Historical and Institutional Analysis	135
<i>Taehee Kang and Sun-Yong Kwon</i>	

Chapter 9 Development, Sport Diplomacy, and Soft Power in South Korea	153
<i>Dongkyu Na</i>	

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view rather than a structuralist point of view and have conducted various studies on this. She is interested in the changes in sports that have emerged from the recent Fourth Industrial Revolution and is trying to approach them from various perspectives.

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INTRODUCTION – SPORT IN KOREA: CULTURE, POLITICS, AND POLICY

Eunha Koh

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KOREAN SPORTS GOING GLOBAL

With the increasing popularity of K-pop and K-drama, South Korean culture has recently stepped into the spotlight with growing interest from the public and academia. Although the emergence of South Korean sports celebrities on the global stage began in the mid-to-late 1990s, the recent success of Korean sport stars is seamlessly coupled with the global surge in interest in K-pop, K-drama, and K-food, creating a multifaceted wave of Korean cultural influence worldwide. Sport stars like Son Heung-min in the English Premier League (EPL) and Hyun-Jin Ryu in Major League Baseball (MLB) excel in their sports and play pivotal roles in increasing the visibility and appeal of Korean culture. Their athletic achievements parallel the explosive popularity of K-pop groups like BTS and BLACKPINK, K-dramas such as *Squid Game*, and the global fascination with Korean cuisine. This synergy amplifies Korea's cultural impact, fostering a deeper appreciation and interest in Korean culture, from its entertainment to its sports stars.

During the past two decades, there has been a growing number of scholarly publications on East Asian sports, including book publications ([Bien-Aimé & Wang, 2022](#); [Hong & Zhouxiang, 2020](#); [Horne & Manzenreiter, 2002](#)), especially on Japanese sports ([Kelly, 2018](#); [Nakayama, 2006](#)). There have been sociological studies analyzing Korean sports ([Bridges, 2012](#); [Hong, 2011](#); [Kwak et al., 2018](#); [Lee, 2015](#); [Merkel, 2008](#)), but they fall short of matching the global interest in Korean culture, including sports. Moreover, it is rare to find a comprehensive book dedicated to sociologically examining Korean sports in depth. This is also primarily true of the domestic Korean situation. Sociology of sport in Korea has more than 30 years of history with a nationwide academic society and undergraduate/graduate programs ([Koh, 2016](#)). However, despite an extensive volume of research done in the field domestically, there has been little effort to collect and publish them in a book to introduce them to the global audience.

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With the growing interest in Korean sports and its social significance from academia and the public, this volume intends to bring together research on the social, cultural, and political aspects of Korean sports today. To this end, this volume is designed as a collection of three distinctive themes: (1) sport culture and consumption in 21st century Korea, (2) key issues and controversies in Korean sport, and (3) Korean sport policy and its impact on shaping the Korean sport structure and process. A total of 9 chapters were written by authors who have been actively working in the field of sociology of sport in South Korea. The topics of each chapter are subjects that the authors have focused on and are currently the most vigorously debated in the sociology of sport in South Korea.

CULTURE, CONTROVERSIES, AND POLICY

Part One of this volume deals with Korean sport culture, where sport has become a consumer culture and provides spectacles from stadia to screens and from competition to entertainment content. As spectatorship has shifted to diverse media platforms such as YouTube, portal sites, cable TV, and OTT, there is a growing tendency of selective consumption of sports content of specific teams or leagues while, at the same time, nationalism and regionalism are still strong when watching football or baseball games. Another clear Korean trend is that sports have become an enormously popular form of entertainment across all media. During the last decade, many reality TV shows have broken the boundary between sport and non-sport media content where sport celebrities challenge to compete in other sports, nonathletes compete in team sports with famous sport figures as their coaches or sport stars become full-time entertainers. Yoonso Choi and Wanyoung Lee deal with interrelated themes of nationalism, consumerism, neoliberalism, and in the context of contemporary Korean sport culture. Choi critically examines the ways in which sports as the content of popular reality TV shows in South Korea is consumed in the Korean media market, while Lee explores the changing meanings of the “nation” and “nationalism” perceived by football fans using the notion of “civic nationalism.” Finally, Nam uses the term “glass escalator” to examine the organizational advantages afforded to male performers in the female-dominated dance industry.

Part Two deals with various Korean sports issues that have attracted public attention and criticism. First, Heejin Seo and Kiwoon Kim examine ethical issues in Korean sports ranging from doping to match-fixing and from violence to organizational corruption. By analyzing the sociocultural context, the authors discuss the use of sports as a tool to reestablish approved sports values and regain public trust. Hanbeom Kim and Saemi Lim raise the issue of the value and roles of collegiate sports by examining current dimensions such as conflicting roles of student-athletes, the decline of college teams, and the role of the Korea University Sports Federation (KUSF). In Chapter 6, Seongsik Cho’s critical analysis of the limitations and challenges of athlete activism continues the analysis. Cho suggests several ideas on individual, institutional, and governmental levels to

promote athlete activism in Korea. Finally, Jungrae Lee draws attention to what may be called the Fourth Industrial Revolution and changes in sports in Korea.

Part Three emphasizes that the government's sport policy has largely shaped Korean sports since the 1980s. Sport policy in Korea has four central pillars: promotion of people's sport participation; elite sport performance enhancement; development of sport industry; and international sport relations and sport diplomacy, with emphasis on specific sub-themes according to political regimes (Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, 2020, 2022). Part Three starts with Taehee Kang and Sunyong Kwon's chapter on the history and development of Korean sport policy centering on the concept of policy paradigm with an in-depth analysis of paradigm shifts in sport policy in congruence with the nation's broader political and economic contexts: industrialization, democratization, and globalization. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks of sport diplomacy and public diplomacy, Na analyses the tripartite blending of sport, diplomacy, and development at both the national and international levels and the historical transformation of Korean sport diplomacy during the course of Korea's politically guided development practice.

As a collective, the chapters in this volume offer a comprehensive understanding of Korean sport culture and structure and open up new avenues for sociological research in the field of sports. This, in essence, paves the way for future research on Korean sports, a prospect that we hope will inspire and motivate scholars from diverse backgrounds to contribute to this evolving field.

THE FUTURE

The planning of this book started in 2022, when I was invited to edit a volume on Korean sport for the Research in Sociology of Sport Series. It was a challenging but rewarding process to edit the first book on the sociology of sport published in English by Korean sport sociologists. As I conclude the introduction, I would like to share the following points with the readers.

First, I would like to mention the importance of the role and status of sport sociologists in Korea. Since the establishment of the Korean Society for the Sociology of Sport (KSSS) in 1990, the sociology of sport has seen significant quantitative and qualitative growth over the past 34 years. Within South Korea, it has become an integral subject in physical education departments and is considered a core academic discipline. Internationally, KSSS has actively engaged in scholarly exchanges with other countries and has been an active national member of the International Sociology of Sport Association. However, despite this progress, research conducted by sports sociologists based in Korea has not been widely recognized abroad. I hope this book addresses this gap by introducing current research conducted in Korea. Focusing on the Korean context, it aims to broaden the scope of the sociology of sport, which has historically been North American and European-centric, and stimulate more discussion from various parts of the world.

Secondly, I would like to emphasize the importance of engaging in sport policy, not only because the landscape of Korean sports has been shaped by state-led policy but also because sport sociologists have participated in the process of designing, implementing, and evaluating sport policy as researchers, administrators, or evaluators. In doing so, the subdiscipline of the sociology of sport in Korea has established itself as a core subject both in university curricula and the national teacher/sport instructor license system, which is in direct contrast with the recent relative decline of sociology of sport mainly in North America (Andrews, 2015) or criticism of it being “decorative sociology” (Rojek & Turner, 2000). The recent annual congresses and special seminar themes highlight significant areas within sports sociology and Korean society in general. Key topics include the social expansion of knowledge (KSSS, 2020), pressing issues in Korean sports, such as athletes’ rights and gender inequality in the sports labor market (KSSS, 2021, 2024), and the societal role of sports, such as the background and purpose of the establishment of National Sports Committee and the role of sports in the era of polarization (KSSS, 2022, 2023). I hope these efforts to address practical issues continue and such examples also become an excellent influence globally.

Lastly, I want to draw attention to the upcoming 2025 World Congress of Sociology of Sport, which is scheduled to be held in July in Seoul, Korea. This event is particularly significant as it marks the second occasion since the 2001 International Sociology of Sport Association Congress was renamed as the 1st World Congress of Sociology of Sport and was held in Seoul, Korea. I am excited about its potential and look forward to ongoing contributions from the authors of this book and Korean sports sociologists, fostering the continuous advancement of sports sociology in Korea. This event will not only showcase the progress of Korean sports sociology but also provide a platform for global recognition and influence.

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PART ONE

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