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Sport in the Asia-Pacific region

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<https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/sport-and-society/book241826>

PUBLISHER

Sage Publishing

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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Bairner, Alan, Jung Woo Lee, and Tien-Chin Tan. 2019. "Sport in the Asia-Pacific Region". figshare.
<https://hdl.handle.net/2134/19959>.

Sport in East Asia

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Overview

Despite the influence of Confucianism, with its emphasis on intellectual rather than physical activity, throughout much of east and south-east Asia, sport has acquired a prominent role in most, if not all, countries in the region. This chapter provides an introduction to the role of sport in four East Asian countries – Japan, Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, and South Korea. It does so by focusing on three main issues, each of which has relevance, albeit to varying degrees, for the countries under discussion. These are the relationship between sport, national identity and nationalism, the significance, or otherwise, of traditional games and/or national sports within the context of globalization, and the role of sports mega-events in relation to modernization.

Sport, politics and nationalism in Japan

In any study of sport in East Asia, it is difficult to know with which country to begin.

Given its influence on the region throughout much of the modern era, however, Japan is arguably the most alluring option. As Kelly (2013: 142) observes, 'sport has been absolutely formative in and for modern Japan – and for longer and with much braider ramifications than many of the other expressions of leisure and mass culture that have received so much more scholarly attention'. Japan's martial arts tradition has been more extensively globalised than those of China and Korea. Japan also had a massive influence on the trajectory of sport in Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, in Korea. Perhaps most significantly of all, it was the first Asian country to host the Olympic Games and, in the course of the ultimately successful bidding process, managed to present itself as both Asian but also considerably more modern than its Asian neighbours. For example, in the period from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, Japan had come up with the slogan 'Keep up with the West' (Yuan, 2013).

The issue of nationalism, and its relationship with sport, is also particularly controversial in the case of Japan. Since the end of the Second World War and its humiliating defeat, along with those of Germany and Italy, at the hands of the allied

powers, Japan has largely absented itself from major conflicts, The history of Japan's involvement in World War Two and in the affairs of other East Asian countries has been constantly written and rewritten by authors with competing views on Japanese nationalism. Many are fearful of an upsurge in nationalist sentiment and are wary of sports fandom in this regard. For others, however, Japan should never have been treated as a guilty party, either by the global community or, more specifically, by the Chinese and Koreans. For them it is time that Japan reasserted itself not only in the region but also on the international stage. Sport would clearly have a part to play in this regard but arguments about which sport or sports are most suited to the task alert us to further cleavages in Japanese society. Traditional pastimes set Japan apart and underline its national distinctiveness. Sports such as baseball and soccer, however, along with sport mega-events allow the Japanese to flex their sporting muscles in international competition.

The place of sumo

As mentioned above, Japanese martial arts, and in particular judo, have been diffused throughout the world. However, the relationship between sport and Japanese national identity is nowhere stronger or more visible than in the sport of sumo wrestling. Images of sumo wrestlers evoke a sense of Japan in the minds of foreigners at least as

much, and perhaps more so, as photographs of Mount Fuji. But the sport has more than purely symbolic significance. Although major competitions take place relatively infrequently and in a limited number of cities, attendances and television viewing figures are high for the duration of each tournament. The events themselves are a curious mixture of the ancient (or what purports to be ancient) and the modern with referees dressed in the style of Shinto priests alongside the banners of major companies indicating how much money top wrestlers can win if they are successful in the final rounds of competition. Sumo is undeniably an invented tradition but it is a tradition nevertheless and contributes powerfully to the idea of Japanese distinctiveness (Thompson, 1998). For reasons such as these, sumo has an important place the hearts and minds of traditionalists and of supporters of resurgent Japanese nationalism. However, there is one significant problem.

For many years, the top sumo wrestlers have been Mongolian rather than Japanese (Tierney, 2013). In addition, wrestlers from European countries including Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Estonia are highly ranked. Although there is logical connection between Mongolian styles of wrestling and sumo, the arrival of the Europeans owes more to the attempts by the amateur sumo federation to promote the sport internationally and thereby establish a case for the sport's admittance to the

Olympic Games. It is reasonable to assume that professional sumo wrestling in Japan needed the injection of foreign talent. The questions for the traditionalists though are how far should this process go and with what effect on what the sport offers to Japanese national identity precisely because of its insularity. Sumo, however, is far from being the only element of the Japanese sporting landscape that has been affected by the twin forces of modernization and globalisation.

Sports Mega-Events in Japan

In terms of Japan's engagement with sport on the international stage, baseball has long been the most successful repository of Japan's sporting ambitions, not only through competitive successes by national teams but also by way of the achievements of Japanese players in Major League Baseball in the United States. More recently, however, soccer has begun to contest this role with the joint-hosting (with South Korea) of the FIFA World Cup in 2002 being a pivotal moment in this respect (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2002). To gain a real understanding of Japan's engagement with the wider sporting world, however, it is important to consider the history of the country's relationship with the Olympic movement.

In 1964, Tokyo became the first Asian city to host the Summer Olympics. It had previously been selected to host the Games in 1940 but these were cancelled due to the outbreak of the Second World War (Collins, 2008). It is ironic, therefore that 'the 1940 Tokyo Olympics were pivotal in the histories of modern Japan and the Olympic Movement' (Collins, 2007: 955). As Collins (2007: 956) argues, 'the complex and fascinating encounter between Japan and the world in the 1930s set the scene and the tone for later Asian involvement in the Olympic movement'.

According to Collins (2007: 969), 'although Tokyo City officials initiated the bid for the 1940 games, the national government would slowly adopt the campaign as the state came to appreciate the role of sports in fomenting both Japanese nationalism and international awareness of Japan'. Tokyo subsequently submitted a bid to host the Olympics in 1960 but was eliminated in the first round of voting, the successful bid on that occasion coming from the Italian capital, Rome. In the cases of both Rome and Tokyo winning the right to host the Olympics can be interpreted as signifying the end of a period of quarantine following the Second World War. It should be noted, however, that the Tokyo bid did not differ greatly from that which had won it the right to host the Games in 1940. The emphasis remained on the idea that both the city and country were Asian but also differently Asian because of the stage of modernization

that had been reached. As Niehaus (2011: 81) notes, ‘for the Japanese, learning about the Olympic Movement and thus about other countries, paradoxically meant not only strengthening the notion of a mono-ethnic nation, but also Jana’s feeling of “uniqueness”’. That said, however, in bidding for the 1940 Games, much was made of the fact that Japan was the most modern country of the non-Western world (Collins, 2008). The Second World War, it could be argued, had done nothing to diminish this claim. Japan’s greatness was not in question despite the image which the country had acquired during the war. Indeed, there was a widespread feeling that the Japanese had been the ultimate victims of the conflict not least because of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In the UK, indeed, *World Sports* magazine did draw its readers’ attention to the wider geopolitical context, albeit by emphasising Japan’s victimhood as the first country to witness the mushroom clouds produced by atomic bombs. Even more interesting, however, is an article written on the eve of the 1964 Games by Otto Mayer who had just resigned as Chancellor of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) after 18 years in the role. According to Mayer (1964: 14), ‘What must be avoided is to surround the Games with a vast circus...a muscle-flexing circus. They must not become a circus for records where curiosity and spectacle are predominant’. So what

was the enemy that Mayer feared? He writes, 'It is the corruption of modern youth. State amateurism and professionalism (or "sham-amateurism") must inevitably lead the principle of the Olympics to its death' (p. 15). He condemns political infiltration in sport and claims that modern sport is being prostituted. He concludes, 'the Olympic concept has no right to be an accomplice in such corruption to which, and I regret to have to say this, certain National Olympic Committees and leading figures in sport subscribe in the interest of ephemeral and nationalistic glory' (p. 17). The writing, for all those who would argue that sport and politics can be kept apart, was well and truly on the wall.

In the meantime, the 1964 Games were widely regarded as a great success with a particularly Japanese form of modernity having been put on show to the world (Aso, 2002). It has been argued that 'the 1964 Olympics served as a rite of passage from the immediate post-war era into a period of economic affluence and renewed national pride' (Tagsold, 2011: 70). According to Shimizu 2011: 53), 'hosting the Olympics was considered to be a magnificent achievement, through which the world would recognize the modernization of the host city, Tokyo, by virtue of the country's rapid postwar economic growth'. Not surprisingly, therefore, despite ongoing concerns about both the IOC and the Olympic Games themselves, other Japanese cities were

also to bid to host the Summer Olympics albeit without success. However, the Winter Olympics were held in Sapporo in 1972 and Nagano in 1998. Perhaps more significantly, the Summer Games will return to Tokyo in 2020.

Thus, Japan's relationship with the West continues. However, Cha (2013: 6) notes that in Asia (and one would argue elsewhere), 'sport acts as an outlet for releasing pent-up historical resentments in ways that cannot be expressed through regular diplomacy. To put it bluntly, Japan's imperial past in Asia causes most former colonies to view every match with Japan as a historical grudge match'. Whilst this is undeniably true of China and, in particular, Korea, one exception to the rule is Taiwan.

Sport, politics and nationalism in Taiwan

In Taiwan, the government's current dedication to sports development can be attributed to various factors, amongst which the most significant are 'diplomacy' and 'modernization', with the former being directly linked to the relationship between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, and the latter to the interaction between the two main political parties in Taiwan. In 1949, after losing the Civil War, the KMT, led by Chiang Kai-Shek, retreated to Taiwan, where it re-established the ROC and declared martial law on 20th May. Meanwhile, the CCP, led by Mao Ze-Dong,

established the People's Republic of China (PRC) in mainland China. Both the KMT and the CCP considered their jurisdictions to be China and claimed sovereignty over the other. The desire for international recognitions on both sides gave rise to diplomatic rivalry and intensified the issue of the 'Two Chinas'. In 1971, PRC replaced Taiwan as a member of the United Nations (UN) and the latter's diplomatic relations with Japan, USA and other countries were also broken off leading to international isolation, one consequence of this being that the ROC dedicated itself to the development of elite sports in an attempt to gain more exposure on the international stage. Baseball, a legacy of the Japanese colonial period, was to play a vital role in this regard.

The ending of the martial law between 1987 and 1988 brought Taiwan to democracy and modernization. In particular, the establishment of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) meant that the ROC entered an age of party politics. From that point onwards, government interest in development was no longer simply a diplomatic matter but rather there were now the goals of enhancing the image for the country, of its cities and even of the different political parties. As a result, the ROC began to focus more generally on modernization. In order to explore this aspect of governmental involvement in sport, three major sports events at different levels -

National Games (small/national), the 2001 Baseball World Cup (medium/regular), and 2017 Summer Universiade (mega/major), will be discussed in such a way as to disclose how diplomacy in relation to the issue of the 'Two Chinas' and rivalry between cities and/or political parties influence the bidding for sports event at either the national or city level.

The place of baseball in Taiwan

Although Taiwan's indigenous tribes who constitute only 2% of the island's population have their own pastimes, these are associated more with dance and song than with pre-modern sport. Indeed, in the modern era, one of tribes, the Amis, became best known in the context of global sport when their singing was featured as the theme music for the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. Nevertheless, as we shall see, indigenous athletes have played a significant role in the development of sport in Taiwan.

.When the Japanese took control of Taiwan in 1895, the island's population of around 5 million people was divided into three broadly defined *ethnic* groups – Minnans (80%), Hakkas (15%), and aborigines (5%). As the first two groups can be

collectively classified as Han Chinese, this means that the predominant ethnic identity of the Taiwanese was and remains Chinese. It is also important to note in passing those western influences on the island which predate Japanese colonisation and had some early impact on the development of sport.

In the late nineteenth century, Taiwan was an ideal colony insofar as its residents did not themselves possess a clear sense of national belongingness. Indeed, it has been argued that 'it took the political and social power of Japanese colonialism to provide the Taiwanese with a shared sense of space, culture, and centralized administration' (Wong, 2001:179-80). This was not, of course, the colonists' intention. For example, under Japanese colonial rule, the sport curriculum played an important part in promoting *Japanese* identity. Through a modernised education system, the colonial rulers introduced school sports and their own physical culture as well as Western sports, most notably baseball, thereby marking the first, but by no means the last, occasion when a government actively promoted sport in Taiwan in a systematic way for political purposes (Tsai Jen-hsiung, 1995). The Japanese colonial government unrelentingly encouraged sport in schools at all levels and for all social strata in what, superficially, appeared to be a benign policy. In reality, however, it was intended to secure Taiwanese approval for Japanese rule.

Baseball was particularly well received island-wide, leading to the establishment of junior, youth and adult leagues (Tsurumi, 1999). Initially, as Yu (2007: 14) notes, 'baseball remained the prerogative of the Japanese during the early years of occupancy'. Over time, however, the development of a baseball culture had a particularly profound effect on Taiwan such that when the Japanese left the island after the Second World War, the sport retained its influence in terms of identity formation.

After its retreat to Taiwan, the KMT government was initially reluctant to promote baseball. Instead it favoured the development of sports like *Taekwondo* which had no direct connection with the Japanese imperial legacy. However, the party leadership soon came to realise that baseball had far greater potential not only to contribute to national solidarity in otherwise difficult times and to enhance Taiwan's international profile.

In no small part due to the role played by indigenous players, Taiwan would subsequently become a dominant force in Little League Baseball competitions held in Williamsport in the United States. In addition, despite the ongoing travails of the professional baseball system in Taiwan itself, Taiwanese ball players, many of them aboriginal, have progressed to professional leagues in Japan and the US. Furthermore,

as of April 2014, the men's national team of Taiwan (or Chinese Taipei as the country is known in international sport in deference to the demand of the PRC) was ranked fourth behind Cuba, the United States and Japan (IBAF World Rankings 2014).

Despite its colonial past, therefore, baseball has undoubtedly established itself as Taiwan's national sport and, indeed, is responsible in no small measure for Taiwan's different attitude towards Japan than that encountered in other east Asian countries. Moreover, the fact that members of indigenous tribes have contributed so much to the sport's development is not insignificant in terms of the promotion of a Taiwanese consciousness. On a more negative note, however, the prowess of aboriginal players has lent weight to the stereotypical views held by many about the further potential of aboriginal people in a context in which the Confucian valorisation of intellectual as opposed to physical labour remains influential.

Unlike the other countries discussed in this chapter, Taiwan has never played host to the Olympic Games and may well never do so. However, this should not be taken as a sign that hosting major events is of no relevance in the case of Taiwan.

Major Sports Events in Taiwan

Taiwan's main multi-sports events are the National Games which can be traced back to 1946. They were introduced to celebrate the first anniversary of the founding of the ROC. After the KMT government had retreated to Taiwan, many athletes, who had made the same journey, joined the fifth Taiwan Provincial Sports Games. In 1974, the [KMT](#) merged the Taipei City Sports Games and the Taiwan Provincial Sports Games and renamed them as the Taiwan District Games. In 1999, Lee Den-Hui proposed the concept of the 'two-sovereign doctrine', highlighting the unusual relationship between China and Taiwan. This claim emphasised the idea of the ROC's independence and its desire for separation from the PRC-governed China. Under these circumstances, the Taiwan District Games, which suggested that Taiwan belonged to China, were renamed as the National Games, according to which Taiwan was taken to be an independent sovereign country.

The choice of events in National Games is based on the Olympic Games and the Asian Games and, thus, helps athletes to prepare for participation in international events. Under popular pressure regarding their performance, cities and counties, as local governments, devote considerable resources to winning awards. In addition to

the actual sporting competition, the hosting of National Games also requires the engagement of cities and counties. National Games are thus funded by [central government](#) as an inducement to encourage local governments to bid to host the event (Sport Administration, Ministry of Education, 2009). As a result, hosting National Games for most of the time provides an opportunity to gain funding from central government to assist the renovation of old sports facilities and equipment, or even to build new ones (Tan, Cheng, Lee and Ko, 2009). On one hand, hosting National Games presents the uniqueness of the hosting city; on the other hand, with the image of modernization created by the renovation of the city, it also attests to the performance of the city leader, thereby enhancing his political reputation. Nevertheless, because the slow progress of Taiwan's economy in recent years has led to financial difficulties for central government, funding for the National Games has decreased. In order to confront the problem of lack of funds, the hosting city of the National Games gradually turns to different means of fundraising, such as marketing, sponsorship and other forms of support (Chen and Zhao, 2008). With the limited funds from central government, the city's capability to finance the hosting of the National Games has thus become an important factor.

The ruling political party has been [a](#) consistently important factor influencing the

bidding results for the National Games; it is easier for a city to win the bid when the leader of the city belongs to the ruling party. However, the decrease in funding from central government has moderated the competitive atmosphere amongst cities and counties.

With reference to international as opposed to national events, early in 1976, the International Association of Amateur Baseball selected Taiwan to host for the World Baseball Classic but the offer was declined for financial reasons. In 1980, the opportunity was again lost as a result of Taiwan's insistence on its diplomatic stance against communism according to which players from Cuba or other communist countries would have been refused entry. In 1997, the match-fixing scandal in Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL) and other sources of conflict brought about a significant decrease in public interest in the sport.

In 1998, an entrepreneur named Peng Cheng-Hao was elected as the President of CPBL. Being expected to revive the fortunes of baseball in Taiwan, Peng Cheng-Hao suggested that bidding for international games and joining international organizations were two important factors for addressing the difficulties with which baseball in Taiwan was faced (Lin, Lee and Cheng, 2010). Given that bidding for international

sports events, such as the Asian Games in 1990 and 1995 was one of the strategies the government had sketched out to improve Taiwan's exposure on the international stage, Peng Cheng-Hao proposed the idea of bidding for the 2001 Baseball World Cup. At that time, Kaohsiung County, then ruled by the DPP, was so desperate to host the event that it even proposed a formal application to the Chinese Taipei Baseball Association and the Sports Affairs Council, the highest governmental section for elite sports at that time. However, Peng Cheng-Hao's intimacy with the KMT and the fact that the KMT was in power nationally led central government and the CTBA to ignore Kaohsiung County's request. The opportunity to host the first international baseball competition in Taiwan finally went to Taipei City (Liu, 2006).

As the key actor, Peng Cheng-Hao had successfully won the right to host the 2001 Baseball World Cup through cooperation with both central and local government, both under the control of the KMT. Furthermore, hosting of 2001 Baseball World Cup did help revive interest in baseball in Taiwan while simultaneously resulting in some of the diplomatic benefits that the government had hoped to gain (Lin, Lee and Cheng, 2010).

Another significant international event to have been hosted in Taiwan was the 2017

Summer *Universiade*. Because of the political rivalry between the ROC and the PRC, participation in international sports events had become an important mechanism for enhancing Taiwan's international profile. However, obstruction by China had hindered Taiwan from acquiring opportunities to host international sports mega-events. After failures in bidding for the Asian Games and the East Asian Games, it seemed that the bidding for the *Universiade* offered another opportunity. The election of the FISU executive committee was comparatively democratic, and as Taiwan was one of the affiliates of FISU, the country had the right to vote and to be consulted on relevant matters. Moreover, since Taiwan had successfully won the right to host the 2000 World University Taekwondo Championship, bidding for the *Universiade* seemed to be a viable option. With an eye on the possibility of winning the bidding contest for the *Universiade*, Chen Tai-Cheng successfully ran for election to the FISU executive committee. Following years of support from the Sports Affairs Council, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and with Chen ensconced in the FISU, Taiwan finally won the right to host the 2017 *Universiade* after four previous failed attempts.

Once again, the political party in control of the bidding city government in each year was the same that of central government. Thus, in Taiwan's campaign film for the

2017 *Universiade*, the KMT President Ma claimed that central government would spare no effort in supporting the hosting of the event. However, according to Chou Rui, the ex-chairman of the international affairs section in the Sports Affairs Council, in addition to cooperation between the central and local governments, improved relations between China and Taiwan also impacted on Taiwan's success in bidding for the 2017 *Universiade*. Furthermore, according to Chou (2012), who was the key figure in the bidding process, the Chinese representative in FISU once indicated that since China trusted the KMT government than that of the DPP, China was inclined to support a Taiwan bid while the KMT was in power.

Modernization has been a key factor in each of these cases, especially when the desire to be seen as modern leads to the competition between cities and political parties. Due to the fraught situation between China and Taiwan, diplomacy has also been an important factor particularly in relation to Taiwan's attempts to host major international sports events. China's rise to superpower status is significant in this respect.

Sport, politics and nationalism in the People's Republic of China

The so-called ‘open door’ (*Duiwai kaifang*) policy has meant not only economic engagement by the People’s Republic of China with the capitalist world – through trade, investment and technology transfer – but also a greater openness to ideas and cultural forms originating in the West (Knight, 2003: 318). After the introduction of the ‘open door’ policy, sport development with a Chinese character was influenced by two major trends – commercialism and nationalism, which were combined within a form of market economy accompanied by strong state intervention. Thus, while speeding up the process of commercialisation of sport, the Chinese government still attempted to maintain control and pursue its priority of Olympic success. However, the question remains - can the Chinese government ensure the co-existence of the effects of a market economy on the structures of Chinese sport and a socialist way of life? In order to answer this question it is important to focus on the major reforms in the Chinese sport system, namely the restructuring of the National Sport Commission (NSC) (downgraded as the General Administration of Sport in 1998), the establishment of the Sport Law, and the introduction of the club system.

Promoted in the course of the transition to a market economy, the Chinese leadership attempted to separate government from other enterprises by gradually downsizing the massive state bureaucracy. In 1998, the NSC was downgraded to the level of General

Administration of Sport (GAS) which delegated its authority in relation to national elite sport selection, training, and competition, to 23 quasi-autonomous organizations, i.e. national sport management centres (NSMCs), and focused its attention on strategic policymaking for sport development. Each NSMC is responsible for up to three sports and, in with the aim of ensuring that NSMC operations are well managed, the current sport minister, Peng Liu, took over as director of the Chinese Olympic Committee (COC) and the All-China Sport Federation (ACSF). Moreover, due to the vital role of NSMC directors – especially of those NSMCs working with the 28 Olympic sports – for carrying out the will and policy of the Chinese government, ‘all the directors in these centres were controlled by the Party groups (*dangzu*), the leading group of the GAS’ (Tan and Houlihan, 2013). In addition to the task of fund-raising, the major mission for these NSMC directors, who were mostly former officials of the GAS, was to help their elite athletes to achieve Olympic success.

To establish a framework for the development of sport within an increasingly marketised economy, in 1995 China announced the first ‘Sport Law of the PRC’ which featured an acceptance of a degree of market forces and commercialism; the retention of the state’s concerns for nationalism, socialism, morality, and discipline; and its emphasis on mass sport, leisure activities, and free time (Jones, 1999: 6).

According to Reekie (1999: 251), the government spent 90 per cent of its sport budget on competition-related activities, and the [GAS](#)'s budget rose by 15% to around £150m in 2004 (Wollaston, 2004). In other words, the official sport budget for mass sport is limited and relies heavily on the money from the sport lottery, established in 1994.

According to a report in the People's Daily of 27 December 2000, 30% of the lottery's revenue was injected into public projects, including holding major sports events and promoting mass sports programmes. But without substantial resources from the government, 'The Fitness for All' project was always doomed to be inferior to 'The Olympic Glory' project. In such circumstances, most citizens can only participate in those physical activities which require a low skill level and few facilities (such as walking, running, traditional Chinese exercise and, disco dancing) (Hwang, 2002: 152).

To solve the financial problems arising from the limited government sport budget and also to revitalize the sport system in general, the 'enterprisation' (*Shitihua*) of sporting associations was gradually adopted. One major development was the introduction of the club system as a way of raising money. Following the apparent success of these marketisation experiments in football and basketball, the Chinese sport system began

searching for other ideas from the West, including the registration system of athletes, the “hiring and firing” system of accountability, the competition system of home and away matches, the introduction of foreign coaches, players and referees, nationwide professional club networks; player transfers player agents, sponsorship, television rights, and merchandising. However, unlike the western market model, the associations under the control of the state which dominated major through its provincial and local commissions not least because most of the ‘professional’ clubs were run by national enterprises or sponsored by regional capital investment organisations.

Although these quasi-autonomous sports bodies introduced the club system to raise funds to support themselves and to offer jobs to staff who transferred from the former NSC (Jones, 1999: 9-10), the key national mission was still Olympic success. [That](#) [meant](#) many Communist Party members involved in sport management ranked national interest (or their personal interest in keeping their jobs) above commercial interests. In essence, therefore, the Chinese club system is different from that of the West because the government, and not the free market, directs its development. Nevertheless, despite this qualification, sport development since the 1990s has been deeply affected by the embrace of the market economy. In short, nationalism and

commercialism became interwoven during the process of reforming Chinese sport, but the former was still privileged over the latter due to the ideology of the Chinese Communists who were still concerned to demonstrate the superiority of socialism over capitalism and, by implication, of China over most of the rest of the world. This helps us to understand the significance of the ‘The Olympic Glory’ project and of the 2008 Olympic Games held in Beijing. But before turning to these, it is worth considering the extent to which traditional pastimes also contribute to the nationalist project.

The place of Chinese martial arts or *Wushu*

Over the past century, *Wushu* has attracted increasing attention in the world of physical culture studies but has been marginalized in the highly politicized arena of elite sports which are primarily used as a means for the Chinese government to promote the nation. The turning point came in 2001 when Beijing successfully bid to host the Olympic Games. From that moment, *Wushu* was actively promoted as a promising sport which China was hoping to convince the IOC to adopt alongside all the other 28 summer Olympic sports. There were two reasons for this *Wushu* campaign. First, Japan and Korea had successfully brought Judo and *Taekwondo* into

the Games in 1964 and 1988 respectively, and this fact alone put pressure on the Chinese government. Second, if *Wushu* could be included the Games, China would win gold medals, thereby bringing glory and honor to the country (Lu, 2010).

Against Chinese wishes, however, *Wushu* was rejected yet again by IOC Executive Board at a meeting held in St. Petersburg, Russia, on 29 May, 2013 and will not be seen in the 2020 Summer Olympic Games. Nevertheless, the President of the Chinese Wushu Association ([CWUA](#)), Gao Xiaojun emphasizes, ‘the goal to bring *Wushu* into the Games is determined and must be realized in the future’ (GAS, 2014). In 2014, China hosts the Nanjing 2014 Youth Olympic Games and *Wushu* will again be present as a demonstration sport, the ultimate goal remaining the formal acceptance of *Wushu* into the Summer Olympic Games (Yuan, 2013).

Sports Mega-Events in China

Following the acceptance of a form of market economy, Chinese sport began to increase its involvement in international sport, especially in the Olympic Movement. Taking advantage of participation in the Olympic Movement, especially in light of its huge commercial potential, while also maintaining a distance from the Olympic spirit – freedom, democracy and fair play (Fan, 1998: 162) which might threaten the

CCP's political legitimacy – the Chinese government has been obliged to manage its engagement with this quintessentially Western movement with great care.

Why are Olympic gold medals so important for the PRC? The major reasons are related to a desire for political superiority and national pride. Wu Shaozu, Sports Minister from 1989 to 2000, claimed that 'Athletes have shouldered heavy responsibilities. They are our political ambassadors' (Wu, 1998: 6-7). And in his opening address at the Congress of Olympic Movement Studies in Beijing in 1993, he also argued that 'The highest goal of Chinese sport is success in the Olympic Games. We must concentrate our resources on it because to raise the flag at the Olympics is our major responsibility' (Wu, 1993: 402-4).

To achieve Olympic success, the Chinese government instituted a series of 'Olympic glory' projects (from 1994-2000, from 2001-2010, and from 2011-2020) which set guidelines for concentrating resources on achieving Olympic success. The combined impact of the three projects has been that China has gradually achieved its goal to become one of the world sport's superpowers. China's Olympic gold medal ranking has risen from fourth at Atlanta in 1996 to second at Athens in 2004 and to first at Beijing in 2008.

The main strategies in the projects focused on the 18 previously selected sports in which the Chinese government had invested 70% of its elite sport budget. In addition, the three projects introduced Western-style training, competition and management models with particular emphasis on sport science and sport technology for elite sport performance, an understanding of which would be gained through intensive and extensive international exchange with the outside world.

Before establishing the first Olympic glory project, the Chinese government attempted to concentrate its limited sport budget for Olympic success by highlighting selected Olympic sports according to the decisions made by the All States Sports Ministerial Conference in 1993. The outcome was that the NSC issued a directive in 1993 that the National Games would be adjusted in line with the Olympic programme and winning Olympic medals could be ‘double scored’ in the final total for each province in the next National Games. This policy shift stimulated unprecedented enthusiasm for Olympic victory from local sports officials (Dong, 2003).

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To make good any shortfall in the sport budget, the NSC held a conference in June 1993 entitled, ‘The Urgent Promotion and Development of Sports Business’, which

called for the development of commercial sports markets (Fan, 1997). Following the conference there was a rapid expansion in sponsorship. Led by sports such as soccer, basketball and volleyball (Jones, 1999) at the provincial and national level, almost every elite team in these three sports would now be sponsored a major company, such as Adidas, Mizuno, Nike, Philip Morris, British American Tobacco, Coca-Cola and Ericsson (Hwang, 2002).

In short, after 1993, the Chinese government adopted western approaches (science and technology), western sport and western commercialism, not only to achieve Olympic success but also to promote its ideology of patriotism, collectivism and socialism with Chinese characteristics (Wu, 1999). Thus, it appears that the Chinese leadership has been able to reinterpret the meaning of Olympic glory in order to make it less challenging to CCP ideology.

The reasons for hosting the Olympic Games, from the perspective of the PRC's political elites, were highly political. As President Jiang Zemin stated, 'The bid was made to further China's domestic stability and economic prosperity. The quest for the Olympics was to raise national morale and strengthen the cohesion of the Chinese people both in the mainland and overseas' (cited in Dong, 2003: 122). To serve these

political ends, it was not surprising that China decided to bid once again for the 2008 Olympics after losing the bid to Sydney for the right to host the 2000 Olympic Summer Games.

With the approval of the State Council, the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Bid Committee (BOBICO) was established on 6 September, 1999. The motto of the Beijing bid was 'New Beijing, Great Olympics', suggesting that reform and opening up to the outside world had brought about great changes in Beijing (COC, 2004). Beijing's second attempt to host the Olympics was successful, the announcement being made on 13 July 2000 at the IOC's 112th Session held in Moscow (COC, 2004).

For the largest developing country with a strong Asian cultural background to host the Olympics could be regarded as significant for spreading the Olympic spirit and expanding exchanges between East and West. Hosting the 2008 Olympics also provided a good opportunity to demonstrate the current state of economic, cultural, social and political development in China in a comprehensive way (COC, 2004).

According to Fan (1998), the foreign investment generated by the successful Olympic bid was part of a broader plan to link China to the international economic community. In other words, hosting the Olympic Games could be regarded as representing an

introduction of modernity to help integrate China into the world economic system, especially after China joined the WTO in late 2001. But the challenge facing the Beijing government was to balance nationalism and commercialism and also, as noted in the IOC Evaluation Commission report, to host 'an unprecedented Olympics that would leave a unique legacy for both China and sport as a whole' (COC, 2004). With such considerations in mind, Sports Minister Liu noted that 'we have to indoctrinate and reinforce athletes in the ideal to win the glory for our country... and to let them never forget their debt of gratitude to their motherland that supported their sport career from the very beginning' (Liu, 2011). In short, since accepting the market economy, the Chinese government has attempted to deal with the political and economic issues in a separate way, namely through combining political socialism and economic capitalism. When it comes to the latter, sport commercialism is regarded as a good way to support the elite sport system in its pursuit of Olympic glory. But with reference to political socialism, the government hoped to present Olympic success, both in terms of participation and hosting the Olympics, as a political statement of the superiority of socialism.

Overall the Chinese government's approach to managing engagement with the Olympic movement was broadly in line with its approach to other major international

sports, such as football and basketball, whose interests and primary competition opportunities lie outside the Olympic movement and the Olympic Games (Tan and Bairner, 2010, 2011; [Tan and Houlihan, 2013](#)). Consequently, if one were to focus exclusively on the state-centred (as opposed to market-centred) aspects of the PRC's re-engagement following the end of the Cultural Revolution, one could conclude that the phenomenon of re-engagement is simply a revival of an established communist pattern of managed involvement in international sport and the Olympic movement, driven by a combination of nationalism and socialist ideology. What is more complex to explain is the development of the Soviet model of elite sport development through acceptance and utilisation of elements of market commercialism, such as the soliciting of sponsorship income, the promotion of an internal money-based transfer system and the marketing of intangible commercial rights.

To a large extent, China has been enthusiastic about absorbing international influences and, rather than seeing them as a threat, has seen them as a resource. GAS (2003: 5) stated that 'after winning the bid to host the 2008 Beijing Olympics in 2001, we will promote China's economic and social development in the new era, open China's doors more widely and deeply, and raise China's status on the international scene. All of these will have a huge impact on China's future'. This assessment echoed Deng's

‘open door’ policy which implied not only greater economic involvement with the capitalist world – through trade, investment and technology transfer – but also an opening up to carefully selected ideas and cultural forms originating in the west (Knight, 2003; Ness and Raichur, 1983).

Sport, politics and nationalism in Korea

In Korea, sport has often engendered social and political ramifications since the modern forms of sporting activities were first introduced to the country in the late nineteenth century. A brief review of the history of modern sport in Korea clearly reveals the socio-political value of sport. When Korea officially opened its harbours and began to import foreign culture in 1876, a number of reformist groups considered Western thought and products, including sport, as representative of a more advanced form of civilisation (Lee H. R., 2000; Shin Y. H., 1990). They also argued that the country should actively embrace a Western sense of modernity, especially a modern military system, in order to protect its autonomy and sovereignty in the face of increasingly aggressive gestures from neighbouring countries, particularly Japan (Shin Y. H., 1990). In this context, sport as a modern physical practice that involved

vigorous actions and movements was seen as an effective means of developing modern individuals. Understandably, when these reformist groups established modern schools, they included physical education in their core curricula (Lee H. R., 2000).

Japan annexed Korea by force in 1910 and the Korean people experienced a relatively short but harsh period of Japanese imperialism for 36 years. During this colonial period, sporting fields were amongst the few public spaces where people could display Korean national identity without severe restrictions (Lee H. R., 2000). In particular, whenever sporting competitions between Korean and Japanese athletes took place, an element of cultural resistance and a strong sense of Korean nationalism frequently emerged. After the liberation from Japan in 1945, the Korean Peninsula was divided in two because of ideological difference, and a few years later the Korean War broke out between North and South Korea. This meant that the climate of the Cold War began to dominate the political circumstances surrounding the peninsula. After the civil war, the two Korean states maintained conflict-laden relations until the 1980s and, during this Cold War period, the sporting arena offered a symbolic battleground to demonstrate ideological supremacy over the other. Not surprisingly, sporting competitions between the two Koreas were intensely political at that time (Bridges, 2012). When the mood of reconciliation between North and South Korea

developed in the late 1990s, the two sides organised inter-Korean friendly matches to facilitate cultural communication, and even made attempts to participate in major international sporting competitions as a unified team to demonstrate a homogeneous Korean identity to the world (Lee J. W., 2010).

In order to explain socio-political dimension of Korean sport more fully, it is useful to examine the specific case of the Korean martial art of *taekwondo* and also major sporting events held in Korea. These considerations will help to clarify that sporting competitions are by no means simply physical contests but are activities that are significantly influenced by social and political considerations. It should be noted that this discussion is mainly concerned with South Korean sport because it would be difficult, if not impossible, to discuss sport in the two Koreas in detail within the limited space available. Yet, given the complicated political and social relations between North and South Korea, and the role sport that plays in terms of inter-Korean relations, it is impossible to completely exclude topics related to North Korea. Thus, while the following discussion attempts to sketch a social scientific review of sport largely from a South Korean perspective, some issues concerning North Korea will be mentioned where necessary.

The place of *Taekwondo*

As we have seen in the case of both Japan and China, most Asian societies have at least one traditional martial art, and this type of physical activity is often considered to be a significant part of the cultural heritage of the nation and/or as a sport of the national importance. Korea is no exception. *Taekwondo* is a martial art that originated in Korea and has been included as an official event in the Olympic Games since 2000. As Bairner (2001) notes, regardless of scale and level of popularity, any sport that provides a meaningful cultural value for the nation can be regarded as a national sport of the country in question. Thus, the fact that this combat sport has its origin in Korea alone offers a sufficient condition for giving *taekwondo* the status of national sport. Additionally, a large number of its practitioners also provide a rationale for considering *taekwondo* as a sport of national importance. According to *Kukkiwon*, one of the major governing bodies of *taekwondo* in South Korea, there are 9, 839 registered *taekwondo* gyms in operation with more than eight and half million people holding at least a first *dan* (degree) in *taekwondo*. Moreover, at major international competitions including the Olympic Games, the South Korean delegation has never failed to win medals so far. Therefore, *taekwondo* is by any measure the national sport of Korea.

Whilst such manifest facts appear to emphasise the cultural values of this Korean martial art, a close examination of its traditions and history reveal a number of controversial issues. In particular, the precise origins of *taekwondo* have been a fiercely debated topic in Korea, and this historical debate is closely tied to the formation of Korean nationalism and national identity in the twentieth century.

Regarding the history of *taekwondo*, two major perspectives can be identified, namely the traditionalist and the revisionist (Kim B. C., 2006). According to the traditionalists, *taekwondo* is the oldest Korean martial art with more than two thousand years of history. They note that modern *taekwondo* developed from prototypical martial arts called *taekgyeon* and *subaki* which were believed to have been practiced from as early as the Three Kingdom Era (37 B.C. to 676 A.D.). Cave wall murals from this period describe the image of men trained in these ancient martial arts. In addition, the historical archives from medieval Korea (*Koryo* and the early and mid-*Chosun* Dynasties from 918 to 1680) record that people practiced *subaki* as a form of leisure activity and that local authorities intermittently arranged martial art competitions. The historical evidence also suggests that the mediaeval Korean army trained in *taekgyeon* and *subaki* and used these fighting skills in war. The traditionalists attempt to establish the linkage and the continuity between these ancient martial arts and modern *taekwondo* especially by highlighting the similarities in conducting various body

movements and techniques (Choi, 2005). They also claim that modern *taekwondo* inherited from its ancient counterparts the philosophical elements of practicing a martial art such as respect for others and self-discipline (Jeon and Choi, 1997). With reference to the legacies of *taekgyeon* and *subaki*, the traditionalists emphasise that *taekwondo* is the quintessential national sport of Korea which reflects its long-standing tradition and culture.

By contrast, the revisionists contend that *taekwondo* is nothing more than a modified version of the Japanese martial art of karate (Yang, 1986). Pointing out that the modern form of *taekwondo* began to be practiced in Korea after its liberation from Japan, the revisionists argue that the strong influence of *karate* on *taekwondo* cannot be ignored (Kim Y. O., 1990). According to the revisionist perspective, revised *karate* was first introduced into Korea in the mid-twentieth century by Korean students who had attended Japanese universities (Yang, 1986). As noted earlier, the Korean Peninsula was under the Japanese Rule from 1910 to 1945 and many students crossed the Korean Strait to study modern academic subjects during the colonial period. Some of them also learned *karate* while studying there. When Japanese imperialism ended, many of these students returned to their home nation, and some of the martial art enthusiasts opened a gym in Seoul so as to spread *karate* to the country (Kang K. H.,

2006). Yet, because of the intense anti-Japanese sentiment prevalent in the country at the time, these martial art masters needed to modify the practice of *karate* and in order to make it more culturally and politically acceptable, they added some skills from the ancient Korean martial arts of *taekgyeon* and *subaki*. Moreover, some elements of Korean national identity were also attached to the way in which this martial art was executed. These included renaming various postures, performances, and techniques with reference to the name of Korean mountains and heroic figures. Additionally, in an attempt to justify their claims, the revisionists also stress that this Korean martial art officially began to be called *taekwondo* as late as the 1960s. Before that time, this it had a number of different names. However, when the modification of the martial art was finally completed, it was given the new name of *taekwondo*. The revisionists note that the naming issue is another indication of *taekwondo* being an invented physical activity. Based on their historical understanding, the revisionists argue that it is a myth to claim that the origins of *taekwondo* can be traced back to the ancient Korean martial arts.

The debate between these two perspectives is still inconclusive and each explanation has its own merit. Put simply, while the traditionalists underline historical continuity and similarity between the ancient and modern Korean martial arts, the revisionists

emphasise the impact of post-colonialism in *taekwondo*. In the resultant circumstances, it is understandable that the established *taekwondo* community accepts the traditionalist view to be the ‘official’ history whereas more or less critical scholars tend to support the revisionist perspective. Regardless of the different historical understanding of this martial art, it should be stressed that *taekwondo* undoubtedly emerged as a nationally significant sport from the 1960s when the activity was institutionalised and codified, and the then Korean government strategically subsidised its promotion both nationally and internationally with the aim of introducing Korean cultural identity to the world.

It is important to note that the 1960s was the time when South Korea underwent a nation-building process that included the reconstruction of Korean national identity after the Korean War (Pai, 2000). This process involved rediscovering heroic figures from its history and reintroducing cultural rituals from the past (Shin G. W., 1998). In this context, the active promotion of *taekwondo* was by no means co-incidental. In terms of the formation of national identity, Hobsbawm (1983) notes that the modern nation states tend to utilise historical traditions of the nation in order to provide a sense of cultural unity and homogeneity amongst its people. Yet, he further argues that what is presented as cultural legacy from the past is in fact largely a modern invention.

By acting in this manner, the ruling class effectively and ideologically disseminates cultural nationalism within the nation's boundaries so as to bind people together. The case of South Korea is not significantly different from other such trends. *Taekwondo* suited the government's nation building efforts because, as the traditionalists argue, it reflects the cultural heritage of Korea. In addition, some of the skills and body movements in modern *taekwondo* symbolically represent key historical figures and geographical areas of the country as the revisionists claim. As a consequence, for the South Korean government, modern *taekwondo* was such a valuable cultural resource for constructing national identity of Korea in a sense that the dissemination of this Korean martial art was seen as part of the political project to rediscover the nation's historical traditions. Thus, the government's support for *taekwondo* can arguably best be read as an invention of national sport taking place within the nation-building process.

Sports Mega-Events in South Korea

It seems that South Korea is obsessed with hosting various types of international sporting competitions. In the past, the 1988 Summer Olympic Games and the 2002 FIFA World Cup Finals (co-hosted with Japan) have been held in the country. More recently, the South Korean cities of Daegu and Incheon delivered the IAAF World

Championships in 2011 and the Asian Games in 2014 respectively. In addition, the South Korean region of Pyeongchang has been awarded the right to host the Winter Olympic Games in 2018. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the country also bid for the FIFA World Cup Finals in 2022. As has been amply demonstrated in earlier discussions, hosting international sporting competitions, particularly mega-events such as the Olympic Games, has significant social, political, and economic implications (Roche, 2006). In fact, being awarded the right to host mega sporting events is often regarded as an opportunity to rebrand cities and regions as important hubs in global economic and political networks (Short, 2004). In this light, the Korean government's recent attempts to host various types of international sporting events can also be considered as an element in the country's rebranding strategy aimed at attracting more investment, capital, and international tourists. Amongst these mega events held in South Korea, the case of the Summer Olympic Games in 1988 arguably most vividly exemplifies the way in which social and political factors can intermingle with an international sporting occasion.

When the Olympic Games was awarded to Seoul in 1981, subsequently taking place in the capital city in 1988, the country was under an authoritarian military government (Larson and Park, 1993). Because the political elite had seized control in a coup d'état

and had implemented repressive policies, it lacked support from its citizens. Moreover, the fact that the incumbent president had orchestrated a massacre in the city of Gwangju which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians who protested against those in power made this authoritarian government particularly unpopular. In these circumstances, the ruling party needed a strategic political event that might alter the domestic situation. The Olympic project was one of the main governmental attempts to control internal affairs, and the military regime actively exploited the news of the successful South Korean bid and subsequent Olympic-related publicity campaign to construct a more favourable political climate for the governance (Kang J. M., 2009). Given that the Olympic Games was the biggest event that the country was going to host in its history, many people voluntarily participated in preparatory work (Park, 1991). Through this active involvement of people in a government-initiated campaign, the military regime gained increased consent from the public and was gradually able to legitimise its power.

However, the Olympic factor did not completely overturn anti-government attitudes amongst the citizenry. In fact, with the objective of the democratisation of the country, a large number of university students, reformist politicians, progressive intellectuals, and members of the trade union movement became continually involved in

nation-wide anti-government demonstrations (Lee J. W., 2010). Initially, the political elites attempted to turn people's attention away from sensitive political issues by introducing a populist urban development plan which was expected to increase the quality of Korean people's lives (Hill, 1996). This was also part of the Olympic preparation campaign which included providing more convenient sport and leisure facilities, improving public transportation networks, and gentrifying rundown areas in the capital city. In spite of this approach, however, the anti-governmental democratic movement did not diminish, and the level of violence associated with the demonstrations intensified as the Games came closer. The protest group threatened an effective opposition to the mega event on the grounds that the occasion would only strengthen the authoritarian regime's political interests (Lee J. W., 2010). Meanwhile, the international media was also concerned about the unstable political situation in South Korea and the government's undemocratic ways of responding to popular demands (Sandra, 2011). Indeed, the foreign media questioned the country's ability to host the Olympic Games amid massive demonstrations against the establishment (Hill, 1996). In response, the military regime reluctantly accepted people's requests and promised a democratic presidential election to be held a year before the Olympic Games took place in case the country should lose the opportunity to host the mega-sport event. As a consequence, the world witnessed the first democratically

elected South Korean president attending the opening ceremony of the Seoul Olympic Games.

The Olympic Games in Seoul also had significant political implications for relations between North and South Korea (Lee J. W., 2010). The Korean Peninsula was seen as an outpost of the Cold War in which the two Korean states antagonistically faced each other across the armistice line. Each Korean government claimed its legitimacy in relation to governing the entire Peninsula and condemned the other Korean regime as an illegitimate occupier. In this context, the fact that the South Korean capital was awarded the right to host a mega sporting event indirectly implied that the South had finally triumphed after 30 years of ideological war against the North. Fearing that the successful delivery of the Olympic Games by the South would constitute a massive political blow, the Communist North sent a petition to the IOC calling for the relocation of the Olympic venue and highlighting the unstable political situation in South Korea. Furthermore, in an attempt to disrupt Olympic preparations, North Korean terrorists exploded a bomb at an airport terminal in Seoul and, in a separate incident, communist agents also blew up a Korean passenger aircraft, killing the 115 people onboard. Additionally, North Korea asked its communist allies to boycott the Olympic Games in Seoul. Despite all these actions, however, the Olympic Games

took place as planned and most communist countries, including the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, communist Korea's closest allies, took part. Moreover, South Korean opened up official diplomatic relations with these communist countries after the Seoul Olympic Games. In that sense, hosting the Summer Olympics in Seoul can be considered as a huge political success for the South Korean government as far as the inter-Korean relations are concerned (Cha, 2009).

The Seoul Olympic Games also functioned as a coming out party for the South Korean government to display its successful economic development to the world (Hill, 1996). When the Korean War ended in 1953, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world. In an attempt to escape from this drastic economic condition, the South Korean government initiated a state-led economic development plan from the 1960s to the 1980s. This development policy proved to be remarkably successful and South Korea was able to develop into one of the world's economic powerhouses in the 1980s. In this situation, the country needed an event that publicised the emerging Korean economy internationally, and no occasion could perform this function better than the Olympic Games (Cha, 2009). In other words, this mega-sport event offered an invaluable opportunity to revamp the image of the nation and to show its economic success to a global audience. Given the political contest in which

sport on the Korean peninsula operates, the debate between traditionalists and revisionists about the national status of *taekwondo*, and the importance attached by successive administrations to hosting sports-mega-events, it is impossible to deny that sport in South Korea is both highly nationalistic and highly political.

Conclusion

Although each of the four countries discussed in this chapter have been examined separately, it is important to bear in mind the extent to which their sporting histories have overlapped and, at times, clashed in different ways. Debates about tradition *vis à vis* modernity are common to all. There is general recognition that winning medals is important in terms of strengthening national identity within each country and enhancing the international profile of each. As a consequence, and linked to historical relationships within the region, rivalries between these countries are commonplace, not only on the field of play but also in the struggle to host major sports events. The region is too large and varied to allow for adequate in-depth analysis in a single chapter. On the other hand, it is impossible to fully understand the sporting landscape of each of these countries unless they are seen in a regional context.

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