

Demonstrating to the World Japan's Revived "Strong Economy": The National Strategy for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games

Yasuhiro Sakaue

What kind of identity and image did Japan seek to build within the international community through the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games? This question can be explored through the "Basic Policy on Preparation and Management of the 2020 Games" document adopted by the Japanese Government Cabinet in November 2015.¹ The hosting of the Games, a mega-event that attracts the attention of the world, involved a complex interplay between the sporting community and the host city, as well as the government, businesses, media, and the people. This Cabinet Decision collectively expressed the aspirations of all of these actors.

In the opening section of the document, the government states: "The 1964 Tokyo Games symbolised Japan's full-fledged return to the international community and showed the world that Japan had risen from defeat. It was an opportunity for the Japanese to gain confidence that if they worked hard, they could compete on a par with the rest of the world, and it gave momentum to Japan's rapid economic growth." In contrast, the stated significance of the Tokyo 2020 Games was to "revive Japan, which had almost lost its confidence, and to show the world its advanced initiatives in a mature society." The reason for Japan's loss of confidence is the long-term economic depression that has continued since the early 1990s, and the significance of the Games was to use the event as an opportunity to break out of this situation, revive Japan, and restore confidence. The model for this is the 1964 Games, which is believed to have been the springboard for Japan's rapid economic growth, and the country was eagerly awaiting a repeat of that event.

This was not just a desire of the government. The catchphrase for the Japanese that the Bid Committee came up with was also "Japan's revival," which appealed to the sense of crisis: "If we do not do something now, the world may forget about us. If we do not do something now, we may deprive the country's future and our children's confidence."² It was natural that people would seek an opportunity for change amid the stagnation caused by the long-term depression, but then why was the Olympics chosen for this purpose?

The main reason for this is the strong image and narrative that the 1964 Games had created a "glorious era" combined with economic growth, which gave rise to a fanatical attitude among the Japanese towards the benefits of hosting the Olympic Games. The most apparent evidence is that since Tokyo's bid in 1952, a total of five cities selected as national candidate cities have participated in a total of 11 Olympic bids and a total of four preparations for the Games, which together amounted to 60 years and three months, or 85% of the total period.³ In this Olympic addiction or dependency situation, the Olympics was chosen as an opportunity to break the long-term depression. The 2020 Games can be viewed as the historical conjuncture of this situation. The power and persuasive force it gave was powerful. That is why the bid for the 2020 Games was not derailed by the major political upheavals and catastrophes of the 2009 change of government, nor by the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. It is also why the event was held forcefully despite

widespread local opposition – 80 percent of the Japanese public, at one point – to holding the Games amid the COVID-19 pandemic and even though the vaccination rate against the virus was still only 38 percent.

Returning once again to the Cabinet Decision of 2015, it is of interest to note that the 2020 Games is considered to be an opportunity to "revive Japan" and simultaneously show the international community that Japan is making "advanced initiatives in a mature society." The "advanced initiatives" referred to by the government are "addressing ageing societies and environmental and energy issues common to advanced nations" and showing that Japan "is leading the world in solving these problems." This statement may have some relevance to Olympism. However, the specifics are environmental and energy technologies for building a hydrogen society, a practical application of automatic driving technology, robot technologies, new services using high-precision satellite positioning technology, and the like. This demonstrates that it is nothing more than a blatant measure to revive the Japanese economy. In other words, the Games are to be seen as a "driver of innovation towards the realisation of a strong economy," and these "showcase Japan's strengths in technology and communicate them to the world through the Games."

On the other hand, the Cabinet Decision also states that various Japanese cultural attractions – or "content that attracts the world's attention as Cool Japan" – will be disseminated to the world.⁴ This aim is nothing other than the realisation of a "strong economy." To this end, the government aimed to "spread the effects of the Games to every corner of the country" by promoting tourism by attracting more foreign visitors and increasing the participation of companies and others in projects and events related to the Games, and "promoting investment by communicating the improved Japanese business environment to the rest of the world." Thus, the 2020 Games became part of the government's economic policy, called "Abenomics". The Cabinet Decision also contains such rhetorical flourishes as assisting in the reconstruction of areas affected by the Great East Japan

Earthquake and realising an inclusive society, but these carry little weight beyond that of an add-on.

Meanwhile, the 2020 Games Organising Committee also established a new sponsorship mechanism, separate from the IOC's The Olympic Partner, to meet the demands of Japanese companies. The system consists of three categories of sponsors, not limited to one company in one industry, and a total of 67 Japanese companies were approved as sponsors.⁵ The vision of realising a "strong economy" also coincided with the expectations of the public. According to a public opinion survey on the Games by the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute,⁶ the top answer to the question "What do you expect from the Games?" was "contribution to the Japanese economy," with 63 percent in the October 2016 survey and 50 percent in the March 2021 survey. However, in the September 2021 survey, immediately after the closing of the Games, when asked what the Games had achieved, only 15 percent answered "contribution to the Japanese economy." The results of the event fell short of the public's expectations.

Needless to say, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a complete lack of foreign visitors to Japan and to the cancellation of most of the events related to the Games. However, the pandemic was not the only factor behind the failure. A more fundamental factor was the failure to generate innovations that would attract the world's attention, including in the technology field, which had been touted as "Japan's strength."⁷ The most apparent evidence is that Japan was unable to halt the ongoing depreciation of the Yen. At the same time, prices have soared, and the average Japanese annual wage has already been overtaken by South Korea (OECD, Stat)⁸. Japan's economy is on the path of decline, the opposite of revival.

The day after the 2020 Games closed, the Japanese newspaper *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* noted that "this atypical Olympics may finally force the Japanese to break free from the illusions of 1964. It is a change that could be a turning point in post-war history."⁹ However, signs of such a change are hard to spot: the decision to host the World Expo in Osaka in 2025 and Sapporo's bid to host the 2030 Winter Olympic Games

both suggest that Japan has not yet broken free from the "1964 illusion."¹⁰ It has not yet developed a vision with vivid outlines of its alternative future.

Yasuhiro Sakaue, Professor Emeritus and Specially Appointed Professor of Graduate School of Social Sciences, Hitotsubashi University, Japan.
Email: y.sakaue@r.hit-u.ac.jp

Notes

- Masaru Ogawa, 2016, *Tokyo Orimpikku: mondai no kakusin ha nanika (Tokyo Olympics: what is the core of the problem)*, Tokyo: Shueisha, pp.160-181.
- Hiroshi Ochiai, 2015, *Konnakoto o kaitekita: supōtsu media no genba kara (I've been writing about this: from the field of sports media)*, Tokyo: Sōbun Kikaku, p.49.
- Calculated based on Table 1 in Yasuhiro Sakaue and Kyoko Raita (eds.), 2021, *Tokyo Orimpikku 1963 no Isan: seikō shinwa to kioku no hazama (The Legacy of the Tokyo Olympics 1964: between Success myth and memory)*, Tokyo: Seikyūsha, p.15.
- Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's appearance at the closing ceremony of the 2016 Rio Games dressed as the popular video game character Mario may have been part of this.
- A total of six newspapers, including Japan's major national newspapers, were included there, preventing newspapers from maintaining the neutrality and impartiality media they were supposed to fulfil.
- https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/research/uron/20220601_7.html (last visited 4 December 2022).
- Growing public opposition to the Games in the country led significant sponsors of the Games to stop airing TV commercials, among other things, which might otherwise have given the Japanese public some idea of the revival of "the Japanese economy".
- <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DataSetCode=RMW> (last visited 26 December 2022).
- Mitsuo Ōshima, "Irei no Natsu Mirai heno kate (An Unusual Summer: Feeding the Future)", *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 9 August 2021.
- In 1970, Osaka hosted the World Expo; in 1972, Sapporo hosted the Winter Olympic Games.

Fig. 1: Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games-Monument of Olympic Rings. (Photo via Wikimedia Commons, reprinted here under Creative Commons license)

