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Playing Politics With the East Asian Olympics, 1964-2016

William W. Kelly

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> "*The aims of the Olympic Movement are to promote the development of those fine physical and moral qualities which are the basis of amateur sport and to bring together the athletes of the world in a great quadrennial festival of sports thereby creating international respect and goodwill and thus helping to construct a better and more peaceful world.*" Baron de Coubertin, 1894

Those who only pay attention to the Olympics on the occasions of the Summer and Winter Games may understandably bear two impressions of these global games and the organization, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), that has sponsored them since the first modern Games in Athens in 1896. First, they may presume that the intrusion of politics into the Olympics is a recent, unwelcomed erosion of the high-minded ideals that Olympic visionary Baron de Coubertin expressed in 1894. The pitched political battles leading up to the Beijing Games, in this view, accelerated this recent depreciation of Olympic philosophy.

A second impression reinforced by the 2008 Games may well be that East Asia has but recently been drawn into the Olympic Movement, which was a European recreation of the ancient Games and remained Eurocentric (and then American-dominated) through the 20th century. Tuning into last year's events, many assumed that East Asia's experience with the Olympic Movement has been brief and episodic, with only the 1964 Games in Tokyo and the 1988 Games in Seoul as prelude to Beijing 2008.

Neither is accurate. The Olympic Movement has been inherently political from the start. Coubertin indeed articulated noble sentiments of the purity of sporting effort and the promise of athletic fellowship. However, he himself was a Frenchman whose motivations for an international gathering of athletes to revive the spirit of the ancient Olympics stemmed from anxieties that France's losses in the Franco-Prussian War were due to the superior physical conditioning of the German soldiers. Even as he was laying the philosophical and logistical groundwork for the Olympic revival, he lobbied behind the scenes to keep Germany out of the 1896 Games. The first overtly political act in the Games took place at the 1908 Games in London, when the United States team refused to dip the American flag to King Edward VII. The overt anti-Semitism in the build-up to the 1936 "Nazi Games," the postwar use of the Games to restore the Axis nations to "normalcy" (Italy, then Japan, then Germany), the Mexican student riots and the Black Power protests in 1968, and the anti-Apartheid boycott movement into the 1970s, the massacre of Israeli athletes and coaches at Munich in 1972, and the "Cold War" Olympics of Moscow 1980 and Los Angeles 1984 are but the best-known chapters of a properly political history of the Games. The Olympics, and elite sports more generally, are significant not because they offer refuge from the political partisanship and commercial interests that infuse everyday life but precisely because the message of Olympism is unclear, so contestable to rival interpretations, so convenient to multiple purposes and agendas. We value the Olympics not for their purity but for their imperfections, not because they exist above the fray but because they constantly confront us with what concerns and agitates individuals and nations.

In the run-up to and aftermath of the Beijing Games, much of the popular and scholarly literature has emphasized it as an occasion when the Olympic Movement had to finally and fully acknowledge this world region and accommodate its distinctive features and as a moment when the East Asia region itself had at last become a regular participant in the Movement. This too induces a historical amnesia because Asian nations and athletes have been involved in the Olympic Movement for close to a century, well before much of the rest of the non-Euro-American world was drawn in. This began in 1909, when Kanō Jigorō, who had developed and promoted judō and was then president of Tokyo Higher Normal School, was elected the first Japanese member of the International Olympic Committee. He led the first Japanese delegation (of only two athletes) to the 1912 Games at Stockholm, and he was an important member of the IOC for three decades.

China too had early contacts with and interest in the nascent Olympic Movement, and a number of East and Southeast Asian nations were drawn into the Far East Championship Games. These were organized by the YMCA in 1913 as the first international regional games in the world and only the second such international games after the Olympics themselves. Indeed, the first meeting was called the Far Eastern Olympic Games, in an effort to draw itself under the Olympic umbrella, although that name was dropped the next year, perhaps because of Coubertin's objections. Intellectual property rights were jealously guarded by the IOC from the outset.

As Sandra Collins has noted so astutely in a number of publications, Tokyo's scheduled hosting the 1940 Olympics was canceled by the spreading war, but the lobbying and planning for these "missing" Olympics during the 1930's were significant for both Japan and the IOC. Immediately after the war, the Asian Games were inaugurated within the Olympic Movement, which was also plunged into a prolonged and contorted effort to address the "Two-China Problem," which it provoked when it admitted the People's Republic of China in 1954 while retaining the Republic of China. Remembering Japan's two Winter Games in 1972 and 1998 and considering the multiple unsuccessful (though costly and time-consuming) bids by Japan, Korea, and China for other Games over the past five decades together document a sustained and significant relationship of East Asia and the Olympic Movement.

This set of three essays offer further testimony to the ways in which politics—national, regional, and global—have been both means and ends in the East Asian engagement with the Olympics. Christian Tagsold, an anthropologist at Universität Düsseldorf, has written widely on the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Although these Games were explicitly intended by the IOC to restore the ex-Axis power Japan to the international community of 'normal' nations, Tagsold argues that official interests within Japan used the Games to restore legitimacy to several potent symbols of authority, including the Rising Sun flag, the armed forces, and the emperor himself. The peaceful and apolitical associations with the Olympics provided useful cover in this project.

Susan Brownell, perhaps the preeminent anthropologist of China sport and the Olympic Movement, speculates on what a future retrospective image of Beijing 2008 might be, based on an analysis of the legacies of Tokyo 1964 and Seoul 1988. The latter two moments are now seen as turning points towards the peaceful integration of Japan and South Korea into a community of nations, but Brownell reminds us of just how politically contentious were 1960s Japan and 1980s South Korea. The struggles (particularly violent in the case of South Korea) that led up to both of the Games have been overshadowed by our later, more benign and positive images. Brownell wonders if the same will be true as the legacy of Beijing 2008.

My own essay analyzes the politics of Tokyo's current bid for the 2016 Summer Games. The push to win these Games has inextricably centered on metropolitan Tokyo's governor, Ishihara Shintarō. Despite skepticism and opposition, he has orchestrated the lobbying and planning with intensity and controversy ever since coming to office in 1999. Later this year, on October 2 in Copenhagen, the IOC will decide among the four candidate cities, with Tokyo

vying with Chicago (conventionally thought to be the front-runner at the moment), Rio de Janeiro, and Madrid. Predictably, Ishihara and other bid supporters make much of a nostalgic recovery of a rosy version of the legacy of the 1964 Games, although as I argue here, their campaign and the opposition to it are driven by very different motivations. The 1964 Games were Japan's Olympics, but I suggest here the reasons why a 2016 Games would be Tokyo's Olympics.

Notes on the essays:

Tagsold's essay is adapted from his contribution to the 2007 volume on Olympic Japan, edited by Andreas Niehaus and Max Seinsch (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag).

A version of Brownell's essay will appear in a forthcoming volume that she and Kelly are editing on The Olympics in East Asia: The Crucible of Localism, Nationalism, Regionalism, and Globalism (New York: Greekworks, fall, 2009).

Kelly's essay will appear in revised form in early 2010 in a special issue of the International Journal of the History of Sport.

William W. Kelly is chair of the Department of Anthropology, Yale University, and co-editor, with Susan Brownell, of The Olympics in East Asia: The Crucible of Localism, Nationalism, Regionalism, and Globalism, forthcoming in the fall of 2009 from Greekworks.

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