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Contested Representations of Taiwanese Baseball: Political Interpretations and Moral Values of a National Sport

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Abstract

In Taiwan, baseball is a national passion that the whole society can relate to. Appeared under Japanese rule, it was enrolled in the nationalist “physical culture” (*tiyu* 體育) just after WWII and became, at the turn of the 1970s, the “national sport” (*guoqiu* 國球) and the flagship of a state isolated on the international scene. It thus provides Taiwanese society with many symbols and references which the political elite cannot afford to ignore. Deeply involved with the education of moral values, its representations are used and claimed by the main existing political and ideological forces.

Keywords: Taiwan, baseball, historical representations, moral values, anthropology.

Izveček:

Na Tajvanu je baseball nacionalna strast, s katero se lahko poveže celotna družba. S prvim pojavom pod japonsko vladavino in vključitvijo v nacionalistični program “športne vzgoje” (*tiyu* 體育) po drugi svetovni vojni, je baseball v poznih 1970ih postal “nacionalni šport” (*guoqiu* 國球) z zastavo države, ki je v mednarodni areni izolirana. S tem pa baseball tajvanski družbi podaja številne simbole in sporočila, ki jih politična elita ne more ignorirati. Predstavljanje baseballe, ki je globoko povezano z vzgojo moralnih vrednot, izrabljajo in si lastijo glavne obstoječe politične in ideološke sile.

Ključne besede: Tajvan, baseball, zgodovinske reprezentacije, moralne vrednote, antropologija

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1 Introduction

It is March 2008 and the presidential election campaign is in full swing. On a large election poster, Ma Ying-jeou, the Nationalist or Kuomintang (KMT) party candidate, appears holding a baseball in his right hand, a glove on his left and wearing the black and white striped shirt of the famous New York Yankees. Meanwhile, the outgoing President Chen Shui-bian (the Democratic Progressive party (DPP)) is leading the campaign for the country to join the United Nations under the name of “Taiwan” for the first time. The symbol chosen for this campaign is displayed on the front wall of the presidential palace: the planet earth held in a right hand like a baseball with an inscription in English reading “UN for TAIWAN. Peace Forever”.

In Taiwan, baseball is more than just a sport. It is a national passion that the whole society can relate to. It thus provides Taiwanese society with many symbols and references—the significance of which largely exceeds the context of sport and entertainment—which the political elite cannot afford to ignore. How can such representations be defined and to what ends are they used or claimed by the main existing political and ideological forces? To what extent are they shared or claimed by the individuals that make up Taiwanese society? These questions shall be examined with regard to the building of the national Taiwanese identity while being careful not to restrict its constant redefinition to a single interpretation. The available sources (discursive/narrative and iconographic)¹ actually underline the ambivalence of the representations at stake, sometimes conflicting or understandable only in their historical context. Such representations have evolved through a variety of changing political circumstances since the introduction of baseball into Taiwan, over a century ago, during the Japanese administration.

¹ The empirical data presented in this paper are the result of three ethnographic surveys carried out during a total of twenty months spent on the field between 2006 and 2010 on Taiwanese baseball, which is the subject of a thesis in progress. These surveys have been mainly carried out among two school teams in Tuku (county of Yunlin) and Chengkung (county of Taitung), one professional team, the Brother Elephants, as well as their supporters and those of the national team. The Olympic Games in Beijing in August 2008, followed from Taipei, and especially the baseball qualifying tournament which happened to be held in Taiwan in March, also served the purposes of the observation.

2 The Legacy of the Japanese Period

The Japanese brought baseball to Taiwan at the turn of the 20th century, although it had been played in Japan since the start of the Meiji era (1867–1912). Their children soon followed in their footsteps in schools reserved for the Japanese. The earliest known official competition took place in 1906 between three Japanese schools in Taipei (Hsieh 2006). It seems that the Japanese had previously been little inclined to share their favourite pastimes with the Taiwanese, as they would find themselves on equal terms with people they regarded as inferior and sometimes out of fear that it may kindle an identity crisis amongst the colonized population (Tsai 1992, 92).

This attitude began to change at the start of the 1920s when this sport became a tool in the policy of “assimilation” (*dōka*, 同化) of the Taiwanese by the Japanese (Ching 2001, 4–7). As sports meetings became more commonplace, they contributed to a pacification of the relations between the colonizers and the colonized. The first historically significant team composed of Taiwanese players, Nenggao (能高, *Nōkō* in Japanese), was founded in 1921 at the initiative of a Taiwanese, Lin Kui-hsing (林桂興), who won the support of the Japanese authorities in Hualien county. This team, exclusively composed of Ami Aborigines, made a triumphantly successful tour of Japan in 1925. Four members of the team went on to join the prestigious Heian High School in Kyoto, of which three studied at the Hosei University. One even managed to play in the Japanese professional league (Yu 2007a, 17–18).

The reform of the school system played a decisive role. The spread of state education and compulsory school attendance for Taiwanese boys and girls quickly came to be seen as essential for pacifying the local population and encouraging local economic development. Baseball was systematically introduced into state schools attended by Taiwanese students from 1919 onwards (Yu 2007a, 16)². In 1929, Yigong (一公), the first primary school in the town of Kaohsiung reserved for Taiwanese children, had the first team composed entirely of local players to win the Taiwan championship in their category and in a competition against Japanese teams (Hsieh 2004). In spite of such an achievement, the Yigong story is

² Children of both sexes take part in running, tennis, basketball, volleyball and swimming while rugby, football (soccer), hockey and baseball are for boys only (Tsurumi 1977, 169).

little known, as the sources at the time being almost exclusively Japanese had largely ignored the event (Hsieh 2006).

Another matter was the destiny of the team from the Agriculture and Forestry School in Chiayi, Jianong (嘉農, Kanō in Japanese), who dominated Taiwanese baseball in the 1930s. Formed at the end of the 1920s, it won the Taiwanese championship four times between 1931 and 1936 and worked itself up to second place in the prestigious Kōshien tournament which took place near Osaka. But apart from its prowess on the field, it was the team's ethnic mix that made it worthy of posterity as it was composed of four Aborigines, three Japanese and two Han. Several Taiwanese players from this team went on to have careers in Japan. As with Nōkō ten years earlier, the Japanese administration benefited from Kanō's second place in the Kōshien tournament to make it a symbol of Taiwanese and particularly Aboriginal assimilation (Morris 2006, 66–69; Morris 2010, 41–44). Its success was providential for the government who had to move on from the events that occurred one year beforehand when a group of Sediq Aborigines massacred 134 Japanese during sports meetings in their village of Musha (Wushe, 霧社) before being hunted down and systematically executed in revenge (Ching 2001, 133–148).

The argument for ethnic integration, put forward by the Japanese authorities to prove to their own citizens that the province's affairs were running smoothly, should not overlook the contradictions. It is rather unlikely that the children who took part in these competitions all shared the desire for either reconciliation between peoples or resistance against the occupying forces. Most comments on this topic had actually been collected *a posteriori*. The Japanese attitude towards the islanders was certainly no more homogeneous. Although sports meetings between Taiwanese and Japanese became more commonplace by the late 1930s, they rarely wore the same shirt and were still as compartmentalized as the school system was. Taiwanese players who joined their school teams were required to achieve good exam results in order to stay in the team, if they were not already the best students in the school. As baseball embodied the essence of the Japanese lifestyle and success at school required a good knowledge of Japanese language and culture, these young Taiwanese were considered the best “assimilated”.

The Japanese also left after their withdrawal a rigid hierarchical structure based on age, which still governs baseball in schools to this day and is considered as “tradition”. It is characterized by the authority of the paternal figure of the

coach (*jiaolian* 教練) over the team and of the “elders” (*xuezhang* 學長 or *sempai* in Japanese) over the “young” (*xuedi* 學弟 or *kōhai* in Japanese). It is a system in which “morals” (*pinde* 品德) and the accompanying values of “discipline” (*jilü* 紀律), “obedience” (*fucong* 服從) and “politeness” (*limao* 禮貌) prevail. The frenzied training sessions were punctuated by often severe physical punishments when the advice of the coach was not followed or respected. The youngest were at the service of their elders, who were sometimes protectors, sometimes torturers. They all lived in dormitories within the school grounds. This mode of operation was not questioned by the Kuomintang when it took over from the Japanese administration and was one of the several continuities between the two forms of administration. In fact, they saw it as providing a solid foundation for the teaching of the values that they intended to promote within Taiwanese society after the handover of the island in 1945.

3 Physical Education for the Masses under the Kuomintang

When the KMT took over Taiwan in the aftermath of World War II, one of its priorities was to “re-Sinicize” a population seen as “enslaved” and “polluted” by half a century of Japanese “occupation”. Any reminder of this was considered highly suspect or even banned, and baseball was clearly one of them. Pre-war players, particularly those from Kanō, contributed to spreading Japanese style and practice by taking up new posts as coaches, school principals, local representatives, etc. Although the sport was already played on the mainland, it was not as popular there as it was in Taiwan (Reaves 2006). However, instead of banning this regional passion, nationalist authorities decided to use it for their own gain to counter the legacy of their predecessors just after the “retrocession”. For this purpose, baseball was included in the nationalist project of “physical education” (*tiyu* 體育) for the masses, a project that had already been aiming at resisting the Japanese as early as the 1930s (Morris 2004, 235–236) and its rules were translated in the middle of 1950’s from Japanese into Mandarin Chinese to standardize the practice of the sport throughout the country.

This concept of *tiyu* had been part of the Chinese Nationalist Party's ideology long before its retreat to Taiwan³. *Tiyu* was build as a rival model to the “sports system” developed in the 19th century in Great Britain and United States. It is imbued with the “Confucian” values promoted by the KMT, including “filial piety” (*xiao* 孝) and “social harmony” (*he* 和) (Soldani 2011). *Tiyu* was a tool used for the shaping of a “good citizen” (*hao guomin*, 好國民)—that is a “self-conscious, self-disciplined” (Morris 2004, 16) individual—by training the body as well as training the mind through the body⁴.

Although the notion of *tiyu* already existed before the foundation of the Republic in 1911, it was subsequently redefined to fit in better with the project to reinsert China into the alliance of modern nations and the march towards progress. It was about the transformation of Imperial China into a modern Nation-State, which, according to its supporters, could not be achieved without regenerating the national and social body, and thus the physical bodies of its individuals. Historian Andrew Morris (2004, 3) points out that those times were characterized by “the systematic teleology of the relationship between individual strength, discipline and health, and the military, industrial or diplomatic ‘strength’ of a national body”.

The notion of “race” (*minzu* 民族) is essential in defining *tiyu*, which aims at regenerating the “Chinese race” whose alleged decline was portrayed through the caricature of the “Sick Man of Asia” (Morris 2004, 12) at the end of the Manchu dynasty. However, the project “physical education” for the masses was aimed at all the ethnic groups of a China intended to be a great multi-ethnic State. One of its purposes was therefore to rally the “minorities” to the Chinese Republic. From this point of view, Taiwanese baseball was one of the greatest successes of the nationalist movement as it encouraged the Aborigine population to support the regime (Yu and Bairner 2010).

The regeneration of the social body implies both body hygiene—rather than the pushing to the limits that the body endures through top-flight sports competition—and socially and culturally imposed moral discipline. “Sport” and

³ *Tiyu* took a new turn under the People's Republic of China, but *red physical culture* was still dedicated to the cultivation of a *national body* (Morris 2004, 15; Chicharro-Saito 2008).

⁴ Andrew Morris (2004, 16) defines *tiyu* and distinguishes it from *sport* in the following terms: “*Tiyu* was about more than just sports, physical education, fitness or any combination of these; its *yu* (educational/cultivating aspect) was an important element that would transform modern physical culture, with its scientific legitimacy, its clear rules regarding physical movement, and its emphasis on rational record keeping, into a set of lived and played moral teachings designed to shape a new self-conscious, self-disciplined citizen.”

“physical culture” are based on two very distinct ideas, with physical culture being at the crossroads of Western and Japanese influences as well as local influences with the principle of “body preservation” (*yangsheng* 養生). This principle is affiliated to “filial piety”, which requires that everyone should return their bodies intact to their parents (Granet 1998, 117). From a nationalist perspective, the notion of “filial piety” can become “patriotism” (*zhong* 忠). In textbooks from the 1980s, the most frequently cited moral values are “patriotism” and “filial piety” (Meyer 1988, 271). They meet in the phrase “turning filial piety into patriotism” (*yixiao zuozhong* 移孝作忠) (Stafford 1992, 370). This principle has long been a justification for severe training regimes and excessive use of young players in the name of national pride. Some of the best players—and thus the most worn-out—were consequently unable to pursue their careers after school.

4 Hours of Glory for Taiwanese School Baseball

In 1969, Taiwanese players won their first Little League Baseball World Series title (10–12 years old category), a tournament held every year since 1939 in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, USA. The young heroes were greeted triumphantly by a crowd of half a million people in the streets of Taipei. Sixteen more titles were won in the same category up until 1996. Families would gather around their new TV sets to watch the finals, in the middle of the night due to the time difference, and unforgettable memories were created for generations to come. Days following these delirious sleepless nights, with makeshift baseball games often taking place in the streets, are forever engraved in Taiwanese collective memory.

In 1971, players were received by the presidential couple and described by Chiang Kai-shek as “righteous Chinese citizens” (Yu and Bairner 2008, 225). However, while these young Taiwanese were supposed to espouse the iconic Confucian values of the Chinese nation as promoted by the KMT, they were likened by their opponents and the American public to robots programmed to win (Sundeen 2001, 258). The government stirred up the general hysteria around the teams, vastly inflating the importance of these children’s tournaments to national cause status (Yu 2007a, 72). Little League triumphs were celebrated in school textbooks. The government created the myth of the “triple crown” (*sanguanwang*

三冠王), which supposedly combined the three World Junior Titles won in the same year (Yu 2007a, 72; Hsu 2004)⁵.

Mainlanders initially preferred to play football (soccer) and above all basketball (Yu 2007a, 26). Until the 1970s, baseball acted as an identity demarcation line between the Taiwanese and Aborigines on one hand, and the Mainlanders on the other. Meanwhile, basketball rapidly reached all strata of society through schools and the military service where it was played fanatically and promoted by the regime. Social representations hold baseball as the sport of rural Taiwanese society, whose vehicular languages are Hokkien and Japanese, as opposed to basketball, the sport of the Mandarin-speaking and urban elite. With Little League victories Mainlanders were getting more and more involved in baseball. Within the context of general jubilation and national mobilization, playing this sport had ceased to be a betrayal of their origins. Baseball became for all what both narratives and discursive sources now describe as the “national sport” (*guoqiu* 國球). The government also capitalized on these achievements to secure the support of the Chinese Diaspora, who were a significant source of financial and diplomatic support for the regime (Yu and Bairner 2008, 229). “Baseball diplomacy” intensified while the KMT lost its seat in the UN to its Communist rival in 1971 and after the USA started diplomatic relations with China in 1979, at the moment when the party was increasingly isolated on the international scene.

5 “The Legend of Hungyeh”

The official history dictates that the Little League successes started with an extraordinary victory. In 1968, the Elementary School team of Hungyeh (紅葉), a little mountain village in Taitung county, a team made up exclusively of Bunun Aborigine youth, defeated the world champion Japanese team twice before a crowd of 20,000 in the Taipei stadium. A re-examination of the facts reveals a different reality which fails to supplant the official narrative. Several details have been omitted or neglected, more or less intentionally, such as the fact that nine out

⁵ During that period, Taiwan dominated in three categories: Little League (10–12 years old), Senior League (13–15 years old) and Big League (16–18 years old) (Yu 2007a, 169–171; Yu and Bairner 2008), making it a hat trick six times (1974, 1977, 1978, 1988, 1990 and 1991).

of the ten Hungyeh players were over the age limit of 12, and had been all registered under fake names, with the blessing of the authorities (Yu 2007b, 1271).

However, from an anthropological point of view, it is not so much the veracity of facts that is important as how the event goes down in history—and maybe the gap between its occurrence and what lingers in the collective memory (Bensa and Fassin 2002). For many Taiwanese people, the Hungyeh victory over Japan—although most players on the team were in fact from the Kansai region—was the milestone that made baseball popular and gave it some credibility. Yu Jun-wei points out that the “Legend of Hungyeh” (*Hungyeh chuanqi* 紅葉傳奇) is an “invented tradition” in the sense described by Eric Hobsbawm (1995), that is to say a nationalist tool designed to legitimize a new social and political order in a “modern” state (Yu 2007a, 37–47; Yu 2007b, 1265).

Most remarkably, this narrative suggests that the nationalist authorities had managed to subjugate Aborigines without facing any resistance. Through baseball, the Bunun children, originally rebellious to the education system, improved their school attendance and became “good citizens” who heroically defended the colours of the Republic. According to the “myth”, the credit for discovering and developing their “hidden sports talent” (*qianzai de yundong caineng*, 潛在的運動才能) went to a Han, Lin Chu-peng (林珠鵬), who had been the school’s principal since 1963. He considered baseball as a solution to poor attendance—which was a recurring issue in his school—and a means of getting the different ethnic groups together in spite of their conflicts (Yu 2007b, 1268). The “Legend of Hungyeh” is a part of Promethean Chinese nationalist party bringing the fire of civilization to indigenous “barbarians”, using baseball as a torch.

These civilizing virtues are vividly celebrated in a feature film released in 1988, *Little Giants of Hungyeh* (*Hungyeh xiaojuren* 紅葉小巨人). The film spares no cliché or caricature, from the grandmother lighting the fire with pages from a textbook to young players cutting off the soles of their shoes so that they can remain barefoot but within the rules. One of the highlights of this Chang Chih-chao (張志超) film is a scene in which young players refuse to leave school to go hunting with their older brothers, claiming they would rather play baseball and “become civilized” (*chengwei wenmingren* 成為文明人).

The socioeconomic dimension of the narrative also appears in the film. In spite of being poor, Hungyeh players beat the rich Japanese team decisively. Their

success was a result of their “unrestrained and carefree” (*bu shou jushu, ziyou zizai* 不受拘束 自由自在) temperament and, by extension, a consequence of the capitalist ideology promoted by the KMT, just starting to bear fruit. The last scene of the film shows a cheering crowd rushing onto the field at the end of a game against Japan, a symbol of Taipei’s new urban middle class. The KMT used “Hungyeh” to apply its nationalist rhetoric to a population who can pull themselves out of poverty by their own effort together with the help of a benevolent government (Morris 2010, 84–88).

6 A Parable of Taiwanese Destiny

The pro-independence movement could not let the opposite camp enjoy the monopoly of such a strong representation in the Taiwanese imagination. On 31st December 2000, President Chen Shui-bian, as he commented on a famous photograph in his first New Year’s address, celebrated Hungyeh as a symbol of the Taiwan experience and spirit:

In this black-and-white photograph, there was a barefoot aboriginal boy at bat. His face showed full concentration, as he focused all of his energy on his responsibility. Meanwhile, his team-mates stood by on the sidelines anxiously watching and giving encouragement. Such a beautiful moment perfectly captures 20th century Taiwan and is a memory that I will never forget. (Morris 2006, 84)

Independence activists also used the Little League Baseball for their own purposes, in the name of a purely insular baseball. During the 1971 finals, activists hired an aeroplane to fly over the Williamsport stadium towing a banner reading: “Long Live Taiwan Independence (*Taiwan duli wansui* 台湾独立万岁). GO GO TAIWAN”⁶. This incident caused anger among nationalist authorities who subsequently decided to broadcast games with a five-minute delay to avoid such unpleasant surprises.

In an attempt to take the imagery of baseball away from the nationalist “physical education” machine, independence activists mythologized stories of accomplishments by Taiwanese teams during the first half of the 20th century,

⁶ The first sentence was intentionally written in simplified Chinese characters as a protest against the Kuomintang who did not recognize them and as a message directly addressed to China. The second sentence was in English.

which the KMT seldom referred to. They highlighted the cultural legacy of Japan and the Japanese period, as well as the ambivalence of a relationship caught between attachment and rejection (Morris 2010, 3), a set of social representations of modernity (Ching 2001, 11) and a rival model to the Chinese nationalism of the KMT (Morris 2010, 97–103)—which bears some similarities with the contradictions of West Indian cricket described by C.L.R. James in *Beyond a Boundary* (2005 [1963]). They established a connection between the history of Taiwan and Taiwanese baseball, distinguishing it from the history of mainland China. The “national sport” became a parable of Taiwan’s destiny. The story of Kanō became a legend about the successful association of Han and Aborigine Taiwanese with Japanese players in the same team. The story took a tragic turn when Lin Kui-hsing, founder of Nōkō, was killed during the violent aftermath of the “February 28 Incident” (Morris 2010, 58).

7 Contested Representations between “Blue” Horizon and “Green” Horizon

Representations of baseball, claimed as their own by both nationalist and pro-independence movements, can be classified into two homogeneous groups sharing numerous common points. They form two horizons, a “blue” one and a “green” one, according to the colours of the two rival political groups—and therefore did not appear prior to the 1990s, when the Taiwanese political scene changed. However, this dichotomy should be tempered. These two groups are ideal types, in the Weberian sense of the term, insofar as they are constructed by the researcher and never fully happen in reality. They are interdependent, and interpenetrate and interact with each other so that the common Taiwanese view of baseball, situated between the two, is shaped by their mutual tension. In order to understand this process and its consequences, it is necessary to outline the motivations and sympathies of these groups.

The main dividing line is probably to be found in the role allocated to the “national sport” beyond its shores. In the “blue” sense of the word, baseball is a nation-oriented activity which supports the regime. Domestic affairs can only benefit from victories in international or foreign tournaments, even when securing the support of the Chinese diaspora. The fact that campaigning candidate Ma Ying-jeou chose to wear a shirt of the New York Yankees rather than one of the

national team is an indicator of the importance of the sport's image over its practice. The shirt referred to a player, Wang Chien-ming (王建民), a former Yankee pitcher, although he was openly in favour of independence. His achievements ranked him at the top of the American League—the most prestigious in the world. The Kuomintang candidate was thus not only promoting these successes, but also the moral qualities, in keeping with the above-mentioned criteria, that the player is attributed with.

Within the opposite side, Wang is seen as a product of Taiwan, as shown by the glowing terms attached to his name: “Glory of Taiwan” (*Taiwan zhiguang* 台灣之光), “Son of Taiwan” (*Taiwan zhizi* 台灣之子), “made in TaiWang”, “King of TaiWang”, etc. Wang and all other Taiwanese players who have made their way to the greatest foreign leagues are seen as ambassadors of Taiwan's local baseball culture throughout the world, with a distinctive playing style (Soldani 2010). This aspect resurfaced during the campaign to join the UN in 2008. “Green” baseball reveals a practice rooted in a territory and a history, symbolizing a sense of belonging to the world of baseball and, by extension, to a globalized international community.

The fact that China had long been almost absent from top baseball tournaments appeared to be a blessing. This lack of competition enabled non-aggravating representations to thrive between the two sides and between the main political forces in Taiwan—unlike what happened with basketball or the Olympic Games (Xu 2008). But this delicate balance was disrupted when China beat Taiwan in the Beijing Olympic Games in August 2008, and again in the last World Classic Baseball Cup in March 2009. This new balance of power reflected the political situation and the evolving state of relations between both sides, while reinforcing internal divisions. Commentators (political or non-political), ordinary people and the media came up with conflicting interpretations of these two historical defeats. Within the “green” side, this setback was received as a humiliation and yet another proof that China's rising power is a threat. In the “blue” side however, satisfaction prevailed that games had been played smoothly and in a spirit of “fraternity” (*boai* 博愛).

Within this new context, the struggle over ownership of the symbolic images also started to shift. A good example is the choice of flags, which extends further than the baseball competition. In international tournaments, Taiwan cannot use its official flag (the flag of the Republic of China), nor its national anthem. There is a

special flag for sporting events, showing the twelve-ray sun and the five Olympic rings in a plum tree blossom. However, whenever possible, Taiwanese fans from all political sides wave the flag of the Republic of China, in their own stadia or abroad, whenever a fellow countryman appears on the field. Independence activists still see it as the symbol of the oppressing party and usually prefer the flag of the Republic of Taiwan, on which they pin their hopes (*Taiwan gonghe guo* 台灣共和國). However, they do not hesitate to rally under the same banner as their political opponents during such events. The banner can be combined with another symbol asserting their allegiances, such as another flag proclaiming the “Taiwan spirit” (*Taiwan hun* 台灣魂). It is a matter of visibility, as the international community relates Taiwan to the flag of the Republic of China more than any other. Ironically, nationalists now hesitate to fly their banner for fear they may upset their Chinese continental neighbours.

This identification to the same flag in sporting events clarifies an adherence to one national team, whether it is called “Chinese Taipei” or “Taiwan”. These two names refer to different entities but are often willingly confused in certain circumstances, as the national team is actually composed of Taiwanese players only. Supporters of “indigenusness” can thus relate to a team officially named “Chinese Taipei” while still calling it “Taiwan” if they wish. Even though some refuse to accept either one or the other, this ambiguity benefits the occasional display of a certain national unity. In reality, those involved are free to adhere to either national mythology and they are free to do so without being associated with one side or the other politically. Other debates can also deal with allegiances on a non-national level, such as stereotypes and claims concerning Aborigines.

8 Baseball and Aborigines

Aborigines are at the forefront of these representations of baseball, as instruments of national construction and individuals who have been educated or perhaps saved from alcoholism through sport. All this may be far from reality but such stereotypes still abound nowadays. Aborigines reappropriate the clichés spread by the Han majority to reaffirm their own identity and defend other significant interests. The heterogeneity of the indigenous population should not be overlooked. As far as ethnic differences are concerned, some of the fourteen recognized groups are a lot less present in baseball than others. For instance, although the Atayal are

the largest group demographically, they have only one player in the Taiwanese professional league, whereas the Bunun, who also live in a mountain area, or the Puyuma, a much smaller group, are significantly represented. The Atayal, like the Taroko, prefer to play basketball or football (soccer). Baseball competitions can also become the scene of local or interethnic rivalries.

Aborigines are often stigmatized by the Han as being lazy, stupid and prone to becoming violent (Yu and Bairner 2010, 74). But there can be positive connotations. The “unrestrained and carefree” temperament attributed to the Hungyeh players also describes a playing style that has been largely idealized and is a lot freer than the Han’s. This kind of rhetoric from the majority group can take on the appearance of a racial discourse comparable to that which surrounds Afro-American sportsmen, a comparison sometimes explicitly made. Since the Japanese era, Aborigines have had a reputation of being “naturally” pre-disposed to sport: their mountainous environment being beneficial to their physical faculties, they are said to be physically fitter than their Han neighbours as far as muscular development and cardiovascular endurance are concerned and genetic studies have been carried out recently to confirm this idea, but found no scientific evidence (Lin 2010, 26 n. 1). These reasons partly account for the high number of Aborigines in the professional league to which they make up 30% of the players on average whilst they come from a minority which makes up only 2% of the country’s total population. As a result of the weak role of education together with a significant lack of prospects, existing social inequalities tend to be perpetuated (Lin 2010).

This form of discrimination has nevertheless led many Aborigines to choose baseball as their main field of study at school despite the drawbacks of an environment where only the very best succeed. They have assumed the stereotypes to which they have been subjected. Unable to relate to a nation that baseball is helping to build; they have taken it back and made it a symbol of their own. Aboriginal players and spectators alike often compare the sense of pride after a victory to the “return from the hunt” which has long been an organizing principle in their society, just as the age system governs the dormitories. They willingly associate baseball with their culture or even as simply being their culture. Many will say: “Baseball is the culture of our village” (“*bangqiu shi women buluo de wenhua*” 棒球是我們部落的文化). Also, they consider the “national sport” as one of the rare means of social and economic elevation they can access.

9 Conclusion

Understanding Taiwan's virtually unanimous obsession with its "national sport" and the common perception of it in their society necessitates an examination of the underlying logic explaining the different levels of allegiance within the same activity. Its representations are simultaneously shared and contested just as the common perceptions that develop around it intertwine and feed off each other more than they conflict. If baseball is the "national sport", it is above all because it offers a stage on which the negotiation of tensions—divisions and consensus—troubling Taiwanese society as a whole is played out. It would be fascinating from this point of view to examine in detail the contrasting relationship formed with basketball, Taiwan's other national passion. But in order to define the role that baseball plays in Taiwanese society, it is also necessary to be able to characterize the political tensions related to it, as well as the moral values attached to it, and to understand its representations in their historical context.

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