
Reviewed by John Soares, University of Notre Dame

Stefan Huebner has produced a fascinating volume that will interest scholars of the Cold War in Asia. Huebner starts before World War II, with the establishment of the Far Eastern Championship Games and the Western Asiatic Games, and the role in Pan-Asian sport played by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), which wanted to use international sport in service of Western Protestant Christianity’s “civilizing mission,” particularly in the U.S.-controlled Philippines. The bulk of the book focuses on Pan-Asian sport during the Cold War, specifically the Asian Games, which were first held in New Delhi in 1951. Huebner carries the story through to 1974, when the Seventh Asian Games were staged in Tehran. In between, Asian Games were hosted by the Philippines, Japan, Indonesia, and Thailand (twice).

As that roster of host countries suggests, the Cold War was an issue in all of these Games. Among the major political actors with starring roles here are India’s Jawaharlal Nehru, Indonesia’s Sukarno, the Filipino president Ramon Magsaysay, the Thai royal family and military leaders, and the Shah of Iran. Cold War politics took varied forms in the Asian Games. For example, Japan and the Philippines sought to exclude participation by Communists, and Indonesia’s Sukarno tried to use the Asian Games in Djakarta to promote and establish his leadership of what he called “new emerging forces” and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Huebner has engineered the book with care and consistency. The chapters are organized chronologically. After two on the establishment and early years of the Far Eastern Championship Games and the Western Asiatic Games, they proceed chronologically through the Asian Games from 1951 through 1974. Each chapter starts with an overview, then proceeds to consider the situation in the host country at the time, identify key sports and political officials, describe the infrastructure improvements (if any) and facilities for the Games, and discuss the opening ceremonies and related cultural events and their symbolism. Each chapter concludes with an assessment of the subject Games.

Huebner ends his story in 1974 because, he argues, “the sportive ‘civilizing mission’ that had characterized the Games since 1913 at last found its end” (p. 277). Readers need not be persuaded by this particular assessment to find the volume useful and its length of coverage sensible. Although readers might dispute when “the sportive civilizing mission” ended, a change in the purpose of pan-Asian sport was unavoidable as the European (and U.S.) empires receded and Asians took ownership of their international activities. For example, although the YMCA sought to use pan-Asian events to encourage mass participation in sport, the postwar hosts typically staged entertaining spectacles designed to bolster their country’s international stature. For example, Japan used the 1958 Games as a (successful) audition for the 1964 Olympics. Had the Shah of Iran not fallen, Huebner credibly speculates, Iran’s hosting of the 1974
Games may have helped Iran, not South Korea, become the second Asian country after Japan to host the Olympics. Sukarno’s disappointment over the 1962 Games served as a springboard for the creation of the international Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO), a sports festival created after Indonesia’s suspension from the Olympic movement because of its refusal to permit teams from Israel and Taiwan to compete in 1962. GANEFO’s open mix of politics and sport appealed to some newly independent Third World countries, and for a brief while it seemed that it might become a rival to the Olympics. However, after the coup in 1965 that toppled Sukarno, GANEFO no longer threatened to overtake the Olympics and was eventually disbanded.

Complicating the politics of pan-Asian sport was the quest for “international egalitarianism.” In the wake of the European bloodletting in World War I and the inconsistency and hypocrisy of Woodrow Wilson’s conception of national self-determination, Asians understandably came to reject notions of European superiority. A concept like international egalitarianism fit nicely with a quest for independence. Yet, even as many Asians shared a rough equality in their history of being subjected to European control, the leaders of the larger, more populous or more economically advanced Asian countries often sought a leadership role in pan-Asian affairs that their neighbors considered heavy-handed.

Readers will find entertaining nuggets in the book. Among them are the Thai organizers’ conscious, conspicuous use of “beauty queens” to demonstrate Thailand’s good karma, Sukarno’s geographically incoherent (but politically logical) efforts to include a north African country, Egypt, in the Asian Games, and the Shah’s refusal to permit the holding of a marathon at the Tehran Games. The Shah wanted to use the Games to link Persia’s glorious past with a contemporary readiness by Iran to assume the role of a great power dominant in the Indian Ocean basin; a highly publicized event with its roots in a historic Persian defeat in the Battle of Marathon simply would not do.

The book is based on extensive research in numerous relevant archives and languages and contains excellent and useful illustrations. It tells a collection of stories that cohere nicely. The well-structured individual chapters could stand alone for use in courses focused on the host countries. Admittedly, some readers will wish for greater fluidity in writing; Cold War scholars may wish Huebner had gone into more detail on some of the political issues surrounding the games; and sport scholars may wish the book had made more of the inconsistencies between the amateur ideals professed by many international sports officials and the frequent hypocrisy of amateurism in practice.

One should not take such criticisms too far, though: Huebner’s book does what it sets out to do. It makes an important contribution to the growing literature on sport and international relations and is of value to those interested in Cold War Asia, the postwar collapse of European empires, and the intersection of international politics and sport.