Stefan Huebner


The forces and forms of nationalism and the possibilities of pan-regionalism were crucial to the fate of the non-West throughout the 20th Century, including of course the continental expanse of Asia. Stefan Huebner approaches this issue in an original fashion through the lens of sports, in particular a series of sports mega-events that were held throughout the Asian region in the second through seventh decades of the 20th Century. He begins with the series of Far Eastern Championship Games, ten of which were held between 1913 and 1934, considers the 1934 Western Asian Games that were held in India in 1934, and then offers a detailed study of the first seven Asian Games, from their inauguration in 1951 through the seventh Games that Iran hosted in 1974. The result is a fascinating contribution to the history of Asian nationalisms and a convincing demonstration of the geopolitical significance of sports.

Western sports entered Asia through imperial and mercantile circuits in the late 19th Century. Through schools, merchants, administrators and missionaries, the British introduced cricket, soccer, tennis, polo and other recently-formalised sports into the Indian subcontinent and to their colonies in Southeast Asia. American teachers and missionaries brought baseball, volleyball, basketball and other American sports to Japan, the Philippines, the Korean peninsula and the Chinese mainland in the same decades.

One of the main conduits in the American sphere of influence was the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), a Protestant lay organisation that began in England but quickly flourished in 19th-Century America, promoting faith, sobriety and social commitment among young men. Its trinity of mind, spirit and body was a “muscular Christianity” that built Christian ideals through physical education and sports competition; indeed, basketball and volleyball were both invented at its training college in Springfield, Massachusetts. When its educators went abroad, they introduced these and other sports not only for Christian education, but as an American civilising mission for Asian youth and their countries.

The introduction of Western sports to mould Asian character is the starting point for Huebner’s erudite study, which is based on rigorous and exhaustive research across archives in multiple languages in Asian, European and American archives. He begins with the crucial figure of the American Elwood Stanley Brown, a lifelong YMCA educator with close ties to the new Olympic movement, who took up a position in the Philippines in 1910. He established the Philippine Amateur Athletic Federation and, in 1913, and organised the first of what were
to become the Far Eastern Championship Games, a multi-event amateur sports tournament that drew contingents from seven nations and colonies (the Philippines, the Republic of China, the British East Indies, Thailand and the British crown colony of Hong Kong).

Brown was quite fervent in his belief that such international regional games of amateur teams could spread a gospel of internationalism, egalitarianism and economic progress. The YMCA activities and Brown’s initiative in organising the FECG are familiar to scholars from earlier studies, but Huebner’s line of inquiry becomes more original and penetrating as he shows how, in short order by the late 1910s, local Asian elites gained control of the Games and turned them into a platform for anti-colonial nationalism. By local elites, he means physical education directors, sports officials, politicians and government officials, and what was significant is that they did not, in fact, reject the YMCA ideals, but rather usurped them and converted them into their own projects of modern nationalism defined by anti-colonialism. In so doing, they recovered and indigenised notions of the “Asia” projected from the West and they used as additional leverage images of a “spiritual” Asia as opposed to the “materialist” West, which neatly trumped the YMCA ideal of the spiritual-physical.

At the same time, as the list of initial contingents suggests, there were wide in the nationalist ambitions and strategies and in the vision of what Asia should be among the participants and, indeed, Japan’s incursions into China fractured the 1934 Games and led to their suspension. The widening war and Japan’s imperialist reach put an end to any chance for regional sports events; there was no appetite for Japan’s version of pan-Asianism.

But in 1951, India took the lead in creating an Asian Games Federation that drew a wider membership as a means of furthering its post-colonial foreign policy of an Asianism that would be non-aligned to the two superpowers and would support nationalist movements in remaining colonies. This too drew limited support across Asian countries, so the story of the Asian Games, which Huebner relates over Chapters 3 to 8, is a fascinating one in which each subsequent host country attempted to showcase its own state agenda and its own notion of pan-Asianism.

Southeast Asia is often neglected in Asian sports history, which is much more centred on South Asia and East Asia, but Huebner rectifies this with his analysis of the early history of the Asia Games. After Delhi, four of the next five Asian Games were held in the region, Manila in 1954, Jakarta in 1962, and Bangkok in 1966 and 1970. Huebner provides a fascinating comparative account of the contrasting ambitions of the sponsoring nations, from the “Cold War” politics of the Philippines to Suharto’s support for the Non-Aligned Movement to the rapprochement of monarch and military in 1960s Thailand to project an