

Title: Colonial Korea's First Participation in the Olympic Games (1932)

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## **Abstract**

Even though it is the first, meaningful Olympics in which three Korean athletes participated in Korean sports history, the 1932 Los Angeles Summer Olympics attracted little attention as an object of critical observation. In this paper, I would like to examine 1932 Olympic Games' multifaceted effect on colonial Korea beyond typical nationalistic historiography focusing on Japanese discrimination vs. Korean resistance. The Olympics, one of the very western, modern mega-sports events, provided golden opportunities for Koreans to boast the power of Korean nation which had been forgotten in the world's stage since the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910. Three Korean athletes, (Kim Ŭnbae, Kwon Taeha, Hwang Ŭlsu) were acclaimed as national heroes who competed in the world stage for the first time in Korean history. When Kim Ŭnbae returned home after finishing the marathon race in sixth place, colonial Korea was flooded with the joy of victory, even under the harsh Japanese colonialism. The unprecedented Olympic fever swept over the entire Korean Peninsula and the joy long-lasting in the hearts of not only those few national leaders, but the wide swath of Korean population. However, even the Olympics could not hold all Koreans together or make them proud of their fatherland. During the 1932 Olympics, a significant number of Koreans living in Los Angeles were not hesitant to dismiss the Korean athletes, viewing them not only as members of Japanese national team, but also as national betrayers. For some Korean intellectuals who focused their attention on popularization of sports, propagating calisthenics was much more an urgent issue than sending a handful of elite athletes to Olympics, especially given the fact that most Koreans were suffering in poverty and lack of medical facilities. Even the three heroized Korean Olympians were not happy with their first debut because of their disappointing result. In sum, the wide array of Koreans—athletes, sports fans, national leaders, Korean residents in America—observed, participated, and consumed this mega-sports event one way or the other. If the Olympic Games convoluted social phenomena, the Koreans' reactions to the 1932 Olympic Games were such.

**Keywords:** Olympic Games, Japanese empire, mass media, Los Angeles, Korean athletes

## Introduction

Yi Kiryong (1899–n.d.), a renowned Korean sports reporter for the *Tonga ilbo*, said: “The year is 1932. This year is a red-letter day when the tenth Olympiad, the biggest goal and the greatest stage for our sports community, is scheduled to be held in the United States.” The Olympics, he continued, “are where every movement of the world’s sportsmen signifies their national vigor. They will become the “world battlefield” without gun and sword.”<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the year 1932 was a crucial junction for Olympic history in East Asia. While the Great Depression heavily reduced European countries’ participation in the 1932 Games, East Asian nations participated aggressively in the Games held on the West Coast of the United States. Since its Olympic debut in the 1912 Stockholm Games, Japan had increasing numbers of Olympians and medals, and it was ready to use the world stage provided by the 1932 Olympics to display its substantial sporting advances. In Los Angeles, the Japanese Olympic team of 131 members, second in size only to that of the United States, achieved unparalleled success taking seventh place with 18 medals after the United States (103), Italy (36), Finland (25), Sweden (23), Germany (20), and France (19). Japanese athletes’ great performance in Los Angeles provided a sound basis for its successful bid for hosting the 1940 Olympics.<sup>2</sup> China’s first Olympic delegation—a lone athlete along with a coach and four bureaucrats—showed up in Los Angeles to become a member of the Olympic family.

When ethnic Korean athletes participated for the first time, they were representing Japan. The three Korean athletes, Kim Ŭnbae (marathoner), Kwŏn T’aeha (marathoner) and Hwang Ŭlsu (boxer), participated in the 1932 Games for the first time in history, along with one Taiwanese athlete, under the Japanese flag. In addition, two Korean executive officials

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<sup>1</sup> Yi Kiryong, “Kŭm nyŏn e yŏllil segye Ollimp’ik taehoe: Sŭp’och’ŭ ŭi ch’oego chŏndang,” *Sin Tonga* (January 1932): 118.

<sup>2</sup> Sandra S. Collins, *The 1940 Tokyo Games: The Missing Olympics: Japan, the Asian Olympics and the Olympic Movement* (London: Routledge, 2007), 40–41.

participated in the Games—Sin Kijun (1896–1965) on the Chinese and Yi Sangbaek (1904–1966) on the Japanese team.

The first Olympics for colonial Korea has attracted little attention, not even in the field of Korean sports studies. Passing comments tend to be nationalistic, focusing on Japanese discrimination against Korean athletes. To remedy this shortcoming, this paper seeks to proffer a more nuanced, multidimensional analysis of the sociocultural impact of the 1932 Olympic Games on colonial Korea. Many Koreans at the time saw the Olympics—a modern, international, Western mega-sporting event—as an ideal setting for demonstrating, if not proving, the prowess of Korea, even as a nation forgotten by the world since Korea’s colonization by Japan in 1910. Not surprisingly, the three Korean athletes who participated in the event immediately became national heroes.

All the same, the reception of the 1932 Olympic Games varied among Koreans, including the athletes, fans, national leaders and the diaspora. The tenth Olympiad disappointed many Koreans’ expectations of the Games’ role in Korean nation building. During the 1932 Olympics, a significant number of Koreans living in Los Angeles dismissed the three Korean athletes as traitors. The athletes poignantly suffered from the demand to live up to Korean fans’ expectation in terms of ranking. In addition, for some Korean intellectuals committed to promoting public health, propagating calisthenics among the general population was more important than a few elite athletes competing in the Olympics, especially given that the vast majority of Koreans were suffering from poverty and inadequate medical care.

### The Birth of the First Korean Olympians

A long-cherished desire of Koreans under Japanese colonial rule was to see their compatriots compete successfully with the best on the world stage regardless of field. It was none other

than Kim Ŭnbae, a diminutive, teenage marathon runner from Yangjŏng High Ordinary School (Yangjŏng kodŭng pot'ong hakkyo).<sup>3</sup> Kim set a new world record at the seventh Korean Shrine Games in October 1931, running the 42.195 kilometer (26 miles and 385 yard) race in 2:26:12, nearly six minutes faster than a legendary Finnish long distance runner, Hannes Kolehmainen, who set a world record at the 1920 Antwerp Olympics. As colonial Korea had hardly anyone regarded as an international figure, Kim and his record excited the entire Korean peninsula. The *Maeil sinbo* reported that Kim's achievement could instill the confidence needed to open the world arena to Koreans worn out by disappointment and desperation, proclaiming, "Kim is the first Korean to achieve an ecumenic triumph in the twentieth century."<sup>4</sup> Korean nationalistic sentiment was also expressed by the *Tonga ilbo*, then the largest vernacular newspaper. It declared that Kim's world record had thrust the historically old-fashioned and passive Korea, often referred to as the "hermit kingdom," onto the world stage in a single bound and had proven that "There is no flaw in the Korean's character or disposition."<sup>5</sup>

At the sixth Meiji Shrine Games held in Tokyo on November 3, 1931, Kim verified that his world record was not merely fortuitous, coming second in the race with resounding cheers from the many Koreans then living in Japan.<sup>6</sup> Once again, the Korean media highly—and clandestinely—praised his achievement in Tokyo as Korean victory. Whereas the *Yomiuri shimbun* recorded Kim's ranking as fourth and nationality as Japanese in an article on the world 1931 marathon records (Picture 2), quoting the *Yomiuri* article, Yi Kiryong dared to change Kim's nationality from Japanese to Korean (Picture 3). Since the Library Department

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<sup>3</sup> Kim T'aeho, "Chosŏn sin'gu undong sŏnsu p'yŏng (1)," *Tonggwang* (June 1932): 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Maeil sinbo*, 20 October 1931.

<sup>5</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 20 October 1931.

<sup>6</sup> *Maeil sinbo*, 8 November 1931. As soon as he came home, Kim apologized for failing to win the race by a head. He was unfamiliar with the marathon course in Tokyo and had spent his final burst of energy prematurely.

of the colonial government was established in 1926, it was carefully overseeing Korean-owned printed mass media under the Publication Law. Yi's manipulation did not cause a trouble, probably because the Japanese censorship at the time generally focused on issues surrounding domestic politics.<sup>7</sup>

6	フェリス(英國)	二時間三十分三二秒八
5	トイヴォネン(芬蘭)	二時間三十分零八秒
4	金恩培(日本)	二時間二十四分五十八秒
3	高橋清二(日本)	二時間三十分三〇秒
2	鹽田玉男(日本)	二時間三十四分四秒
1	ザバラ(亞然丁)	二時間三十分一九秒

Picture 1. *Yomiuri shimbun*, 28 November 1931.

1	사바라(亞然丁)	2時33分19秒
2	鹽 龍(日 本)	2時34分04秒
3	高 橋(日 本)	2時34分30秒
4	金恩培(朝 鮮)	2時34分58秒
5	도이보넨(芬蘭)	2時35分08秒
6	페리스(英 國)	2時35分31秒

Picture 2. *Tonga ilbo*, 1 December 1931.

Kim's feat provoked instant, fervent responses from national leaders, authorities in the sports community, and the public. When Kim came back from Tokyo after the sixth Meiji Shrine Games, a commendation ceremony was held for him hosted by the Kyōngsōng Sports Reporters Corps, Yangjōng High Ordinary School's alumni association and several nationwide sporting organizations such as the Korean, Kwansō, Taegu, and Hamhūng Sports Associations. This was in tandem with a congratulatory address delivered by nationalist leaders and a crowd of nearly a thousand.<sup>8</sup> Taking advantage of this opportunity, the Korean Sports Association decided to raise funds from the public to advertise sports extensively

<sup>7</sup> Yi Minju, "Ilche sigi kōmyōlgwandūl ūi Chosōnō mididō wa kōmyōl ōmmu e taehan insik," *Han'guk ōllon chōngbo hakpo* 55, no.1 (February 2011): 169–95.

<sup>8</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 17 November 1931.

nationwide.<sup>9</sup> Korea was a colony of the Japanese empire from Tokyo's perspective, whereas Koreans had no intention of supporting Kim as a Japanese athlete, even before the 1932 Olympics had begun.

In contrast to the huge celebration in Korea, Kim's establishment of the world record received little attention from the international sports community. The marathon distance for the Olympics—42.195 kilometers, or 26 miles and 385 yards—was standardized at the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) convention in Geneva in 1921.<sup>10</sup> The marathon route of the Korean Shrine Games had not been authorized formally as a full course of 42.195 km by any international sports organization; thus, Kim's record did not gain official approval. In addition, the position of colonial Korea as a marginalized nation in the context of geopolitics made it hard to draw the much attention from anyone outside of colonial Korea to Kim's unofficial world record, as Yun Ch'ihō reckoned as follows; “Had an American or a British young man of 18 done the stunt, the world would have spilt bottles of ink in writing up his praises, but who cares whether a Korean has broken a world record or a glass cup?”<sup>11</sup>

Regardless, Kim's impressive performance led the Koreans to pay unprecedented attention to the Olympic Games, calling Kim the “the world's king of the marathon.”<sup>12</sup> Before the Korean participation, the growing quadrennial mega-sports event was largely ignored by colonial Korea. With Kim's world record, Korean perception of the Olympics changed to the point that the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics was no longer a “fire far off in the

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<sup>9</sup> *Maeil sinbo*, 23 October 1931.

<sup>10</sup> David E. Martin and Roger W. H. Gynn, *The Olympic Marathon* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2000), 113.

<sup>11</sup> Yun Ch'ihō, *Yun Ch'ihō ilgi*, Vol. 9 (Seoul: Kuksa P'yōnch'an Wiwōnhoe, 1973–1986), 14 November 1932.

<sup>12</sup> O Susan, “Segye kirok tolp'a han marason sōnsu Kim Ŭnbae kun,” *Pyōlgōn 'gon* (December 1931): 12.

distance from the Pacific.”<sup>13</sup> To participate in the Olympics, Korean athletes had to get through the preliminaries held in Kyōngsōng before competing with Japanese counterparts from each region of the Japanese empire. Between 1920 and 1928, Korean athletes were no match for Japanese athletes in the Olympic trials, but the 1932 Olympic marathon tryout was different. Above all, the Japan Amateur Sports Association’s acknowledgement of Kim Ũnbae’s great performance in 1931 allowed him to run at the final tryout held in Tokyo without running the preliminary race in Kyōngsōng.<sup>14</sup> In addition, since Kwōn T’aeha, who was a Meiji University graduate and long distance runner, came in first with a decent time (2:35:12 in the 1932 Olympic trial held in Kyōngsōng), the Korean sports community was infused with new hope of having its first Olympians. Compared to Ma Pongok’s record (3:15:00) four years ago set in the 1928 Olympic trial, the record of Kim and Kwōn showed that Korean marathon runners had caught up with the advanced world level in a short period of time.<sup>15</sup>

At last, two Korean marathoners had achieved the highest measure of success in the Olympic marathon tryouts in Tokyo, in which three athletes would be selected as Japan’s national representatives.<sup>16</sup> Kim moved from fourth place to second due to a miraculous sprint in the final moments of the race. More joyful for Koreans was Kwōn T’aeha’s unheralded win because he, once a captain of Meiji University’s athletic club, had little prior experience in marathon running. It was remarkable that two Koreans beat Japanese competitors, given that the interwar era was a golden age of Japanese marathon running featuring many world-class athletes: “nine different [Japanese] runners ranked among the world’s five fastest for

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<sup>13</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 2 January 1932.

<sup>14</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 9 May 1932.

<sup>15</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 8 May 1928.

<sup>16</sup> In the 1932 Games, the marathon entry quota for each country was reduced to three. See David E. Martin and Roger W. H. Gynn, *The Olympic Marathon*, 113.

one or more years between 1925 and 1930” and “five Japanese times were listed among the top nine worldwide for 1930.”<sup>17</sup> The Japanese marathon community continued to produce top-tier runners to the point where, right before 1932 Games, “Japan could have fielded several teams of three Olympic-caliber athletes.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the final outcome was a perfect ending for Koreans. Kim T’aeho, a sports writer, struck a common chord in Koreans’ hearts, valorizing Kwŏn’s superhuman will and calling Kim’s last sprint a “bloody race risking death.”<sup>19</sup> When the two runners returned to Kyŏngsŏng and had a car parade, they received a thunderous applause from overjoyed onlookers.

To praise the two athletes’ feats, Korean intellectuals constructed a discourse redolent of glorious, militaristic Korean history. In the face of the onslaught of global imperialism since the nineteenth century, Korean intellectuals’ efforts focused on retrieving glories of the past to instill a sense of autonomous collective identity and pride into the mind of Koreans. In particular, the kingdom of Koguryŏ (second century BCE?–668 CE), which dominated a large swath of Manchuria as well as the Korean peninsula, and its warrior’ ethos, emerged as a symbol of the glorious past of Korean masculinity. On the other hand, Korean journalists, historians, and reform-minded activists such as Sin Ch’aeho often scathingly criticized what they saw as effete and effeminate the notions of the ideal man as shaped by Korea’s Confucianism.<sup>20</sup> In this context, the *Tonga ilbo* described the birth of the first Korean Olympians as “Korean youth’s expansion into the world” rekindling irredentist voices like this one: “Although Korea was doomed to national pauperization and has fallen into the evils of seclusion, literary indulgence and the neglect of the military arts in the past several

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas R. H. Havens, *Marathon Japan* (Honolulu : University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015), 46.

<sup>18</sup> David E. Martin and Roger W. H. Gynn, *The Olympic Marathon*, 147.

<sup>19</sup> Kim T’aeho, “Uri ūi sŭp’ossŭ yongsa,” *Cheilsŏn* (July 1932): 59.

<sup>20</sup> Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea: A Genealogy of Patriotism* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 4–15; Andre Schmid, *Korea between Empires, 1895–1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), Chapter 7.

centuries, these hidden world-class athletes prove that the blood of a continental nation is romping around Koreans' blood vessels." The *Tonga ilbo* likened the two athletes to the Koguryŏ warriors and praised their achievements as "the pride of Korea and the glory of Korea."<sup>21</sup> Colonial Korea's press deployed the commonly-used rhetorical parallelism between military and athletic heroism to identify the two athletes as heroes resuscitating Korean masculinity.

Koreans hailed another Olympian, a boxer, with acclamation immediately after Kwŏn and Kim earned their slots as members of the Japanese national contingent. Hwang Ŭlsu, already well known as a lightweight boxer at Meiji University, got through the preliminaries as the Kantō representative. As much support for Hwang as for Kwŏn and Kim came from Koreans on a national scale. Hwang wrestled with economic hardships and the serious injuries he sustained in the preliminary matches. People of all walks of life joined a fund-raising campaign launched by the *Tonga ilbo*, including a supporters' association organized by Korean students studying in Tokyo, the Korean Boxing Club, and even every sixth-grader in Ch'ŏrwŏn Public Ordinary School (Ch'ŏrwŏn kongnip pot'ong hakkyo) Hwang attended. Eventually, Hwang received a sizable sum of money (270 yen) before the Games.<sup>22</sup>

A farewell party served as another occasion to affirm the Olympians' Korean identity. When the first main Japanese squad marched to the Meiji Shinto Shrine to pray for victory, continuing on to the Imperial Palace, many Japanese supporters sang the national anthem, "Kimigayo," and cheered "*Banzai!*" (Long Live the Emperor!).<sup>23</sup> Before joining the Japanese company and the ceremony held in Tokyo, Kim and Kwŏn attended a farewell ceremony at Kyŏngsŏng train station hosted by Koreans. The two Korean marathon runners left with the

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<sup>21</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 2 June 1932.

<sup>22</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 30 June 1932; 1 July 1932.

<sup>23</sup> Eriko Yamamoto, "Cheers for Japanese Athletes: The 1932 Los Angeles Olympics and the Japanese American Community," *Pacific Historical Review* 69, no. 3 (2000): 405.

words of encouragement, “Win and by all means, come back as Koreans.” The atmosphere was effervescent and trembling with excitement.<sup>24</sup> Embarking on the *Taiyo Maru* in Yokohama leaving for Los Angeles, Hwang found his cabin filled with garlands, fruits, and snacks from his compatriots. He was also deeply moved upon receiving a number of cheering telegrams and letters from Korea.<sup>25</sup> The *Tonga ilbo* solicited encouraging letters from the public, and delivered 75 letters to the three athletes by international mail.<sup>26</sup>

When a large crowd saw the Japanese Olympic team off at the Yokohama port, the hearts of the athletes of Korean ancestry were replete with sorrow as members of a subjugated race.<sup>27</sup> In particular, Kwŏn’s antipathy towards Japan is noteworthy in light of two unfortunate events involving the police in colonial Korea during the Olympic trials. He was brutally beaten by Japanese policemen during a practice race in Myŏngdong, downtown Kyŏngsŏng, a day before the Korean trials for flouting a traffic signal.<sup>28</sup> Further, when he was about to get on the Pusan–Shimonoseki ferry (Kwanbu yŏllaksŏn) to join the Japanese team after becoming a Japanese national athlete, three drunken policemen (one Japanese and two Koreans) beat him up quite badly because of his poor attitude during questioning.<sup>29</sup> As his diary reveals, Yun Ch’iho was also outraged at the beating of Kwŏn by police officers:

Today’s paper reports that three detectives beat Kwon Tai Ha [Kwŏn T’aeha], the Korea Marathon runner on the ferry boat at Fusan [Pusan] on the ground that he was impudent in his language. I feared that the Japanese would do some-thing of the kind to vent their hatred against the Korean who had dared outrun all the Japanese Marathon aspirants in the last preliminary contest. The Japanese can be chivalrous and even generous to their proteges. They are dangerously treacherous to their rivals especially when the rivals happen to belong to another race—a weaker race. The Japanese vanity must have been hurt to the core by the fact that two Koreans had to be elected as the first and the second men in the Marathon contest in the coming

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<sup>24</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 14 June 1932.

<sup>25</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 14 August 1932.

<sup>26</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 20 July 1932.

<sup>27</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 1 January 1936.

<sup>28</sup> *Maeil sinbo*, 8 May 1932.

<sup>29</sup> *Maeil sinbo*, 15 June 1932. American papers, as well as Korean and Japanese papers, reported on the incident. See *Los Angeles Times*, 15 June 1932.

Olympic Games to be held in Los-Angeles. I wouldn't be surprized [*sic*] if the Japanese will resort to some trick that will put Kwon [Kwōn] altogether out of the list between now and the great game. Whatever may be the virtues of the Samurai character—and they are many too—, sportsmanlike generosity is not one of them.<sup>30</sup>

Kwōn, with his deep-rooted rancor towards Japanese colonialism, resolved to win at any cost and with good reason felt that “No one gave us a hearty send-off among the crowds of Japanese in Yokohama.”<sup>31</sup>

### A Meeting between Korean Athletes and Koreans in the United States

In the summer of 1932, the Japanese-American community in Los Angeles eagerly participated in the Olympiad to make it a success for Japan. The first generation (*issei*) and second generation (*nisei*) of Japanese residents in the United States suffered from virulent racism against Asian immigrants. A series of legal actions such as the Naturalization Act of 1906, the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907–1908, the California Alien Land laws of 1913 and 1920, and the Immigration Act of 1924 reflect the escalation of anti-Japanese discrimination. The first-generation immigrants were barred from owning land, marrying whites, or sending their children to schools attended by whites. Even the American-born second generation faced legalized discrimination in employment, civic activities, housing, and at public venues such as restaurants, stores, and hotels. In this context, the Japanese-American community was looking forward to Japan's Olympic victories as proof of Japanese excellence and a refutation of white America's racial prejudice against them. Simultaneously, the Olympics, as a cosmopolitan peaceful undertaking, were viewed by them as a great opportunity to improve the Japan–United States relationship, which had been deteriorating since Japan's invasion of

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<sup>30</sup> *Yun Ch'ihŏ ilgi*, Vol. 10, 15 June 1932.

<sup>31</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 25 June 1932.

Manchuria in 1931. By doing so, they sought to coexist more comfortably with American society's dominant whites.<sup>32</sup>

The United States was also important to the history of the Korean diaspora. After a small number of Koreans, including merchants, diplomats, and students, entered the United States in the late nineteenth century, between 1903 and 1905, approximately 7,400 Koreans immigrated to work on Hawaiian sugar plantations that sought new sources of cheap labor. Korean laborers were to replace the Chinese and Japanese. Chinese immigration to the United States had come to an almost complete halt after exclusionary legislation first enacted in 1882. Japanese strikers more frequently demanded higher wages and better working conditions. Korean migration continued between 1906 and 1924. Among the migrants were approximately 600 political refugees from Japanese colonial rule and over 1,000 “picture brides” marrying Korean males already in Hawaii. Searching for better living conditions, from 1905 to 1907, approximately 1,000 Koreans migrated from Hawaii to the mainland. The United States Census of 1930 records 1,860 Koreans residing on the mainland who had migrated from Hawaii. A total population of approximately 10,000 Koreans in America remained relatively constant until the 1950s.<sup>33</sup> The Korean population was a small fraction of the size of the Chinese- and Japanese-American communities in America's West Coast. All the same, among the mostly Western host cities of the Olympics until the 1964 Tokyo Games, Los Angeles and its vicinity had the largest Korean fan base for the three first Korean Olympians.

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<sup>32</sup> Eriko Yamamoto, “Cheers for Japanese Athletes.”

<sup>33</sup> For an early history of Korean immigration to the United States, see Wayne Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America Immigration to Hawaii, 1896–1910* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988); Richard S. Kim, *The Quest for Statehood: Korean Immigrant Nationalism and U.S. Sovereignty, 1905–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Chapter 1.

As did other immigrants to the United States, Korean immigrants encountered much adversity. In general, Korean immigrants coped with racism, cultural differences, privation and a generation gap between the first and second generations. Fundamentally, the most serious hardship, however, was the loss of their country as a defender of their interests, as Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910 transformed Koreans in the United States into "international orphans."<sup>34</sup> This "double colonization" by American racism and Japanese imperialism had effectively left Korean-Americans on their own to survive in a strange land.<sup>35</sup> As Korean-Americans directed much of their energy and resources toward nationalistic activities, the United States remained an important base for the Korean independence movement until the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945. The foundation of the Korean National Association (Kungminhoe) in 1909 as a representative organization for all Korean residents of the United States initiated the United States-based Korean independence movement's efforts to undo Japan's grip on their homeland.

Before and after the 1932 Olympics, the nationalism of Korean communities scattered across the United States was running high. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria sparked anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States, and Korean nationalists saw this as a development that could contribute to the liberation of Korea from Japan. In addition, two incidents—one in Japan's metropolitan center (Tokyo) and another in the core of its expanding empire on the continent (Shanghai)—became a huge rallying point for Koreans in the United States. On January 8, 1932, a young Korean revolutionary named Yi Pongch'ang (1900–1932) threw a grenade at the passing horse carriage of the Japanese emperor, Hirohito (r. 1926–1989), outside the palace gates in Tokyo (referred to as the Sakuradamon Incident) but failed to kill

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<sup>34</sup> Yŏngho Ch'oe, "Introduction," in *From the Land of Hibiscus: Koreans in Hawai'i, 1903–1950*, ed. Yŏngho Ch'oe (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>35</sup> Elaine H. Kim, "Korean American literature," in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. Kingkok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 158.

his target. On the afternoon of April 29, Yun Ponggil (1908–1932) hurled a bomb onto the dais at a triumphal Japanese military review to celebrate their victory in the “Shanghai Incident of January 28” and the emperor’s birthday (Tenchōsetsu) in Hongkew Park, Shanghai. General Shirakawa Yoshinori (1869–1932), the commander-in-chief of Japanese forces, and Kawabata Sadaji (1874–1932), the head of the local Japanese community association, died. Shigemitsu Mamoru (1887–1957), the Japanese minister plenipotentiary to China, Admiral Nomura Kichisaburō (1877–1964) and consul-general Murai Kuramatsu (1888–1953), to name a few, were seriously wounded. Masterminded by Kim Ku (1876–1949), a prominent Korean independence activist based in the French Concession of Shanghai, the two incidents were pivotal moments in the history of continuing anti-Japanese activities of Koreans after the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. Many Koreans in the United States provided financial support for Kim Ku, both before and after the incidents.<sup>36</sup> In 1932–1933, most Korean communities in the United States from coast to coast were reportedly celebrating the attacks and held memorial ceremonies in honor of the assailants after their executions by Japanese authorities.<sup>37</sup>

Before the 1932 Olympics, Koreans in both Korea and Los Angeles expected this international sports event to serve as a meaningful reunion of Koreans in Korea and the United States. On their departure for Los Angeles, Kim T’aeho said, “We wish Korean Olympians all the best as we anticipate their participation in the tenth Olympiad where athletes converge to battle for the honor of their homeland and present remarkable performances on behalf of their Korean compatriots in the United States.”<sup>38</sup> From Hawaii to Los Angeles, the three Korean athletes received hearty welcome from Korean immigrants. In

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<sup>36</sup> Kim Wōnyong, *Chaemi Hanin osimnyōnsa* (Reedley, CA: Kim Ho, 1959), 215–16.

<sup>37</sup> *Sinhan minbo*, 20 October. 1932; 22 December. 1932; 29 December. 1932; 12 January. 1933; 19 January 1933; 2 February 1933; 23 February 1933; 16 March 1933.

<sup>38</sup> Kim T’aeho, “Chosōn sin’gu undong sōnsu p’yōng (1),” 48.

Hawaii, *Tatsuta Maru*'s midway stopover, local Koreans greeted Kim and Kwŏn with such enthusiasm that both regretted the brevity of the encounter with their compatriots.<sup>39</sup> An even more welcoming atmosphere was awaiting them in Los Angeles, even though the Great Depression had hurt many Korean immigrants financially.<sup>40</sup> Hwang was thrilled that “the *Paegŭi minjok*” (Koreans, literally ‘white-clad folk’), without regard to age and gender, cheered him with all their might.” Young second-generation Korean-Americans asked him every day if he was in good shape by phone or even in person by travelling a long distance to the Olympic Village by car. Korean athletes especially appreciated the Korean food delivered to them, including kimchi.<sup>41</sup> Except for some who could not afford tickets or independent businessmen who could not leave their shops, most Koreans in Los Angeles went to the games to see firsthand the Korean athletes they hoped would bring honor to Koreans in this faraway foreign land.<sup>42</sup>

The Los Angeles Korean community sincerely welcomed Korean athletes with open arms. While Japanese-Americans were united in cheering for all Japanese athletes, receptions and other activities were often based on prefectural origins, and thus Korean and Taiwanese athletes were not beneficiaries of their hospitality, even though they represented Japan.<sup>43</sup> National camaraderie across the Pacific Ocean between the Korean peninsula and the West Coast climaxed with the welcoming ceremony hosted by the Korean National Association and other United States-based Korean groups as shown in Pictures 4a and 4b. They invited

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<sup>39</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 26 July 1932; 14 August 1932.

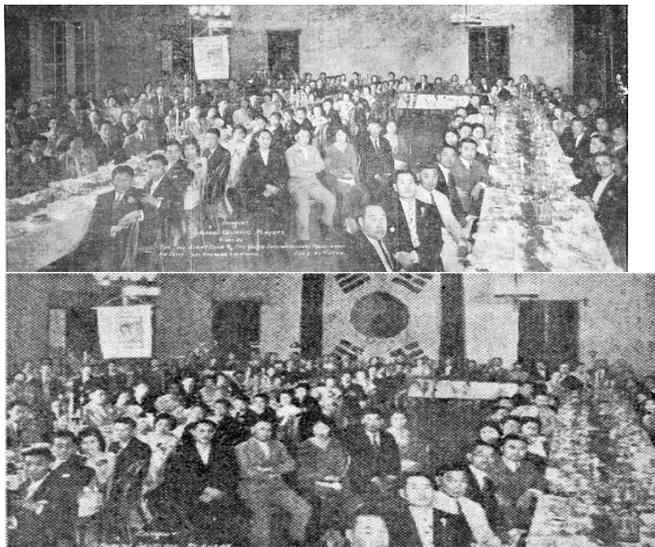
<sup>40</sup> Reportedly, Korean students in America were experiencing the worst time amid the Great Depression for three reasons: one, the exchange rate was not in favor of the yen; two, most colleges had abolished the loan system; and three, the immigration office had strictly banned international students from working. See, “Sin’gu sinmun, Miguk yuhaksaenggye sosik,” *Tonggwang* (September 1932): 13.

<sup>41</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 28 August 1932.

<sup>42</sup> *Sinhan minbo*, 18 August 1932.

<sup>43</sup> Eriko Yamamoto, “Cheers for Japanese Athletes,” 428.

the three athletes, along with Yi Sangbaek and Sin Kijun, several days before the marathon races and boxing matches began. A welcoming speech by Ch'oe Nŭngik (the president of the Korean National Association) was followed by remarks by the three athletes. A mirthful dance party for the young men and women created an emotional gathering of Koreans in a foreign land so far away from home.<sup>44</sup> In fact, the Olympics were closely related to the independence movement in Shanghai. According to a Japanese authority in Shanghai, the purpose of Sin's visit to Los Angeles seemed to be to discuss the Korean independence movement with Korean residents in Los Angeles and to organize Kim Ku's escape from Shanghai to the United States.<sup>45</sup>



Pictures 3a and 3b. *Tonga ilbo*, 1 October 1932 (above) and *Kyŏngnyang sinmun*, 6 July 1979 (below). In the *Tonga ilbo* picture, the Korean flag was allegedly erased by Yi Kiryong, who was mindful of Japanese censorship. See Chae Paek, *Sarajin Ilchanggi ūi chinsil: ilche kangjŏmgi Ilchanggi malso sakŏn yŏn'gu* (Seoul: K'ŏmyunik'eisyŏn puksŏ, 2008), 96–97.

<sup>44</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 30 August 1932. Philip Ahn (1905–1978), the eldest son of An Ch'angho, was the emcee of the party.

<sup>45</sup> Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, *Hanminjok tongnip undongsa charyojip*, Vol. 42 (Kwach'ŏn: Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, 2000), 103–104. With French cooperation, the Shanghai consular police executed a raid of the Korean Provisional Government headquarters in the French Concession of the city right after the April 29 bombings. French authorities were troubled by the violence brought to their concession by resident militant Korean revolutionaries in the early 1930s. In return for French help, Japan provided French authorities with intelligence regarding Vietnamese political refugees in Tokyo. See Erik Esselstrom, *Crossing Empire's Edge Foreign Ministry Police and Japanese Expansionism in Northeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 116–17.

The Olympic Games gave United States-based Koreans a golden opportunity to let others know how eager Korea was to become a full member of the community of nations. The three athletes spoke on the KHJ radio, one of Los Angeles' first radio stations founded in 1922. Chŏn Kyŏngmu (n.d.–1947), who was engaged in the anti-Japanese movement in the United States and played a major role in the entry of South Korea into the IOC after liberation, served as the interpreter. Their appearance on the broadcast was meaningful, given that only nations participating in the Los Angeles Olympics were granted this opportunity.<sup>46</sup> Due to donations from the Korean community in Los Angeles and Chŏn Kyŏngmu's negotiation with the organizers of the Games, Korean reporters received a press table and made an effort to introduce Korea to correspondents from other countries.<sup>47</sup> At an Olympic ball held at the Shrine Auditorium with the participation of 48 countries, an entourage of Korean women wearing traditional costumes (*hanbok*) arrived with Korean flags to proclaim that the Korean national spirit had yet to die, despite Japanese oppression.<sup>48</sup>

All the same, a significant number of local Koreans were outraged by the fact that the Korean athletes were wearing Japanese uniforms. As Ch'oe Nŭngik mentioned in the welcoming ceremony, it was true that some Koreans in Los Angeles excoriated the three athletes for coming to the Olympics under the Japanese flag. Although he asked the Korean athletes to understand that "Their anguish came from anti-Japanese sentiment" and Kwŏn T'aeha and Sin Kijun stressed their Korean identity during the welcoming ceremony, some Koreans in Los Angeles treated these Korean athletes with suspicion.<sup>49</sup>

For instance, Kim Sun'gwŏn (1885–1941) dipped his pen in vitriol for the three athletes' participation in Japan's Olympic team. Disparaging the three athletes and Yi Sangbaek as

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<sup>46</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 31 August 1932.

<sup>47</sup> *Sinhan minbo*, 18 August 1932.

<sup>48</sup> *Sinhan minbo*, 25 August 1932.

<sup>49</sup> *Sinhan minbo*, 4 August 1932.

“the Japanese warriors,” he was censorious about their participation in the Olympics as Japanese athletes. According to Kim Sun’gwŏn, they were simply “living corpses” without Korean national spirit and represented a blot on Korea’s escutcheon. He also saw them as instruments of an adroit Japanese campaign promoting the empire. By including several Korean athletes on the team, the Japanese administrators were giving a false impression to foreigners that their assimilation policy in Korea had realized success.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast, Hwang Sayong (1882–1964), one of the representative nationalists in the United States, defended the three athletes, regarding them as patriots. First, they were obliged to be members of the Japanese national team, since Korea had lost its sovereignty as a nation. Second, given that Koreans and the Korean Sports Association in Korea had contributed to the three athletes’ participation in this grand competition of nations, their spirit as Koreans was not to be questioned. Third, the Olympics were a chance to show the whole world that the intellectual, physical, and moral excellence of Korean people was comparable to that of the Japanese. Fourth, the Olympics could instill confidence in Koreans to strive toward achieving independence.<sup>51</sup> Similar arguments in defense of the Korean Olympians stressed that blaming the three athletes for wearing the Japanese uniform was unfair, comparing them to Koreans using a Japanese passport to move to the United States and still being welcomed by local Koreans.

Some writers even likened the three athletes with Yi Pongch’ang. When Yi first showed up in Shanghai speaking Japanese and wearing Japanese clothes and clogs (*geta*), the Korean residents viewed him with suspicion and tried to kill him. Contrary to his appearance, his attempt to assassinate Japanese Emperor Hirohito by throwing a grenade at his horse carriage in 1932 proved his sincere nationalism. By the same token, supporters of the three athletes

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<sup>50</sup> *Sinhan minbo*, 1 September 1932.

<sup>51</sup> *Sinhan minbo*, 28 July 1932.

argued that Koreans had to disregard their appearance and notice the firm Korean identity in their hearts.<sup>52</sup>

The three athletes were disappointed with and felt threatened by the hostile reception from their compatriots. Yi Kiryong had warned Hwang Ŭlsu in advance about the hostile sentiment in Los Angeles. Thus, Hwang felt intimidated when Paek Ilgyu (1880–1962), the president of *Sinhan minbo* (a US-based newspaper for Korean Americans founded in 1909) dropped by at the hotel to meet him while Paek offered words of encouragement, requesting that Hwang exhibit “the Korean spirit worldwide,” which touched him deeply.<sup>53</sup> In fact, before their arrival in Los Angeles, in several incidents Korean residents in Hawaii had expressed feelings of hostility toward Korean athletes, regarding them as collaborators. When Kyōngsōng YMCA baseball team came to Hawaii to play a friendly match with Korean residents there, some Korean compatriots upset with his pro-Japanese activities threatened Pak Sōgyun, the leader of the team, with death.<sup>54</sup> Yi Sangbaek also encountered hostile Koreans in Hawaii when, as a manager, he led the Waseda basketball team to the United States in 1927.<sup>55</sup>

Even after the Games’ closing ceremony, tension between Korean residents and a Korean athlete persisted. Kwōn stayed on in Los Angeles as an athlete at the University of Southern California under the guidance of Dean Bartlett Cromwell (1879–1962), who would become the assistant head coach at the 1936 Berlin Olympics and head coach for the American track team at the 1948 Olympic Games in London, to improve his skills after the Olympics. In order to defend his participation in the Olympics as a Japanese teammate, Kwōn

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<sup>52</sup> *Sinhan minbo*, 4 August 1932.

<sup>53</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 19 August 1932; 20 August 1932.

<sup>54</sup> Taehan yagu hyōphoe, *Han’guk yagusa* (Seoul: Taehan yagu hyōphoe, 1999), 39–40.

<sup>55</sup> Han Yōnghye, “Yi Sangbaek kwa kūndae ch’eyuk: Singminji sidae chisigin ũi chaa sirhyōn kwa minjok aident’it’i: Ilbon esō ũi ch’eyuk hwaltong ũl chungsim ũro,” *Hallim Ilbonhak* 1 (November 1996): 265–66.

argued that he had to wear Japanese uniform not due to the fault or the failure of himself and twenty million Koreans under Japan's harsh colonial regime but the shameful five-hundred-year history of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910). Declaring that he would wear Korean uniform in the future as an effort to let the entire world know about the excellence of Korean sports, Kwŏn scorned those Koreans asking why he was wearing a Japanese uniform—calling them “ignorant.”<sup>56</sup>

Compared to their Chinese counterparts, Korean athletes were in a more difficult situation in terms of letting the world know about the plight of Korea. At first, the financially strapped Chinese National Amateur Athletic Federation was not planning on participating in the 1932 Games. This changed with the news that the state of Manchukuo, established under Japanese auspices in 1932, intended to send two track and field athletes of Chinese ancestry: Liu Changchun (1909–1983) and Yu Xiwei (1909–1980). Actually, their participation was not feasible even though Japanese propaganda falsely claimed that the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee had accepted this plan. The United States would not recognize Manchukuo under the terms of the Stimson Doctrine, a policy of the American government, enunciated in a note to Japan and China in early 1932, of non-recognition of international territorial changes effected by force. The Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, backed by the IOC, did not allow the Manchukuo government to send a team.<sup>57</sup> In any event, the news sparked a campaign in China to send an athlete, Liu Changchun, who was then living in Beijing, to Los Angeles, as a Chinese representative. Once Liu's participation in the Olympics was confirmed, many Chinese social elites played a leading role in a public fundraising campaign. Among them, Zhang Xueliang (1901–2001), one of Manchuria's major

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<sup>56</sup> *Sinhan minbo*, 6 October 1932.

<sup>57</sup> Guoqi Xu, *Chinese and Americans: A Shared History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 238.

warlords, donated large sums of money. The Chinese government's decision to send Liu from northeastern China to Los Angeles was intended as a political impediment to Japan's attempt to legalize its Manchurian puppet state. With this backdrop, Americans understood the significance of China's one-man team. When Liu and Song Junfu, his coach, arrived in Los Angeles just one day before the games started, many excited Chinese residents in California greeted them and went to the Los Angeles Colosseum to watch the Chinese delegation in the Olympic procession. Even though he was quickly eliminated from competition in his two races (the one-hundred- and two-hundred-meter sprint heats), his dignity as a Chinese athlete representing four hundred million people suffered no slight. Liu's participation led Americans and mass media to show sympathy for China's plight vis-à-vis Japan.<sup>58</sup>

**TAY GON NOW TROJAN STUDENT**  
**Japanese Olympic Games Star at U.S.C.**



Tay Gon, Olympic Marathoner  
Distance runner likes Southern California climate and enjoys his  
American meals.

Picture 4. Braven Dye, reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, interviewed Kwōn T'aeha and described his life on the campus of the University of Southern California. *Los Angeles Times*, 24 January 1933.

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<sup>58</sup> Andrew D. Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 169–71; Lu Zhouxiang and Fan Hong, *Sport and Nationalism in China* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 50–52; Guoqi Xu, *Olympic Dreams* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 40–45.

While the mass media treated Liu as a Chinese athlete, they recognized the three Korean Olympians as Japanese athletes. This reflected the Official Report, in which “The Games of the Xth Olympiad Los Angeles 1932” registered the three Korean athletes as Japanese nationals, using Japanese versions of their names: Kin Onbai (Kim Ŭnbae), Gon Taika (Kwŏn T’aeha), and Otsu Shu Ko (Hwang Ŭlsu).<sup>59</sup> When Kim was attracting great attention from the American press as a young Japanese high school student athlete, the subtitle of an article about the arrival of the Japanese Olympic delegation in San Francisco was “Baby Marathoner is a Hero in San Francisco” and went on to say: “Kin Onbai, 18-year-old Marathon runner and the youngest athlete on the Japanese squad, came in for much attention.”<sup>60</sup> When Kwŏn T’aeha participated in a half-marathon held in New York as a student at the University of Southern California, one American paper reported as follows: “The entry of Taika Gon, the Japanese distance runner who finished ninth in the Olympic marathon, in the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States 10-mile championship at Lewisohn Stadium Saturday gives the race an international flavor,” under the headline of “Japanese Star in 10-mile Race.”<sup>61</sup> As Picture 5 shows, Kwŏn appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* as a Japanese athlete.

Compared to their compatriots in colonial Korea, some Koreans in the United States could not readily accept the reality of the three athletes competing in the Olympic Games as Japanese. For many, all that mattered was the fact that the athletes’ ancestors and parents were Korean was enough.<sup>62</sup> Having been away from home for quite a long time, however, some Korean immigrants could not tolerate Korean athletes representing the *Hinomaru* (the Japanese flag). To them, representing Korea as a Japanese athlete was simply a betrayal of the

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<sup>59</sup> Frederick G. Browne, ed. *The Games of the Xth Olympiad Los Angeles, 1932: Official Report* (Los Angeles: COJO Los Angeles, 1932, 1933), 800–803.

<sup>60</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 7 July 1932.

<sup>61</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2 November 1932.

<sup>62</sup> Kim T’aeho, “Undong sip’yŏng,” *Tonggwang* (July 1932): 70.

nation. Evidently, such an attitude did not fully take into consideration the fact that the Koreans in the United States had far greater freedom to articulate their nationalism than did those in a Japanese colony.

More importantly, the controversy over the three athletes was to be a reflection of a divided Korean immigrant community. The Korean independence movement was tormented by chronic internal conflict early on, riven by discrepancies in ideology, strategy, the regional backgrounds of national leaders, and factions scattered throughout the Korean diaspora. The division was evident by the mid-1920s when the enthusiasm of the 1919 March First Movement had cooled down, and the Provisional Government in Shanghai dissolved amidst partisan infighting, dwindling donations from rank-and-file Koreans, and reports of corruption. Each faction had its own leaders, organization, newspaper, and church, enabling them to establish supporters in the Korean communities in the United States. In particular, the rivalry between the two most prominent leaders, Rhee Syngman (1875–1965), who would later become the first president of South Korea, and An Ch'angho (1878–1938), was one of the main roots of division in the Korean-American community.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, some circumstantial evidence does indicate that the controversy surrounding the three Korean athletes was linked to existing internal conflicts entrenched in the Korean community. An's followers, Paek Ilgyu, Chŏn Kyŏngmu, Ch'oe Nŭngjin, Philip Ahn, and the members of Korean National Association, rolled out the red carpet for the three athletes, while Kim Sun'gwŏn, a member of the Comrade Society (*Tongjihoe*), founded in 1921 as Rhee's own political party, gave them the cold shoulder. The historic meeting between Korean athletes and Korean-Americans at the 1932 Olympics ended in an awkward

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<sup>63</sup> Kim Sangt'ae, "P'yŏngando chiyŏk ūi kŭndaejŏk pyŏnhwa wa kuksa kyogwasŏ sŏsul naeyong kaesŏn pangan," *Chibangsa wa chibang munhwa* 8, no. 2 (November 2005): 179–232.

atmosphere. The Korean community in Los Angeles began to cover up the internal conflict immediately after the Games.<sup>64</sup>

### Olympic Fever in Colonial Korea

The eyes of colonial Korea were on the 1932 Olympic Games to root for the three Korean athletes in Los Angeles. Newspapers and magazines paid special attention to the event to increase their circulation. The *Tonga ilbo* in particular was delivering the latest news about Korean athletes. Two correspondents for the *Tonga ilbo* reported news about the Olympics and three Korean athletes in detail. The three athletes themselves also served as correspondents for the paper, describing their daily activities and feelings to Korean subscribers.

Radio, a cutting-edge media in colonial Korea, also played an important role in generating Olympic fever among Korea's population. From the 1920s, sporting events on radio were popular in most countries due to radio's ability to broadcast live programming to large audiences. With increasing sales of radio receivers to Koreans (from 386 in 1926 to 95,153 in 1940), radio in colonial Korea "created a unique cultural space using the diverse informational, educational, economic, and pure entertainment programming it sent over the public airwaves."<sup>65</sup> After the first broadcasting of the All-Korea High Ordinary School Baseball Tournament in 1928, radio broadcasts of sporting events such as baseball, boxing, and basketball were among the most popular programs. Radio came to the fore during the Games, although this was not live broadcasting due to a dispute concerning broadcasting rights. Broadcasters later transmitted accounts of sports events by Japanese announcers in

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<sup>64</sup> *Sinhan minbo*, 18 August 1932.

<sup>65</sup> Michael E. Robinson, "Broadcasting, Cultural Hegemony, and Colonial Modernity in Korea, 1924–1945," in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, ed. Gi-Wook Shin and Michael E. Robinson (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), 52–69.

Los Angeles by shortwave radio to Tokyo and colonial Korea.<sup>66</sup> The Kyōngsōng Broadcast Corporation (Kyōngsōng pangsongguk) not only delivered the Olympic news transmitted from the metropole, but also produced its own programs in which Yi Kiryong introduced the Olympics to audiences and described the huge welcoming ceremony for Kim.<sup>67</sup>

When Kim came in sixth and Kwōn ninth in the 1932 Olympic marathon, the unprecedented Olympic hype overcame colonial Korea. Even though the two did not win medals, their performance meant a lot to the Korean sports community. While the IOC has never acknowledged a general point score by country, some major participating nations were devising their own scoring systems to show off their performance in the Olympics. The two most popular systems in the international sports world offered points for six places, differing as to whether first place should be greater than second and third combined or less than the two combined: 7–5–4–3–2–1 or 10–5–4–3–2–1.<sup>68</sup> Either system confirmed for Korean fans that Kim’s achievement brought 1 point to Korea. The story that Kwōn had finished the course despite being completely exhausted was taken as a sign of true sportsmanship and garnished rave reviews from the international press.<sup>69</sup>

The welcoming ceremony held in Kyōngsōng for Kim was nothing short of a sacred ritual for celebrating his success in the name of “Korea.”<sup>70</sup> Thousands gathered at the landing pier in Pusan to see Kim, and after a car parade and two Olympic briefing sessions, he managed to depart Pusan for Kyōngsōng. The situation on the train was no different. Kim was besieged by his fans, from first class passengers to the train’s sanitation crew, as they

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<sup>66</sup> Andreas Niehaus, “Swimming into Memory: the Los Angeles Olympics (1932) as Japanese lieu de memoire,” *Sport in Society* 14, no. 4 (2011): 431–32.

<sup>67</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 19 September 1932.

<sup>68</sup> Alfred Erich Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1999), 42.

<sup>69</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 11 August 1932.

<sup>70</sup> After the Games, Kwōn came back to Korea in June of 1933 while Hwang in December of 1932.

wanted to listen to every word about the Olympics. In particular, a group of twenty poor farmers from a small village, Simch'ŏn township in North Ch'ungch'ŏng province, brought all passengers and Kim close to tears by apologizing for having no way to adequately express their gratitude to Kim.<sup>71</sup> Eugen Weber argued that the French peasant was nationalized from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century by the emergence of modern state structures such as roads and railroads, universal schooling, military conscription, industrialization, and interregional labor migration, all of which weakened distinctive and local social, political, and linguistic practices.<sup>72</sup> In 1930s colonial Korea, the Olympics and a teen athlete inculcated a collective Korean identity in Korean peasants' minds.

When Kim arrived at Kyŏngsŏng station, the biggest city in colonial Korea temporarily became an outlet through which Koreans expressed their nationalism to the fullest. A crowd of thousands carried Kim on their shoulders to the municipal hall to have a briefing session. On the same day, a hundred prominent Koreans held a celebration to reward the eighteen-year-old high ordinary school student for his success in the Games and to give three cheers for his health. Another guest of honor at the scene was Theodor Schmidt, Austria's IOC delegate, who was visiting colonial Korea on his way to home from Los Angeles. When he praised Kim as a great athlete and expressed sympathy for Korea's ill-fated history, comparing it to that of his nation after World War I and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, many in Korea appreciated the remarks of this blue-eyed foreigner.<sup>73</sup> Kim's schedule remained full afterwards, including an interview on the radio and a

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<sup>71</sup> *Maeil sinbo*, 16 September 1932.

<sup>72</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

<sup>73</sup> Syumit'ŭ [Schmidt], "Pando yŏ, pŏnyŏng hara, *Samch'ŏlli* rŭl t'onghaya Chosŏn hyŏngje ege tŭri nora," *Samch'ŏlli* (October 1932): 49–50. He was a strong supporter for 1940 Tokyo Olympics. See Sandra S. Collins, "Conflicts of 1930s Japanese Olympic Diplomacy in Universalizing the Olympic Movement," in *Olympism: The Global Vision: from Nationalism to Internationalism*, ed. Boria Majumdar and Sandra S. Collins (London: Routledge, 2008), 42.

commemorative lecture that was heard not only in Kyōngsōng but also in each local district where people were becoming aware of the Olympics. As his father declared, now Kim was not someone's son but "a son of the Korean nation."<sup>74</sup>

Along with Kim, what grabbed the attention of the Korean public was the marathon and boxing, the sports in which the three Korean athletes had participated. The year 1933 was so crowded with marathons, an around-the-nation marathon and local marathons in each region, that it earned the sobriquet of the "era of marathon mania."<sup>75</sup> The marathon boom turned many children into aficionados of the longest race in track and field. For instance, children from Tongnae county, South Kyōngsang province, were asking how to participate in Olympic marathon races, and a twelve-year-old boy from Kangwōn province boldly declared that he would be a future Kim Ŭnbae after flinging down the gauntlet to adult athletes in a local marathon.<sup>76</sup>

A new way of looking at boxing, an emerging sport in the late 1920s, also came to the fore. Formerly dismissed as a sport for street hoodlums, Hwang Ŭlsu's participation in the 1932 Olympics changed perceptions. Members of the Korean Boxing Club increased from a few score in 1928 to five hundred in 1934.<sup>77</sup> Tongyang Boxing Hall established in 1935 was swamped with trainees, including children as young as twelve and thirteen and letters asking about becoming a trainee both from the local area and all over Kyōngsōng every day.<sup>78</sup> After Hwang's participation in the Olympics, children and rural farmers fought in a manner

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<sup>74</sup> *Maeil sinbo*, 16 September 1932; 17 September 1932.

<sup>75</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 21 October 1933.

<sup>76</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 8 December 1933; 2 June 1933.

<sup>77</sup> "Chōn chosōn ch'eyuk tanch'e sullye," *Sin Tonga* (March 1934): 30.

<sup>78</sup> "Kwōnt'u chosōn ũi segyejōk chinch'ul," *Samchōlli* (August 1935): 169–71.

emulating boxers.<sup>79</sup> As the *Chosŏn ilbo* was clamoring, men had to know boxing to be modern and “[b]oxing definitely holds the premier position among sports since 1933.”<sup>80</sup>

### Discontent with the First Olympics

As much as international success in sporting events such as the Olympic Games could become a symbol of a nation’s virility, poor results often produced disappointment and frustration. The final result of Japanese marathon team—Tsuda Seiichiro (fifth), Kim (sixth), and Kwŏn (ninth)—disappointed Japanese sports fans. As Kishi Seiichi (1867–1933), president of the Japan Amateur Sports Association and the second IOC member for Japan, mentioned with regret, Japanese track and field team had to focus on long distance running given Japanese athletes’ inferior physical condition vis-à-vis foreign counterparts in the short and middle distance races and throwing sports. The two Japanese marathon runners, Yamada Kanematsu (1903–1977) and Tsuda (1906–1991) had taken fourth and sixth place at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympic Games. A year before the 1932 Summer Games, the Japan Amateur Sports Association sent Tsuda to Los Angeles to train and prepare hard for good result. Notwithstanding many efforts, the Japanese marathon community’s hope of reaching the Olympic podium crumbled to dust once again in 1932.<sup>81</sup>

Even though it was Korea’s first participation in the Olympics, expectations were so high that they were not satisfied with just seeing Korean athletes in the Games but clamored for news of victory. Because Kim and Kwŏn beat top-notch Japanese marathon runners in the tryouts, the Korean mass media presented rosy prospects that the two Korean marathon

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<sup>79</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 9 June 1935.

<sup>80</sup> *Chosŏn ilbo*, 12 January 1933; 1 January 1934.

<sup>81</sup> Kishi Seiichi, *Dai 10 kai kokusai Orimupitsuku taikai ni tsuite* (Tokyo: Dainihon taiiku kyōkai, 1932), 18–19.

athletes could win Olympic medals.<sup>82</sup> Another piece of good news was that Paavo Nurmi (1897–1973), a clear favorite in the 1932 Olympic marathon, could not compete in Los Angeles because he had been banned by the IAAF in a dispute over his amateur status. The dream of a gold medal was realistic on the eve of the Games.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the news of Kim’s sixth and Kwōn’s ninth places disappointed many Korean fans.

The kernel of the question was who should take a full responsibility for the tactical failure of the three athletes in the Japanese marathon team: Kim, Kwōn, or Tsuda? First, Tsuda argued that the original tactic for the Japanese team was to sprint at the last minute after chasing down the other competitors, but Kwōn T’aeha did not heed this instruction and conceitedly went ahead too early. On this basis, Tsuda put the onus on Kwōn for his recklessness, which he claimed had put him off his stride.<sup>84</sup>



Picture 5. The Japanese marathon team from the country of rickshaws [Japan] ahead of other foreign athletes. *Yomiuri shimbun*, 22 July 1932.

<sup>82</sup> Yi Kiryong, “Man’guk gōna rŭl kyōkp’a hago taesŭng hal pækŭi samsōnsu,” *Samchōlli* (August 1932): 78; Yi Kiryong, “Kaejōn toen Ollimp’ik taehoe,” *Sin Tonga* (August 1932): 32; Kim T’aeho, “Undong sip’yōng,” 71. In addition, Harold Bruce, a coach for the 1932 American Olympic marathon team, pointed out German athletes, Zabala from Argentina, and three Japanese athletes as front runners. *New York Times*, 6 August 1932.

<sup>83</sup> Between 1920 and 1928, he won a record nine Olympic gold medals and three silver medals in long-distance races, such as the 1,500 meter, 3,000 meter (team), 5,000 meter, 10,000 meter, steeplechase, and cross-country run.

<sup>84</sup> *Maeil sinbo*, 10 August 1932.

Most Koreans blamed Tsuda's passive race pacing strategy as preventing Kim's dash for a better result.<sup>85</sup> Facing Tsuda's carping strictures, Kwŏn demurred at Tsuda's pretext for anticlimax.<sup>86</sup> Kim was too dejected by the result and had a grievance against Tsuda. At first, he blamed his own insufficient experience and knowledge of marathons for the poor achievement but later confessed that Tsuda had tried to use him as a pacemaker. It is not easy to tell who was right and wrong. All that is certain is that Tsuda, who had already participated in the 1928 Olympics, had the authority to give Kwŏn and Kim strategic directions, but he went beyond his commission from the Korean perspective.

Hwang Ŭlsu was placed in more difficult circumstances than either Kwŏn or Kim. In spite of his firm determination, he lost to Franz Kartz, a German boxer and went out of the tournament in the first round. In his letter to *Tonga ilbo* from Tokyo, he could not help feeling sorry for the Korean fans who had given him their full material and emotional support.<sup>87</sup> He expounded his state of mind, saying that he would be willing to become an object of ridicule as long as Koreans understand that he gave his all in his fights.<sup>88</sup> As Coubertin argued, "The important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning, but taking part."<sup>89</sup> However, nothing could free Hwang from the pressure he felt due to his poor performance. Allegedly, after the Japanese Olympic team returned home, Hwang stayed in Tokyo for about three months because of his injury and came back to Korea in December of the same year. The disappointing outcome must have made him choose a belated homecoming.

As mentioned above, marathon and boxing became the focus of Korean sports in colonial Korea due to the three Olympic athletes, but many treated the two sports with

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<sup>85</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 10 August 1932.

<sup>86</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 1 January 1936.

<sup>87</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 11 September 1932.

<sup>88</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 28 August 1932.

<sup>89</sup> David C. Young, *The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Revival* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 112.

disdain, largely underpinned by social distinctions. Social class is one of the most important influences on predilections for and participation in specific sports. After its introduction in the 1890s in the United States, the marathon became the sport of blue-collar athletes from minority groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews. Increasing numbers of working-class men had found recreation, identity, and even monetary gain in marathon running.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, boxing, having once been a predominantly middle class sport, particularly in English public schools, became primarily a working class sport around the world. A necessary precondition for boxing to take root and thrive was the existence of an impoverished working class population in industrialized urban towns since the nineteenth century. The majority of the boxers in the United States have been minorities including the Irish, Jews, Italians, blacks, and Hispanics.<sup>91</sup>

In addition, the winners of two sports in the Olympic Games were not from privileged class or nation in many cases. For instance, Ahmed Boughèra El Ouafi (1898–1959) from Algeria (representing France) in 1928 and Juan Carlos Zabala (1911–1983), invariably labeled as the “20-year-old Argentine newsboy,” won Olympic gold in the marathon in 1932. Medals for boxing in the 1932 Olympics went to marginal nations in the sports world, such as South Africa and the Philippines. In this sense, the first Korean marathoners and boxer in the Olympics symbolized the poor condition of Korean society rather than Korean national physical strength. Winning athletes in these sports came from lower socioeconomic strata and

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<sup>90</sup> Pamela Cooper, *The American Marathon* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); George B. Kirsh, Othello Harris and Claire Elaine Nolte, *Encyclopedia of Ethnicity and Sports in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 304–305.

<sup>91</sup> For more information on how boxing’s working-class culture connected with physical prowess and personal honor as integral to masculinity, see Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). The popularity of boxing in Korea decreased since 1980s thanks to economic development, industrialization, and standard of living. See Shin Euihang, “State, Society, and Economic Development in Sports Life Cycles: The Case of Boxing in Korea,” *East Asia: An International Quarterly*, 24, no. 1(2007): 1–22.

the periphery of the sports world. The following comment by an anonymous reader of the *Tonga ilbo* reveals the skeptical views on Korean athletes' participation in the marathon and boxing of the 1932 Games: "A naysayer for the Olympics lamented that other nations fight with guns and swords. However, Koreans, lacking even kitchen knives, penknives, and firecrackers, are necessarily good at fistfighting. According to this logic, are we only good at running for want of airplanes?"<sup>92</sup>

In colonial Korea, some intellectuals, if not many, were skeptical of the Olympic Games' claim to epitomize fair play and amateurism. For instance, *Samch'ŏlli*, a Korean-language popular magazine, reported that a civic group sent a questionnaire to ask the *Tonga ilbo* why it was so crazy about Kim Ŭnbae and the Olympics. The *Tonga ilbo* replied as follows: "We did that solely for the spirit of sports."<sup>93</sup> *Samc"ŏlli's* cynical article probably was intended to reveal that the *Tonga ilbo's* nationalism was thinly disguised vulgar commercialism. In addition, Yi T'aejun (1904–n.d.), a famous writer of the colonial era, counterposed undue concern for a few Olympic athletes with the ordinary mass of laborers who are never in the public eye:

Some people make a living or perform a glorious deed with their feet. The mailman or willowing-machine worker. People of that ilk depend on their feet for a living, and these days the Olympic athletes are attracting a great attention around the world. They render great services not only for themselves but also for the nation using their feet. These feet are particularly worthy of gratitude but most of all, the willowing-machine worker's feet are so thankful that I am in tears. Their feet are not treated very carefully, while a minor injury to the feet of Olympic athletes bring medical doctors and sympathetic tears and telegrams of encouragement right after the sad news are

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<sup>92</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 22 June 1932.

<sup>93</sup> "Chongno negŏri," *Samch'ŏlli* (December 1932): 41. On the other hand, *Chosŏn ilbo* ran no articles on three Korean athletes during the 1932 Olympic Games.

transferred to the homeland by a wireless telegraph and called “honorable injury.” In spite of working hard enough to get cramped, their feet take a rest in the patchwork quilt with socks without anyone’s patting. . . . The difference is reasonable because one is only in charge of a household’s livelihood, while the other assumes an honor of a nation, but the effort of the willowing-machine worker is very desolate compared to that of the Olympians. Thus, I feel more compassion and thankful for willowing-machine workers’ feet. Lonely effort! Hidden remarkable activity! Concealed virtue! There is nothing that makes me more tearfully thankful.<sup>94</sup>

Such critics regarded the Olympic Games as a luxury for poor colonial Korea, which lacked the resources to disseminate sports nationwide. Many intellectuals in Korea’s physical education and medical circles differentiated an elite sphere of competitive sports for the privileged from public health for the masses who lacked the time and money to do sports. In this context, calisthenics drew the most attention from the supporters of physical activities for the masses. Often triggered by military defeat, the primary form of physical education and recreation on the European continent were noncompetitive, collective gymnastic activities which disapproved of the principles and practices of modern sport from England: specialization, individualization, record orientation, commercialization, and international focus. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778–1852) saw *Turnen* as the best way to chase Napoleon’s French troops out of the Rhine Valley, and the Slavs resorted to *Sokol Movement* to extract themselves from the political yokes of German and Austrian rule.<sup>95</sup> Passion for gymnastic exercises from the European continent excited many of the Korean nationalists who were critical of fostering small numbers of elite athletes.

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<sup>94</sup> Yi T’aejun, “Pal,” *Man’guk Puin* (October 1932): 93.

<sup>95</sup> Allen Guttmann, *Sports: The First Five Millennia*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 273–82.

Colonial Korea saw a gymnastics boom when Niels Bukh (1880–1950), a Danish gymnast and educator, visited one year before the 1932 Games.<sup>96</sup> In 1931, during Bukh’s world tour of Danish gymnastics from the Soviet Union to the Japanese empire to North America, the Japanese empire lionized his troupe. In particular, Bukh’s team drew the largest crowds, with 30,000 to 35,000 spectators in Kyōngsōng. In fact, he was passionate about Japan’s becoming a militarist and imperialist state, in accord with his later fascination with Nazi Germany, South American dictatorships, and white-dominated South Africa. Later, as part of the general militarization of Japanese society, Bukh’s gymnastics gained ground in Japan in the 1930s through radio gymnastic, company gymnastics, a warm-up program for sports, and in official curricula for school gymnastics.<sup>97</sup>

Bukh’s gymnastics left a deep impression on Korean medical doctors and physical educators who were oriented towards the masses. Yi Yongsōl (1895–1993), a professor at Severance Medical College, claimed that gymnastics rather than sports such as baseball, softball, tennis, or football were easier to disseminate and had proved their health benefits since Denmark’s life expectancy was twenty years longer than Korea’s average of 30.<sup>98</sup> Kim Poyōng, an executive secretary of the Korean Physical Education Research Institute (Chosōn ch’eyuk yōn’guhoe), which was organized by physical education instructors, also maintained that it should not be Korea’s priority to raise world-class athletes for the Olympics considering the small number of students and athletes and shortage of sports facilities.

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<sup>96</sup> Kim Chaeu and Yi Hangnae, “Ilche ha minjungjōk ch’eyuk e kwanhan koch’al,” *Han’guk ch’eyuk hakhoe* 40, no.4 (2001): 51–60.

<sup>97</sup> Hans Bonde, “Nationalism in the Age of Extremes: Taking Danish Gymnastics to the World,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 26, no. 10 (2009): 1414–35.

<sup>98</sup> Yi Yongsōl, “(Kōn’gang nan) Pogōn undong ūi p’iryō,” *Tonggwang* (November 1931): 92–94.

Collective physical exercise should be practiced by ordinary people for a variety of reasons: it is safe, good for the whole body, and not limited by time, place, or facilities.<sup>99</sup>

In a similar vein, Yu Sanggyu (1897–1936), an independence activist and surgeon, was skeptical about the benefits of the Olympics for colonial Korea. From his perspective, even though most media and sports organizations were making a great fuss about Korean players' participation in the 1932 Olympics, this was just hollow pageantry and in no way mitigated the fact that most Koreans were suffering from hunger and disease. Korea was overly steeped in Olympic fever, and this heroism had devolved the land into nothing more than “a psychiatric hospital with mental patients.” The most pressing issue, he continued, in Korea replete with people suffering from conditions such as knock knees, crooked backs and asthma among others, was to disseminate calisthenics, which everyone could do anywhere and anytime at almost no cost. The Olympics were a party for superpowers such as Japan or the United States but were incongruous for Korea, which was awash with paupers.<sup>100</sup> For intellectuals such as Yu, gaining the reverence of the world's powers in the realm of international competition had little meaning for the majority of the Korean population, who lacked access to expensive and time-consuming competitive sports.

## Conclusion

Allegedly, the city-states of Ancient Greece welcomed Olympic winners after demolishing their ramparts because having Olympic winners proved that they could defend themselves without castles. Just before the marathon in the 1932 Olympics, in which the tension and

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<sup>99</sup> Kim Poyŏng, “Minjok pogŏn munje, minjung pogŏn kwa ch'eyuk pop'yŏnhwa ūi kŭpmu,” *Samch'ŏlli* (March 1932): 18–19.

<sup>100</sup> Yu Sanggyu, “Chosŏnin ūi ch'egyŏk kwa pogŏn ch'ejo ūi pop'yŏnhwa ch'aek,” *Sin Tonga* (March 1933): 10–13. For more information on Yu's life, see Ch'oe Kyujin, Hwang Sangik, and Kim Suyŏn, “Singmin sidae chisigin, Yu Sanggyu ūi salm ūi kwejŏk,” *Ŭisahak* 18, no 2 (December 2009): 157–72.

anticipation of the Korean runners came to a climax, the *Tonga ilbo* introduced this ancient Greek welcoming ceremony for the winners by declaring: “Our castle has already been torn down, so we are fully ready to let you [Korean athletes] march through town in a victory parade.”<sup>101</sup> Although Japan had wrecked the castle, Korea, more than two decades ago, Koreans kept imagining Korea as a true nation eligible for international competition in the hope of restoring its sovereignty. Under the Japanese colonial regime, Koreans were not interested in Olympism seeking world peace through sports, but were eager to see their athletes standing on the victory platform.<sup>102</sup>

The Olympics did not always serve as a catalyst for national unity of colonial Korea. A variety of actors—athletes, reporters, nationalist leaders, Korean immigrants in the United States, and supporters of mass-oriented gymnastics, among others—participated in and observed the Olympics from various perspectives. Although most Koreans hoped that the vitality gained from sports would be able to help revive the sagging spirit of the jaded Korean peninsula, what the Olympics meant and how to best represent colonial Korea in the Games remained a contentious issue to Koreans of every political hue. Most of all, as Yun Ch’iho mentioned in his diary after the welcoming dinner reception for Kim Ŭnbae, Koreans had to acknowledge the Japanese colonial rule as the stark reality to attend the Olympics:

Last night about 40 people gave a welcome supper party at 食道園 [Siktowŏn] in honor of our Marathon man, 金恩培 [Kim Ŭnbae]. One of the speakers(李雄) [Yi Ung] said that he was at a loss to know which was more proper namely, whether to express joy or sorrow at the success of 金 [Kim]. He meant to say that he rejoiced at the fact that a Korean had made a name in the Marathon world, but regretted that a Korean had to do it under false colors...as a Japanese contestant. That fellow seems to have forgotten that 金恩培 could never have gone to the Olympics but for the support of the Japanese Athletic [*sic*] Association in Korea. The most important

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<sup>101</sup> *Tonga ilbo*, 8 August 1932.

<sup>102</sup> The 1932 Olympic Games were the first Games with proper victory ceremonies like today, as medal winners stood on a podium and had their national flags risen while the victor’s national anthem played.

consideration is we must attend international gatherings whenever possible to show that Koreans can do international stunts.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> *Yun Ch'ihŏ ilgi*, Vol. 10, 16 September 1932.