Of Besoboru and Squid Dogs

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Baseball has always been the great American game. It’s almost magical to go out to the diamond during the summer with friends and play a friendly game. The sheer number of great sports movies like *The Sandlot*, *The Natural*, *Field of Dreams*, are just a few examples of America’s obsession with baseball. Fans feel so tied to the game that they refrain from doing anything that might hurt the team, whether they blame their team’s woes on the curse of the Billy Goat or of the Babe, hope for their team to play hard and “cowboy up,” or even let the rally monkey augment their chances of a comeback. Baseball is truly the game of the nation. Yet since the inception of the game, fights have been commonplace, cheating is accepted as a natural part of the game, and its greatest heroes, the superstars of the diamond, have been involved with alcohol, gambling and murder. Ironically, as the American game has been transferred to other countries, it has been those countries, foreign homelands of a definitively American idea, that have returned the game to a purer state. These distant lands have refined the game and, more importantly, the ideals behind the game. Emerging baseball powerhouse Japan won the World Baseball Classic in the U.S. this spring— the American team didn’t even make the semi-finals (MLB). This is an illustration of the explosion of skill across international leagues and could be interpreted as a death knell to the American dominance of baseball. Baseball has become a national pastime in Asia, especially Japan, overtaking soccer as the most popular sport; Asian players have taken the game and changed the game; for instance, the Japanese have “Japanized” the game, and infused it with their own values. Baseball has served as a conduit for exchange, first by bringing the American dream to oppressed African-Americans in the 1950’s and now by intermixing traditional Asian values to with the American philosophy of individualism and self-worth.
Today 27.4% of the players in Major League Baseball are foreign-born (MLB). The road these players took to get to the big show was paved by the bravery and suffering of Jackie Robinson and all those who suffered for the integration of baseball. Before U.S. baseball would allow players from across the ocean to join the league, it first had to overcome prejudices against some U.S. citizens. On April 16, 1945, the Boston Red Sox gave three Negro League players, Marvin Williams, Sam Jethroe, and Jackie Robinson, a ninety minute tryout session. Though the tryout would end without a single player being picked up by the club, history had been made: that was the first time a professional team in the US had even looked at a colored player in more than 60 years. There had been a “gentleman’s agreement” during that time among all of the professional teams to keep the game pure—that is, to keep the game white (Stout). It had existed since July 14, 1887, when owners met in Buffalo (Scheinin 44-45). The Red Sox took the first step in toppling this agreement by giving the three a tryout, but it would be up to the Brooklyn Dodgers, in August of 1945, to give the final nudge and allow a black player into the white game.

Baseball bridged a gap between two different sections of the American people and, with the signing of Jackie Robinson with the LA Dodgers in 1947, united them in a new way, as equals. However, long before the civil rights movement used baseball as a tool for the advancement of African-Americans, it was used as a connection between America and the Orient. Baseball would become one of the few commonalities between the oppressed countries of Asia and their foreign rulers (namely the US, European nations and even the Japanese who had divided China up into spheres of influence). Upon entering the modern age, baseball would serve as a channel of exchange, sending Asian philosophies about teamwork and pride to the US and in return American ideals of individuality and competition to Asian nations.
The Qing Dynasty of China, rulers during the 1870s, was faced with a stark reality: their land had been parceled up by foreigners, their people were controlled by strong-arm tactics and debilitating drugs, and their power was largely ceremonial. In order to overcome this and to reestablish the dominance of the Middle Kingdom, the Court decided to send Chinese students and tutors to the U.S. in the hopes of gaining enough technical and scientific knowledge to strengthen China, an idea proposed by Rong Hong, an immigrant Chinese who went on to graduate from Yale (Reaves 19). This plan succeeded to an extent; the students did come back, and they brought with them “a modern navy and sophisticated shipbuilding techniques, the long-distance telegraph, specialized mining skills, and the Beijing-to-Mongolia railway,” wonders untold to the then technologically primitive and closed-off China (20). Unfortunately, at least from the perspective of the Imperial Court, the students also learned “the language of the schoolroom and the playground… [and] shed their long silk gowns and their dignified Chinese manners” (21), as a result of the mocking and insults they received in the U.S. (such as being called “Chinese girls”) (21), and facing racial insults similar to those faced by African-Americans.

The change in dress resulted also from a desire to compete in baseball, something that would be much harder to accomplish in the traditional dress of the Chinese scholar. This wardrobe change showed how strongly the Chinese students had adopted their new culture, going against the traditional Chinese image of a Confucian scholar, an intellectual who disdains physical exercise and who exhibits this disdain by allowing his nails to grow out to extraordinary lengths. Instead of this image the students cut off their traditional Chinese queues, a hairstyle which showed their respectability or honor, and “took to playground baseball almost as soon as they arrived in the United States” (23) and viewed competition with their peers as “a badge of
validation, [or] a stripe off social acceptance”(23). Baseball in this case was a benchmark of cultural assimilation, providing proof of the Chinese students’ acceptance into the foreign American society. Though the students of the exploratory expedition would return home as the exploratory program was canceled, they took with them much knowledge, and would go on to become prominent men in Chinese history, changing China and bringing not only many technological advancements and scientific ideas but, possibly most important among these ideas, the game of baseball, a common tie and a common ground on which more exchanges could occur.

Until 1890, sports did not exist in China. In 1890, American missionaries organized the first sports meet in China. Within five years of that, there were no fewer than three baseball teams (34). One of the leading men in the conversion of Chinese values was Henry Kingman, a southern California native who grew up playing for Pomona College in 1913 (35). He was a talented player who is described as having “no weaknesses” in his game (35). He would go on to play in the Southern California League and then the New York Yankees briefly before ending his professional baseball career (35). Kingman would eventually leave his touch on many of the first sports events in Asia, including a brief stint as the coach of the Chinese baseball team at the Far Eastern Olympics and as a coach of the Japanese Waseda University Baseball team (35).

Kingman died in 1982, but before he did he saw a China that had assimilated enough American culture to approve of students who show “spirit, [as they] enter into sports and games” (36). He had also seen China lose itself to WWII and the Cultural Revolution, undergoing a complete ideological shift as the pro-West Nationalist party was forced to the island of Taiwan by the Communist Party’s Mao Zedong. Though China would, for a period of time, view Western
influence negatively, baseball in Asia was not killed off. Rather, it moved across the sea to Japan, a land which would go on to become the torchbearer for Asian baseball.

The Japanese are viewed by many Americans as a culture of people who dedicate themselves to the team, to perfection, and, above all else, to their honor. The samurai code which emerged during the feudal age showed this dedication, with suicide considered a legitimate and preferable route than dishonor. Loyalty to the feudal lord and honor gained for him was the entire purpose of the samurai. This ideal was later applied to baseball as a player would rather face death than dishonor his team with selfishness or bad play. In 1934 Babe Ruth and other American all-stars played a series of exhibition games in Japan; this spurred the Japanese players to even greater heights of practice and dedication. This “baseball diplomacy” was the precursor to Nixon’s Ping-Pong Diplomacy, and was the U.S.’s effort to interact with an entirely new people (Crepeau 68).

At the same time, the U.S. undermined its own effort by passing the “Immigration Strike of 1924,” also known as the Japanese Exclusion Act, which excluded nearly all Japanese and other Asian peoples from entering the U.S. (Odo). This set the stage for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and led to a wartime surge of nationalism reflected in Japanese baseball when American words such as “strike” and “ball” were replaced with the Japanese words “yoshi” (good) and “dame” (bad) (Whiting The Bat 4). This was a time in which American influence “politically and culturally… was deliberately swept aside” by the tide of war (Reaves 34). Japanese baseball would take the same plummet that Chinese baseball suffered as a result of WWII but the effects would be repaired far faster as a result of the U.S.’s interest in Japanese reconstruction and defense against the newly Communist People’s Republic of China. General MacArthur, head of Japanese reconstruction for the U.S. army, saw the positive effect baseball
could have upon the people, and he “personally issued the order to clean up Korakuen Stadium, home of the Tokyo Giants,” Japan’s most beloved and most storied team (Whiting The Bat 5).

Japan would head into the 21st century on the forefront of technology and, due in large part to their fanatical adherence to training, as one of the leading baseball nations in the world.

Japanese troops during WWII also showed the samurai-like desire to avoid shame, choosing death rather than capture or retreat. It comes as little surprise that upon receiving the game of baseball, the Japanese applied their traditional characteristics to the game. An American team’s spring training includes light batting practice, a few fly balls and some stretching. Japanese players, in an effort to achieve the competitive edge, go to such lengths as a five-mile run, stair training and running up and down steps with 50-pound sacks (44). Where an American professional team would practice for approximately three hours on the field during spring training, a Japanese team has a practice schedule starting at 7:30 in the morning and going to 11:00 at night, including three different types of batting practice (left-handed, right-handed and laying down the bun), an intra-squad game, a team meeting and a strict diet (43). Some teams will even schedule trips to temples or spas in the mountains, places at which the players can exorcise their demons and gain focus on their task. The Japanese baseball player, “like the ancient swordsman who stood blindfolded on a high pedestal for hours to develop his balance,” even goes beyond the strict schedule of the team, doing such things as “100 shadow swings” (a shadow swing is merely swinging the bat as hard as possible and with the best form possible) in the middle of the night to overcome a slump (46). As much as the West has influenced Japanese culture, traditional values still shine through. These values are especially reflected in the way the players interact with the management. Japanese players are concerned with the team’s success, not with the individual’s. Players routinely sacrifice their bodies: outfielders dive headfirst into
walls to make catches, pitchers regularly throw over 150 pitches a game and then, after only two
days rest, they do it again (this stands in strong contrast to American pitchers who throw roughly
125 pitches a game and have a minimum of five days rest). Respect for seniority is integral to
everything, establishing almost a father-son relationship, so a Japanese player would never
demand “a 600 percent increase in salary as Vida Blue did,” no matter how good his season was
(85). The Japanese players, even the Japanese superstars, still conduct themselves with humility,
always following the first and foremost rule of the “Samurai Code of Conduct for Baseball
Players in Japan: The player must be a total team member” (38). The nationalism that had
existed in Japan as a result of WWII penetrated baseball and is still demonstrated by the strict
training regimens used by the teams. The teams and players are showing Japan’s strength to the
world by excelling in baseball: when players leave Japan to play in another league, the Japanese
people are extremely proud because it represents another notch on their collective belt, another
victory for the Japanese philosophy.

When asked about playing selfishly during the 1992 season Chicago Cubs slugger
Sammy Sosa was genuinely dumbfounded. “I try to do my best… if I do my best I help the
Cubs,” he replied (Reaves 6). In his mind, personal achievement would translate to group
achievement. As Reaves put it, “In Sosa’s world… great baseball teams are made up of nine
individuals” (6) and if one did well and stood out, they all would prosper. Sosa would eventually
go on to compete with Mark McGwire for the single-season homerun record in 1998. McGwire
ended the season with 70 homeruns, a monstrous total. He was hailed as one of the greatest
hitters of all time but his team, the St. Louis Cardinals, finished only 74-88, a 45.7% winning
percentage (Baseball Reference). McGwire played his best, having one of the greatest hitting
seasons in the history of the game but his team couldn’t even win half of their games. Contrast
this team to the 2003 Florida Marlins team which had no single superstar, the highest home run total of any player on the team was 32 (Baseball Reference), but they went on to win the World Series in large part because of their team-oriented style of play.

This American emphasis on individuals clashed with the Japanese belief in self-sacrifice for group gain and represents the largest baseball and cultural gap between the two cultures. This is clearly demonstrated by the differences between scoreboards in the two countries. Scoreboards in the U.S. have three categories: R for runs, H for hits and E for errors. The Japanese scoreboard adds one more category, “‘B’ for bases on ball,” more often referred to as walks (15). The walk does nothing to help the player’s statistics but “it helps the team and therefore deserves a place of prominence on the scoreboard” (15). Where an American player might have swung for the fences because of the favorable pitch count, an Asian player would bide his time and hope for the walk because that would give his team an advantage. This difference in thought, guided by the traditional principles, is what distinguishes Asian baseball, small-ball (a game style which focuses on base running and scoring one run at a time rather than the big-ball style of hitting homeruns and overpowering the opposing team), from the big-ball and big-bat style of the U.S. These differences in philosophy would eventually spread to the U.S. as more Asian players joined the MLB but, ironically, because of this greater exchange of players and ideas, the values of the Asian players, which distinguished them from their American counterparts, would become more and more similar to the views of Americans.

The players that Americans have seen are all cast from the same mold, focused upon the team and forgetting the individual. Hideo Nomo, one of the first Asian superstars to play in the US, was nothing like this. He was a new breed of Asian player, someone who had interacted enough with American players that he began to pick up their attitude and feelings of self-worth.
Where other players happily followed the “traditional constraints of group loyalty” that teams and managers wanted, Nomo felt that he was being wasted and forced to put his body through unnecessary hardship (Whiting *The Meaning* 70). This rebellious streak first showed itself during an All-Star game in which Nomo went against team policy and wore Nike shoes instead of the team approved Mizuno brand (100). He also clashed furiously with his coach, a former player who believed in pitching a tremendously high number of pitches (upwards of 175). Nomo refused to sacrifice his body and risk injury by pitching so recklessly for the team, so he took advantage of a loophole in his contract to sign with the Los Angeles Dodgers, the same team which had seen the integration of the game with Jackie Robinson some 50 years earlier.

After joining the league, Nomo immediately made a large impact, going on to lead the league in strikeouts his first month, being voted all-star starting pitcher, and leading the Dodgers to a dream season. More importantly, he inspired a phenomenon dubbed “Nomomania,” a time in which Dodger attendance rose 4% because of increased number of Asian spectators (108). Asians responded in force to his appearance because he represented a mix of the old, the homeland which they had all come from, with the new, the dominance and tough attitude he showed playing a foreign game in a foreign land. While those in his homeland at first thought that he was traitor to the ideals of Japan, Asian-Americans flocked to him because they saw themselves in the way he played. His story echoed that of the Chinese exploratory mission. He had achieved his mark of approval and distinction. He accepted the culture and ideals of his new homeland and thrived in an unfamiliar environment, expressing his own individuality over the more traditional team, similar to Sammy Sosa or other American players.

Though Nomo was a standout player and broke many barriers for later Asian players, the most identified Asian player in the game right now is Ichiro Suzuki of the Seattle Mariners. If
Nomo represents a new type of player, an Asian player with American attitude, Ichiro is the other side of the coin, a traditional thinker who plays for the team. Ichiro was a four-spot hitter in Japan, someone whose goal was to hit homeruns and bat for power, driving in other runners.

After being signed by the Mariners, he was modified into a leadoff man, a player whose goal is to “get on base and put some pressure on the opposing battery” (Komatsu 20). This was a total shift in roles for him but he took it in stride, agreeing to do what the team thought best. As a result of his willingness to follow the team and do his assigned job, he won the Rookie of the Year and American League MVP awards in his first year in the league and eventually set the single season hit record (Baseball Reference).

Later on, another Japanese player, Hideki Matsui, would sign with the New York Yankees, and would also exemplify the traditional values of Asian players, publicly apologizing to New York fans after suffering a broken wrist during the course of the game. Matsui felt that he had let down the team by being hurt, unable to play or help his team, but still getting paid, and even thanked the coach for allowing him to play everyday (ESPN). Joe Torre, his manager, provided an explanation for Matsui saying that “it's all about responsibility -- what he thinks his responsibility is to this team, this organization,” describing perfectly the traditional Asian principles behind the apology (ESPN). The Yankees had relied on Matsui and his injury would keep him from meeting the task set for him. In his eyes, he had failed his organization, his adopted family, and had brought shame upon himself. This type of thinking, coupled with the tremendous drive to train and attain perfection, represent the part of the Asian psyche that still clings to the traditional homeland and values, striving and allowing Asian players to succeed in a foreign world with different standards.
A team rushes out onto the field, jubilant and triumphant, having just won the big game. They all pile together around their pitcher, the player who has guided them to this victory, and lift the manager into the air, proud of his and their accomplishments. The crowd continues to cheer, ecstatic and speechless with joy. Many would assume that the Yankees or the Red Sox have just won the World Series again but this scene is being repeated around the world as international teams and leagues compete in the American sport. Baseball has always been thought of as uniquely American, like cheeseburgers or the Beach Boys, but in the modern age, with Asian-Americans as one of the fastest rising minorities and many Asian countries on the verge of becoming world superpowers, that definition is no longer sufficient. It has become the new tool of conversion for the world, comparable to the Spanish missionaries bringing Catholicism to the New World. Like the Spaniards and their religion in the distant past, baseball and Americans both modify the converts and are modified in turn by the converted.
Works Cited


