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Swimming into memory: the Los Angeles Olympics (1932) as Japanese lieu de mémoire

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This paper will analyse the swimming events of the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics in the framework of collective memory. Olympic Games are memorable moments in the history of a nation. As moments they are a unit of time, but they are equally part of an Olympic as well as a national narrative sequence: Each Olympic Games continues the established rituals and symbolism of the Olympic Movement and each athletic event is firmly based in the history of prior athletic events. Performative practices are, in this sense, also commemorative practices that function as cues for collective memories. The memory of the 1932 swimming competitions thrives on the notion that Japan once has been a nation of extraordinary skilled and successful swimmers. I will show that the significance of the 1932 swimming competitions as lieu de mémoire is not based on the invention of a tradition, but rather lies in them being a frame of reference to verify the invented past as present.

This article analyses the significance of the swimming events of the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics in the framework of places of remembrance and its role in the construction of collective and national identity in Japan. Olympic Games are memorable moments in the history of a nation. Olympic Games are primarily remembered in the host nation because of their intrinsic meaning for the individual as well as the nation in terms of identity forming, patriotism, international visibility, economy, etc. A crucial factor for the degree to which the Games become part of the collective memory is public space, that is, parks, buildings, monuments, statues of athletes, etc., which all serve as focal points of remembrance and commemoration.1

The Games of 1964, as well as the Nagano and Sapporo Olympics, are remembered – or to be more precise, are not forgotten – because their monuments, the stadiums, are still present in the public space as well as in public speaking. However, the mental topography of a nation is also marked by events and places outside its spatial borders, and the Olympic Games certainly belong into that category. Today mega-events like the Olympic Games or World Championships claim public space even if they are held outside a country’s borders. Public viewing or broadcasting of events in pubs, parks and other public locations becomes an event in itself that communicates collective experience and facilitates its storage into memory. As moments, Olympic Games are a single unit of time, but they are equally part of an Olympic, as well as a national, narrative sequence. Each Olympic Games continues the established rituals and symbolism of the Olympic Movement and each athletic event is firmly placed in the history of prior athletic events. Performative
practices are, in this sense, commemorative practices that function as cues for collective memories. For example, in the 100- and 200-m breaststroke events of the 2004 Athens Olympics and 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Japanese swimmer Kitajima Kōsuke won two gold medals, and the media, as well as numerous blogs, immediately recalled the 1932 and 1928 Olympic Games and the swimmer Tsuruta Yoshiyuki, who had won consecutive gold medals (200-m breaststroke) in both Games.

In the case of the 1932 Olympics, it could be argued that the success of the Japanese athletes, especially that of the swimmers, who won five gold medals in six events, would ensure that these Games would be remembered. However, failure is the promising core of a narrative, and the 1932 Games, where Japan’s fame as a suiei ōkoku (kingdom of swimming) originates, later attained significance in memory also because of the lack of success of Japanese swimmers following the Second World War. The memory of the 1932 swimming competitions thus thrives on the notion that Japan had once been a nation of extraordinarily skilful and successful swimmers. I show that this narrative was already established during the Taishō and early Shōwa periods (1912–32), in which swimming, as well as other sports, was integrated into the process of constructing a collective and national identity that found itself in the memory of a lost and idealized past. The significance of the 1932 swimming competitions as a lieu de mémoire, it is argued, is not only based on their remarkable success, but also lies in the event’s function as a frame of reference to verify the invented past as present as well as a promise for the future.

Mass media and public space

The 1932 Olympic Games certainly were important for the mass media, providing the moments and emotions that form the foundation of individual as well as collective memory, especially because the events were already charged with expectations and ideological meaning. The Games were intensively radio broadcasted throughout the country, generating an ‘Olympic hype’ among the Japanese population. Because live broadcasting was prohibited due to a dispute concerning broadcasting rights, the Japanese announcers recorded the events, which were later sent by shortwave radio to Tōkyō. Broadcasting about the Games actually continued over a period of four months and included not only the athletes’ preparation for the Games, but also their return. Print media had discovered that sport was an effective means to increase the circulation of newspapers and had played a crucial role in the popularization of sports in Japan since the Meiji period, paying special attention to the Olympic Games.

The political context of the 1930s provided the narrative for the memory, and the desire to create a specific memory, what Georges Vigarello calls the ‘commemorative will’, can be observed even before the Games started, as media attention turned towards the upcoming event months before the Olympic team left for Los Angeles. The Asahi Shimbun, for example, asked its readers to send in ‘support songs for the Olympic team’ (Orinpikku haken senshu ōenka) and received 48,581 texts by the deadline. By these and other means, the press politicized and ideologized the Games as well as stimulated the population’s interest in and enthusiasm for the upcoming event by calling for patriotic support as the athletes were ‘fighting’ for their country.

As the Games were staged outside of Japan, they could not occupy public space in Japan. Therefore the athletes’ departure to the USA and their return were publicly staged. In particular, triumphal parades were organized for their arrival in Japan on 3 and 9 September. The athletes were greeted at the Yokohama pier by ships, sirens and crowds of people. When they reached Tōkyō Station, the platforms were crowded with fans and
officials. A parade was held from the station to the imperial palace, where the athletes paid respect to the emperor. Noda Kazuo, participant in the 1924 and 1928 Olympics and coach of the Olympic women’s team remembers: ‘Until Nijūbashì, I just remember people, flags and the mounted police... At Nijūbashì I rejoiced in showing respect to the emperor and in singing the national anthem twice. I was moved to tears.’ From the imperial palace the athletes were driven by car to the Meiji Shrine, where Kishi Seiichi, president of the Nihon Taiiku Kyōkai, presented a sasaki-branch. The palace of the emperor as well as the Meiji Shrine are the ultimate symbols of the imperial system and state shintoism, representing historic as well as religious and ideological continuity. By paying their first visit to these institutions rather than to the political representatives of the education ministry, the athletes were integrated into the political and ideological agenda, and incorporated spatially into the political realm. It is also worth noticing that the athletes did not enter either of these places, thereby allowing the locations’ religious purity and abstractness as well as political integrity or aloofness to remain intact.

The symbolic significance of the athletes’ visits to the imperial palace becomes especially evident when we consider that only one day earlier a victory parade was held for the return of the commander in chief of the Kwantung Army, Honjō Shigeru. The Tōkyō Asahi evening edition of 9 September featured two photographs under the headline ‘Two glorious returns’ (Futatsu no gaisen): one of the Olympic team paying their respect to the Meiji Shrine and the other of the return of Honjō on his way to the imperial palace. The athletes’ return is juxtaposed with that of a war hero, and the athletes’ participation at the Olympic Games becomes – in this discourse – part of the same political and ideological agenda as the war in China. As Honjō had conquered China, the Japanese athletes had, so to speak, conquered the USA and had to be remembered as heroes.

**Olympic swimming in the historical context**

Sport competitions thrive on rivalry between teams, individuals, bodies, nations and ideologies, and are a stage to symbolically negotiate existing conflicts. The political as well as spatial context of the late 1920s and early 1930s gave the Los Angeles Games a special significance for the Japanese nation. During the 1920s, Japan followed a course of internationalism: the country became a member of the League of Nations in 1926 and signed the Kellogg Briand Pact only two years later, followed by ratification of the London Naval Treaty in 1930. However, the signing of the Naval Treaty was followed by public and military protest in Japan and marked a turning point in Japan’s domestic and international politics. The assassination attempt on Prime Minister Hamaguchi Osachi (November 1930) and the assassination of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi (May 1932) during a coup d’etat by the military ended the democratic period of the Taishō and early Šōwa periods, and domestic politics ultimately shifted towards conservatism and nationalism. This trend was paralleled by an increasingly confrontational course in international politics. In 1931, the Mukden incident had been used by the army as justification to invade Manchuria, and by January 1932 the USA had announced that they would not recognize a Japanese puppet state in Manchuria, which increased the tension and rivalry between both countries. Only one year after the Olympic Games, Japan resigned from the League of Nations. Furthermore, the world was confronted with an economic depression (1929–33) that reached its peak in 1932.

The Olympic Games in Los Angeles thus had special significance for the Japanese nation, and the swimming pool was the place where the Japanese organizers, officials and athletes hoped to win gold medals. The swimming competitions also received special attention because American swimmers like Johnny Weissmuller, Buster Crabbe and the
Kalili brothers dominated international competitions during the 1920s. The swimming events were thus semantically charged as they symbolically reflected the Japanese challenge to American hegemony. The Japanese government was well aware of the effect that international mega-events, such as Expositions and Olympic Games, could have on the international reputation and the image of a nation.

In the contemporary international climate in which Japan was marked as an aggressor and threat to international treaties, Japanese athletes could, on the one hand, present the image of a strong and wealthy Japan, a positive image to counteract the negative international press. On the other hand, the Games could be utilized domestically to strengthen patriotism and national pride, as well as restore trust in the Japanese economy. The relevance the government attached to the Olympic Games of 1932 is mirrored in its logistical support and financial funding, which far exceeded the support given to earlier Games. Governmental support enabled the Nihon Taiku Kyōkai (Japan Physical Education Association) to send 131 athletes to Los Angeles, the largest group of athletes since Japan’s participation in the Olympic Games. The aquatic team provided the largest single team in the Japanese Olympic delegation with 41 athletes and 12 staff members. The size of the aquatic team equalled the expectations concerning the athletes’ performances. During the 1920s, an effective organizational structure and a system of local and national swimming competitions had been established, based on fostering middle and high school level talents. These competitions contributed significantly to local and regional identity formation as the Japanese East–West (Kanto–Kansai) rivalry began to be negotiated in the pool. Swimmers not only started for their school, university or club, but also were seen as representatives of a region and often of a regional swimming tradition.

Beyond those national competitions, international swimming meets in Hawaii in 1926, the All-American Swimming Championship Meet 1927, intercollege competitions between Meiji University, Hawaii and Yale University (1930) as well as a meet with the American champion team in the pool of Meiji Shrine in 1931, served to evaluate and prepare Japanese athletes for international competitions. Financial support, organizational structure, improvement in training conditions and method, in addition to talent promotion, led to an amazing number of new national records being set in the 1930s. However, it was not the quantity of records beaten but the quality of those records that placed Japanese swimmers among the group of top international athletes. In 1930, men swam their way to 13 new Japanese records and women 16, only to be bettered one year later by 11 male and 14 female records. Even during the last qualification meet for the Olympics, four Japanese records were broken.

**Sport ideology and the swimmer as samurai**

The observed political shift in Japan also influenced sport ideology. Abe Ikuo et al. (1992), Irie Katsumi (1986, 1991) and Sakaue Yasuhiro (1998) have shown that sport, especially during early 1930s, was increasingly ideologized and integrated into the process of total social militarization and ‘Gleichschaltung’. Local and national sport competitions were designed to foster the spiritual development of the nation and to provide strong young soldiers. In oral and textual communication, the athlete was consequently placed in the semantic proximity of the soldier. In his analysis of the Meiji Shrine Games, Irie (1991) showed that athletes in the 1930s were frequently referred to as senshi (soldiers) in opening speeches and public notes. The Meiji Shrine Games that were held under different names 14 times between 1924 and 1943 were certainly the main annual national sport competition. The stadiums for these sport competitions were physically located in the outer...
gardens of the Meiji Shrine, which also ritually connected sport competition and emperor worship. Swimming became part of the spatial spiritualization of sport through the Meiji Shrine Games in 1931, when the Meiji Pool was completed and the swimming events could finally be held in the sacred proximity of the shrine. Sport is not only a lieu de mémoire in itself but also a reference made to other lieux de mémoire in order to give meaning; placing the athlete in the context of the pre-modern samurai and the spirit of bushidō became common in sport media. This process went hand-in-hand with a translation and adaption of the English concept of ‘sportsmanship’ into the Japanese context. In 1903, Takeda Chiyosaburō had already connected ‘sportsmanship’ with the ethical values of the pre-modern warrior class in his work Riron Jikken Kōgi Undo. Takeda also coined the term kyōgido, ‘way of athletic competition’, thus connecting athleticism with the ethical tradition of Japanese martial ways.

However, the discursive transfer of the idea of the samurai to the idea of a modern athlete was influenced by different and often contradictory discourses. The image of a warrior devoted to his lord certainly contradicts a warrior who is on a lonesome intellectual or spiritual pilgrimage, as presented in the article Gorufu musha shugyō, by the politician Hatoyama Ichirō, which was published in Bungei Shunjū in 1935. But the dominating narrative is that of a samurai, who is devoted and loyal to his master, ready to sacrifice his life. Loyalty, self-sacrifice, endurance of pain and hardship are identified as the main legacy of the code of the warrior, as well as the dominating forces in ‘Japanese sportsmanship’ ideology. Swimming is no exception in its contribution to the official narrative of the athlete as samurai, and in the case of the Los Angeles Olympics, the swimmers were addressed as samurai or warriors in the foreign as well as national press. For example, the Kashu Mainichi Daily News of 14 August 1932, an American newspaper for Japanese living in the USA, wrote: ‘As we turn our eyes upon a Japanese lad who stands on the top platform gazing up for the Japanese flag that he helped to raise, we see not just a Japanese boy, but a true son of Japanese warrior–samurai... The living memory of those men of ancient Japan who built the tradition of Bushido becomes a guiding spirit of a new generation.’

**Remembering the body and body techniques**

‘The living memory of those men of ancient Japan was extended to the athletes’ bodies and body techniques, and the swimming athlete was discursively connected to pre-modern swimming styles, which had been one part of the warrior classes’ bugei juhappan (18 martial skills). In this sense, the memory of pre-modern Japanese swimming made swimming ‘Japanese’.

In the first half of the Meiji period, ‘traditional’ Japanese body techniques were considered to be inferior to Western body techniques. They disappeared, were marginalized or modernized according to the needs of the time, as in the case of judo. From around the 1880s, the pendulum swung back towards Japanese body techniques, and with growing self-confidence and the coining of a national identity, ‘tradition’ became a focal point of the discourse. During the Meiji period, traditional swimming styles continued to be taught, and when Japanese swimmers won the first international swimming meet in 1898 in Yokohama, they demonstrated that athletes using ‘traditional’ swimming techniques could compete and win in a Western sport discipline. Swimming became a symbol for the value of pre-modern bodies as well as body-techniques and was situated in the discourse of forming, defining and defending national and cultural identity.

Joseph Maguire has stated that ‘[n]ational culture and identity are also represented by an emphasis on origins, continuity, tradition and timelessness’, and Japanese physical
educators as well as representatives of the pre-modern swimming styles, which had integrated competitive swimming into their programme, successfully stressed the significance of swimming for the moral education, defence, economy and well-being of the nation. Contemporary writings on swimming attempt to create a national history of swimming and to connect the origin of swimming to the earliest history or even place it within the foundation myths of the nation.18 Swimming was linked to the development of brave character (daitan kishō) and stamina (nintairyoku), which were in turn defined as qualities of the national—male Japanese character,19 and the history of swimming became firmly based within the tradition of bushidō, a concept that intellectuals rediscovered and reinvented during the late Meiji period, defining its values as the intellectual and moral characteristics of the Japanese people.20

Body techniques play a central role in the popularity and memory of athletes. The kaiten return of the Asian Witches is as much remembered as Rikidozan’s karate choppu,21 and the discussion of using certain swimming techniques in this context not only became a question of physics and effectiveness, as could be expected in modern competitive sport, but also touched upon questions of cultural identity, since swimming in Japan meant to actively remember pre-modern body techniques.22 When Japanese swimmers started to compete internationally in the Far Eastern Championships in 1913, they were able to dominate the events by swimming in a ‘traditional’ style. At the Olympic Games of Antwerp (1920), however, it became evident that Japanese techniques were inferior to the newly developed front crawl.23 But swimming is a modern sport, based on the principles of effectiveness and optimization, and the front crawl consequently spread in Japan. Yet the discourse ascribed to the way these modern techniques were realized and exercised a certain ‘Japaneseness’: the front crawl was first named Ibaraki-ryū kurorū, after Ibaraki Middle School from where the style started to spread, following the Antwerp Games.

Around the time of the Los Angeles Games, the terms nippon-kuroru and nipponshiki suiei came into use, implying a Japanization of competitive swimming concerning techniques as well as training methods. Nippon-kuroru, the front crawl preferred by the Japanese swimmers at that time, was indeed different from the American front crawl, as it used strong leg movements in addition to a considerable rolling of the body and a shorter arm stroke than, for example, Weissmuller. The term nipponshiki suiei, by contrast, refers not so much to certain techniques as to rigid training methods, the stress on leg exercises, and the importance of gymnastics as part of training and warm-up, which greatly differed from the Western approach.24

As much as the swimming competitions in Los Angeles can be read as competitions of different body techniques, they are also competitions of different bodies. This contrast is especially striking in the 1920s and 1930s.25 By the 1930s, many of the best Japanese swimmers were actually either still going to school or had just started university. Ellen Galford (1997) quotes Samon Runyon: ‘We have little Japanese boys, at an age when our kids are still balking at spinach, breaking Olympic records and outsplashing the greatest swimmers in the world’.26 Dirk Schaap writes: ‘Even more amazing was the youthfulness of the flying fish from Japan: Kusuo Kitamura, who won the strenuous 1,500-meter free style, was only fourteen; Masaji Kiyokawa, the 100-meter back-stroke champion, was sixteen; and Yasuji Miyazaki, the 100-meter free style champion, was seventeen.’27 The public display of the sporting bodies in the 1920s and 1930s showcased the difference in stature and muscle structure between Japanese swimmers and Western athletes, like Johnny Weissmuller, Arne Borg, Buster Crabbe and the German champion Erich Rademacher. These athletes not only embodied and personified the Western ideal of the
strong muscular modern male, but also symbolized and indeed seemingly proved by their results the superiority of the Western body.28

The narrative of the small and inferior Japanese body that had become an integral part in the description of Japan as the other as well as in Japanese self-descriptions, at least since the arrival of the ‘black ships’ in 1853, is echoed in the swimming events. The success of Japanese swimmers propagated an alternative and equally successful modern Japanese body, which through the discourse of the athlete as samurai brought back into memory an idealized pre-modern body. Ultimately, the body of the athlete came to personify the body of the nation as expressed in the lyrics of the Asahi Shimbun Olympic support song titled ‘Hashire! Daichi wo’ (Run! Across the earth):

Run across the earth with all your might,
Swim that the water splashes,
Your arms and your legs,
Are the arms and legs,
Of Our Japan, Our Noble Japan.29

Remembering the athletes

The best-remembered Japanese athletes of the 1932 Olympics are certainly, apart from Baron Nishi and his horse Uranus, the swimmers Kiyokawa Masaji, Irie Toshio and Kawazu Kentarō, who won all three medals in the 100-m backstroke event, and Tsuruta Yoshiyuki, who is certainly the single most remembered swimmer of the 1932 Olympics and whose name was listed in the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1968 as the third most important Japanese swimmer, following Kitamura Kusuo (1965) and Furuhashi Hiromoshin (1967). His significance for and in national memory is expressed in a series of stamps entitled Niju seki design kitte, published between 23 August 1999 and 22 December 2000 (see Figure 1). This series of stamps maps various places of remembrance in twentieth-century Japanese history, including sport-related historical photographs and pictures, such as Rajio Taisō, J-League, the baseball legends Ō Sadaharu and Nagashima Shigeo, as well as the 1928 Olympics bronze medal winner (800-m run) Hitomi Kinue, and the 1964 Olympics.30 In this series, Tsuruta is part of the years 1927–8 and thus placed in the context of the Amsterdam Games, which were the first Games at which Japanese athletes won gold medals.

Tsuruta is also one of the few athletes who is publicly remembered through a bronze statue. As Sven Saaler has shown, bronze statues of historical figures in Japan have, since the Meiji period (1868–1912), served to personify the idea of the nation and to transmit national history, contributing to the establishment of national awareness and identity.31 The static pose of the statue also establishes the past as heroic and as a source of national pride. In this sense, statues and photographs share a common function:

Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible, of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote. One can’t possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images – as according to Proust, most ambitious of voluntary prisoners, one can’t possess the present but one can possess the past.32

The bronze statue and a memorial stone for Tsuruta were erected in a small public park in his hometown Kagoshima, securing personified remembrance on the national as well as local level. An information board and newspaper clippings inform the visitor about Tsuruta’s life and achievements. The memorial stone features a poem that focuses on the hardships (kurushisa) of athletic training and life, by which Tsuruta and what he has
achieved become a product of Japanese sportsmanship ideology (see below), and at the same time this ideology is verified as a road to success.

Famous graduates are very much part of a university’s presentation and contribute to its status. For example, Meiji University, from where Tsuruta graduated, held an exhibition in 2008 adding an institutional dimension to Tsuruta’s realms of remembrance. Tsuruta dominates the memory of the 1932 Olympic swimming events because he was not only the first swimmer to win a gold medal for Japan but also the only athlete, until Kitajima in 2008, who was able to do so in two consecutive Games. By Tsuruta’s achievements, the symbolic boundaries of a single sporting event were extended into the narrative of the ‘glorious’ tradition of Japanese swimming. In contrast to Tsuruta’s memory, the memory of Kiyokawa, Irie and Kawazu became a primary focus in the political and ideological narrative of the 1930s, whereas in the years following the Second World War, their place in memory is rather underrepresented.

The success of Tsuruta was expected and taken as a given by the officials, media and audience, but the triple win in the backstroke event came as a surprise because Japanese swimmers had been comparably weak in this discipline. Accordingly, the three winning athletes made the Japanese tabloids and emotionalized the memory of this event in the years following the Games. In the notes of announcer Shimaura Seizo, the moment of this

Figure 1. *Nijû seki design kitte*, 1999–2000.
triple win is recorded with pride: ‘... it is the moment when the world is at Japan’s feet. It
is a scene we will never forget.’ However, it was not the moment of victory, not a
finishing photo or a photo of the Japanese athletes showing the gattsu pozu in the pool (in
this sense differing from the memory of Kitajima Kōsuke’s or Michael Phelps’ victories)
that entered national memory. Private and collective memory of the 1932 backstroke event
is dominated and represented by two photos. The first is that of the three backstroke
swimmers right after they had left the pool. The athletes stand close together, waving
towards the crowd in the stadium and to the world as they were immediately surrounded by
reporters and cameramen. Because the swimmers had just left the pool, their bodies in
the photo are still wet, displaying a freshness that transmits a positive young and congenial
Japan, contradicting the stereotypical characterizations of the ‘aggressive Japanese’ or
‘yellow peril’. The much commented upon fact of the swimmers’ youthfulness
additionally communicates a promising ‘positive’ Japanese future. The second photo that
dominates the discourse of remembrance is that of three hinomaru (nisshōki) flags on the
‘flag poles of honor’ above the Olympic stadium during the victory ceremony. The
symbolic power of the three hinomaru is mirrored in interviews, newspaper articles and
the personal memories of athletes and audience as a national moment of recovery of self
confidence and pride. Yamamoto (2000) has shown the extent to which the 1932 Olympics
and the performance of Japanese athletes affected ethnic self confidence and self
awareness of the Japanese living in the USA. Tabata Seiji, head coach of the swimming
delagation, remembers meeting on the street a fellow countryman, who had moved to the
USA 30 years earlier. This countryman is quoted as saying:

I was discriminated by stones that were thrown at me, when I walked around, and I was not
allowed into restaurants. In front of a white person, I could not say that I am Japanese. Because
of our swimming victories at the Olympics, I am asked by white people (while shaking hands):
‘Are you Japanese? I like Japanese swimming. Their attitude is good. Congratulations.’ Since
long time ago I could say again: ‘I am Japanese.’ Thank you very much.

The moment of the Japanese flag(s) being raised and the Japanese anthem being played
was experienced as a moment in which the objectified time of modernity and sport was
transformed into the subjective time of individual and collective emotionality, poignantly
expressed in Kiyokawa’s memory (1997): ‘I stepped up onto the centre of the podium, Irie
on my right and Kawazu on the left side. The large Japanese national flag went up on the
center pole with smaller flags on each side; the Japanese anthem played, and the noise on
the stands quieted down. I felt it took an extraordinary long time to complete our national
anthem during which we stood in attention to the flags.’ In order to place the athletes win
firmly into the national context, Saitō Takahiro in his book on new Japanese swimming
techniques (1934) projects the three athletes before the national flags and thereby into the
realm of the nation (see Figure 2).

In contrast to the photographic conditions that did not allow for shooting the
three athletes as well as the three flags together, the spectators experienced the two visual
impressions simultaneously, which becomes clear in the words of announcer Shimaura:

First place Japan, second place Japan, third place Japan. Three Japanese flags. The impression of
three flags fluttering high in the sky has been accomplished by our heroes the three athletes
Kiyokawa, Irie, and Kawazu. It is the pride of three backstroke athletes that had won in a style
that has been called the weak point of Japanese swimming; it is the joy of the Japanese, the
three athletes coming out of the pool waving. On their wet bodies the glittering and already
setting sun is reflected. It is a rather divine scene. In one corner of the stands the whole
swimming team has taken position and stood up. Following the example of team leader
Takaishi ‘Banzai’ was chanted three times. Into that harmonized the Banzai of our country
fellowmen, now Japan has completely conquered the world. Nippon Banzai.
The reference towards the national and collective community rather than to individual athletes in the symbolic representation becomes evident in yet another striking aspect of the Games’ memory. Not only personal accounts of the Games, but also newspaper articles frequently quote auditory memory: the *Banzai* shouts of Japanese fans when the athletes left Japan, when they arrived in the USA, during the Games, and especially during the victory ceremonies, as well as upon their return to Japan. The overwhelming victory in the backstroke event blended each single athlete into the group and although the three swimmers were in fact competing against each other, they were perceived as a team that won gold, silver, and bronze for the Japanese nation. The strong symbolic potential of the triple win predestined the backstroke event to contribute to the contemporary political tendency of using sport as means not only to train strong young men but also to communicate to the outside world a positive and fresh young image in times when Japan was increasingly isolated in international politics.

**Notes**

Although Furukawa Masaru was able to win gold in the Melbourne Games of 1956, this was the time of the Australian swimmers, and it was 1972 before Taguchi Nobutaka was successful in winning an Olympic gold medal for Japan again. It is interesting to note that the Olympics often feature as a goal or dream for swimmers in manga. In 1970, Kodansha published a shōjo manga (4 vols) with the title Kin medaru he no taan, in which the main character trains for the 200-m freestyle competition at the Munich Olympics. The story focuses on a specific technique, named tobiuo taan (flying fish turn), which enables the main character to win against her opponents. The manga was made into a TV series in 1970 and aired by Fuji TV between July 1970 and September 1971. Other examples include the manga Futatsu ni watta dō medaru (The split bronze medal; Sutajio Shippu,) from 1978; the series Bata ashi kingyō (6 vols, Kodansha), which was published from 1986 to 1988; and more recently, Gold Rush (2 vols, Kodansha) from 2003.

Sakaue, Kenroku sochī, 183. The success of the broadcastings suggests that the announcers were able to transmit the excitement of the actual competitions.

For sport in Japanese newspapers during the Taishō-period see esp. Shimada, Taishō jidai no taiiku, supōtsu. Shimbun ni yoru shiryō.

See supra. Actually the three 100-m backstroke winners Kiyokawa, Irie and Kawazu also recorded a song entitled ‘Suiei senshu no uta’ (‘Song of the swimmers’); Bungei shunju, ‘Bungei shunju’, 135–6.

Nihon Suiei Renmei, Suiren Yonjūnenshi, 93. The discursive parallelism of military- and sport-heroism is displayed in an article in the October 1932 edition of the magazine Gakkō Kyōiku written by a primary school. The author identifies two events in 1932 that moved the Japanese population and that will have a ‘lasting value for national education’: one of these events is the Olympic Games and the other is the story of the ‘Three Flesh Bullet Patriots’ (nikudan san yāshi/ bakudan san yāshi) about three soldiers killed during the First Shanghai Incident (28 January 1932 to 3 March 1932) while trying to bomb the defences of the Chinese troops and whose story became very popular during that time. For sport and war heroism, see especially Aaron Skabelund’s article in this issue.


It is interesting to note that despite the facts known about the Japanese records being broken, contemporary and later Western commentators explained the ‘surprising’ success of the ‘little brown men’, as the press had named the Japanese swimmers, by the traditionally perpetuated stereotype of Japan as being a copycat nation: ‘Japan made its efforts with the kind of care and meticulous preparation that it would later use in entering global export markets after World War II: They studied the opposition carefully, copied what they felt would stand them in good stead, and made adjustments that maximized the benefits of foreign methods for the smaller Japanese physique’. See Russell, The IX Olympiad, 83. See also Galford, The X Olympiad; and Sprawson, Haunts.

Irie, Shōwa supōtsu shiron. For ideology in swimming see especially Hirano, Kokumin suiei taisō; Dai Nihon Taikukai, Sōtei kaiei tokuhon; Saihō, Nihon suiei tokuhon; Tōkyō Kokumin Gakkō Suiei Renmei, Suiei tokuhon; Tōkyō Shōgakkō Suiei Renmei, Suiei tokuhon, and Toyama, Aikoku Suirei.

Nihon Suiei Renmei, ‘Nihon Suirei nenpyō’, Nihon suirei shiryo shusei, 70–1; Nihon Suiei Renmei, Suiren Yonjūnenshi, 78.

Abe, Kindai supōtsushinpippu, 297.


Giving nicknames certainly reflects cultural stereotypes as in the case of Furuhashi Hironoshin, called ‘The Flying Fish of Fujiyama’, an athlete who also features in the Tokyo Bid Legacy 1964 series.


Maguire, Global Sport, 178.

See, for example, Takahashi and Kimura, Suiei Nihon, 4.

See Kida, Sai shin Suiejutsu, 1; Ueno, Nihon no suijutsu, 3; Nihon Suijō Kyōgi Renmei, Nihon suiei-shiryo shūsei. On pre-modern Japanese swimming styles see Shirayama, Nihon eiho. 12 ryūha no hihō.
20 Kenô, J, ‘Kokumin taiiku shinkô’, ‘Kongo ni okeru kokumin’; Kida, Saishin Suieijutsu, 1; Ueno, Nihon no suijutsu, 3; Nihon Suijô Kyôgi Renmei, Nihon suiei-shiryö shûsei. The Olympic Games of 1932 also resulted in a boom in swimming literature, especially teaching manuals that also contained introductions into the history or the ideology of swimming and books referring to swimming as a means of national defense, such as, Hirano, Kokubô yûei kyôhen. For the development of a swimming style by Kenô see Sanada et al., ‘Kenô Jigoro shûdo ni yoru suijutsu no saihen ni kansuru kenkyû’. For swimming manuals see also Katô and Mukai, Saishin yûeijutsu; Katô, Oyogi sanmai, 1926 and Katô, Oyogi sanmai, 1932 and Yada, Saishin mohan suieijutsu.

21 Yomiuri Shinbunsha, Nijû seiki nipponjin, 256. According to a Yomiuri questionnaire, Rikidôzan’s techniques are an even more important factor in his popularity than the fact that he defeated American wrestlers.

22 One good example occurred in 1918 when a discussion on the Japanese-ness of the breaststroke was held in the magazine Orinpia between Kida Takeo and Iwamoto Tadatsugu. Kida, who is also famous as the radio commentator who made the first radio broadcast in Japan (1925), which he started by ‘A, A, A kikoemasu ka’ (Eh, eh, eh. Can you hear me?), argues that the Japanese success in the Far Eastern Championships of 1917 is based on the training of indigenous Japanese swimming techniques.

23 For the development of the front crawl see Colwin, Breakthrough Swimming.

24 For the Japanese training style, see Saito, ‘How we coach’. Also the swimwear showed a certain deviation from international standards. Although the primary swimsuit for men in the 1920s and 1930s at international competitions was a one-piece swimsuit, and Western as well as Japanese swimmers can also be seen in swim shorts, Japanese swimmers were occasionally using the ‘traditional’ rokushaku fundoshi (length of cloth used as underwear, but could also be used for swimming).

25 By this time, media interest, infrastructure and the new interest in leisure activities like mountain climbing and bathing had resulted in the foundation of local swimming clubs, as well as school and university swimming clubs. Statistics show that by 1932 swimming was well established at middle and vocational school, with 773 schools having swimming clubs. It was nearly as popular as judo, which had 787 school clubs (Sakaue, Kenroku söchi, 32). These middle school clubs became the driving force behind the establishment of a nationwide organizational infrastructure and national competitions. The introduction of a fixed annual schedule for competitions further developed the competence of young swimmers.


27 Schaap, An Illustrated History, 204. See also Guttmann and Thompson, Japanese Sports, 122.

28 The American swimmers Weissmuller and Crabbe were especially seen as prototypes of masculinity. Both were able to transfer their body capital into economic and cultural capital as they featured in the popular Tarzan movies, and Crabbe acted as main character for the Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers series. The French champion Jean Taris, who became topic of the film Taris, rois de l’eau (1931), should also be mentioned.

29 The chosen lyrics were that of a fourth grade college boy from Tôkyô and were recorded and distributed by Columbia.

30 Other lieux de mémoire included in this series are J-Boy, Berusaiyu no bara, Urutoraman, Tora san, Shinkansen, Kawabata Yasunari, Natsume Sôskei, and Misora Hibari.

31 On bronze statues in Japan and their relevance in the context of nation building. See especially Saaler, ‘Personenkult’.


33 Kiyokawa is institutionally remembered at the Nagoya Daigaku Hakubutsukan (former Nagoya Kôto Shôgyô Gakkô), where he graduated and where his medals from 1932 are displayed.

34 Sakaue, Kenroku söchi, 178.

35 For example, Takaishi and Kimura, Suiei Nihon; Saitô, Shin Nihon Suieijutsu; Nihon Suiei Renmei, Suiei Yonjûnenshi, 95; Bungei Shunjû, 135. Sakaue, Kenroku söchi, 179.


37 For example, in Grix, Olympische Tage, we read ‘Zur Ehre der Amerikaner sei gesagt, dass sie sich tapfer wehrten gegen die gelbe Gefahr’. Ibid., 56.

38 For example, Takaishi and Kimura, Suiei Nihon; Saitô, Suiei, 20; Sakaue, Kenroku söchi, 179; Nihon Suiei Renmei, Suiei Yonjûnenshi, 95; Saitô, Shin Nihon Suieijutsu.
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