According to one version of the founding myth, Heracles, after completing his famous “twelve labours,” initiated the ancient Olympic games and built the stadium within which the competitions were held to honour his father, Zeus. Beyond the Final Score is not the product of such arduous labours nor is it aimed at the gods. The stated objective is to outline a “systematic way of thinking about how sports and the Olympics matter in world politics” for the “educated and interested general reader” (2, 32). The book covers the entire modern history of the Olympics as it relates to East Asia, but also contains numerous references to Olympics and other sporting events held around the world. The writing style is clear and accessible, and the author occasionally sprinkles in some interesting personal anecdotes from his time as the director of Asian Affairs on the National Security Council during the latter years of the Bush administration.

Using the lacuna in the study of sports in political science and the purist argument that sports and politics should not mix as launching points, Cha argues that there are three ways in which sports affect politics and international relations. First, sports are often a projection of national image and affect international prestige. Second, sports can facilitate the improvement of diplomatic relations or exacerbate international conflicts. Third, sports can be a vehicle of material transformations in urban space, everyday behaviours, and policy thinking. In establishing the parameters of the book, Cha asserts that Asia is particularly inclined to mix politics and sports, and sporting events have a unique ability to mobilize national sentiments and intense emotions.

Perfect games and scores are rare in sports and perfect books are even rarer in academia. Although it generally fulfills its ambition of introducing an interesting and complex issue to a general audience, there are some issues that need to be flagged. First, the summary of the existing body of literature on the Olympics and sports is misleading. Cha claims that much of the literature in various social sciences fields on sports is “predictable and parochial” (30). Historians, anthropologists, sociologists and urban geographers have in fact published numerous studies of the three points of intersection between sports and politics that Cha cites: prestige, diplomacy and transformation. Academic journals are hardly short of articles that trace the impacts the Olympics have had on national image, diplomacy, urban planning, civility and the environment. Of course there are undoubtedly a number of works on sports that are narrow in scope, but considering that Cha’s argument is indebted to several existing streams of research, a more considered summary would have been appropriate.
Second, the book deals with nation-states, but not differences within the nation or the region. Cha seems to invoke the notion of “soft power” as his frame (47-50). The pro is that this allows for the exploration of subject matter considered non-orthodox in political science. The con is that some of the problems inherent in the notion of “soft power” are replicated. To cite one example, since the nation-state is the unit of analysis, there is no sustained attempt to analyze differences between official and unofficial Chinese nationalism, inter-city competitions for Olympic bids within Japan or the domestic opposition to the preparations for the 1988 Olympics in South Korea. Moreover, despite his claim that only sports can trigger emotions required to galvanize national identity, Cha ends up referencing several cultural events and exchanges. The nebulously defined rubric of “soft power” covers anything that is not military power and thus, is not the best tool for supporting a claim that sport is uniquely evocative of collective emotions.

Third, Cha’s initial explanation for his focus—his assertion that sports have more resonances in Asia than in other regions—is not entirely persuasive. He notes that the Olympics are rare in Asia, that Asia has had a turbulent history and that its pace of transformation has been rapid. The very same points could be applied to all regions in the contemporary world other than Western Europe and North America. After all, the IOC’s longest-running feud was likely with Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Africa and Latin America have yet to host an Olympics (although this will change after 2016 with the Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympics). Even the relatively sedate contemporary history of Canada has not stopped Vancouver from undertaking massive urban construction leading up to 2010 or from domestic opposition groups from demonstrating against the Olympics. Moreover, some sports would appear to generate political tensions throughout the world, while some other sports do not seem to trigger similar responses in Asia (for example, rugby, K-1).

Despite these and other issues, the book does weave together multiple threads into a compact and clear form. Instructors of introductory undergraduate courses will find it to be particularly useful when dealing with the complex nexus of politics and sports.

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