

Walking 'Hand in Hand' Towards Harmony

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Thousands of flags billowing in the breeze. The sounds of marching bands from outside filling the apartment complexes. Scenes of children playing sports out in the field. These are not the typical images that arise when people think of Korean national holidays. The current national holidays—which are all still very important for us to remember and cherish—tend to be more on the serious spectrum rather than on the “holiday” spectrum, as they mostly reflect the painful past of our country. As the global society changes to become more positive and fast-paced, we have to set more national holidays that truly celebrate an important turning point in Korean history, starting with an excellent example: the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

Until 1988, Korea had been suffering tremendous violence and periods of unrest. 1972 suffered a series of conflicts under former President Park with the October Restoration, which ignited the 1979 rebellions of Busan and Masan, and the Coup d'état of December Twelfth the same year. The 1980s began with the Gwangju Massacre and the establishment of President Chun's regime, and was characterized by continuous tumult and disorder. The chaos started to settle down from 1987 when the new president, President Roh, declared the establishment of a direct election system and marked the beginning of Korean democracy. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Korea was still in its process of democratization, and citizens were determined to keep up with the bursting economy, which was exemplified by the first Olympics in Korea held in Seoul in 1988. The Olympics marked the beginning of a democratic Korea and was the first event in decades where Korean citizens were finally able to join together for collaboration rather than ideological conflicts. Koreans must celebrate this feat by setting the starting date of the 1988 Olympics, September 17th, 1988, as a national holiday.

Before the Olympics, the international community had witnessed Korea suffer through decades of chaos and disorderliness. Korea had suffered through economic hardships as it was recovering from the Korean War and trying to keep up with the highly industrialized countries of the West. Korea had to receive financial aid from developed countries, and in

the global citizens' eyes, Korea was just another country suffering from war and poverty. The Olympics were a perfect opportunity for us to show the world that we were not "just another country," and that we were capable of hosting an international event with one hundred and sixty participating nations. Twenty-seven different sports were successfully held in over thirty different venues; it was not just the biggest-scale sports event in Korea, but the biggest-scale Olympics held in global history. When Seoul had been chosen to host the 1988 Olympics, not all people had been confident about Korea's ability to host such a large-scale event, but with the efforts of the thousands of people involved in the event, Korea was able to prove that it was not in its weak, unstable state anymore. President Roh spoke at the United Nations right after the Olympics, as the first Korean political leader to give a speech at the General Assembly, once again demonstrating the elevating international status of Korea.

The Seoul Olympics were not only meaningful for Korea, but was also a site of reunion for the global community. Just like the Korean peninsula had been split into two, the world had also been split between democratic and communist states and their respective allies. There was an ongoing tension between the First and Second World countries, which was best reflected by the Olympics that came before the one held in Seoul. Over sixty countries, including the United States and their allies, boycotted against the 1980 Moscow Olympics after the Soviet Union had attacked Afghanistan, showing a sign of disharmony in a sports event meant to be enjoyed by everyone in the world. Likewise, the Soviet Union and its allies boycotted against the 1984 Olympics held in Los Angeles, and the Olympics did not seem like a global event anymore. However, the Olympics returned to an enjoyment for everyone when it was hosted in Seoul in 1988 and Koreans started singing "Hand in Hand," promoting world peace and collaboration. Countries from both the communist and democratic worlds joined hands in hands, despite Korea also being part of a communist-democrat conflict with North Korea. Over eight thousand athletes from one hundred and sixty countries had joined together, disregarding all geopolitical conflicts, and this was accomplished by a tiny developing country in the corner of East Asia which was of no importance in the global community until then. This is a feat that all Korean citizens must be and should be proud of, regardless of age and generation.

The 1988 Seoul Olympics deserves to be celebrated as a national holiday as a milestone in Korean history where Koreans proved their ability to achieve something no other nation, not even the most developed countries, could achieve. The effort of millions of Koreans helped successfully host the largest Olympics in history, only three decades after

the country had been devastated from warfare. It was an exciting event for people of all ages to enjoy that marked the beginning of democratization in Korea. It was a collaborative effort by people from all nations that marked the beginning of global reunification during the Cold War. It was a heart-stopping event that sparked the same spirit of excitement in billions of people around the world, all watching athletes compete in a country that had been destroyed to ashes only a few decades ago. As this is supposed to be an exciting holiday, everyone should have their own choice of celebrating the event. People can simply enjoy the sports that had marked the highlights of the Seoul Olympics or sing “Hand in Hand” with family members and friends. By simply emulating the Olympic spirit of 1988, Koreans can cherish the moment when the future of Korea changed and reexperience the excitement our parents and grandparents felt watching the Olympics on television on September 17th, 1988.

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