

The Development of Post-WWII Japanese Baseball Culture Under Dual Domestic and External Driving Forces

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Abstract:

After World War II (WWII), the Japanese government was facing the challenges of rebuilding domestic cultural order and restoring Japan's international image. This process was not only a matter of political reconstruction, but also a broader attempt to reshape social values, public memory, and Japan's cultural position in the postwar world. As an imported foreign sport from America, baseball functioned as a tool for demilitarization in Japan and for the construction of Japan-U.S. cultural identity during the occupation period. Through its association with American leisure, discipline, teamwork, and fair competition, baseball provided a relatively gentle and popular medium through which postwar Japanese society could distance itself from wartime militarism. Meanwhile, the Japanese government, education system, and mass media fostered the localization of baseball culture in Japan through school physical education, competition systems, infrastructure construction, and cultural diffusion. These mechanisms gradually transformed baseball from an imported sport into a widely accepted national cultural practice, especially among students and urban audiences. From the perspective of international relations and cultural construction, this paper clarifies that the development of baseball culture was not a pure cultural transplantation, but the result of both external impetus and internal renovation.

Keywords: Baseball; cultural localization; national image; sport diplomacy.

1. Introduction

With the openness of global culture and deepening cultural interactions nowadays, the localization of foreign culture and establishment of national image

become a critical topic for current researches. Sports, as a vital culture carrier, combines both competitiveness and ornamental value, emerging as an important medium for a country to shape its national image and conduct international exchanges.

Compared with other cultural products, sports possess stronger capacity for embedding and diffusing in the society. It can not only enter the public consciousness through competitions and viewing, but also continuously expand its influence based on school education, social organizations, media communication, and urban public spaces. Thus, the development of a sport in a country can often reflect not only its competitive level, but also the social and cultural structure, public value orientations, and modes of national image construction of that country. The post-war development of baseball in Japan is highly representative. It entailed not merely a simple process of sports transmission, but a historical process intertwined with social reconstruction, cultural readjustment and international representation. In the mid-twentieth century, Japan entered a historical phase marked by an ideological vacuum in its internal cultural system and a collapsed international image after World War II. Simultaneously, Japan also took the introduction of baseball as an opportunity to fill its cultural void and reshape its national image. It embedded baseball into education, built relevant infrastructure and local competitions, carried out the localization of baseball culture, and tied the sport to its national image through publicity. This allowed baseball to integrate deeply with Japanese local culture and national spirit, realizing the successful localization of baseball and the improvement of Japan's national image.

This paper takes the introduction of baseball in Japan as its analytical subject, examining and analyzing how baseball, as an imported sporting culture, entered Japan under the influence of U.S. geopolitical strategy, successfully localized itself through reform and support from the Japanese government, and eventually became an important medium for Japan to showcase its national image and conduct cultural exchanges with the outside world.

The innovation of this paper lies in three aspects. First, it does not examine Japanese baseball merely as a sport, but places it within the broader framework of postwar cultural reconstruction, national image rebuilding, and international relations. Second, it emphasizes the dual driving forces behind the development of Japanese baseball culture, namely the external impetus of U.S. cultural policy and the internal transformation promoted by Japan's government, education system, and media. Third, it analyzes baseball localization as a hierarchical process, moving from institutional introduction to educational embedding, infrastructure construction, mass cultural dissemination, and finally international image reconstruction.

2. Literature Review

Scholars in global range have accumulated considerable

research on the development of baseball culture in Japan.

As far as the historical context is concerned, Roden pointed out that baseball in Japan during the Meiji period was no longer just a foreign sport, but was closely linked with national dignity, modern state construction and national identity; Williams further emphasized that baseball was gradually integrated into the social and cultural narrative of Japan in the 20th century and was eventually shaped into Japan's "national game" [1, 2].

As for the study of international relations and cultural communication after the war, Guthrie Shimizu pointed out that baseball was not only an important medium for the United States to reshape its relations with Japan after the war, but also an effective cultural resource for Japan to return to the international community and rebuild its image as a peaceful country; Tanikawa further revealed how the United States promoted the diffusion, institutionalization and social acceptance of baseball in Japan through cultural policies during the occupation period [3, 4].

At the level of social culture and education, Kelly's research on college baseball shows that school baseball is not a simple sports competition, but an important cultural device embedded with the mass media, national education and public ceremonies. Therefore, the extensive influence and emotional mobilization ability of baseball in Japanese society is not accidental [5].

However, the existing studies tend to analyze Japanese baseball from a single perspective, such as diplomatic role, cultural influence, and lack a systematic analysis of the driving factors, methods and logic behind the localization of baseball in Japan. Few existing literature summarize and sort out the specific measures to deal with the foreign culture and the localization transformation. At the same time, there is also a lack of in-depth analysis of the process of baseball culture reshaping Japan's national image and soft power reconstruction. Based on this, this paper examines the important role of baseball in Japan's post-war transformation, as well as the historical background and driving factors behind this process.

3. Post-War Import of Baseball Culture From U.S. to Japan

After World War II, the U.S. occupation administration implemented cultural reforms in Japan to achieved geopolitical stability in East Asia. Its primary goal was to eliminate deeply rooted militarism, bushido spirit and ultra-nationalism in Japanese society, prevent the resurgence of extremist ideologies in Japan. At the same time, it built a socio-cultural atmosphere and value system compatible with Western values in Japan. For this strategic purpose,

baseball was chosen as the core cultural carrier.

The high emphasis placed on baseball during this period was closely tied to its inherent characteristics as a modern sport. With clear rules, a high degree of organization, strong ornamental value and extensive public participation, baseball was suitable for popularization in schools and communities. It also helped generate steady and sustained social influence through media such as newspapers and radio. Compared with sports steeped in regional traditions, baseball could be more easily shaped into a popular cultural form adapted to modern society, granting it distinct dissemination advantages in the post-war social context.

In the early occupation period, the U.S. military and civil administration explicitly banned traditional sports including kendo and sumo, which had been appropriated by militarist forces. Instead, they promoted baseball on a large scale. By drawing on the values embodied in baseball, such as rule awareness, teamwork, fair competition and egalitarian civilian values, the occupying administration aimed to replace Japan's traditional Bushido culture.

As Takeshi Tanikawa argues in *Baseball in Occupied Japan*, during the occupation of Japan, the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (GHQ/SCAP) sought to suppress and regulate budo, or Japanese martial arts, as a relic of prewar Japanese militarism while encouraging people to play and watch baseball as a way to foster teamwork and sportsmanship [4].

His argument shows that during the occupation, GHQ restricted budo as a lingering legacy of militarism while actively promoting baseball participation to cultivate cooperation and sportsmanship among the Japanese public.

Under such an international situation, Japanese government had no choice but to accept the introduction of baseball culture. Meanwhile, Japan's traditional culture after World War II was deeply entangled with militarism. Constrained by international opinion, the Japanese government could not vigorously promote or publicize its traditional culture, which plunged Japan into a void in cultural soft power. In a 1990 article, Joseph Nye defined soft power as a nation's capacity to influence other states and shape its international image through cultural attraction, value recognition and social appeal by non-coercive means [6].

Accordingly, Japan was in urgent need of reshaping its domestic cultural climate and external national image.

Faced with such practical demands, baseball, with its openness, emphasis on rules and popular accessibility, emerged as a highly suitable cultural resource. At this time, baseball, as a foreign sport, has no obvious political attribute and can also serve as a medium to carry the new social culture and national spirit of Japan after the war.

It's not appropriate to understand the spread of baseball in this period simply as the spread of an ordinary sport. Instead, it should be considered in the context of the overall social transformation of Japan after the war. The reason why it can quickly obtain development space is that it has strong plasticity in the cultural sense: it can not only accept the modern sports form of external input, but also be reinterpreted and reorganized in Japan, and gradually combine with the values and collective emotions of the local society. Therefore, the Japanese government accepted the introduction of baseball culture, and began to promote its localization transformation, so that baseball gradually broke away from the label of "foreign American sports".

4. The Localization Measures of Baseball in Japan

Japan's localization measures for baseball culture can be roughly divided into internal transformation and popularization, along with external cultural promotion.

4.1 Embedding in Education System

Japan integrated baseball into its education system, including primary schools, junior high schools, high schools, and universities, using campuses as a foundation for the spread of baseball culture. Japan's baseball community culture is very developed. According to the data published by the baseball and wild ball League of Japanese Colleges and universities, in 1982, 3488 schools in Japan joined the Kono League, and the total number of clubs reached 117246, and then increased steadily year by year [7]. According to statistics, baseball clubs on Japanese campuses have consistently had one of the largest numbers of participants among school sports clubs in Japan. The developed community culture not only continuously transports talents for the high-level competition of Japanese baseball, but also connects baseball with the youth growth of Japanese people, becoming a broad soil for the spread of baseball.

At the same time, Japan's College Baseball League has great influence and participation. The national college baseball championship, also known as the famous Koshien, is not only the most influential high school event in Japan, but also a national cultural ceremony in Japan. The national audience rating has exceeded 30% for a long time. Similarly, according to the public data of the Takano Federation of Japan, the total number of people attending the Koshien game has continued to grow from 291700 in 1959 to 699200 in 1976 and 837000 in 1983, more than tripling [8]. This data fully reflects the gradual growth of the popularity and influence of the Koshien event and the

popularity of baseball culture in Japanese society. The youth narrative and the spiritual concept of "one ball into the soul" carried by the Koshien event are highly consistent with the national spirit of Japan, realizing the purpose of stripping the American cultural attribute of baseball and replacing it with the national spirit of Japan.

Through the continuous implantation of the education system, baseball has gradually internalized from an foreign sport into a necessary cultural experience in the growth of Japanese teenagers, laying a double foundation for the prosperity of baseball culture in Japan: mass participation and cultural recognition.

More importantly, the significance of the education system for baseball is not only reflected in the level of competitive training, but also in its transformation of baseball into a daily culture that can be repeatedly experienced and continuously copied. For many Japanese teenagers, baseball is not a distant professional sport, but a growing experience closely related to community life, collective honor, discipline training and youth memory. Because of this, baseball has been able to break through the scope of pure "Sports" and gradually enter the level of emotional identity and social memory.

In this way, baseball transcends the boundaries of a mere competitive sport and enters the realm of emotional identity and collective social memory. When a sporting activity is reproduced across generations of campus life, it sheds its identity as an imported cultural product and is gradually recognized by society as an indigenous cultural tradition.

4.2 Infrastructure and Competition Construction

Japan also attached great importance to the development of baseball infrastructure and competitions at all levels. In terms of infrastructure, according to the official statistics of the sports facilities survey conducted by the Ministry of education, culture, science and technology of Japan over the years, the number of baseball fields in Japan was 4587 in 1969, increased to 6974 in 1975, and further increased to 10297 in 1980 [9, 10, 11]. Among all kinds of special sports venues, baseball venues have occupied a high proportion for a long time, which reflects Japan's continued attention to baseball infrastructure construction nationwide [9, 10, 11].

In terms of professional league construction, Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB), established in 1936, was rapidly restored and developed after the war. Tokyo Dome and other large professional courses in Tokyo have also become unique urban landmarks and cultural signs. The wide distribution of Japanese baseball facilities across the

country provides a basis for daily training and competition for a large number of baseball fans in Japan, allowing baseball to go deep into the grass-roots level and greatly improving the convenience of baseball participation. At the same time, the perfect league system at all levels has provided an environment for the high-level competition of Japanese baseball, continued to create topics and heat, attracted teenagers to participate in baseball, stimulated the public's enthusiasm for baseball, and promoted the emergence of baseball talents. The complete infrastructure construction and event system construction complement each other, and jointly lay a solid foundation for the popularization and inheritance of Japanese baseball culture.

In addition, the reason why Japanese baseball culture can stabilize rapidly after the war is that it has formed a complete rising channel from campus clubs, local games to professional leagues. For ordinary people, baseball is not only an ornamental professional performance, but a practical activity that can be repeatedly participated in in communities, parks, schools and local courts; For teenagers with competitive potential, the continuity between school events and professional leagues makes baseball have a clear development path. It is this interconnected structure of "daily participation, social concern and career rise" that makes baseball obtain a stable social foundation that is difficult to replicate in other foreign sports in Japan.

4.3 External Cultural Dissemination

Japan also attaches great importance to the external dissemination of baseball culture. As the equal players of Ichiro Suzuki and Shohei Ohtani landed in the Major League Baseball (MLB) and achieved great success, the competitive level of Japanese players began to be recognized worldwide, and Japanese baseball began to have global influence. At the same time, the competitive spirit, understanding of baseball and their own growth experience of these players also provided an opportunity for fans and the international community to understand Japanese baseball culture and its spiritual connotation.

In addition, Japan's baseball culture is often combined with the emerging culture of Japan at that time, which plays an important role in binding baseball culture and Japanese culture. The baseball manga *Touch* is an excellent example of the cultural influence of Japanese baseball. During the golden age of Japanese manga in the 1980s, *Touch*, a youth baseball manga, became a nationally popular work in Japan and exerted considerable influence across East Asia. With the popularity of this cartoon at home and abroad in Japan, the link between Japan and baseball has also been deepened, and more people pay attention to the unique Japanese social culture contained in

Japanese baseball.

The widespread development and maturity of baseball have fundamentally reshaped Japan's national image in the international community. In the early post-WWII years, Western public opinion generally labeled Japan with negative stereotypes such as militarism, belligerence, autocracy and brutality. From 1945 to 1950, reports on Japan in The New York Times largely maintained a negative perspective, framing the nation as a defeated country with potential military threats requiring strict supervision.

By contrast, media attitudes softened significantly after the 1955 visit of the New York Yankees, as news coverage shifted focus to people-to-people goodwill and diplomatic reconciliation reflected in baseball exchanges. The 1955 Yankees tour is widely regarded as a pivotal milestone in the improvement of U.S.-Japan relations.

In the article *Good Optics: The 1955 Yankees Tour of Japan* published on the official website of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR), Roberta J. Newman noted: "Unlike the 1953 Giants tour, the Yankees' goodwill trip was an unmitigated success. Indeed, even the New York Times, which had paid it scant attention, declared it so. Red McQueen, writing in the Honolulu Advertiser, agreed. 'This morale, patriotic and goodwill stuff can be stretched a bit too far, but in the case of the recent visit of the New York Yankees and their present tour of Japan and the Philippines, it is one of the most diplomatic excursions in the history of sports,' opined McQueen. 'Except for the explicit purpose of spreading goodwill between the respective nations, it is doubtful that a venture of this nature could ever have materialized.' Whether or not the tour had a direct effect on US-Japanese relations, it provided great optics. It was a public-relations coup." [12] During the 1960s, Time magazine repeatedly described baseball as Japan's most successful cultural symbol of post-war transformation, presenting a new, peaceful, co-operative and reconstruction-focused Japan to the world. In a 2024 special report on Shohei Ohtani, The Wall Street Journal stated explicitly that baseball has become one of Japan's most globally appealing cultural icons. Together with animation and cuisine, it shapes modern Japan's international identity and has completely overturned the negative perceptions left by World War II [13].

In summary, baseball culture has not only erased the international community's negative impressions of Japan's militarist past, but also filled the vacuum of national soft power in post-war Japan. It has helped Japan reconstruct its contemporary social culture and spiritual core.

5. Summary

On the whole, the development of Japanese baseball after

the war is not the natural spread and evolution of culture, but the result of the joint action of the domestic and external factors of American cultural strategy and Japan's national development policy.

From the internal point of view, serving its East Asian cultural strategy, the United States regarded baseball as an important cultural medium to promote social reconstruction and value transformation during the occupation period, and built the cultural identity of Japan and the United States. The cultural strategy of the United States has provided external incentives for the development of Japanese baseball by raising baseball from an ordinary sport to the carrier of national culture;

Internally, the Japanese government has implanted baseball culture into the domestic education system at all levels, shaping baseball as the youth experience of Japanese people and making baseball a symbol of Japanese campus culture; At the same time, efforts should be made to build local infrastructure and baseball events, so as to enhance the national participation in baseball and the influence of baseball in China. In addition, Japan has also deeply bound baseball with its own image and carried out publicity to the outside world, desalinating the identity of baseball as a foreign culture from the United States, integrating the sport with Japan's local social culture and national spirit, and completing the localization of baseball culture. In this process, baseball not only filled the social and cultural gap in Japan after the war, but also played a key role in improving Japan's national image and connecting with the international society and culture. Baseball has grown from an exotic sport to a national business card representing Japanese culture and improving international public opinion.

However, this study still has several limitations. First, due to the limited length of the paper, it mainly focuses on the macro-level relationship between baseball culture, national image reconstruction, and postwar cultural policy, while the experiences of ordinary players, students, and audiences are not examined in sufficient detail. Second, although this paper uses historical materials and statistical data to support its argument, it does not conduct a systematic comparison between baseball and other imported sports in postwar Japan. Third, the discussion of Japan's external cultural dissemination mainly focuses on representative cases such as professional players, media coverage, and baseball-related popular culture, while more regional and long-term empirical evidence could be further explored in future research.

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