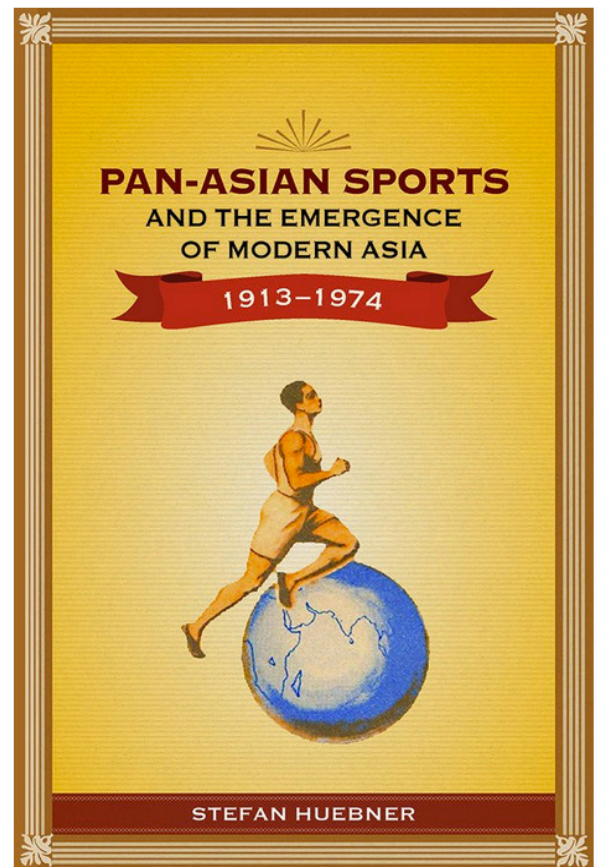


BOOK REVIEW: *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913-1974*, by Stefan Huebner

By Susan Brownell, University of Missouri-St. Louis

Sports in general, and Asian sports in particular, have been an under-studied topic in any language until recently. China's hosting of the 2008 summer Olympic Games to mark its emergence as a superpower, together with the upcoming three Olympic Games in East Asia (PyeongChang 2018; Tokyo 2020, Beijing-Zhangjiakou 2022) have attracted increasing attention from scholars and media who have realized that sports play an important role in Asian regional and international relations. This book shows that they have done so since the turn of the last century. *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913-1974* joins an emerging critical mass of scholarship. It pursues the novel but somewhat limited approach of focusing on the major regional games that have taken place in Asia. Thus, it covers the temporal span from the first Far Eastern Championship Games (FECG) (1913-1934) to the first through Seventh Asian Games (1951-1974), with a detour through the first and only Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO), held in Indonesia in 1963. Along with these better-studied events, it is perhaps the first work to integrate discussions of two one-off events, the West Asiatic Games in India in 1934, and Asian GANEFO in Cambodia in 1966, into analysis of more well-known events. The book covers the vast geographical span covered by the FECG – which primarily included the Philippines, Japan, China, and Hong Kong – to the Asian Games, held in India (1951), the Philippines (1954), Japan (1958), Indonesia (1962), Thailand (1966 and 1970) and Iran (1974). The 1974 Asian Games were the first major sports event for the People's Republic of China, which after its founding in 1949 refused (and still refuses) to join any international organizations that recognize the "Republic of China" (Taiwan), a source of continual tension in the Asian Games Federation.



The focus of the book is on the hosting of these mega-events as an expression of pan-Asianism. As the book proceeds, it becomes clear that, whatever the semantic differences, the various attempts at constructing pan-Asianism shared the pragmatic goals of establishing regional solidarity, identity, and peace. In addition to the expected macro-level political and economic background, to pin down the various brands of pan-Asianism, Huebner employs clever micro-level analysis of the lives and thinking of key individuals, the rhetoric in speeches and mission statements, and – his most original method – the symbolism in medals and trophies, opening and closing ceremonies, monumental architecture, and other symbolic expressions.

A fascinating overall picture emerges from this unique romp through half a century of Asian history. The paradox of hosting sports events against the background of colonialism and war makes it seem almost miraculous that the events discussed in the book were held at all over such

a long span of time, so that Asia not only possesses the world's oldest regional games, but also the world's biggest regional games. It seems amazing that, time and again under extremely difficult circumstances, a desire for peace and connection was strong enough to overcome antagonistic ideologies and even the horrendous grievances of war and occupation. While the FECG served the universalistic aspirations of the YMCA and IOC alongside nationalist interests, the book depicts pan-Asianism after World War II as an anti-Western, anti-colonial reaction: the horrors of that war had discredited the West's "civilizing mission," and the Korean War and the Cold War made Asian leaders fearful that the West was going to pull everyone into another world war. Thus, pan-Asian solidarity was not internally-driven, but resulted from a perceived shared threat coming from the West. Japan recurs as the "most advanced nation" that other nations wanted to match, sometimes winning more medals than all the other nations combined. Japan itself seemed to always have one eye on its standing in the Western-dominated global order. The prevalence of the Grecian symbols in the 1958 Asian Games in Japan at a time when Japan was bidding to host the 1964 Olympic Games and wanted to win over the Western-dominated IOC is particularly telling.

The book also shows how nationalism linked with pan-Asianism motivated self-interested government leaders to host the games as a platform for bigger regional strategies. A series of nations emerge one after the other with aspirations of leading their own brand of pan-Asianism, only to disappear again due to domestic regime changes and/or an inability to mobilize other nations behind their visions. Despite organizing the first Asian Games, India had a negative image in the region due to the corruption and lack of organizational skills seen in its attempts to organize sports events. In the early 1960s, Indonesia's Sukarno attempted to utilize sports in leading the Non-Aligned Movement, but in short order he was replaced in a coup d'état. Then the Philippines and Thailand, with their pro-American stance, were unable to attract the support of anti-Western and Muslim nations. Iran succeeded where they had failed, but the Shah's Indian Ocean Project to create a zone of peace and a common market ended with the revolution there. Huebner does an excellent job of drilling down below the macro-level politics to point out the myriad of practical obstacles in constructing pan-Asianism. The lack of a common language and culture led to the paradoxical use of English and neo-classical Greek symbolism even though they represented the very same Western culture that Asian leaders rejected. But Western colonialism and imperialism were the one history that they all had shared: in the end, *Auld Lang Syne* became the song sung by the spectators and athletes at the end of the closing ceremonies.

The author frequently returns to an argument that the "egalitarian internationalism" of sports was a sufficiently ecumenical concept that all Asian nations could accept, in contrast it with the Western "civilizing mission" and its Christian underpinning. Because of the range of events covered, for any one of the events, only a smattering of speeches and other evidence can be provided. The thorough search of relevant archives is praiseworthy, but it relies heavily on English-language sources, and on sources about sports. Engaging more fully with primary sources in the languages of the respective countries, literature on the general historical context, and critical postcolonial studies would no doubt have required several more years of research, help with translation, and a still longer book. However, this reader is left feeling that the book has only scratched the surface, and that a number of arguments are worthy of fuller treatment. The book's main question is "Why and how did the early Asian Games and their predecessors turn into sites of contestation of the nation and of visions of a modern Asia?" (p. 10). However, without comparison with other channels that might have served the same purposes, it is difficult to evaluate the importance of sports in the bigger picture of nationalism and pan-Asianism. The major accomplishment of the book is to reveal a very interesting history of Asia through the lens of major sports events.