

Response to "Samurai Baseball vs Baseball in Japan "Revisited"

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I'm flattered that Robert Whiting has taken my piece of last year so seriously—hits, runs, errors, and all. Here in reply are my thoughts on three points.

Academic and Popular Modes of Writing about Japan

The point of my piece was that two top observers of Japan, Robert Whiting and William Kelly, "illustrate the clash between academic and popular modes" and that the modes "differ in question setting, in standards of evidence and argument, of form, and in target audience." I've written elsewhere about the intriguing differences as seen, for instance, in Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's biography of Mao and in Gavin Menzies's book on Zheng He's voyages, though I hasten to add that Whiting's work is more careful and satisfying than either of those. [1]

I believe Whiting's aim was to "let the American public know what it was like to be there" and he therefore "takes explanations of the actors more or less at face value." Kelly, on the other hand, "wants his colleagues and students to understand the deep structure and relevance of what happened" and to "relate his observations to the systematic debate in the field, which is structured by theory."

Whiting's "Revisited" comments: "What I

wanted to do was write a book about contemporary Japan that had living and breathing people in it, not academic cutouts, a book that would communicate something about modern Japanese society to the general public and one that people would not want to put down after a few pages."

He goes on: "I have nothing against academic modes. But, for me, there are more interesting ways to get at the truth. . . . In the end, I feel we are speaking two different languages. When I use the term national character, I use it to help describe what I see, to make sense of a complex phenomenon, and to point out a shared feeling or understanding of what things mean." Besides, his editor was "not interested" in academic disputes and wouldn't allow notes and references.

So my reply is that original characterization still seems fair and I'm not sure who Whiting is arguing with. I spelled his name right, I said that he "masterfully framed" what he saw in "terms which the American public could understand," and he seems to agree with my summary of the differences.

Samurai Baseball

Whiting said that the "Samurai Way of Baseball" is a "system" which "dates back to the nineteenth century" and has been called 'samurai besuboru' by many participants." He speaks of "the very real similarities and the grounding that the game has in . . . the martial arts of old, and its relationship to *bushido*," with lessons that "have been passed down from generation to generation by fathers, teachers,

coaches and, in adulthood, corporate bosses, right to the present day.” [2]

In “Revisited,” Whiting objects: “Hayford implies that Kelly’s standards of evidence (which he did not identify) are somehow superior to mine, but in these instances that is clearly not the case. To suggest that I’m dealing in stereotypes and not adequately sourced reporting is mistaken.”

Here there is room for both elucidation and disagreement on two points:

Standards of Evidence:

Evidence based on observation and participant testimony must be taken seriously, but not always literally or at face value. Whiting says he uses the “metaphor” of “Samurai Baseball” to interpret what he sees. Since he accepts the metaphor as correct, he feels no need to explain why the participants believe it. He just wants to describe what he sees.

However....

If you see a group of people with their umbrellas open and they all say “we opened our umbrellas because we don’t want to get wet,” their explanation seems reasonable—but only if it’s raining. But what if the sky is clear? We do not ignore what they said—it’s “adequately sourced reporting”—but it’s no longer a sufficient explanation. Maybe there was a vast right-wing conspiracy. Maybe the reporter lacked the cultural information that it was April Fool’s Day. Maybe the group all got stoned and *thought* it was raining. Or, to make the analogy closer, maybe their group had a tradition of open umbrellas and it’s part of their cultural identity.

So I didn’t claim that Kelly’s “standards of evidence” are “superior,” only different. Evidence is “superior” or not only in relation to a stated question. In that sense, the question

determines what is evidence—“where you were on a certain night?” only becomes evidence when the prosecutor asks “where were you on the night of the murder?” Whiting is a master of the evidence for the reportorial mode he chose and the questions involved.

Samurai Baseball: Reporting or Interpreting?

Here we have some disagreement. Both approaches rely on “adequately sourced reporting,” that is, getting the facts right. Academic audiences, however, ask different questions and frequently assume that the more complex and nuanced explanation is better; popular audiences often demand straightforward accounts using the frameworks already in their minds or else they will, in Whiting’s words, put down the book after a few pages.



T. R. Reid, a *Washington Post* reporter, offered an explanation for Japan’s modern social successes which raises the same issues. “East Asians act the way they do at the dawn of the twenty-first century,” says Reid, “because of a few basic precepts laid down by a Chinese sage who lived at the end of the fifth century, B.C. . . . Asian spirit, or Asian values” were “passed down over the millennia in Oriental societies.”

[3]

Both Reid and Whiting use the passive voice and the phrase “passed down” to explain a continuity which is apparent but misleading. Reid’s friend says “Confucius lives next door” and players and managers indeed use the samurai metaphor, but their meaning is quite different from a few centuries ago or from the 1930s and 1940s.

Things change—which is why people like to think that they don’t. Unless somebody takes charge, things get destroyed, replaced, forgotten, eroded, mangled, or transformed. Whiting starts off well saying that late nineteenth century Japanese “reached back” (active voice) for inspiration, but then says the *Bushido* style “stayed in vogue” because it “worked best,” not because public policy or opinion makers or political leaders “dictated it.”

If managers today demand “bloody urine” or drive pitchers until their arms fell off, does it explain anything to say “granddaddy did it?” Do players in Japan today stay with their teams longer because of loyalty or lousy contracts? Are the owners, mostly large companies, more powerful because of their *Daimyo*-esque character or because of laws, regulations, and policies? Did samurai characteristics persist because, as Whiting says, “they worked,” that is, because they insured winning? Every day half the teams lose.

Just as the “traditional” Japanese family was shaped by Meiji era legislation [4] and the “traditional” holidays of Christmas and Thanksgiving are shaped by commerce and our family values, traditional values are not so much “passed down” or inherited as they are continuously reinvented.



Taiwanese baseball further illustrates the interaction of sport and changing traditions. In Andrew Morris’ elegant analysis, the colonial Japanese introduced baseball as a modernizing measure, but the teams then recruited players from all classes and ethnic groups, making baseball a unifying and democratizing force as well as a way to beat the Japanese at their own game (just as the villagers in the film *Lagan* defeated the British at cricket). After 1945, international baseball became a way for Taiwan to show that it was world-class and assert cultural distinctiveness. [5] No samurai need apply.

Why did baseball in Japan develop this “samurai” self-image? Kelly argues that Samurai Baseball in Japan was “shaped” (not “dictated”) by “important elements of the nation in the early 20th century—education, industry, middle class life, the government, and above all the national project.”

Kelly does not agree that Samurai Baseball explains the Japanese national character, but does this mean, as Whiting alleges, that he finds “nothing different” in the way that the average Japanese and average American “see the world?” Kelly says, and it’s quoted in my piece, that the “proper response to the claim that the Japanese are radically different from you and me is not that the Japanese are just like you and me, but rather that, in important ways, the Japanese are not like each other.”

On to *Bushido*.

The Past Is Never Dead, It Is Not Even Past?

Yes, as Whiting says, we can find antecedents for modern *Bushido*, and yes, I am “surely aware” that they existed, thank you kindly. But something only becomes an “antecedent” retrospectively, after somebody has created what it is the antecedent of. We can go back and sort through the mess of history and pick out the antecedents. We live history forward but write it backward. So it does not follow that historic martial values lead to or explain modern *Bushido* or *kamikaze* pilots or baseball or Japanese business organization, much less modern Japan.

Academic writings too often lack spark and popular writings too often lack rigor. Whiting and Kelly mostly avoid these problems—Kelly writes attractively and Whiting is historically grounded. Still, I wish that working reporters and working scholar/teachers could get together more often to keep each other on their toes.

Notes

[1] “[Mao: The Unknown Story: Popular History and the Scholars](#),” *Education About Asia* 11.2 (Fall 2006); “Popular History, Academic History, and Bunkum (Gavin Menzies 1421 on H-Asia),” *History News Network* (November 28 2005).

[2] “[Samurai Baseball vs. Baseball in Japan](#),” *Japan Focus*, September 29, 2006 and “[The Japanese Way of Baseball and the National Character Debate](#),” Special Issue: *Baseball and Besuboru In Japan and The U.S.*

[Studies on Asia Series III](#) 3 (Fall 2006). In my original piece I also quote from Whiting’s books.

[3] T. R. Reid, *Confucius Lives Next Door: What Living in Japan Teaches Us About Living in the West* (Random House 1999), pp. 17, 16.

[4] Anne E. Imamura, *Re-Imaging Japanese Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Anne E. Imamura, “[The Japanese Family Faces Twenty-First Century Challenges](#),” *Education About Asia*, 8.2 (Fall 2003): 30–33.

[5] Andrew D. Morris, “Baseball, History, and the Local in the Global in Taiwan,” in David K. Jordan, Andrew D. Morris and Marc L. Moscovitz, ed., *The Minor Arts of Daily Life: Popular Culture in Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, 2004): 175–203.

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He wrote this comment for Japan Focus. Posted on May 29, 2008.

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See also, Robert Whiting, [The Samurai Way of Baseball and the National Character Debate](#) and his response to Hayford, [Samurai Baseball vs. Baseball in Japan—Revisited](#).

See also William W. Kelly, [Is Baseball a Global Sport? America’s “National Pastime” as Global Field and International Sport](#).