

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

The Olympic Games: Showcases of Internationalism and Modernity in Asia

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Stefan Huebner. *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2016. 416 pp. \$42 (paper).

Jessamyn R. Abel. *The International Minimum: Creativity and Contradiction in Japan's Global Engagement, 1933–1964*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 344 pp. \$54 (cloth).

Over the past two decades, the English-language scholarship on sports in Asia has blossomed. Spurred in part by the announcement in 2001 that Beijing would host the 2008 Summer Olympics, the number of academic symposia, edited volumes, and monographs looking at sports in East Asia from multiple disciplinary perspectives has increased substantially in the twenty-first century. With three Olympic Games forthcoming in East Asia (Pyeongchang 2018, Tokyo 2020, and Beijing 2022), the volume of scholarship on sports, the Olympics, and body culture in this region has continued to grow and to become ever more nuanced. Prior to 2001, very little English-language scholarly work on sports in Asia considered the broader significance of sporting events in East Asian history, societies, and politics (both regional and global). Several recent publications have complicated and contextualized this area of inquiry.¹

While some of this recent scholarship makes reference to countries across East Asia, single-author monographs tend to focus on one nation, and particularly on how nationalism and sports fueled each other in the tumultuous twentieth century.² Scholarship on *internationalism* in the context of sporting events in East Asia is much harder to come by. However, this gap has recently been filled by Stefan Huebner's and Jessamyn Abel's books, each of which sheds much light on how sports (among many other events) played a crucial role in how countries viewed

themselves and how they came to be viewed by others before, during, and after the world wars. While international competitions like the Olympics naturally bring to mind nationalism and intense pride for one's country, nationalism and internationalism coexist and interact in complex ways, as both of these books exemplify.³

Stefan Huebner's ambitious book covers a broad temporal and geographic terrain, from 1913 to 1974, and from the Persian Empire to the Japanese Empire. This pan-Asian approach allows the reader to gain a comprehensive understanding of how Western notions of modernity were adopted, rejected, and reinterpreted by a range of Asian players throughout the twentieth century. Just as Huebner takes a pan-Asian approach to looking at sport in order to better contextualize individual nations, Jessamyn Abel takes a pan-twentieth-century approach to historical moments that have epitomized internationalism in Japan. She notes the importance of looking at events such as Japan's split from the League of Nations (1933), together with Tokyo's winning Olympic bids (1940 and 1964) and the Asian-African Conference in Bandung (1955) in order to "trace change and continuity over time—to tell a history that is more encompassing than any one of these particular events alone" (3). In this sense, there are many parallels between these two works, as they both utilize a "zoom-out" approach in order to more fully understand a specific twentieth-century trend (how and why the Asian Games and Olympics became showcases of Asian modernity in Huebner, and the development of an internationalist world view in Japan in Abel).

Aside from this methodological similarity, one event is a focal point in both works—the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. It serves as the subject of the opening scene and fifth (of eight) chapters of Abel's book, and as the subject of the opening epigraph and fifth (of eight) chapters in Huebner's as well. Both see the Tokyo Olympics as a central event—not just chronologically in the twentieth century, but also ideologically in the development of modern Asia and Japan. The 1964 Olympics plays a prominent role in most historical narratives of postwar Japan, evoking the image of Japan rising "like a phoenix from the ashes" to show the world that it was a modern, peaceful, and technologically advanced nation that was ready to have its seat at the table again after the disgraces of World War II.⁴ However, the approaches employed in these books implore readers to think beyond conventional tropes surrounding the Tokyo Olympics, and in so doing offer significant contributions to more fully understanding this oft-referenced event.

Huebner draws in pan-Asian discourse, which puts forth a more holistic understanding of the role that Tokyo 1964 played in the development of modern sports across Asia. While much of *Pan-Asian Sports* focuses on the prewar era and the power asymmetry between East and West that went well beyond the world of sports but was epitomized within it, the latter half of the book makes repeated reference to Tokyo's 1958 Asian Games and the 1964 Olympics as standard-bearers across Asia. For example, Luang Sukhum Nayapradit, president of the organizing committee of the Asian Games that were held in Bangkok (in 1966 and 1970), stated in 1964 that "the Asian Games will be as good as the Tokyo Olympic[s] but on a much smaller scale" (Huebner 212). Chapter 8 begins with a quote by Gholam Reza Pahlavi, the brother of the last Persian shah, discussing the 1974 Asian Games held in Tehran: "The Asian Games organized by the Japanese were, as you might expect, perfect. The ancient Persian Empire could not do less well than the ancient Empire of the Rising Sun. And we succeeded" (230). Huebner's compilation of statements on Tokyo's sporting events made by leaders across Asia was a laborious task and is a unique addition to the now well-trodden scholarship on the Tokyo Olympics.⁵ Particularly with respect to the shared focus on internationalism of both Huebner's and Abel's work, the collection of foreign viewpoints offers an important layer to what "nation-branding" means in the context of the Olympics. Huebner writes, "Bringing the Olympics to their country further supported Japan's nation-branding and underlined its central position in Asia" (148). Abel also discusses nation-branding and soft power in the context of Japan's incessant involvement with the Olympics over the past century.

Given its single-country focus, Abel's *The International Minimum* goes into far greater detail about Japan's "Olympic diplomacy," including an in-depth analysis of Japan's entry into the Olympic movement (with its first International Olympic Committee member in 1909) and its bid, preparations, and ultimate cancellation of the 1940 Tokyo Olympics. "Although the 1940 Olympiad would eventually be swept away by war," Abel writes, "several years of planning to use the Games as a means of public diplomacy helped reformulate Japanese views of international relations, making the phantom Olympics part of the continuous narrative of internationalism in Japan" (109). The book shows that the 1964 Olympics indeed had important and often overlooked roots in the prewar era, the consideration of which are essential for understanding the pivotal role that 1964 plays in the narrative of twentieth-century Japan. Abel's extensive use of primary source materials from the prewar era along with Japanese-language

secondary sources helps construct a full and complex account of Japan's involvement with the Olympics, up to and including the present day.

The epilogue of Abel's book, which discusses the twenty-first-century iterations of nodes of transwar internationalism, highlights again the role that the Olympics have played (and continue to play) in Japan with respect to internationalism. As she notes, there are remarkable parallels between the rhetoric surrounding Tokyo's 2020 Olympics and its 1964 and 1940 antecedents. In spite of dramatic differences between domestic and global politics of these three eras, Japanese Olympic bureaucrats maintain a remarkably steady vocabulary in selling the event both to the world and to the Japanese people.⁶ Citizens on the ground in Tokyo and across Japan will inevitably have differing opinions about the mega-event coming to their country, but there seems to be little public dissent about the 2020 Games, in spite of the fact that it has been plagued with scandals and gaffes since Japan won the bid in 2013.⁷ While this could be in part because, for the first time, Japan's four major newspapers are official Olympic sponsors and therefore less likely to publish critical content,⁸ it could also be because of the history to which these two books speak. The Olympics have come to play an outsized role in the geopolitics of Asia—the fact that many European and American cities are no longer bidding for the Games (or dropping out of the process midway), while three Asian cities are currently pouring countless resources into them is telling indeed.

After examining the Asian Games and Olympics in a hugely diverse region across seven decades, Huebner concludes that the Asian organizers of these events utilized them (to varying degrees) to modernize, develop, and put forth a particular national image to the world (i.e., “nation-branding”). Abel would agree that nation-branding has played an important role in Japan's involvement with the Olympics, and that Japan's internationalist world view has shaped and been shaped by these periodic showcases. While other scholars have also used sporting events as a lens through which to better understand Asia, these two books, particularly when read in conjunction, provide the rich historical context necessary for understanding why Asian nations continue to invest so much in hosting these events. In his book on the politics of sports in Asia (to my knowledge, the only other single-author monograph that discusses sports in a pan-Asian context in depth), political scientist Victor Cha offers some theories as to why sporting events remain so meaningful in Asia (arguably more so than in other parts of the world). He points to the historical animosities that lay close to the surface in Asia, and are still being actively played

out (such as with territorial disputes between Japan and its neighbors). Sports, he argues, act as an “outlet for pent-up historical resentments in ways that cannot be expressed through regular diplomacy” (2009, 25). He also argues that the unprecedented pace of political and economic development in Asia has resulted in a more compacted and intense process of nation building in the postwar era, and that “the symbolism of sport as part of this nation building is strong” (2009, 27). Cha’s political analysis fits well with both Huebner’s and Abel’s conclusions; together, they help explain why sporting events like the Olympics continue to resonate among Asian leaders.

Both Huebner’s and Abel’s books contain excellent analyses of twentieth-century events that go well beyond the Olympic Games. Of particular note are Huebner’s nuanced discussion of the role that YMCA physical educators played in the spread of sporting culture and Christian ideals of egalitarianism across Asia, and Abel’s parsing of how prewar nationalist, militaristic rhetoric came to be woven into postwar, peacetime rhetorics of internationalism. While both *Pan-Asian Sports* and *The International Minimum* are historical works that are rooted in the past, they tell us a great deal about the Olympic movement and Asia’s role within it today.

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Notes

- 1 The work by Collins (2008), Kwak et al. (2017), Mangan, Collins, and Ok (2012), Mangan et al. (forthcoming), Morris (2004), and Tsutsui and Baskett (2011) has shed light on the historical development of sports in the region, while the scholarship of Brownell (2008), Dong (2002), Frost (2011), Kelly and Sugimoto (2007), Kietlinski (2012), and Manzenreiter and Horne (2004) considers the sociocultural context of East Asian sports. Cha (2009), Kelly and Brownell (2011), Mangan, Collins, and Ok (2012), and Mangan et al. (forthcoming) look principally at the political forces that shape and are shaped by sporting events in the East Asian region.
- 2 See, for example, Mangan et al. (forthcoming), Huang and Chang (2008), Tosa (2015), and Yu and Gordon (2006).
- 3 Abel notes that “internationalism and nationalism have typically been seen as opposing forces, but a growing body of works views them as interrelated, rather than mutually exclusive” (10). Her book offers several well-researched examples of how the two were interrelated in transwar Japan.
- 4 One (of many) vivid descriptions of the 1964 Games as turning point is in the prologue of Ian Buruma’s popular *Inventing Japan*, in which he focuses on one Olympic instance in particular, a judo bout in which Japan’s national champion loses to his Dutch opponent.

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- Buruma writes, “Overconfidence, fanaticism, a shrill sense of inferiority and a sometimes obsessive preoccupation with national status—these have all played their part in the history of modern Japan, as we shall see. But one quality has stood out to serve Japan better than any other: the grace to make the best of defeat” (2004, 7).
- 5 Huebner’s archival research for this project was monumental in scope, taking him from Manila to Minneapolis, from Singapore to Switzerland, and to many archives in between.
- 6 Abel sums up this rhetoric in this way: “The new Japan to be presented to the world in 2020 looks strikingly like the one that planners spoke of introducing in both 1940 and 1964: a country that maintains its traditional culture while innovating world-leading technologies and trends, with a capital that is a global city but still full of unique charm” (257).
- 7 These include the selection of a new national stadium design by Zaha Hadid that proved to be too expensive and controversial so was scrapped by Prime Minister Abe in 2015; an Olympic logo that was shown to have been plagiarized (then also scrapped); a new stadium design that utilizes unethically sourced timber from Malaysian jungles; a no-longer “compact” Tokyo Games that has event venues stretching from Sapporo to Saitama; and, of course, sky-rocketing costs that are being borne by increasingly complex cost-sharing schemes that draw funds from local municipalities and the federal government.
- 8 While the *Yomiuri Shimbun* was previously the only national paper to serve as an “official partner” with the Japanese Olympic Committee, the *Asahi Shimbun*, *Nikkei Shimbun*, and *Mainichi Shimbun* have also signed on as official partners for the 2020 Olympics. The *Tokyo Shimbun* (owned by *Chunichi Shimbun* Company) is the only major news outlet to regularly criticize the Tokyo 2020 Olympics rollout.

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