

BOOK

**Pan-Asian sports and the emergence of modern Asia,
1913-1974**

Edited by Stefan Huebner
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Pan-Asianism was largely constructed as an ideal of Asian solidarity, regional cooperation, and integration (Saaler and Szpilman 2011). In this regard, historians Rana Mitter and Akira Iriye suggest that an “Asian” identity could somehow mediate between emergent nationalisms and provide a convincing counterargument to the challenge of Western dominance (Mitter and Iriye 2007, ix). For Stefan Huebner, a historian of colonialism, modernization and development policy, the desirable goal for such identity is for “Asia” to be “One”, and he frames his arguments within the contexts and nature of the Asiad (The Asian Games).

In his fascinating book, Huebner traces the origins of “Sportive Pan-Asian Aspirations” to the establishment of the Far Eastern Championship Games (FECG 1913–1934), which evolved into the Western Asiatic Games (WAG 1934), after the sporting event turned into sites that mirrored anti-colonial nationalisms because of “mutually exclusive visions of Asia,” particularly concerning the status of Manchukuo and its right to join the FECG.

The FECG was an American construct, says Huebner. Former Manila Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) Physical Director Elwood Brown founded the Games to globalize “muscular Christianity” based on amateur sports ideals and their “civilizing” effects (Huebner 2016, 52). Asian themes and motifs were somewhat muted during these Games. During the early years, Asians hardly controlled the management and execution of the FECG. Participating countries embraced the idea of assimilating Asia through sporting events organized by Americans connected with the YMCA.

By the 1930s, the FECG failed largely as a result of worldwide economic recession. The WAG, on the other hand, suffered severe logistical problems. It was only held once. Around this time, nationalism processes were on the rise in China, Japan, and the Philippines. Paradoxically, western sporting ideals were also being incorporated into the context of Asian regional integration (Huebner 2016, 99).

After World War II, India sought to promote its postcolonial foreign policy of integrating Asia by organizing the Asian Relations Conference in 1947. Eventually, its visions of Asian integration under Nehru led to the hosting of

the First Asiad in New Delhi, in 1951. The Games focused on the message of amateur norms and values not quite different from the spirit that launched the FECG and the WAG many years before.

Basketball, soccer, and athletics were the most popular events during the Second Asiad in Manila. The participation of member-countries aligned with the United States characterized the Second Asiad. In many ways, the Games created the impression that members of the “communist bloc” were not interested in obtaining peace across Asia.

Tokyo’s hosting of the Third Asiad in 1958, and the XVII Olympiad in 1964, became a significant factor in the development of a renewed Pan-Asian sportive identity, largely because Japan embraced peaceful internationalism. By hosting both Games, Post-War Japan was demonstrated to be “Asia’s most developed and competent country” (Huebner 2016, 14).

Successive editions of the Asiad were complicated by Indonesia’s vision of a non-aligned (pro-socialist) Asia under Sukarno, and how these got entangled with what Huebner referred to as “(universal) internationalisms and egalitarianism that included political entities such as Israel and Taiwan” (Huebner 2016).

By the late 1960s, The Asiad became an arena for anti-communist Asian cooperation and nation-branding. In addition, Bangkok’s hosting of the Fifth and Sixth Asiad (1966, 1970) was hugely successful because of intense cooperation between civilian and military authorities. The Bangkok Games likewise underscored Thailand’s victory in the 1965 and 1966 Miss Universe pageants¹. It also amplified the personality cult of the King (“Thailand has a King”) and established the Kingdom’s image as a “rapidly developing country that nevertheless embraced its Buddhist cultural heritage” (Huebner 2016).

Iran’s hosting of the Seventh Asiad (1974) projected the host country as an enthusiastic benefactor for Asian countries suffering from the debilitating effects of the 1973 oil crisis. But finally, the Tehran Asiad welcomed delegates from China and many Arab countries. It also encouraged anti-Soviet Pan-Asian cooperation while legitimizing the host country’s modernization plan under the Shah of Iran, based on the legacy of the Great Persian Empire (Huebner 2016, 15).

In his book, Huebner uniquely identified individuals, institutions, alliances, and associations that brought about the Asiad. In many ways, he was successful in bringing about the importance of the Games in shaping Asia as we know it today.

Huebner’s point is very clear. *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974* is not just about sports and the evolution of sporting events across Asia. The Asiad and its previous editions served largely as an occasion to project the visions and aspirations, not to mention the celebrated past of the host country. Every staging of the Asiad was also determined to “change the

regional shape of the Games according to a new vision of Asia,” which at times included Manchukuo, excluded Taiwan and Israel or substituted Taiwan with China (Huebner 2016, 266).

Throughout the checkered history of the Asiad, the Games were conceptualized to support the notion of an anti-colonial, anti-Western regionalism. This noble intention, however, was frequently marred by the intervention of the host country’s political and financial elite, crafting very carefully what Huebner describes as “cultural elements that their own nation-building” supported (Huebner 2016).

Even so, despite many setbacks and controversies, the Asiad evolved as Asia’s dress rehearsal for the Olympic Games. It also became a forum for international participation and quite frequently, a tool for diplomacy among Asian nations. From the mid-1960s onwards, advancements in technology enabled viewers to finally watch the Games live on television. There was massive media coverage and infrastructural development. More people sought to watch the Games live. Winning an Asiad medal has become a matter of nationalistic pride.

Large-scale nation-branding, politics within and between sporting federations, and the promotion of personality cults, however, became issues of greater concern for many Asiad sponsors and organizers. Crass commercialism and in-fighting between sporting officials affected the status of athletes participating during these Games. These circumstances competed frequently with the ideal of genuinely promoting amateur sports and cultivating cooperation across the region.

In the end, Huebner notes, Pan-Asian Sports is all about power, politics, and persisting expressions of nationalism. The Asiad and its previous incarnations appropriated sporting traditions from the West to help build local, national, and regional identities. Yet, as historian Simon Creak notes, there remains a strong tendency in sport and globalization studies to think in terms of “the West and the rest” (Creak 2013, 114). The transfer of Western sport to Asia is still being perceived by a number of sports leaders outside the region as a “civilizing mission” (Dimeo 2004, 165–178).

Quite frequently, every Asiad edition is vulnerable to the demands of regional and global politics. Countries may be booted out of the Games due to shifts in a particular country’s leadership or foreign policy. Star athletes are being hyped as objects of fascination, much to the delight of sponsors and sporting officials. Hosting the Games is eminently but a matter of national pride and projection to the rest of the world.

Ultimately, for all the talk surrounding the shaping of a “stronger”, “healthier” Asia through sport, and Asia as no longer a “backward” and colonial region, power asymmetry vis-à-vis the West and among Asian nations persists. As a social construct, regional integration remains problematic. It is no wonder the pundits are still having their field day.

Notes

1. Apasra Hongsakula was crowned Miss Universe 1965 on 24 July 1965 in Miami Beach. Her successor, Charand Savetanand, became 2nd runner-up to Miss Universe 1966 Margareta Arvidsson of Sweden.

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