

BASEBALL AND *BESUBORU*: INTRODUCTION

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This edition of *Studies on Asia* is based on papers presented at a conference on “Baseball and *Besuboru*” sponsored by the Asian Studies Center at Michigan State University on April 1, 2006. As the two-word title suggests, the game may be similar everywhere, but is not exactly the same anywhere. The papers, the sometimes heated discussions among panelists they ignited, and dialogue with the audience made clear just how different the game (or is it games?) can be in various cultural, social, and historical settings. But it was not just the differences in the pastime that made the conference so excitingly eye-opening. What also became evident as the conference progressed is that baseball in its various national and international contexts says much that is salient about the societies in which the game is played. Baseball is a game, but it is much more than that. It is also a powerful economic force, a ladder for social mobility, a vessel freighted with national symbols, and for many something of a sacred cultural preserve with practices (or is it rituals?) that delineate them from us. Given the richness of the subject, the trajectories that begin with the game but fly in new, unexpected directions, we are presenting several of the conference papers, in revised and edited versions, for our *Studies on Asia* readers.

As is the case with several of the contributors to this edition, I first became fascinated with baseball by playing the game and just a little after that finding a pro team that provided player idols to worship when they won and grieve over when they lost. My first appreciation of baseball’s contribution to higher education pedagogy came out of a need to find something that inspires undergraduate students in the *historical* relevance of the mundane. J.H. Hexter’s essay in the *International Encyclopedia of Social Science* on how the New York Giants got into the 1951 World Series, a piece he grandiloquently titled “The Rhetoric of History,” worked perfectly to spark an interest in social history, cliometrics, and narrative varieties. The essays included in this issue bear on these same historical approaches and might be helpful in encouraging students who perpetually wonder about any immediate connection between history and their own lives.

In addition to history, these articles consider baseball from the vantage points of anthropology and sociology. In particular, a concern with nature versus nurture, or cultural essentialism versus shared solutions to shared problems, runs like a common thread throughout these essays. As he did at the conference, Robert Whiting contends that there is something essentially different about the way the game is played in Japan; in effect, there really is a difference between “baseball” and “beesuboru,” and the difference is socially and culturally deep and enduring. William Kelly, who took part in the conference but whose essay we were not able to include in this collection, took a position

at odds with Whiting's in arguing that against national character as explanation for specific differences. Peter Bjarkman's enriches the debate by considering the "alternative sporting universes" of Korean, Taiwanese, and Cuban varieties of baseball. My own modest contribution on Moe Berg's sweeping views of prewar Japanese society and culture attempts to give a first-hand view of how one player perceived the enduring cultural and social difference during the prewar period. Robert K. Fitts, who also took part in the conference, brought the debate forward into the post-war period by examining the experiences of American players who played in Japan. His findings are published in his *Remembering Japanese Baseball: an Oral History of the Game* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

I deeply appreciate our contributors' willingness to allow their articles to be edited and published *Studies on Asia*. I am also grateful to co-editor Bill Londo, who has done much of the work in editing these pieces for publication. Transforming panel presentations into publishable essays is challenge that our authors and editors have met and met successfully.

Of course, the academic value of these essays need not be justified to true-blue baseball fans. They do not need such justification for a conference on their favorite sport because its value is self-evident. Yet, as these articles remind us, there is educative value in realizing that baseball is and has been for a long time a lot more than just the American pastime. That message comes thorough unmistakably in this volume.

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