



Niigata City getting into shape for the Football World Cup 2002:

Football meets pop culture. Manga artists such as Mizushima Shinji, Akatsuka Fujio, Maya Mineo and Yasuda Hiroyuki support the host city Niigata.

The Construction state welcomes the World Cup. >



Picture by Kobayashi Makoto photograph by Wolfram Manzenreiter, Niigata

Sports in Asia & Sports Studies in Asian Studies

Since the early twentieth century, sports have continued to play significant roles in the formation processes of nations and nation states. Few modern states have abstained from the educative and disciplinary opportunities embedded in the curricula of physical education and sports. Furthermore, states and their representatives have become increasingly aware of the symbolic value and practical benefits of international sporting events. The Tokyo Olympics of 1964, the Seoul Olympics in 1988, and this year's FIFA Football World Cup Finals in Japan and Korea are three such sports mega-events which have provided a stage for the representation of national virtues, the celebration of national achievements, and the re-enforcement of national identity.

Forum >
Asia

By Wolfram Manzenreiter

Over the past 400 years, Western civilization has exported numerous social, cultural, political, and economic institutions to the rest of the world. The hegemonic power of Western formations framed the processes in which previously particular ideas and practices turned into universal principles. Worldwide, states and people consented to the notion of the nation state and the principles of parliamentarianism, democracy, egalitarianism, market capitalism and the like. Yet, in terms of global diffusion and common acceptance, hardly any Western product has proved to be more successful, pervasive, and persistent than sports. While for some factions within the world's societies, the meanings of representative political participation, equal employment opportunities, and even basic human rights are often the subject of heated debate, there seems to be almost unanimous consent to the beauty of sporting victory, the value of a gold medal, or the fascination of a new record.

Modern sports emerged in the countries that spearheaded the path towards modernity as a powerful cultural device and were further disseminated in concentric waves: from the centre to the periphery and from urban to rural areas, passing neighbouring countries, the outskirts of colonial empires, and finally reaching the shores of even the most distant countries. Johan Huizinga's seminal study on the culture of play (1938) clearly demonstrated that all societies knew how to transform the basic drive of physical, playful motion into a cultural expression subduing the chaos of natural play to the rules of social play. But the particular qualities of modern sports, which Allen Guttmann identifies as secularization, equality, specialization, rationalization, bureaucratization, quantification, and the quest for records, proved to be appealing to all cultures and societies and even moved vernacular traditions, such as Asian martial arts, towards their own reinvention in line with these universal standards.

David Rowe recently claimed that contemporary sport must fulfil three preconditions in order to be successful as a product: it must have a popular base within communities; it must have a reliable governing body; and it must demonstrate itself to be attractive to the commercial trinity of sponsors, advertisers, and television. This reminds us that sports are much more than just a pedagogic playground and a showcase of

individual or collective exercise. Nowadays, sports are part of popular cultures all over the world. They offer entertainment, tales and moments of high tension, as well as personal challenges and sources of meaning and fulfilment to a population of billions. The global spread of sports was accompanied by the establishment of its own governing organizations that currently mingle with national governments and transnational corporations on an equal footing. This is less because of the ethics, aesthetics, or values of sports and more because of its surplus values: sports constitute a huge industry, a giant market, and an important employer, while being the backbone of large segments of the globally operating service and media industries. The broadcasting media particularly have been, and still are, crucial in creating and transmitting the image of the nation to audiences at home and abroad. On a much more basic level, the answer to the question of what sport is increasingly depends on the defining power of the media. The media also helps to determine what good sports entertainment is, as its subtext sets the world standards of quality and excellence in hosting sport events. Thanks to the demand for content and the increasingly sophisticated transmitting technologies of the media, ever larger audiences are encouraged to consent to the phrase of having witnessed 'the best event ever'.

Sports Studies in Asian Studies

Because of the important role played in the private and public lives of communities around the world, the study of sports serves as an excellent vantage point from which to analyse past and present aspects of globalization. Dealing with the numerous social, political, and economic relationships and processes – including centres and peripheries, global labour migration, multinational corporations and transnational media industries, regionalism and nationalism, commercialism and consumerism – affords multi-disciplinary ways of approach and analysis, which is one of the key features and characteristic strengths of area studies. Yet, questions about what kinds of sport cultures are emerging out of the interaction of native traditions, local preferences, and homogenizing effects are key concerns for the field, and not only for the few specialists in Asian Studies but to all members of the disciplines involved. A closer look at the practice of sports in a given locality soon reveals the dialectics of universalism and particularism in modern sports at work.

Given that, under the current neo-liberal influences of global capital accumulation and transnational marketing strategies, sport has become inextricably linked to agents, structures, and processes of global capitalism, sports seem to be a promising starting point for economists with a strong interest in the interaction of financial markets and leisure industries, or the localization of the global players' sales strategies. For political scientists with a keen interest in civil society and new forms of governance, sports constitute a battleground for the tensions between civil, commercial, and governmental actors who are involved in the making of sports. Anthropologists may join local sports clubs, and even teach or play with

the team in order to gain first-hand insights into the social fabrics of leisure communities. Sociologists attracted by the changing relationships of individuals and social formations in late-modern societies will find a vast field of research possibilities in sports, e.g. its role in the building of collective identities or community processes. Urban planners will soon detect the overwhelming importance of sports for regional development programmes and the seemingly transcultural validity of the ideology of sports as a growth machine. To find out how the modern myth of sports as an economic multiplier achieved its power to overshadow many alternative concerns is a research task for cultural historians to investigate by deconstructing the social field of actors within the production/consumption cycle of sports.

This short list of research questions is just a first step into an enormous universe with its own rules, governing institutions, values, and norms. As mentioned above, Asian Studies are well-equipped to analyse the phenomenology and internal contradictions of modern sports. There are certainly several reasons for the international fascination with and attraction to sports; yet, the particular appeal of sports seems to be rooted in the two interrelated binary pairs of certainty/uncertainty and the juxtaposition of sameness and difference. Most, if not all sports, are based on the certainty of the claim that starting conditions are the same for all contestants. Once the race or the game is underway, certainty changes into uncertainty, as the meaning of the game is to extract difference out of sameness: difference measured in seconds, centimetres, goals, or points that differentiate between victory and defeat. How this desire to generate differentiation is realized in sports in various regional or national contexts, is the first question regional studies researchers or their local allies have to answer.

Regional studies can, and in my eyes should, attempt to bridge the gap between local memories, archives, and national knowledge systems on the one hand, and transnational discourses and the formation of universal theories that consciously transcend the particularistic boundaries of Western epistemology on the other. While the international and interdisciplinary exchange has seen improvements in the recent past, the subject of Sports in Asia is still a largely unexplored site in the terrain of Asian Studies and open for your contribution. <



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Editors' note >

See interview with Wolfram Manzenreiter, this issue's Guest Editor, on p. 12.

The meaning of sports is strongly influenced by its place in society. In Japan, educational institutions are the most important provider of sport facilities and sporting opportunities in Japan. Every spring, huge billboards attract newcomers to the university sport clubs at Kyoto University.



Photo by Wolfram Manzenreiter