

## Book Reviews

STEFAN HÜBNER, *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. 416 pages, €36.99. ISBN 978-981-4722-03-2

In 1913 Governor General William Cameron Forbes officially opened the first Far Eastern Championship Games in Manila. Six nations took part, most notably the Republic of China and the Empire of Japan. The opening of the games by an American clearly hints to their imperialist context and marks the starting point of Stefan Hübner's "tumultuous ride, through six decades of the strenuous lives and organizational activities of many leading sports officials and politicians" (p. 261) of Asia. The last Asian sports mega event covered by Hübner is the Seventh Asian Games hosted by Teheran in 1974, which revolved around the Shah regime's self-representation and the question of reintegrating mainland China into the Asian sports world.

Hübner structures his book around Asian sports events from 1913 to 1974, with each event receiving a chapter. He connects these chapters through the overarching concepts of nation branding, body politics and post-colonial resistance. Thus he is able to show how the American YMCA's early initiative towards launching an Asian sport championship was based on the imperialist perception of Asians as backward and not yet fit enough to compete in the modern world. By and by, Asian sports officials pushed back against the Americans to shape these championships according to their own needs and beliefs. However, these Asian sports officials failed to replace modern Western sports, rituals modelled on those of the Olympics, or the ideology of modern nation-building with any visions of their own. As a result, Asian sports mega events remained entangled in a colonial world order. On the other hand, when countries like Japan and Iran staged the Asian Games in 1958 and 1974, respectively, they impressed the world with their organisational skills and substantiated claims of national progress vis-à-vis the West. Hübner also emphasises that the various Asian sports mega events were a contested arena for negotiating the notion of Asia. Conflicts between communist China and Taiwan as well as rifts between West Asian Arab countries and East Asian ones such as Japan repeatedly led to disputes which were only partly resolved through sports.

In pointing out these diverging interests and aligning them with the performative side of the various Asian games, Hübner follows a recent trend in sport history. Sports mega events have received more and more attention in the last decades as highly significant symbolic political arenas of the 20th cen-

ture. Kay Schiller and Christopher Young's *The 1972 Munich Olympics and the Making of Modern Germany* (2010) and Eva Maria Gajek's *Imagepolitik im olympischen Wettstreit: Die Spiele von Rom 1960 und München 1972* (2013) are two outstanding examples of this trend. These books prove how symbolic politics are at work in the Olympics and defy the naive belief in apolitical games so dear to IOC officials and organisers of the games.

Hübner, however, is much more ambitious than Schiller / Young or Gajek in covering a whole series of Asian games in one book. He succeeds in including sources in various languages, such as English, French, Japanese and Chinese, thus laying a thorough foundation for his extensive project. In the foreword, Hübner also sets out a very convincing path for integrating his findings into post-colonial studies as well as studies on nation branding. The concept of nation branding, however, is slightly anachronistic as an analytical tool, as it is mostly linked to neoliberal ideologies of turning the state into a market-oriented institution. Relying on classic theories of nationalism might have been more sensitive to the respective historical contexts. Nevertheless, Hübner's theoretical narrative still succeeds in connecting his examples. The strength of moving beyond borders and analysing more than one or two mega events is evident. Hübner is able to avoid the methodological nationalism that is more or less inherent in focusing on isolated sports mega events.

Yet broadening the scope comes at a price. By focusing on only one event per chapter, Hübner loses some of the benefits which might have been gained had he not limited himself to a certain period or country as seen through the lens of one event. He correctly remarks that this way of organising the text caters to readers who are only interested in certain Asian games or countries (p. 13). Indeed, the narrative of each event is dense and self-sufficient. Yet in the end, the reader might have profited from a deeper and more thorough comparison that scrutinised common concepts and the reasons for differences in the staging of Asian sports events over time. Nonetheless, even the harshest critic would still have to concede that the sources used and the descriptions of the various games are both rich and extensive enough to enable readers to draw their own conclusions. Despite its occasional shortcomings, Hübner's approach certainly makes sense and leads to a rich book packed with very valuable information and analysis.

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