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# The Tokyo Olympic Stadium: Site of National Memory

**Akiko Hashimoto**

**Abstract:** The Olympic Games are burdened with this inherent paradox of universal humanism and chauvinistic nationalism. Japan took palpable national pride in being the first ever Asian host of the modern Olympic Games in 1964 and in executing the mission with zeal, precision and order. Hosting the 2020 Olympics again represents Japan's aspiration to play a significant role in the global world – and rebranding Tokyo as a leading global city -- but this grand scheme has also invoked some antagonistic sentiments at home.

The *Olympic truce* practiced in ancient Greece was a pact of ceasefire observed every four years by warring city-states to celebrate the international sport competitions in Olympia. Inspired by the idea that peace could be achieved between belligerent states when people turned their attention to international athletic contests, a French educator decided to revive the ancient sports festival, and thus gave birth to the modern Olympic Games in 1896.

Pierre de Coubertin's lofty ideal did not survive the 20<sup>th</sup> Century intact. Two bloody world wars would force the cancellation of three Olympic Games (1916, 1940, and 1944), Cold War hostilities would lead to mass boycotts of two Olympic Games (1980 and 1984), and a violent terrorist attack would turn another Game (1972) into a bloodbath. The ostensible goal of fostering international peace clashed repeatedly with the naked reality of national antagonisms. Global politics would intrude over and over in the polarized world.

The Olympic Games are burdened with this inherent paradox of universal humanism and chauvinistic nationalism. This tension is evident even when we trace the Olympic history of individual host nations, and Japan's Olympic history has been one of the most turbulent in this regard. Japan forfeited hosting the 1940 Olympics because of the Sino-Japan War, was banned from participating in the 1948 Olympic Games because of its war guilt in World War II, and then a decade and a half later, finally hosted the 1964 Olympics as the first Asian nation to do so. In Tokyo, many urban sites and buildings, city infrastructure and institutions embody this turbulent Olympic history as sites of memory, *les lieux de memoire* (Nora, 1996). Those sites can remind us today of how Japan was transformed through decades of war and peace, negotiating the compelling and contradictory impulses of nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

## National Stadium as *Lieu de Memoire*

The site where the 2020 Olympic Stadium stands today in Tokyo's Meiji Shrine Outer Park (*Meiji Jingu Gaien*) has seen three generations of national sports stadiums built over the last 104 years. Each is associated directly with Japan's national memories of war and peace as they were defined by the volatile political landscape in the last century. Together they occupy the center of Japan's Olympic memories.

1. The first, the Meiji Jingū Gaien Stadium (1924-56) was built as the national stadium for the largest international sports competition of Asian nations (The Far Eastern Games 1930),

though the competition was disbanded later after Japan's invasion of Manchuria. It is in this sports stadium that Japan had also planned to host the 1940 Tokyo Olympics, before the Sino-Japan War broke out. The site is, however, etched in national memory less as a sports arena and more as the site of an unforgettable military march in 1943, when 25,000 new student conscript soldiers of the region were mournfully sent off to war, as the university student mobilization exemption came to an end. This Stadium is now remembered predominantly as the site of that massive military send-off amid an ever-worsening war, when Japan sent its best and brightest from elite universities to the battlefield, with slim chances of return. Indeed, many of those student soldiers who marched in the torrential rain on that October day never returned.

The Stadium would become intertwined further with the war as it became part of an Imperial military installation in the district. It was also bombed heavily in the wartime air raids. After Japan lost the war, the stadium, along with the surrounding areas of central Tokyo, was confiscated by the American Occupation who renamed it the "Nike Kinnick Stadium" after a Heisman Trophy winning football player who died as a US Navy aviator in World War II. A few years later, while still under the U.S. Occupation, Japan, along with Germany, was banned from the first postwar Olympic Games in London (1948).

2. The second arena to be built on the site, replacing the Meiji Jingū Gaien Stadium, was the National Stadium (1958-2015), well-known for hosting the 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics. Japan declared this event to be a "Festival for Peace" (*heiwa no saiten*), representing Japan's quest to be a modern nation-state striving for the future of international peace. It was a singular opportunity for Japan to demonstrate to the world that it had become a stable, pacifist, advanced-industrial nation, after waging a disastrous war for a decade and a

half. The IOC President Avery Brundage appeared to confer that recognition when he declared at the opening ceremony in the Stadium that: "The Olympic Games at last are here in the Orient, proving that they belong to the entire world." As thousands of international delegates from 93 nations paid respects to the Emperor and dignitaries in the Stadium - during a two-hour long march that was telecast to millions of international spectators -- Japan's day in the sun within the world community of athletes seemed to have finally arrived.

Japan took palpable national pride in being the first ever Asian host of the modern Olympic Games and in executing the mission with zeal, precision and order. Broadcasters at the ceremony gave voice to the collective sentiment that Japan had struggled through "a very long, very hard journey," to become Asia's champion for peace, no doubt alluding to the phantom Tokyo Olympics of 1940, the censure at the London Olympics of 1948, not to speak of the massive modernization of Tokyo to prepare for the Games. Indeed, Tokyo's urban space was transformed wholesale; its infrastructure was overhauled with new architecture and buildings, public transportation systems like bullet trains, subways and highways were built, public sanitation, deluxe hotels and services became available, all propelled by double-digit economic growth. As historian Yoshikuni Igarashi (2000) has noted, the Japanese hosts were driven by a quest for recovery and equality in their international standing, a goal which also conveniently masked the scars of a humiliating international war.

Remembered today, the iconic scenes of the 1964 Olympics - from the opening ceremony in the Stadium to the individual sporting events - may be indistinguishable in our minds from the images we have seen in Ichikawa Kon's masterpiece *The Tokyo Olympiad* (1965). This film, viewed by the largest film audience ever in Japanese film history (23 million), holds a special significance in shaping Japan's Olympic

memory. Ichikawa understood the inherent paradox of the Olympic Games – the tension between internationalist ideals and nationalist interests – and captured its embodiment in the events without ever giving in to ideological or partisan clichés. Ichikawa portrayed the glory, despair, passion and suffering of the Olympic competition as a human endeavor, illustrating the achievement of athletes in all its beauty and struggles. The film acutely disappointed the Japanese government’s expectations (“not nationalistic enough”) but brilliantly encapsulated the extraordinary human achievements of international sports beyond national partisanship.

Ichikawa also portrayed the people who prepared the event, spectators, and everyone who joined in the Olympics (Nakaji 2019). Practically every waking Japanese citizen watched the finals of women’s volleyball and brimmed with national pride for its victory against the Soviet Union (highest ever television ratings of 66%). Spectators were also enthralled with the men’s gymnastics victories, tinged with a palatable sense of postwar redemption. While the seeds of sports nationalism in Japan may be found in some of these events, however, Ichikawa never gives them glory. Indeed, the very first appearance of Japan’s national flag, raised along with the national anthem for a gold medalist, occurs only after 83 minutes into the film. The most memorable cinematic scenes are those that portray the weight of people’s struggles and strains: the solitary and somber figure of the illustrious women’s volleyball’s coach at the moment of victory; spectators gasping in horror as a Japanese marathon runner is demoted to third place before the finish line in the Stadium; and the crushing disbelief when Japan’s judo champion is downed by a two-meter tall Dutchman, squelching Japan’s hope of winning a Gold in its own national sport. Through Ichikawa’s vision, postwar Japan was to gain a clearer understanding of how to carry national pride without the nationalist fervor of

decades past.

3. The third arena to be built on the same site, replacing the National Stadium, is the *New National Stadium* (2019- ) which will host the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics. In the half century since the last Tokyo Games, modern Olympics have become a quadrennial extravaganza driven by the global media; along the way, much of public awareness about the meaning of this now mega-event has changed (Nakaji 2019). The young, talented Japanese athletes poised to march into this New National Stadium on the opening day of the 2020 Olympics symbolize a multicultural future. More of Japan’s best and brightest athletes now are biracial or naturalized citizens, and these non-ethnic Japanese who are global celebrities will be toiling hard to make the nation proud. With their growing visibility, a new sports identity and sports fandom are emerging.

Hosting the 2020 Olympics again represents Japan’s aspiration to play a significant role in the global world – and rebranding Tokyo as a leading global city -- but this grand scheme has also invoked some antagonistic sentiments at home. Anti-Olympic proponents are aggrieved by the spiraling high costs of constructing venues that could be diverted to the recovery of the northeast region destroyed by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami disasters. They have also cautioned against the repressive expectations that citizens cooperate and fall in line collectively “for the sake of Olympics,” likening them to the collaborationist sentiments that aided Japan’s wartime efforts. Still others have decried the U.S. media’s corporate interest to hold the mega-event in the hottest month of the year, without regard to the athletes’ physical conditioning or performance (Mōri 2019).

The 2020 Olympic Games have also not been spared from global politics and corruption that have become ubiquitous in recent decades: bribery allegations have been made against the

Japanese Olympic Committee in its bidding process, leading to the President's resignation. Doping investigations have led to a ban on Russia to participate in the 2020 Olympics. South Korea has formally requested Japan to ban in Olympic venues the use of the rising sun flag (the red dot surrounded with 16 rays) that harkens back to the colonial and wartime past. Fearing the politicization of the 2020 Olympics, the IOC has now issued a ban on any political gesture, protest and demonstration by athletes at the medal ceremonies and any Olympic venue.

### Conclusion:

Although the *Olympic Truce* never thwarted the hot and cold wars and other international conflicts, the Games nevertheless remain the world's premier stage for sports competitions, watched and followed by billions of viewers around the globe. Seen as a mega-event that brings together the participation of 200 nations, it is an international spectacle *sui generis*. For all the problems and shortcomings of the Olympics today - from costs and commercialism, to corruption, boycotts and politics - the Games are still a potent reminder that the world community can still find common ground and purpose for a fortnight every few years. As the closing ceremonies in the national stadiums never fail to remind us, the Games bring together the widest spectrum of people of different race, ethnicities, religion, and nationality who can demonstrate the power of fellowship and unity in the moment. Referring to the intermingling of international athletes parading together at those closing ceremonies, broadcasters are quick to make remarks such as "one world, one dream." The intermingling of international athletes expected in Tokyo's New National Stadium at the end of the Games in 2020 will likely add another dimension to the *lieu de memoire*.

The Tokyo Summer Games of 2020 will be the

seventh Olympics hosted in Asia, following the Summer/Winter Games in Tokyo (1964), Sapporo (1972), Seoul (1988), Nagano (1998), Beijing (2008), and Pyeongchang (2018). The Beijing Winter Games will follow in 2022 as the eighth hosted in Asia over a span of six decades. In East Asia where political tensions run high, enmities remain unresolved, and missile tests from North Korea threaten regional security, hosting the Olympic Games has come to serve as a tool of public diplomacy. As the host nations rise to the occasion and pursue national prestige, they also maintain their best behavior toward one another in the fortnight of *Olympic truce*. In 2020, Taiwan and Hong Kong will participate as state entities separate from China. North and South Korea plan to participate as unified teams in several sports. As anthropologist William Kelly (2011, 14) suggested, the Olympic Games, for all their imperfections, may remain "popular, powerful and profitable" not only because they move us with athletic excellence but also because they force us to confront the fundamental issues of politics, economics and culture in the world that call for more attention and better solutions.<sup>1</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As I completed this essay, I became aware of Gotō Takeo's book *Kokuritsu Kyōgijō no 100 nen* (Kyoto: Minerva Shobō, 2013). While I did not have the opportunity to profit from it myself, interested readers may wish to explore it.