

Cross-Cultural Communication, Localization, and Diplomacy: Role of Baseball in Shaping Japan-South Korea Relations

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Abstract:

As a type of soft power, sports play an important role in international diplomacy and cross-cultural exchange. Baseball, due to its cultural and political significance, thus has been integrated into the historical evolution and diplomatic interactions of Japan and Korea. This paper makes a systematic study of baseball in shaping Japan-Korea relations since the introduction of baseball to the present. The research is based on theories of cross-cultural exchange, sports diplomacy, people-to-people diplomacy, and national identity, using methods such as literature review and case study. It is found that baseball has undergone a localized process in Japan and Korea after its introduction. Then, it became a significant bridge for people-to-people exchanges between the two countries after World War II. Meanwhile, it also served as a key field for competing national identity. At present, the interaction of baseball between Japan and South Korea shows a pattern of both competitions and cooperations. Overall, this research makes an attempt to overcome the limitations of existing research that focuses only on single periods or events, and tries to build a framework for Japan-South Korea interactions around baseball. It can not only enrich the study of sports and international relations, but also provide a reference for understanding the role of sports in diplomatic interactions in East Asia.

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication; sports diplomacy; baseball; Japan-Korea relations; national identity.

1. Introduction

Sports, as a universal human activity, has the power

to change the world, inspire people, and unite the masses [1]. It is an important and positive form of soft power for promoting international understanding

and shaping a national image [2]. Baseball was used as a tool of governance, to control the society, and as part of colonial governance and so-called “civilizing” missions, which led to the colonial baseball system, making baseball increasingly important in national relationships [3]. Therefore, baseball plays a significant role in shaping national relations. It is not only a sport, but also a carrier of cross-cultural communication, understanding and identity. Baseball, as a sport with profound cultural and political meaning, was closely connected to the historical processes and diplomatic dynamics of Japan and South Korea. Baseball was firstly introduced to East Asia by American missionaries and educators. It reached Japan in 1872 and reached the Korean Peninsula around 1894 [3]. Then, baseball took root and developed quickly in the different social contexts of these two countries. In the early 20th century, baseball became widely popular in East Asia through school sports, grassroots competitions, and cultural exchanges. After World War II, Japan and South Korea established professional baseball systems [4]. Moreover, because of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea in 1965, baseball became a bridge for sports diplomacy and people-to-people diplomacy between these two countries. Now, events of baseball such as the World Baseball Classic and professional league exchanges further strengthened the role of baseball in balancing competition and cooperation in relations between Japan and South Korea.

This study not only enables people to reexamine the sports exchanges and cultural integration in modern East Asia from the perspective of sports, but also provides a perspective of historical and practical significance for interpreting the cultural interactions and identity competitions in contemporary East Asia.

2. Literature Review

This paper systematically reviews representative academic works on development of baseball, sports diplomacy, people-to-people diplomacy, and cultural exchanges in East Asia, including fields such as sports history, cultural heritage, international relations, and diplomacy. Existing literatures can be summarized into three core research perspectives, which have both advantages and limitations.

2.1 Sports History and Cross-Cultural Communication

Roden looked back on the introduction of baseball during Meiji period and showed its integration with Japanese collectivism and samurai spirit, clarifying the characterization of baseball in shaping the symbol of Japanese national spirit [5]. In addition, Reaves studied the origin

of baseball in Korea. He recorded the early development of Korean baseball teams and competitions, and appended the historical background of early spread of baseball in Korea [4]. These studies laid a solid historical foundation for understanding the introduction of baseball into East Asia. However, these papers lacked comparative analysis perspective and relevant discussion of the connection between the two countries in baseball.

2.2 Sports Diplomacy, Soft Power and People-to-People Diplomacy Perspective

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela put forward the important power of sports in 1995 [1]. Shearer (2014), has further defined sports as a vehicle for soft power and public diplomacy, pointing out that sports events can ease international tensions [2]. Moreover, TURPEAU, ANNE B argued that people-to-people diplomacy, as a kind of grassroots activism, can break down political barriers and achieve international understanding [6]. These studies provided the theoretical basis for sports diplomacy. However, they did not mention any specific examples of baseball interactions between Japan and Korea.

2.3 Cultural Heritage and National Identity Perspective

Choi and Shackel explored the heritage of baseball in South Korea. They argued that Korean baseball has ties to both geographical culture and popular culture, analysing the connection between baseball and Korean national identity [7]. This study focused on cultural functions of baseball in Korea, but it did not further link baseball to diplomatic interactions between Japan and South Korea. Generally, existing research often focuses on single events or periods, which lacked a systematic analysis of that how baseball has dynamically shaped relations between Japan and South Korea from the colonial period to the present. However, this paper aims to fill the research gap by applying theories of people-to-people diplomacy, national identity, and sports diplomacy, and using methods such as literature review and case analysis. In short, this research explores the role of baseball in shaping relations between Japan and South Korea, and shows its unique value.

3. Historical Context

By the 1870s, baseball already became the national sport of the United States, defined as an embodiment of male virtues such as courage, discipline, and vitality, and was introduced to Japan in 1872 by American missionaries and educators [5].

At this time, Japan was in the early Meiji period. The Jap-

anese treaty revision movement and the protection of Korean interests fuelled a surge in nationalism. Meanwhile, the civilization and enlightenment movement promoted modernization and Westernization. Therefore, Japan began to search for a national sport that could represent its collective national spirit. Traditional Japanese sports like Judo and Kendo were considered too individualistic. However, baseball, as a foreign sport, with its concepts of teamwork and fair competition, was interpreted by some Meiji intellectuals as compatible with ideals of discipline, teamwork, and national strength, which was quickly localized and became a core sport among society.

Baseball in Meiji Japan was not merely a sport or entertainment. It embodied Japanese nationalist sentiments and became a cultural symbol in shaping national spirit and pursuing national dignity.

Baseball in South Korea was also initially introduced from the United States. Philip Loring Gillett, an American missionary, who is considered the father of Korean baseball, formed the first baseball team of Korea in Seoul in 1905. On February 11, 1906, the Seoul Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) team played against the Seoul German Language Academy near the site of today's Seoul Stadium, marking the first officially recorded baseball game in Korea. However, baseball initially did not gain much popularity in South Korea as basketball and football, but it gradually took root through campus and non-governmental promotions.

4. Localization Period

After baseball was introduced to Japan and South Korea, it was gradually integrated into local social and cultural environment, forming localized baseball cultures, which laid the historical foundation for future baseball development and sports exchanges.

4.1 Localization in Japan

Japan integrated baseball into the construction of national spirit. Through school education and social organizations, Japan promoted baseball and formed a standardized baseball system centred on high school tournaments such as Koshien [8]. Japanese baseball emphasized collective honour and disciplined competitive spirit, which became a sports culture deeply rooted in Japanese society later.

In 1896, Japan won the Japan-US Baseball International Tournament championship, gaining international recognition. In the first game, First Higher School (Ichikō) decisively defeated Yokohama Sports Club 29-4, breaking the Western stereotypes of Japanese physique. Then, Ichigo continued to win in subsequent matches. Between 1897 and 1904, Ichigo played nine more games against Yoko-

hama American team, winning eight. These achievements completely overturned the inherent concept that baseball was only an American sport [5].

4.2 Localization in Korea

In 1922, Major League Baseball (MLB) players such as Waite Hoyt travelled to Korea to play exhibition games with Korean amateur players, sparking the interest in baseball among Korean people. In 1925, the University of Chicago and the Philadelphia Women's Professional Baseball Team visited Korea. Furthermore, in 1927, the Philadelphia Royal Giants of the American African League also visited Korea. These events continued to strengthen the influence of American baseball [7].

Unlike top-down promotion of Japan, the early development of Korean baseball relied on grassroots efforts. For examples, Korea promoted baseball through the YMCA, schools, and non-governmental groups, adapting the sport to Korean social customs [7]. Therefore, it gradually formed a sports culture closely connected to folk life and regional identity. This localization laid a unique cultural foundation for Korean baseball, avoiding simple copying of foreign models.

During the period of separate development of baseball in Japan and Korea, there was a lot of exchanges and competitions between the two countries because of some reasons such as colonization. Japan, to some extent, limited the development of baseball in Korea. Therefore, sometimes, the victory of the South Korean team over the Japanese team can strongly evoke nationalist sentiments among Koreans.

In this process, baseball development in Japan and South Korea focused on adapting to their respective social needs, including holding some matches and exchanges, which laid the foundation for future sports exchanges and diplomacy.

5. Post World War II

From the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s, the development of baseball in Japan and South Korea nearly stopped due to the outbreak of World War II, with only a few professional games remaining. After 1945, the end of World War II, the government established the Korea Baseball Association to promote its development, thus, baseball rapidly revived.

Following the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, the US military that stationed in South Korea further promoted baseball. In 1954, South Korea joined the International Baseball Federation. Subsequently, South Korea won a series of national competitions. Baseball officially became a national sport in South Korea.

5.1 Establishment of Professional Baseball Systems

Nippon Professional Baseball of Japan was fully consolidated and developed, with a complete talent training and competition system. South Korean baseball learned many characteristics of Japanese baseball. For example, the Korean High School Baseball Championship followed Japan's Koshien baseball tournament. The Korea Baseball Organization (KBO) league system was modelled after the Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB). Besides, some advanced techniques and high technology equipment were introduced from the Japanese league [4].

5.2 Baseball Diplomacy and People-to-People Diplomacy

After World War II, baseball relations between Japan and South Korea moved towards equal exchange and interaction. People-to-people diplomacy of baseball was a very important part, promoting national relations between Japan and South Korea through regular exchanges and competitions. For instance, in 1954, Japan and South Korea had a competition in the Asian Baseball Championship, marking the resumption of formal baseball exchanges between these two countries. Although it was fierce, with the South Korean team being shut out 0-6 in this game, this game laid the good foundation for subsequent grassroots baseball interactions and helped gradually ease the post-war hatred and alienation between Japan and South Korea to some extent.

Baseball was significant in politics and formal diplomacy. In 1958, the St. Louis Cardinals visited South Korea, with President Syngman Rhee throwing the ceremonial first pitch to over 30,000 audience. Although the South Korean team lost, its performance gained international recognition [4]. Besides, during the dictatorship of Park Chung-hee, baseball became a political and diplomatic tool in relations with Japan, and lots of baseball players went to Japan to study.

5.3 Conflicts of National Identity

At the same time, some nationalist conflicts can still be seen in the baseball field. The government did not have public discussion regarding the establishment of diplomatic relations with Japan, leading to the suppression of anti-Japanese sentiment. Therefore, anti-Japanese sentiment was released in the form of demonstrations [9]. In the field of baseball, after the KBO was established in 1982, Korean players in Japan returned to their home country to participate in the competition. However, they were discriminated against due to anti-Japanese sentiment. They were called pan-jjokbari, which is a derogatory term,

meaning half-Japanese.

6. Modern Development Period

Currently, baseball-related interactions between Japan and South Korea enters a diversified interactive stage, characterized by competition and cooperation.

6.1 Baseball and South Korean Identity

Although baseball in South Korea was influenced by the US and Japan, it has developed its own unique intangible cultural heritage. Its core characteristics include, firstly, a collective cheering culture, with each team having its own unique cheering slogans that incorporate regional elements. Second, a diverse sensory experience, with local cuisine becoming attractive points. Thirdly, the influence of popular culture. Films, songs, and other popular cultures pass on nationalism of South Korean baseball to the younger generation. For example, the film YMCA Baseball Team in 2002 described the colonial history of the first baseball team of South Korea in 1905. The film The Perfect Game told the story of two legendary pitchers.

6.2 National Identity and Friendly Exchanges

On the one hand, fierce competitions happen between these two countries in aspect of national identity. For South Korea, baseball symbolizes national identity and unity, and Koreans have a deep emotional connection to baseball, as well as a strong sense of national identity and pride in it. After the victory of South Korea over Japan in the 2006 World Baseball Classic (WBC), a Korean player planted the South Korean flag on the mound to express nationalistic sentiments. It can be seen in that baseball serves as a bond for overseas Koreans to maintain their national identity.

On the other hand, there is also deep cooperation between Japan and South Korea. For example, players move frequently between the NPB and KBO, and joint exchange matches are usually held. In November 2025, the Rakuten Golden Eagles of the NPB and the KT Wiz of the KBO participated in the Asian Professional Baseball Exchange Tournament in Taiwan, attracting an audience of over 22,000, showing the cooperative aspect of baseball relations [10].

7. Summary

Based on theories of transcultural communication, national identity, people-to-people diplomacy and sports diplomacy, this paper explores the process and underlying logic of how baseball shapes relations between Japan and South Korea from the introduction of baseball to the present.

This paper reaches three main conclusions. First, baseball entered East Asia through cross-cultural diffusion and was localized by Japan and South Korea, forming distinctive local sports cultures, which is the historical foundation of exchanges. Secondly, after World War II, baseball gradually became a bridge for Japan-Korea exchange and interaction, and also a fierce area for competition of national identity. Finally, Japan and South Korea formed a pattern of competition and cooperation now. The underlying logic of baseball shaping relations of Japan and South Korea is the interaction of historical memory, national identity, and national interests. As a cultural symbol, baseball carries both historical grievances and promotes cooperation of interests, playing an important role in the complex international relationships.

This article attempts to break through the limitations of existing research that focus on single periods or single events, and to integrate a relatively complete framework from the perspective of time, which slightly reveals the dynamic process of how baseball shaping relations between Japan and Korea, enriches interdisciplinary research in sports and international relations, and provides a reference for subsequent research on the role of sports in international relations.

Nevertheless, this article also has some limitations. Firstly, the analysis of this paper relies more on literature support and case studies, lacking quantitative data such as mobility statistics of baseball players, media report and economic influence of baseball games. Besides, it lacks in-depth research on baseball during colonial period. For example, baseball colonial policies and ethical resistance embodied in baseball were complex and meaningful to research. For further research, richer materials can be used to enhance the reliability of research, such as archives, media and statistical data. Moreover, the perspective can be expanded to multilateral framework. It can help to reveal the broader significance of baseball in East Asia cultural interaction and regional integration.

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