

The Relationship between Government, Business and Armed Forces in South Korea's Elite Sport Policy

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of elite sport development policy in Korea with a particular focus on the relationship between government, Chaebol (large corporations such as Samsung and LG) and Sangmu (Armed Forces) which are considered to have been main driving forces over the last two decades for Korea to become one of the most successful countries on the Summer Olympic stage. Since the early 1980s when Korea adopted the twin objectives of hosting major sports events and producing successful elite athletes Chaebol and Sangmu have been remained consistent features of Korea's elite sport policy alongside the government owned TN Village despite the radical shift in governing regime – from an authoritarian military-based governing coalition, to in 1993, a civilian-based government. The paper aims to identify and analyse the reasons for Chaebol to continue to manage sport teams despite the substantial cost involved and the motive of the Ministry of Defence to sustain Sangmu even during the IMF Crisis in 1997.

The paper adopts a critical realist perspective, that is, seeking to identify the significance of both structure and agency in the policy process and take account of unobservable factors such as beliefs or perceptions embedded in the social structure. The analysis is informed by empirical data drawn from twenty six semi-structured interviews with senior officials (government and non-governmental) and an analysis of government and non-governmental policy documents.

A 'Policy Network' analytical framework is used in this study. According to Rhodes (1986), a 'Policy Network' can be defined as a cluster or complex of organisations connected to one another by resource dependencies. A 'Policy Community' is characterised by stability of relationships, continuity of a restrictive membership, vertical interdependence based shared service delivery responsibilities, insulation from other networks, high degree of vertical interdependence and limited horizontal articulation. Most decision-making takes place in this closed community that consists of a small number of participants who know each other very well and have common values and policy goals.

Initial findings indicate that the reasons for Chaebol companies to operate teams in elite sport had moved through three phases: first, a desire to maintain good relations with the military regime, second, a concern in the late 1990s with public relations (to raise brand awareness and promote the companies' images), and third, as a form of social responsibility, in other words, returning benefits back to the public. As regards Sangmu, research indicates that the cohesive power from the 'Policy Community' in the sport sector contributed to its retention despite severe budgetary pressure within the Ministry of Defence. The Heads of the National Sport Organisations were

concerned about losing elite athletes if they were required to undertake normal military service for two years. Senior officers in the Korea Sport Council were eager to avoid criticism from the public for not doing enough to protect elite athletes and were consequently regarded as core figures ('policy entrepreneurs') in the elite policy community. Lastly, the government's approach to managing Chaebol and Sangmu has been altered over time. While Chaebol was closely linked to the government elite sport policy before the civilian regime took office more recent governments have tended to keep a distance from them consistent with the values of a liberal democracy. As for Sangmu, the attempt by the Ministry of Defence to abolish the organisation has led to a change in the government's perspective, with Sangmu no longer thought of as a backbone of elite sport but only a 'burden' that diverts resources from national defence.

In Korea's elite development policy, the influence of government played an important role through TN Village which can act independently of Chaebol's initiatives. In addition, the 'Policy Community' for elite sport was effective in persuading the government to maintain Sangmu as they share identical beliefs and values, that is, at least preserve the current policy in Korea's elite sport.

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