

Sport and Politics in Taiwan

Baseball and National Identity

There are perhaps few places where a particular sport has been tied so closely to the formation of national image, as well as domestic and international politics, as it has been in the case of Taiwan in respect to baseball. It is clear that many modern states and leaders have placed great emphasis on the importance of sports to both national and political identities. What has made baseball in Taiwan so striking is that it was crucial both in terms of domestic politics in the old *and* the new Taiwan, and in the international politics of 'legitimacy' debates. The combination of these factors make this story a valuable case study of the workings of politics within sports, domestic politics and sports, transnational political organization, and sports and international relations.

Research >
Taiwan

By Chien-Yu Lin

The broad aim of my main research project is to produce a sociologically driven account of the dynamic relationship between baseball and politics in Taiwan since 1895; more specifically, how national and international political factors during the period under study (1895 – 2000) and the Japanese and Kuomintang (KMT) governments' respective political ideologies influenced the development of baseball in Taiwan.

There are many nations in which the significance of sport is readily apparent; Taiwan is no exception. Baseball, the first modern sport introduced into Taiwan, has held a position of extraordinary prominence and symbolic importance for Taiwan from shortly after its original introduction in 1895. As Horne et. al. (1999: 196) indicate, 'sport is considered political because it is ideologically symbolic'. Two aspects in which sports can be seen as overtly political are in its uses: firstly, to project an image of the state and its political and ideological priorities and, secondly, to promote national identity. In Taiwan, the attachment of social and cultural meanings to the game of baseball were, and remain today, openly linked to official political ideologies and policies.

Baseball during the Japanese Regime

The game of baseball was introduced into Taiwan in 1898 by the Japanese. It was not until 1918 and along with the international political movements just after the First World War ended, that the democratic aura and the desire for colonial liberation spread through significant areas the world, resulting in many independent actions against colonizers. In order to avoid and to mitigate the anti-colonial resistance force in Taiwan, the Japanese government implemented a new assimilation policy – 'homeland extensionism' – in which compulsory Japanese education and cultural assimilation were emphasized as the

fundamental policy for ruling Taiwan and, as part of the physical education curriculum during this time, baseball was diffused and manipulated into the colonized society.

The government believed that there would be a number of benefits to be gained through the implementation of sports. Firstly, for individuals, sports can foster loyalty to the empire (through obeying the sports rules) and also improve overall health in order to enhance productivity. Secondly, in society as a whole, the use of sports competitions to improve harmony and produce a national identity was a clear strategy. Thirdly, improving the ability for national defence (by improving health and morale) and finally, demonstrating the success of the imperial power (Tsai 1990: 92-93) were also projected benefits to be drawn from sports. The Japanese also introduced other sports to Taiwan, such as sumo and judo; however, the game of baseball became the favourite sport for many Taiwanese, as it already was for the Japanese, so it became a specific vehicle to implement and maintain the government's dominant power and political ideologies, and also to reproduce the Japanese identity.

Baseball @ the Kuomintang Regime

Taiwan formally returned to Chinese rule in 1945. By 1947, however, due to the '2/28 Incident' of 28 February when the KMT government slaughtered up to 28,000 native Taiwanese, divisions began to appear between the local Taiwanese, the newly arrived mainland Chinese, and the KMT government, which was fleeing the oncoming Communist army. Although, Taiwan returned to Chinese rule in 1945, baseball had not initially been seen as a political tool by the KMT government. It was not until the end of the 1960s, when the Red Leaf baseball team defeated the visiting Japanese Wakayama baseball team in 1968, that the KMT government started to sense that the game of baseball had a great

influence within the islanders' society which could perhaps be used as a means to diminish the divisions.

In the 1970s, the KMT government faced many international political crises such as the expulsion from the United Nations, Japan, and the USA severing diplomatic relations, and the 'two Chinas' issue concerning Taiwan's membership in the International Olympic Committee. These crises not only led to the whole of Taiwanese society losing confidence in the KMT government, but the KMT government's political legitimacy was also challenged in the international arena. When a country cannot find any strength to win people's beliefs, achievement in sports is often a means to build up loyalty in the people and to create the sense of 'nation'. In the 1970s, Taiwan was exactly in this position. During that period, the government used the great achievements in international baseball competitions to arouse a patriotic fervour and to reproduce a Chinese identity whilst dampening the still smouldering feelings of parochialism, and to maintain political hegemony.

There has been a growing amount of literature analysing the role of politics in sports and the role of sports in national and international politics. This short article has endeavoured to demonstrate how politics has played a significant role in the historical development of baseball in Taiwan. In my research, I am trying to highlight elements of each of these areas within my analysis of the history and contemporary place of baseball in Taiwanese society and international relations. It is my hope that the conclusions can provide a useful groundwork for further sports sociology research in Taiwan. <

references

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