

# The 1964 Tokyo Olympics as Political Games

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The 2008 Olympics in Beijing were the third Summer Games to be held in Asia, and even before the Olympic flame was extinguished in the Closing Ceremonies, its legacy was being debated. The impressive ceremonies, the beautiful facilities, and the well-organized events captured the imagination of a world viewing audience. This has led some commentators to forecast that the Games will bring China greater international acceptance as a rising superpower with a human face. However, the crackdown in Tibet, the protests against the Olympic Torch Relay, and other controversies that received widespread media attention brought human rights issues to the forefront and left many doubts about China's progress.

The divided reception of the Beijing Games leads us to reflect back on how the two earlier Summer Games in Asia were seen at the time, and the contrast is remarkable. The 1988 Seoul Games are burnished by the view that they crowned the reemergence of democracy in the country; they were as political as the Beijing Olympics but met with far more positive acclaim. And compared to Beijing and Seoul, the first Summer Games in Asia, those in Tokyo in 1964, are still considered to have been comparatively apolitical, and little attention has been paid to the organizational background of the Games. Most remembered are the moments of sporting glory, such as the thrilling victory of Ethiopian runner Abebe Bikila in the marathon

and, especially in Japan, the gold medal victory of Japanese women's volleyball team, known as the "Witches of the East." [2]

However, this is a quite superficial and misleading image of the earlier East Asian Olympics. We now realize that the Seoul Olympics may not have played such a decisive role in South Korea's democratization of the 1980s [1] and that the Tokyo Olympics had a powerful political subtext not easily discernible in 1964. Subtle politics helped the ruling conservatives in Japan to revive and redeploy—even reinvent—key symbols of nationalism. This was not an easy task less than two decades after World War II, which had discredited state symbols, and just four years after the massive public protests against the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty. To pull it off so successfully a striking coup for the conservatives, even more so because almost no one—inside or outside Japan—raised a voice against this revival of nationalism. The Olympics provided the perfect arena for their coup and for a national reconciliation in the mid-sixties, and this essay will explore their political agenda and the ways it was encoded in the Olympics Games themselves.

The prime mover in this revival of nationalist symbols was the Ministry of Education, which had been a conservative beacon both prior to 1945 and after Japan's defeat in the Asia-Pacific war. The promotion and regulation of amateur sports fell under the Ministry's purview. Although Olympic regulations stipulated that the Games were to be by cities and not by national governments, the role of the central government was paramount in 1964. Tokyo itself simply could not shoulder the

infrastructural requirements of hosting the Olympic Games without extensive state support. The key role assumed by the Ministry of Education was expressed by a political cartoon that appeared in the *Asahi Shinbun*, which placed the Ministry in the middle of the cauldron for the Olympic flame while the city and the Organizing Committee are trying to make their points from opposite sides.



**The Ministry of Education in the middle of the cauldron for the Olympic fire discussion with the metropolitan government and the Tokyo Organizing Committee (*Asahi Shinbun* 1959, Month, Page).**

The restoration of national pride that was staged in 1964 involved the deliberate rehabilitation of classical national symbols, especially the tennō (emperor), the hinomaru (Rising Sun) flag, and the army. The method of their revival was to free them of their wartime associations and present them instead as symbols of peace. This was made possible by embedding them in the Olympic Games' own narrative and by introducing new national symbols. The latter were mostly associated with the technical achievements of postwar Japan, such as the Shinkansen bullet train, which ran

for the first time just a few days prior to the opening of the Games and which was at the time the fastest train in the world. The world-wide broadcast of the games in color and via satellite demonstrated the high technological standards of the games, although Japan in fact relied heavily on assistance from America to make this possible.



**The Shinkansen, which started its service weeks before the opening ceremony, and the highway from Osaka to Nagoya, also inaugurated shortly before the Games, were the new national symbols of Japan as rising economic power.**

The most powerful example of the repossessing of classical national symbols is the emperor (tennō) himself, who made the official proclamation to begin the Games at the opening ceremony on October 10. The IOC requires that this role be performed by the head of state, in which capacity the tennō was clearly acting. Legally, though, this was a very complicated situation. The first article of the Japanese constitution of 1946 states only that "the Emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people." In Article 7, he is given many duties that are normally the privilege of heads of state, but nowhere does the constitution explicitly state that this is his role. Legally, it was then and remains unclear whether he or the prime minister is the head of state. [3] Interestingly, in the 1964 ceremony, the tennō was formally presented not as head of state but rather as the patron of the Tōkyō

Olympics. This had been determined in 1962 by the Organizing Committee and, behind it, the Ministry of Education (and no doubt after discussions with the Imperial Household Agency), in order to forestall any public debate about the emperor's status as head of state. [4] It is certain, though, that this subtle difference was not clearly understood by the Japanese public and the rest of the world. Only 19 years after he had been narrowly spared from trial as a war criminal by the United States, the tennō appeared in as head of state and as a symbol of peace.

A very similar story can be told about the hinomaru flag, which was not officially sanctioned as Japan's national flag until 1999. Nonetheless the flag had been in public use throughout postwar Japan and served in the Olympics as Japan's official flag. Nevertheless its status was hotly disputed hotly in public for its strong connections to the country's imperial past. Thus, as the 1964 Games approached, an attempt was made to recreate the flag as a symbol of shared beliefs. A commission was set up to redesign the flag, whose colors and proportions had not been defined since 1945, and a number of variations had appeared. [5] The commission decided to use the Olympic standard for the flag size, which is a vertical to horizontal ratio of 2:3. This ratio diverged from the proclamation of 1870, which had set the ratio to 7:10. For the color of the sun disk (the literal meaning of "hinomaru"), the commission distributed a public questionnaire that asked respondents to choose the most apt shade from a scale of reds. The resulting flag could be seen as a product of democracy and internationalism.

But it was not only the design process that altered the flag's image; its prominent display before and during the Olympics was even more important. To see the hinomaru flying along with other national flags or the Olympic banner of peace was an impressive demonstration of its new status. Could there be anything

nefarious with using the hinomaru as a national symbol when it complied with international standards in the most peaceful of world arenas? The peak in the flag's image shift was its appearance on the uniform of Sakai Yoshinori, the final runner in the Olympic torch relay. Sakai had been born in Hiroshima prefecture on August 6, 1945, the day the first atomic bomb was dropped on the prefecture's capital. To be precise, it was not actually the hi no maru that shone bright on Sakai's white t-shirt but rather the logo of the 1964 Games. However, that logo was the red sun (albeit with in a slightly different shade), plus the five Olympic rings and the phrase "Tokyo 1964" below it.

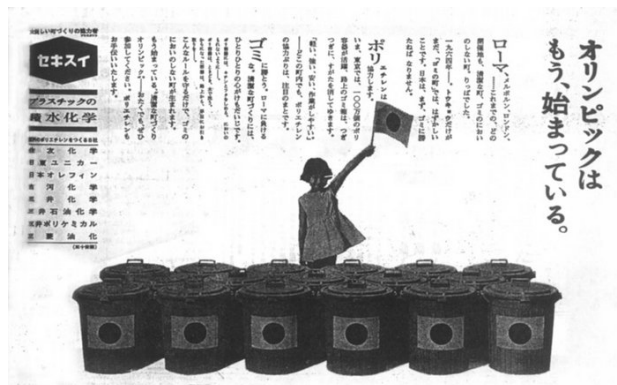
Because the narrative told by and through the 1964 Olympic Games was clearly linked to Japan's own narrative in that era, it was highly credible to the Japanese. Very few would have questioned the necessity and logic of performing rituals to symbolize the rebirth of the nation, especially when those rituals were embedded in such a well-established and accepted context as the Olympic Games. When the IOC broached the idea of playing a fanfare rather than the national anthem, the Tokyo Organizing Committee insisted on retaining *Kimi ga yo*, which like the *Hi no maru* was the *de facto* but not legally designated anthem..

The effectiveness of these new national symbols to the general public was evidenced by the results of NHK opinion polls, which showed that, second only to the women's volleyball success, it was the ceremonies and rituals that had left the deepest impression on the Japanese audience, including Sakai's igniting the Olympic flame. [6]

This discussion of the symbols deployed would seem to reveal fairly clear political intentions for the Tokyo Olympics. Given the controversies and protests that surrounded the recent Beijing Olympics, we must wonder just why the official Japanese political agenda was

so little noted at the time, both within Japan and abroad, and the ceremonial apparatus was even applauded by normally critical voices. For example, in accordance with IOC procedures, marching bands played and young soldiers from the Self-Defense Forces (jietai) handled most of the ceremonial tasks, such as carrying the Olympic flag into the stadium. . Given the debates of the time about whether the Self-Defense Forces violated Article 9 of the constitution, one might expect there to have been an outcry from liberal intellectuals and other progressives. But even future-Nobel Prize laureate Ōe Kenzaburō praised the soldiers' efforts during the Opening Ceremony. [7]. Nor did he or others criticize the use of Sakai Yoshinori's as the final sacred torch runner, even though the gesture subtly emphasized Japan's as victim rather than perpetrator of the events of World War II.

distinction that was ignored or unrecognized by the viewers and commentators. Most watching the Opening Ceremony would think of the emperor as head of state, and they would take the logo on the torch-runners' shirts as the national flag sanctioned by the IOC. Even if such symbols were contested domestically, few international observers were able to understand the significance of the differences. For instance, there was a dispute among the members of the national florists' association about whether a variety of lily or the chrysanthemum, the imperial symbol, should be the official flower of the Games. The lily bloomed naturally at the time of the Games, but under guidance, the association went with the chrysanthemum, which florists then had to contrive a means of bringing to blossom about a month prematurely. [8]



**The hi no maru was sometimes used in rather comical contexts in 1964. This advertisement shows a girl waving the flag behind dust bins. The texts remind readers that the previous Games in Melbourne and Rome were very clean and therefore Tokyo must also make its best efforts.**

In general, the symbolic acts were sufficiently subtle as to bypass legal and moral obstacles. The tennō did not officially open the games as head of state and Sakai was not wearing the hi no maru flag on his shirt, but rather the official logo of the games. This, however, was a

Even into the 1980s, the Olympics were widely seen in Japan as a realm apart from politics, and there were very few questions raised against the constant insistence by the IOC and the Japan Olympic Committee that the Olympic Movement was apolitical. For instance, the 62<sup>nd</sup> session of the IOC, which was held in Tokyo shortly before the Games themselves, addressed the need to resist “political interference,” by which the IOC meant the threat of politics intruding into the Olympic Movement. As hosts of the imminent Games, the Japanese were of course eager to embrace this pretense. Such claims, of course, required an enormous suspension of disbelief—or perhaps a Lewis Carrollian notion of ‘politics,’ it being clear that the Games were awarded to Japan for the (apolitical?) act of welcoming it back to normal nationhood! But if that was not political, then how could anyone see the flag and the anthem and the emperor in anything but a benign light Sakai serving as sacred torch runner was not a political gesture towards Japan’s imagined wartime victimhood but rather a powerful statement by the peaceful youth of the world towards nuclear dangers. This fit well in the aftermath of the



1962 Cuban missile crisis that had brought the world on the brink of a devastating nuclear war and that was still fresh in the public mind.

Against the tide of anti-government protests that rose again in the late 1960s, these re-nationalized symbols retained much of their legitimacy because of their deployment during the Olympics. It would still take another three decades for the flag and the hymn to be granted formal legal legitimacy, and the status of the tennō as head of state remains ambiguous—or rather is deliberately left ambiguous by conservative politicians and the Imperial Household Agency as the best strategy for preserving imperial prerogatives. Hence, the emperor opened the 1972 Sapporo Winter Games and the 1998 Nagano Winter Games again in the capacity of patron.

From 1960 through the Tokyo Games themselves, very few critical voices were raised against the Olympics and its uses by the Japanese state. There were no controversies like those surrounding the Beijing 2008 Games. Neither did the 1972 Sapporo Winter Games generate opposition, even if they did not enthuse the Japanese people to the extent that the Tokyo Games had. But the Olympic truce in Japan did not last forever. During Nagoya's bid for the 1988 Summer Olympics, broad-based citizens' groups emerged in protest against their city's bid, arguing that the games would be a wasteful expenditure of public money and would cause ecological problems. The movement even called into question the ideals of the Olympic Games themselves. This was probably the first popular anti-Olympic movement in Asia.

Prefectural mayor Nakaya Yoshiaki had initiated Nagoya's bid in 1977 to gain national and world recognition for Japan's fourth largest city. After the Tokyo Olympics, Japan's second city, Ōsaka, sponsored the 1970 World Expo, attempting to restore balance to the ever-competitive relationship between eastern and

western Japan. The far north received attention in sponsoring 1972 Sapporo Winter Olympics. Nagoya's politicians were eager to burnish the city image and that of the Central Japan region, situated between Kantō to the east and Kansai to the west.

The anti-Olympic movement in Nagoya was not the principal reason for the failure of the bid. While Nagoya's effort was probably technically superior to its only competitor, Seoul, but the Seoul committee did a much better job of lobbying and politicking within the Olympic movement. Although not decisive in Nagoya's loss, the anti-Nagoya Olympic movement was the first to formulate some of the principal arguments that have since been used against the staging of mega-events, be they Olympics, World Cups or World Expos. Their most basic argument was that the economic costs of the Games and the infrastructure that would remain were prohibitive and wasteful. This had also been raised against bidding for the Tokyo Games, but the difference was that in the 1960s the skepticism was whether Japan could afford these costs, while with the Nagoya bid, it was whether Japan should shoulder them., If hosting the Olympics meant flattening Nagoya's Heiwa-Park in order to make space for the Olympic stadium, was this really to the benefit of the city's citizens? And what of the environmental effects of the games? Many citizens were no longer prepared to sacrifice their own wellbeing for the lofty plans and international ambitions of politicians, and they demonstrated in the streets, organized large public debates, commissioned studies, and distributed information and fact sheets.

The criticism went much further than questioning the direct consequences of the Olympics for the city. The protesters challenged the very aims and ideals of the Olympic Games; their anti-Olympic movement expressed its reversal of sport literally, by calling itself "trops." [9] Trops was intended to promote playful games that were an alternative

to the consumerist, sports industry-driven Olympics. Trops also highlighted the symbolic politics surrounding Olympics Games. Nagoya's anti-Olympic movement was part of a worldwide shift in the perception of the Olympic movement. From this time, cities everywhere which were bidding for the Games faced local citizen opposition, and criticism of Olympism became much more widespread.

For all of the reasons outlined above, Tokyo's bid for the 2016 Olympic Games is problematic. As Kelly details in the accompanying essay, the arch-nationalist mayor of metropolitan Tokyo, Ishihara Shintarō, is trying to revive the atmosphere of 1964 and the Japanese Olympic Committee's plans and advertisements for 2016 are full of nostalgic allusions to 1964. [10] Even if international criticism is still less harsh than that which preceded Beijing 2008, Ishihara's attempts to re-nationalize Japan through hosting the Games will surely generate skepticism, if not outright repudiation, within Japan itself and by the international community and especially by other East Asian nations.

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## Notes

[1] Jarol B. Manheim, "Rites of Passage: The 1988 Seoul Olympics as Public Diplomacy," *The Western Political Quarterly* 43(2)(1990), p. 291-93.

[2] Arata Masafumi. "Tōyō no majō : Sono joseise to kōjō no kioku [The Witches of the East: Their Femininity and Memories of the Factory]." In *Orinpikku studies: Fukuzū no keiken - Fukuzū no seiji [Olympic Studies: Multiple Experiences - Multiple Politics]*, edited by Satoshi Shimizu, 175-93. Tokyo: Serika shobō, 2004.

[3] Yokota Kōichi, *Kenpō to tennō-sei* [The constitution and the emperor system] (Tōkyō: Iwanami shoten, 1990), 27.

[4] Olympiad, The Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVIII. *The Games of the XVIII Olympiad Tokyo 1964: The Official Report of the Organizing Committee: Volume I.* Tokyo: 1966, p. 39

[5] Fukiura Tadamasa, *Hi no maru o kagaku suru* [The hi no maru as science]. Tōkyō: Jiyū Kokuminsha, 1995, p. 96; 158

[6] *Nihon hōsō kyōkai hōsō seiron chōsasho*, Tōkyō orinpikku (Tōkyō, 1967), 238.

[7] Ōe Kenzaburō, “73.000-jin no „kodomo jikan” [“The childhood of 73.000 people”], in Noma Shōichi, ed., *Tōkyō orinpikku: Bungakusha no mita seiki no saiten* [The Tōkyō Olympics: The festival of the century as the literati saw it] (Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1964), 36-43.

[8] Tagsold, Christian. *Die Inszenierung Der Kulturellen Identität in Japan: Das Beispiel der Olympischen Spiele Tokyo 1964* [Staging Cultural Identity in Japan: The Example of the Tokyo Olympics 1964]. München: Iudicium, 2002, p. 78.

[9] Two books introduced tropes to the public in Japan: Kageyama, Ken, and Masaru Okasaki.

*Minna toropusu: Haisha no nai gēmu nyūmon* [Altogether Trops: Introduction to Games Without Losers]. Nagoya: Fūbaisha, 1984. Kageyama Ken, Okasaki Masaru, and Hoshi Mizuta. *Han-Orinpikku sengen: Sono shinwa to hanzaisei wo tsuku* [Anti-Olympic Manifest: On the myth and the criminal character]. Nagoya: Fūbaisha, 1981.

[10] The homepage of the Bidding Committee features the Games of 1964 prominently in a [special section](#).