Whose story counts? The place of sport discourse in relations between north and South Korea from 1978-1997

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Introduction –Research Aims and Background Literature
This paper undertakes a critical historical analysis of the discourses of N. Korea and S. Korea in their interaction in relation to sport as evidenced in their media. The aim is to provide an account of the changes in the government’s policies in terms of inter-Korean policy in sport relations, and how such ‘domestic’ policy is bound up with the circumstances or dominant structures of international relations (IR).

The focus of the paper is on the decades before and after the Seoul Games. It addresses the role which the global sports movement played in the debate between two Koreas. The political debate is bound up with a specific set of inter-Korean policy in sport relations, and how such ‘domestic’ policy is bound up with the circumstances or dominant structures of international relations (IR).

The paper draws on a constructivist theoretical frame, seeking to identify how each side seeks to position itself in relation to aspects of ethnic nationalism within the context of international relations using sport as a vehicle for diplomacy. The paper appears in a way that both sides are able to appeal to shared nationalism.

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The discourse in No-Dong and Dong-A constructs a set of ‘diplomatic positions’ drawing on the respective positions of N. Korea and S. Korea in the international sporting community in which both Kores manifest a tendency for overt rivalry while at the same time strongly emphasizing their shared ethnic nationalism. This aspect is used by the North in arguing against Seoul’s candidature (unsuccessfully) and subsequently insisting (unsuccessfully) on a joint hosting of the 1988 Games. In these interactions, both sides sought to portray themselves as championing ethnic nationalism.

This is particularly the case after the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. Although there was détente in IR, the competition between the two regimes continued and was transformed into discussion of the unification issue symbolically represented by initiatives to organise a single team for key international sport events. The terminology used by both sides is subtly different – N. Korea tending to use the term “unification team” (Tong Il Team) and S. Korea preferring the term “one team” (Dan Il Team), with each term understood as implying a different approach to the implications of shared ethnic nationalism and its relation to political union. This presentation will elaborate on the ways in which the post-Cold War IR context forced the two Koreas to come together with sport events becoming one of the few tools for managing this process (occasionally harmoniously). The 41st World Table Tennis Championship in Japan was a significant example since the combined team gained a gold medal in the women’s group competition against China, the world champions. The media discourses highlight the usage of sport in reconciliation of the divided Koreas. Nevertheless, the potential of sport events to foster unity was not always positive, since it was affected by political incidents such as N. Korean Judo players’ defection to S. Korea during the international competitions.

Results and conclusions
Following the Korean War 1950-53, N. Korea and S. Korea became locked into the political ideological conflict of the Cold War with sport as one of the important battlegrounds. Relations between the two Koreas were viewed in the context of IR in particular the S. Korea-American alliance, and relationships between the countries in northeast Asia (Japan, PRC, and Russia) with both regimes.

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