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Questions raised over (Hyung Jin Moon's) Unification Church's involvement in 2018 Winter Olympic venue

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The Olympic Games are no stranger to influence-peddling scandals and delegate buying in the selection of venues. In December 1998, for example, it was revealed that International Olympic Committee delegates had been on the receiving end of all types of bribes—ranging from Super Bowl tickets to plastic surgery—in order for Salt Lake City to secure the 2002 games.

A 2006 investigation by the governor of Nagano Prefecture found that the Japanese city has expended \$4.4 million “on entertainment alone” in efforts to host the 1998 games. The report concluded Nagano had engaged in “illegitimate and excessive level of hospitality” to IOC members,

This is not to imply that the IOC corruption continues to be rampant, but rather, that with the selection of any venue, it's to be expected that the media in other countries are wont to nitpick over any decision.

On July 6, when the IOC announced that Pyeongchang, Gangwon Province, South Korea had been picked to host the 2018 winter games, TV cameras zoomed in on the tear-streaked face of Korea's champion figure skater Kim Yuna - who had energetically campaigned on behalf of her country.

South Korean president Lee Myung-bak promptly announced the nation would invest the equivalent of 40 billion Japanese yen into upgrading facilities.

But the confetti had barely settled in Seoul after the announcement when Asahi Geino (July 28) ran an article noting that the site of the 2018 games has close ties with the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, aka the Unification Church.

“The church is the largest shareholder of the Yongpyong ski resort, with 49.9% of shares,” says Yoshifu Arita, a well known investigative journalist and currently a member of Japan's House of Councilors. “In addition, the Segye Ilbo newspaper founded by the church [called Sekai Nippo in its Japanese edition] owns another 12.59%.

“In other words, for all intents and purposes, the resort is owned by the Unification Church. In books and other church publications, the hotel, condominiums, ski slopes and other facilities are introduced as ‘sacred territory.’ The site has also been the venue for ‘special training seminars’ attended by Japanese church members, at which founder Moon Sun Myung (now age 91) participated.”

Actually, Pyeongchang is already famous in Japan for another reason: the heart-throbbing coffee shop scene in “Winter Sonata,” the lachrymose 2002 TV serial starring Bae Yong Jun and Choi Ji Woo—credited with setting off the “Hanryu” boom in Japan—was shot there. Subsequently, hundreds of thousands of Japanese fans have traveled to the ROK to visit the famous spot.

“You can also see ‘Winter Sonata’ spin-off goods on sale there,” says Arita. “Naturally I suppose a travel agency affiliated with the Unification Church has tied up with Japanese tour operators to promote tourism to the area. The church is most likely to benefit from the holding of the Olympics here. In South Korea, the church enjoys the status of “zaidan hojin” (foundation) and is recognized in Korean economic circles.

“From the Japanese viewpoint, when organizations engage in religious gimmickry, it may raise ethical problems, but I’m not necessarily saying I’m opposed to South Korea’s hosting the Olympics just because of this,” a cautious Arita adds.

Moon Hyung-jin, the founder’s seventh son, has also been quoted as saying that he will “expand investment in the Yongpyong Resort,” suggesting that the funds will provide a good return on investment. Korea’s vernacular media has also reportedly remarked that the Unification Church is likely to be the “greatest beneficiary” of the 2018 Olympics.

Japanese, of course, will be cheering for their compatriots to bring home medals. But Asahi Geino remarks that when an international sports event winds up filling the coffers of a religious organization, the sense of irony is inescapable.