



Samurai Baseball vs. Baseball in Japan

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Baseball fans, lovers of a good fight, and those who are curious about how we go about understanding Japan, will all welcome “Baseball and *Besuboru* In Japan and The U.S.” (*Studies in Asia* online), a group of essays growing out of a conference at Michigan State University last year. Michael Lewis in his Introduction does concede that baseball is a game but is “also a powerful economic force, a ladder for social mobility, a vessel freighted with national symbols, and for many something of a sacred cultural preserve with practices (or is it rituals?) that delineate them from us.” Lewis reports that there was great debate at the conference over “nature versus nurture, or cultural essentialism versus shared solutions to shared problems.” [1]



Pretty heavy stuff – as the cliché has it, “life is a metaphor for baseball.” Peter C. Bjarkman’s essay “American Baseball Imperialism, Clashing National Cultures, and the Future of Samurai *Besuboru*” quickly makes the case for larger significance. [2] Looking at baseball in Cuba, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan he argues that American Major League Baseball is trying to control and Americanize a lovely, global game and turn it into a cash cow. He quotes a Latin American charge that “El béisbol is the Monroe Doctrine turned into a lineup card, a remembrance of past invasions.” Bjarkman concludes that the American game has been assimilated; *besuboru* and béisbol are different from “baseball.”

Is the difference between the original Yankee baseball and the game in other counties the difference between the real thing and a knock off or between the narrowly conceived original and new versions creatively adapted? Is baseball franchised around the world like MacDonald’s? After all, “a Big Mac is a Big Mac is a Big Mac,” so isn’t baseball just baseball?

The dispute over baseball in Japan vs. Japanese baseball involves more than whether the bats are heavier, balls smaller, and training more strenuous. Do these differences represent differences *within* a system or *between* systems? Depends on who you ask.

On one side is Robert Whiting. His books are classics of sports writing and hugely influential. [3] His first book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat* (1977) begins by stating that Japanese baseball “appears to be the same game played in the U.S. – but it isn’t”:

The Japanese view of life, stressing group identity, cooperation, hard work, respect for age, seniority and “face” has permeated almost every aspect of the sport. Americans who come to play in Japan quickly realize that Baseball Samurai Style is different. (Forward)

Whiting goes on to describe the game as “outdoor kabuki” rather than an athletic competition, for in a most un-American way, the game can end in a tie. The chapter “Baseball Samurai Style,” illustrated with a photo of Sadaharu Oh posing with a samurai sword, derives a “set of strict unwritten rules that might be called *Samurai Code of Conduct for Baseball Players*” which “has roots in *Bushido*, a warriors’ mode of behavior dating from the 13th century.” (p. 37) These rules show how Japanese national character differs from American. In America, for instance, “excellence is equated with getting results no matter how unorthodox the form,” while in Japan “it is more important to conform to the set way of doing things.” Other articles in the Code provide for rigorous training and self discipline; that “the player must not be materialistic” (a provision invoked especially by management at salary negotiation time); that a player “must follow the rule of sameness”; must “recognize and respect the team pecking order”; and, finally, must strive for *wa* – “team harmony and unity”:

The good team is like a beautiful Japanese garden. Every tree, every rock, every blade of grass has its place. The smallest part ever so slightly out of place destroys the beauty of the whole.... When each player’s ego detaches itself and joins twenty five others to become one giant ego, something magical happens. All the efforts and sacrifices the players have made at last become worthwhile. For they are now a perfect functioning unit. (p. 67)

Whiting’s eye and effective style have insured that this way of framing the differences between American and Japanese ball has passed into media lore. [4] The 1994 documentary, “Baseball in Japan” claims:

Because of its slow pace, baseball fits the Japanese character perfectly. The conservative play mirrors the Japanese conservative and deliberate approach to life. Managers and coaches view baseball as a tool to teach loyalty and moral discipline – the same type of loyalty and discipline feudal Japanese lords expected from their soldiers and subjects. This samurai discipline requires endless hours of training, self-denial, and an emphasis on spirituality. So goes the Japanese approach to baseball. [5]

But others frame matters differently. These include Yale anthropologist William Kelly. Kelly’s first book was on Tokugawa irrigation practices, so he knows feudal Japan. Kelly criticizes those writers, Whiting among them, who go back to unexamined ancient traditions rather than look at specific responses in particular historical circumstances. [6]

In his Yale class lecture “[Professional Baseball](#),” Kelly agrees that some professional baseball in Japan does fit the “samurai” stereotype: “not entirely, not convincingly, not uniquely, but enough to feed the press mills and the front offices and the television analysts.” In fact, he says, this “spin” is part of the game. Our job is “not to dismiss this commentary as

misguided (though much of it clearly is)” but to ask who is putting these ideas about, who is believing them, and why they are appealing: “The myths are essential to the reality....” Japanese baseball is “not a window onto a homogenous and unchanging national character, but is a fascinating site for seeing how these national debates and concerns play out – just as in the United States.”

Why did baseball in Japan develop this “samurai” self-image? Baseball in Japan was shaped by the important elements of the nation in the early twentieth century – education, industry, middle class life, the government, and above all the national project. Since baseball was an American sport but Japan was not a colony, baseball in Japan was a way of declaring independence, defiance, and creativity. From early in the century, the middle schools and colleges adopted a “fighting spirit” in athletics (recall that Teddy Roosevelt called for the abolition of college football in the United States when violence had become the hallmark of the game). In the 1930s the newly formed professional leagues adopted that spirit, which styled itself “samurai.” The government, which stepped in to shape local social institutions, used sport to train and manage its citizenry both spiritually and physically; major business corporations turned to college teams to recruit loyal executives; large commercial newspapers competed for readers by telling more and more nationalistic sports stories; transport companies bought professional teams. The Japanese public and media demanded “Japanese style” in sports to distinguish themselves from the foreigners and set models for self-sacrificing workers and citizens. [7]

This summary does not do justice to Kelly’s detailed argument, but should show that he does not rely on “national character.” He charges that “national character” is misleading because it “essentializes a population,” that is, explains its actions in terms of fixed codes which govern everyone rather than history or political choices; applies ethnocentric standards of judgment; and homogenizes the varieties of everyday lives.



At the Michigan State conference, Whiting went on the counter-attack. [8] Whiting stated that he has lived in Japan since the 1970s, graduated from Sophia University, speaks fluent Japanese, and is immensely peeved that academics use him as a straw man. He pitted his “forty years of watching baseball in Japan” against Kelly’s scholarship: “I admire his effort to put together an academic history of Japanese baseball,” Whiting began, but “I must say that I find some of [Kelly’s] interpretations of the game in Japan uninformed and believe that they undermine Americans’ understanding of it.” To bolster his case, he inserts a few choice specimens of academic jargon.

Some critics, Whiting continued, objected to the appellation “samurai baseball” as too simplistic, but he replied that he did not claim that Japanese big leaguers wear top knots, carry swords, or commit *seppuku*: “samurai baseball” is just a metaphor. The metaphor may not be perfect, but “metaphor means resemblance, and so we must consider the ways in which it does fit.” The word “samurai” is used to highlight the “very real similarities and the grounding that the game has in *budo* or *bugei*, the martial arts of old, and its relationship to bushido with its lessons about dedication, self-perfection, submergence of ego and development of inner strength.” “Samurai baseball” does indeed reflect the Japanese national character since the lessons have been “passed down from generation to generation by fathers, teachers, coaches and, in adulthood, corporate bosses, right to the present day.”

National character studies can be abused, Whiting agrees, but denies implying that Japanese behavior is instinctive, unique or without internal contradictions. In the end, however, “to suggest that there is nothing different about the way that the average Japanese and average American see the world... is to deny reality and throw the baby out with the bathwater.” Whiting charges Kelly with believing that “there is nothing different about the way that the average Japanese and the average American sees the world.”

The Professor and the Journalist: Or, Wa’s Up, Doc?

The clash here is not merely personal but between generations and professional cultures, ways of telling a story, and standards of evidence.

Someone once remarked that each new generation stands on the shoulders and sometimes on the faces of previous ones. If so, Whiting must feel footprints all over his face. In spite of his many awards – in 1990, for instance, the translation of *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat* was named one of the one hundred most important Japanese books of all time – he has not been given his props by American academics. In return, he shows impatience and lack of sympathy with academic modes. To establish his bona fides, he explains that after he first went to Japan in 1962 as a military intelligence analyst and began his life long addiction to *besuboru*, he majored in Japanese politics at Sophia University in Tokyo and read the works of Ruth Benedict, Hugh Patrick, and Edwin O. Reischauer (though he does not mention that American scholars were then rejecting this style of scholarship). “These were all distinguished by pages of intelligent but dense, dry exposition and a total lack of passion.” When he then tried to write about the Liberal Democratic Party and such, there was zero interest. It was only when he started writing that there was a “magical home run hitter” who honed his skills with a samurai sword, or that “there were star pitchers who would pitch three or four days in a row without concern for the obvious potential damage to the arm, or that spring training began in the freezing cold of mid-winter, that people started paying attention.” [9]

Whiting masterfully framed what he saw at the ball park in terms which the American public could understand at a time, before the boom of the 1980s, when Japan was still exotic. James Clavell’s *Shogun: A Novel of Japan* used some of the same images of feudal Japan, though without Whiting’s knowledge and experience of Japan. [10]

Kelly’s professional socialization was different. When he started his baseball fieldwork, he found himself working in what he called the “direct shadow” of his predecessor, Whiting. Japanese baseball people pegged him according to how close they thought his views were to Whiting’s. By that time, most readers both outside the academy and inside it had read and often been persuaded by Whiting’s portraits. What Kelly indelicately called his “Whiting

problem” was then how to be appreciative of the older man’s “much longer experience with the game, respectful of the evocative power of his prose, yet staunchly critical of his explanatory logic...” [11]

The two men explain the way they work and illustrate the clash between academic and popular modes. The two modes differ in question setting, in standards of evidence and argument, in form, and in target audience. Whiting takes the difference personally, while Kelly is philosophical though not entirely reconciled. Kelly describes how local sports reporters were generous and helpful in the beginning of his fieldwork, and the two sides “recognized uncomfortable affinities.” But the journalists and the professor emphasized different parts of the story. When the manager of the team was fired, for instance, the journalists moved “from the details of the incident to the motivation of the actors and to the consequences for future actions,” while the anthropologist was “more inclined to move from the same details to exploring the premises, the process of decision-making, the alternative courses of action available, the forms of disengagement,” that is, “working against the grain of the daily routine.” [12]

Whiting’s ambition is to let the American public know what it was like to be there; he takes explanations of the actors more or less at face value. Kelly wants his colleagues and students to understand the deep structure and relevance of what happened, which can’t always be done in layman’s language, and to relate his observations to the systematic debate in the field, which is structured by theory.

What’s the Difference?

Decide for yourself who comes out on top. But the deeper challenge remains: how do we account for difference? Difference is everywhere: they say no two snowflakes are alike, and if you’ve wondered how they know – did somebody actually look at them? – now a University of California physicist has a website explaining why, [Is it True That No Two Snowflakes Are Alike?](#)

“Different” is not the same as “unique.” A Japanese official in the 1990s wanted to restrict the importation of American skis on the grounds that Japanese snow was unique – essentialism on the slopes! True, he may only have been trying to keep American skis out of the Japanese market, but the choice of arguments is important and shows that Japanese are often involved in self-essentialization.

Nor does “different” need to mean “opposite” or “incompatible.” On the one hand, Americans like to say “we’re all the same when we’ve got our skins off.” But what if that really means is that Americans think everyone is “just like us”? The Disney historical films, for instance, proclaim multi-cultural themes but when we get back to 12th century China or 16th century New England, it turns out that Mulan and Pocohantas are actually modern American teenagers in costume. Perhaps to claim in the face of obvious differences that we’re all alike really means we’re afraid of difference.

The opposite mistake is to portray others as unique and beyond explanation: “*not* like us.” In his lecture “[Zen Aesthetes and ‘Economic Animals: The Perils of National Character’](#)” Kelly lays into the idea that Japan is America’s “radical cultural opposite.” The “proper response to the claim that the Japanese are radically different from you and me is not that the Japanese are just like you and me, but rather that, in important ways, the Japanese are not like each other.”

To say “samurai baseball” implies that we have to appeal to unique Japaneseness to explain the differences but do not have to characterize American baseball in a similar way.

The Anthropologist and the Sword

“Samurai” is now an all purpose synonym for “intense” – the Sunday New York Times has a column on fashionable drinks called “Samurai Sipper.” Jim Jarmusch’s 1999 [Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai](#) incorporates references to samurai, bushido, and French movies in a way that floats above mere historical accuracy. Yet many Japanese – ball players, executives, the Japanese Army in World War II, and even “kamikaze” pilots – also point to samurai ethics as an all purpose explanation for Japanese behavior and call themselves followers of bushido.

Karl Friday debunks the idea of explaining modern conduct by reference to historical samurai in [“Bushido or Bull? A Medieval Historian’s Perspective on the Japanese Warrior Tradition.”](#) “Hanging the label of ‘bushido’ on either the ideology of the Imperial Army or the warrior ethic of medieval Japan,” he says, “involves some fairly overt historian’s sleight-of-hand.” Much of the modern version of bushido was “at odds with the apparent behavioral norms of the actual warrior tradition.” Even the term “bushido” is the invention of a twentieth century Japanese, Nitobe Inazo (1862-1933), who wrote in English. Ironically, Whiting, without mentioning his role in the invention of the bushido tradition, includes in his history of the game Nitobe’s 1905 charge that baseball was a “pickpocket’s sport” in which players tried to swindle their opponents and steal bases. [13] In fact, these samurai traditions are contradictory and could be equally well used to explain either “samurai” group ethic or “samurai” individualism, submission to authority or rebellion against it, innovation or traditionalism.

Whiting’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat*, of course, plays off the title of Ruth Benedict’s wartime classic, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Houghton Mifflin 1945), but does not use its insights. Benedict’s school of anthropology rejected nineteenth century “scientific racism” as a way to explain human difference, and saw cultures as the weaving of universal human threads into distinctive national patterns: “We fear irreconcilable differences when the trouble is only between Tweedledum and Tweedledee.” (p. 13) Although she looks to Japanese history herself for explanations, she remarks somewhat tartly that “bushido” is a “publicist’s inspiration” which “became a slogan of the nationalists and militarists” in the 1930s (p. 175), that is, in Kelly’s view, just when “samurai baseball” became set in concrete.

Anthropologists and historians do not deny that some Japanese sincerely embrace these myths. Ted Bestor did an ethnographic history of another Japanese institution, the great Tokyo fish market at Tsukiji (and no, he does not call it “the chrysanthemum and the swordfish”!), which puts myths of Japanese national identity in commercial and even edible form. He puts it nicely that “often what is most important about the past is the present-day perception of it.” [14] So Kelly does not hold that stripping away the “myths” like layers of an onion will reveal the inner truth, only that we should look upon these myths as themselves needing explanation, not simple acceptance or rejection.

Full Circle: Sushi Baseball?

Japan is no longer exotic when sushi is served in ballparks (at least on the West Coast) and Japanese ballplayers are no longer rare. The Baseball Preview issue of *Sports Illustrated* (March 26, 2007) has a cover story on the Boston Red Sox pitcher who was acquired this year from Japan: “Why Daisuke Matsuzaka is Worthy (And What America Will Learn From Him).” Tom Verducci’s article on the inside mentions a number of the practices once

associated with “samurai baseball”: Matsuzaka trains hard and has *doryoku* or “unflagging effort,” but most impressive of all, last year he threw at least 130 pitches in more games than all pitchers in North American major leagues combined. This combination makes Matsuzaka a potential instrument of change, but “it’s his throwing regimen, rather than his place of birth, that makes him the ultimate foreigner to major league baseball” (p. 60). One American coach quoted by Verducci says that the philosophy of Japanese pitchers and coaches is “if you’re a pitcher, you need to throw,” and calls for Americans to follow suit: “We’re training our pitchers to throw less. And nobody wants to try anything different.”



Daisuke Matsuzaka, Boston Red Sox Pitcher

The conformity shoe is now on the other foot, but still it’s hard for a sports writer to avoid the Japanese touch: “Matsuzaka’s pitching motion is an elegant haiku, beauty captured in three parts separated by two pauses” Americans, Verducci goes on, want to pitch like Roger Clemens: “The compact ‘tall and fall’ is technically sound, a Sousa march with no wasted elements. Matsuzaka’s free-flowing, drop-and-drive delivery is improvisational, like live jazz. Matsuzaka is coloring outside the lines...” (p. 62)

Now will somebody please explain why we call the October classic the “World” Series? I would like to know, because my team, the Chicago Cubs, haven’t won one of them in more than a century, and next year is going to be our year.

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See also Robert Whiting, [*The Samurai Way of Baseball*](#).

Notes

[1] Baseball has long been fodder for international history: Richard C. Crepeau, “Pearl Harbor: A Failure of Baseball?” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 15.4 (1982): 67-74; Donald Roden, “Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan,” *The American Historical Review* 85.3 (1980).

[2] For a fuller study, see his *Diamonds around the Globe: The Encyclopedia of International Baseball* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005).

[3] *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat: Baseball Samurai Style* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1977); *You Gotta Have Wa: When Two Cultures Collide on the Baseball Diamond* (Macmillan 1989); *The Meaning of Ichiro: The New Wave from Japan and the Transformation of Our National Pastime* (Warner Books, 2004; retitled for the 2005 paperback to *The Samurai Way of Baseball*).

[4] The film clip "[Samurai Baseball](#)" presents Japanese baseball as a different game in about two minutes. The PBS Frontline program "American Game, Japanese Rules," (PBS Video, 1990) has more talking heads. "Mr. Baseball" (1990) stars Tom Selleck as an aging hitter who goes to Japan and runs into problems undreamed of in *Lost in Translation* (see [Alan Chalk Guide to Japanese Films](#) at the University of Illinois Asian Education Media Service site). Beat Takeshi's [Boiling Point](#) (1990) shows a very Japanese but very unsamurai-like little league team that runs up against yakuza.

[5] Quoted on William Kelly's website (below).

[6] Kelly's paper for the East Lansing conference is not included in the online conference volume but the website for his Yale course, "[Japan: The Anthropology of an Alternate Modernity \(2002\)](#)" and his home page, [William Kelly](#), make some of his essays available online.

[7] William Kelly, "Caught in the Spin Cycle: An Anthropological Observer at the Sites of Japanese Professional Baseball," in Susan O. Long, ed., *Moving Targets: Ethnographies of Self and Community in Japan*. (Ithaca, 2000); William Kelly, "Blood and Guts in Japanese Professional Baseball," in Sepp Linhard and Sabine Fruhstuck, ed., *The Culture of Japan as Seen through its Leisure* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998): 95-111; William Kelly, "Is Baseball a Global Sport? America's 'National Pastime' as a Global Sport," *Global Networks* 7.2 (2007): 15 pp. (forthcoming; kindly supplied by the author).

[8] Whiting's talk, [The Samurai Way of Baseball and the National Character Debate](#), was also published with revisions at *Japan Focus* (September 29, 2006), with an introduction by Jeff Kingston, who teaches contemporary Japanese politics at Temple University, Tokyo.

[9] Whiting, "Samurai Way of Baseball," *Japan Focus*, n. 35.

[10] See Henry Smith, *Learning from Shogun: Japanese History and Western Fantasy* (Santa Barbara: Program in Asian Studies, 1980).

[11] William Kelly, "Caught in the Spin Cycle," 144-145.

[12] Kelly, "Caught In the Spin Cycle, p. 141-143.

[13] *You Gotta Have Wa*, p. 35.

[14] Theodore C. Bestor, *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004): 16.