

# perspectives

Issue 9  
September 2020

POLITICAL ANALYSES AND COMMENTARY

## ASIA

### Two Sides of the Medals – Sports and Politics in Asia



This edition of **perspectives Asia** is published jointly by the offices of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Asia



## Heinrich Böll Stiftung

The Heinrich Böll Stiftung is a publicly funded institute that is closely affiliated with the German party Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. From our headquarters in Berlin and 32 overseas offices, we promote green ideas and projects in Germany, as well as in more than 60 countries worldwide. Our work in Asia concentrates on promoting civil society, democratic structures, social participation for all women and men, and global justice. Together with our partners, we work toward conflict prevention, peaceful dispute resolution, and search for solutions in the fight against environmental degradation and the depletion of global resources. To achieve these goals, we rely on disseminating knowledge, creating a deeper understanding between actors in Europe and Asia, and on a global dialogue as a prerequisite for constructive negotiations.

Cover illustration: Kaitlin Chan

All rights reserved to Heinrich Böll Stiftung

# Contents

- 2 Editorial**
- 4 The Tokyo Olympics: East Asian Sporting Mega-events Revisited**  
Brian Bridges
- 7 The Fukushima Disaster and the Tokyo Olympics**  
Koide Hiroaki
- 11 Asia at the Olympics**  
Ashish Khandaliker
- 15 From the Streets to Stadiums: Extreme Sports in China**  
An Interview with Ding Yiyin
- 20 Sport in Southeast Asia: More than Medals, It's the 'We' Feeling**  
Johanna Son
- 24 We are the Champions**  
Photographs by Pho Thar
- 30 Politics and Sports Capitalism in the Southeast Asian Games**  
Bonn Juego
- 35 Coming apart at the Seams: Why Women Workers in the Cambodian Garment Industry Need a Sporting Chance at Equality**  
Rachana Bunn
- 40 From Mud to Mat: How Kabaddi Recaptured the Public Imagination**  
Shripoorna Purohit
- 44 Skateistan: Empowering Girls to Follow their Dreams**  
An Interview with Zainab Hussaini
- 49 Shaping up Sport for all Genders**  
An Interview with Law Siufung

# Editorial

This should have been a summer like no other for Tokyo. After 56 years, the Games of the XXXII Olympiad and the Paralympic Games should have returned to the city to bolster former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's grand project to revitalize Japan. Like in 1964 – when Tokyo, as the first Asian city to host the Olympics, sought to demonstrate to the world that it had emerged from the post-war period and transformed into a strong, liberal democracy – the 2020 Tokyo Olympics were meant to show the nation and the world that 'Japan is back' and that the 2011 Fukushima triple catastrophe was a thing of the past.

But the corona pandemic struck the world. Although Mr. Abe stubbornly clung to his plans and pretended for weeks that everything would go on as 'normal,' the International Olympic Committee on 24 March announced the postponement of the Games until summer 2021. Now Tokyo has to wait another year to become the first Asian city to host the summer Olympics twice.

And it has set a new record, as the first Olympic host to be plagued by postponements twice.

In fact, large sporting events are often entangled with politics and hidden interests. In his 2009 book, 'Beyond the Final Score: The Politics of Sport in Asia', Victor Cha argues that sports can impact diplomacy, serve as a prism to project a country's vision, and facilitate change within a country. This seems especially plausible in Asia, where in the early 1970s small ping-pong balls helped to end the Cold War between China and the United States; in 1988 the Seoul Olympics were a catalyst for South Korea's surprising transformation into a

democracy; and in 2018 Pakistan's greatest cricketer, Imran Khan, became Prime Minister. Fittingly, former Indonesian President Sukarno – after setting up the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO) in 1963 as a counter to the Olympics, and having his country banned from the Olympics the following year – declared: '[N]ow let's frankly say, sports have something to do with politics.'

This issue of Perspectives Asia examines such intersections of sports and politics. We look at how, through sports, identities are shaped, myths and heroes are born, and unconventional truths are buried. Brian Bridges gives a concise analysis of the political currents behind the various summer and winter Olympics held in China, Japan and South Korea. Koide Hiroaki, an activist in Japan's anti-nuclear movement and former nuclear engineer, points out the Japanese government's mismanagement of the Fukushima disaster and its aftermath, and questions the strategy of using the Tokyo Olympics to divert attention from the ongoing consequences of the nuclear meltdown.

Ashish Khandaliker highlights some fascinating statistics about the Olympics from a distinctly Asian perspective. Who would have known, for example, that the first Olympic gold medal won by an Asian was received by Tejbir Bura from Nepal at the first Winter Olympics in 1924 in Chamonix, France, where the 1922 British Mount Everest expedition was recognized for its (unsuccessful, and for seven Indian porters tragically fatal) attempt to conquer the world's highest peak?

Extreme sports expert Ding Yiyin gives an account of how skateboarding, BMX racing and other previously subculture sports

have found their way into China and are enriching the country's sporting horizons. Zainab Hussaini explains how skateboarding is helping to build trust among young children, often girls, from different ends of the social divide in Afghanistan, many of whom bear the scars of war-time trauma.

Joanna Son explores how sports can help to build a shared identity across nationalities. The ASEAN nations' Southeast Asian Games, which officially include indigenous martial arts beloved throughout the region, such as muay, sepak takraw and pencak silat, have helped to transcend national boundaries and build a regional sense of community. One such sport, kabaddi, has spread from India to large parts of South Asia and beyond. Shripoorna Purohit describes how this unique sport has gone beyond its origins and captured the public imagination.

On the other hand, the SEA Games exhibit a complex amalgam of nationalism, patronage and corruption. Bonn Juego explains these linkages and sketches out a path towards the depoliticisation of sports for more positive purposes.

Photojournalist Pho Thar, recently released from Yangon's notorious Insein Prison after a 14-month sentence for making fun of the military, follows a cohort of disabled athletes from Myanmar's Paralympic Sports Federation. His photographs testify to the transformational power of sports.

While athletes and sports enthusiasts around the world sport fancy jerseys provided by global brands and sponsors of large sporting events, the workers who make them, mostly female, toil under atrocious conditions in the garment sectors of Cambodia and other Asian countries. Rachana Bunn raises her voice for them, calling for

more respect for human rights, and an end to exploitative working conditions in garment factories.

Gender fluid bodybuilder Law Siufung discusses the multiple hurdles LGBTI athletes in Asia have to deal with, and suggests ways to work upon the rules, norms and market forces towards gender diversity.

With the battle against the coronavirus far from over, sports may seem like a distant memory to many people. It remains uncertain whether the Olympics and Paralympics will take place in 2021 in Tokyo, or will be cancelled altogether. Nevertheless, when the games do resume, the rich, diverse and complicated interactions between sports and societies in Asia will continue. So will the struggles over exploitation and exclusion related to class, race and gender, which, as Bonn Juego puts it, are best overcome by collective political action.

With this issue, the production of Perspectives Asia has moved to our new regional office in Hong Kong. We look forward to working with the other Asian offices of Heinrich Böll Stiftung to provide political analysis from Asia twice a year. Please contact us should you have any suggestions, questions or comments.

**Clemens Kunze, Kevin Li, and Lucia Siu**

The Editors

Heinrich Böll Stiftung Hong Kong Office

# The Tokyo Olympics: East Asian Sporting Mega-events Revisited

Brian Bridges

East Asians take the hosting of major sporting events very seriously. The three previous Summer Olympics in East Asia all had symbolic meanings for the respective hosts and for the Olympic movement. But the Coronacrisis has upset Japanese ambitions for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, bringing not just additional socio-economic costs but casting a shadow over Prime Minister Abe's political legacy.

The Olympic flame has arrived in Tokyo, but not in the manner envisaged by the organisers of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Reluctantly, in the face of the global coronavirus pandemic, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Tokyo 2020 Olympics Organising Committee had no option but on 24 March to cancel the domestic torch relay across Japan and postpone the Olympic Games until the summer of 2021. For the moment, the Olympic flame – alight but hidden in a secret location – and the Olympic movement remain in suspended animation.

Tokyo was set to become the first Asian city to host two Summer Olympics. But now it has become the first city anywhere in the world to suffer two hosting disruptions. Tokyo had been due to host the 1940 Olympics until the wartime situation forced cancellation (Collins 2007). The memory of those “missing Olympics” has come back to haunt Japan. This time the Olympics have been postponed, not cancelled, but it has still been a bitter pill for Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and indeed for the Japanese public as a whole. Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro has even gone so far as to describe Tokyo 2020 as the “cursed Olympics”.

There is little doubt that the first two decades of the 21st century have seen global

economic and political power slowly but steadily shifting to Asia, especially to East Asia. This trend now includes “soft power” sporting mega-events. The Olympic movement, indeed, is now in the middle of a cycle that confirms the prominence of East Asian sporting hosts. In 2018 the Winter Olympics were held in PyeongChang, South Korea, while in 2022 they will be hosted by Beijing-Zhangjiakou. Sandwiched in the middle are the Tokyo Summer Olympics which, under the new timetable of July to August 2021, will finish barely six months before the Beijing Winter Olympics begin.

Despite the internationalist Olympic ideal of sport bringing peoples and countries together through peaceful competition, the exciting sporting events cannot be separated completely from the issues of nationalism and identity, international and intra-regional rivalry, and domestic politics. Given the legacies of historical – and even present-day – antagonisms, the East Asian region is no exception to this rule. In fact, the East Asian environment might even accentuate such tendencies, for “not only is sport political, but it is arguably more political in Asia than elsewhere in the world” (Cha 2009, 23).

The three previous East Asian Summer Olympics had important symbolic meanings for the host countries. In 1964, Japan had re-emerged in the world community as a peaceful and economically successful state after its militaristic exploits during World War II. South Korea’s “coming out party” at Seoul in 1988 highlighted a new economic power, equipped with state-of-the-art technology and a self-confidence that belied the tense stalemate in inter-Korean relations on the peninsula. The intensity and spectacular magnitude of Beijing 2008 symbolised



**Brian Bridges** is an honorary professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the Education University of Hong Kong and an affiliate fellow of the Centre for Asian Pacific Studies at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. His interests lie in the diplomatic history and international relations of the Asia-Pacific region, with a particular focus in recent years on the sport-politics nexus. Over the years he has visited Olympic stadiums in Beijing and Seoul, and the old one in Tokyo, but is not sure when he can visit the new Tokyo stadium.



China's endeavours to secure its place – and achieve world recognition – as a major and modernised economic, political and sporting power on the global scene, though not without frequent references to centuries-old Chinese culture and civilisation. Therefore, these three Games provided a means of highlighting the “enhanced” national identity of the respective hosts (Cha 2009; Kelly and Brownell 2011).

Japan in 2020 or 2021 no longer needs a “coming out party”, but it does wish to remind the world of its particular national identity by being an efficient, welcoming and creative host. The Rugby World Cup held successfully across Japan in October 2019 already amply demonstrated those characteristics, which even the passing Typhoon Hagibis could only partially dampen. Yet, in the past decade or so, despite all the eloquence of Prime Minister Abe's claim that “Japan is back”, Japan has been living in the shadow of the emerging Chinese economic and political “superpower”. The debilitating images of the “lost decades” of the 1990s and 2000s may have dissipated, not least because Japan has become such a popular tourist haven for other Asians, but in reality Japan has continued to struggle in reconstructing its economy and way of life to cope with the demands of the 21st century.

Although international sporting rivalry is important, not least as demonstrated by China and the United States determinedly pushing to garner the most gold medals, there is also a regional dimension. This pits Japan against its closest geographical and sporting rivals, China and South Korea. Japan may wish to show these neighbours that, despite a shared turbulent past, sport can transcend long-standing animosities,

but there is little doubt that the media and the publics in both China and South Korea will watch carefully for any perceived slights or failures by Japan, especially when their own competitors are directly facing Japanese athletes or teams (Mangan et al 2017).

Hosting the Olympics also has domestic repercussions. The economic benefits, much touted in advance, do not always materialize and the global media spotlight often picks out less-than-ideal aspects of the host society. Japan's militaristic past and the Abe administration's flirting with nationalist sentiments today will certainly be aired. Rarely is the hosting politically neutral. The Japanese government in 1964, by running the torch relay through Okinawa, then still under post-war US administration, deliberately strengthened the argument for its reversion to Japan. In South Korea the fear of losing the Olympics if martial law were to be declared was a crucial factor in encouraging the dramatic move to democracy in 1987 (Cha 2009: 123-128). Yet, paradoxically, 2008 did not bring any equivalent political transformation in China, despite the wishful thinking of human rights advocates.

In the case of 2020/2021, it is long-serving Prime Minister Abe's political legacy that is linked to the eventual Games. His strong determination to carry on with hosting the Games this year was reflected in a stubborn pretence that everything was “normal” and in delaying announcing emergency measures to deal with the coronavirus pandemic until after pressure from athletes and certain countries overseas had forced the IOC into action. His visionary economic reform programme, labelled “Abenomics”, had run into the ground even before the coronavirus struck, and the additional costs incurred by

the postponement, which could reach as much as USD 2.7 billion (Ozanian 2020), will further harm the struggling economy. Abe's dream of revising the pacifist Constitution has also been foundering in the face of divided public opinion, and his high-profile foreign policy agenda on contentious issues with North Korea and Russia has failed to produce any breakthroughs.

## From bang to whimper

Consequently, even more than before the postponement, Abe sees a successful Olympics as a means, perhaps the only means, to enhance his own status and secure his "place in history". But the summer of 2021 is politically tricky, since Abe's term as party leader (and therefore prime minister) expires in September and by law he must hold a general election before late October. With several rivals eagerly waiting in the wings, including the popular Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko, who has already disagreed with him publicly over his ineffective coronavirus response, Abe may find that his premiership ends not with a bang but a whimper. Ironically, the postponement may actually hasten the post-Abe era in Japan.

In the three previous Asian Summer Olympics much of the international media interest was in how far the hosting and opening up would impact the domestic society, economy and politics of the host country. However, the opposite question, namely to what extent the hosts have impacted the evolution of the Olympic movement, should also be asked. At the very least the overpowering Euro-centric lens of the IOC has been removed (Mangan et al 2017). Following on from Beijing 2008, the Tokyo Olympics will undoubtedly sustain this process of rebalancing the power of the "East" against the "West" in the corridors of the IOC. As a footnote, ironically the Beijing Olympics had two other impacts on the scale and rituals of the Olympics. The huge financial cost of that massive celebration ensured that subsequent Olympics, and that includes Tokyo 2020, which prides itself on a compact hosting, will never try to compete on such a scale. The political controversy surrounding the lengthy global torch relay in 2008 also ensured that in future all torch relays would only occur within the host country. In the spring of 2021 the Olympic flame will be returned to its planned starting point in Fukushima prefecture, the epicentre of the

tsunami and nuclear meltdown in 2011, to begin its tour around Japan.

The Tokyo Olympics were sold to the IOC as a means to rejuvenate Japan after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake devastation, as well as to showcase the combination of innovation with traditional values ("Discover Tomorrow"). But the delayed Olympics in 2021 will take place in a completely different atmosphere thanks to the coronavirus pandemic. The most recent Asian Olympics in February 2018 in PyeongChang had been marketed as opening up "New Horizons" – bringing winter sports to new places – but at the last moment it changed dramatically into the "Peace Olympics", at least in the rhetoric of South Korean and IOC leaders. After escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula in the second half of 2017 threatened to cast a warlike shadow over the sporting events, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un suddenly decided to seek reconciliation with the South by active participation in the Winter Olympics, sending his sister to the opening ceremony and allowing a joint Korean entry into the opening ceremony and the formation of a joint women's ice hockey team.

So too the coronavirus outbreak and its resolution will have major implications on how the Tokyo Games are perceived. The Japanese will hardly welcome any attempt to label these as the "Coronavirus Olympics", but history will inevitably link these Games to the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, conversely, the Japanese government and people will have an opportunity not only to demonstrate that Japan has successfully recovered from that outbreak but also to celebrate the return of the globe to good health. Abe's call for the re-scheduled Olympics to be a "beacon of hope" for the world sounds like a rhetorical flourish to mask his disappointment at the postponement, but it also contains a kernel of truth. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> Cha, Victor D. 2009. *Beyond the Final Score: The Politics of Sport in Asia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Collins, Sandra. 2007. *The 1940 Tokyo Olympics: The Missing Olympics*. Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly, William and Susan Brownell, eds. 2011. *The Olympics in East Asia: Nationalism, Regionalism and Globalism on the Center Stage of World Sports*. New Haven: Yale University.

<sup>4</sup> Mangan, J.A., Qing Luo, and Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu, eds. 2017. *The Olympic Games: Asia Rising – London 2012 and Tokyo 2020*. Beijing: ICUC.

<sup>5</sup> Ozanian, Mike. 2020. "Postponement of Tokyo Olympics Expected To Increase Games' Cost by \$2.7 Billion." *Forbes*, March 25, 2020.

# The Fukushima Disaster and the Tokyo Olympics

Koide Hiroaki

Nine years after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, fundamental issues remain unresolved. In fact, the “Nuclear Emergency Situation” declared on 11 March 2011 has yet to be rescinded. Many domestic critics saw the Olympics as a ploy to distract from the nuclear disaster. It was concern about the spread of Covid-19 that led to the temporary postponement of the Tokyo Olympics for one year. But the larger question remains: Should a country with an ongoing nuclear disaster be hosting these games?

## Nuclear power development as national policy

In Japan, national policy has driven the development of nuclear power. Through such laws as the Electricity Business Act and the Act on Compensation for Nuclear Damage, the government has incentivised nuclear power generation and dragged power companies into the business. Large corporations, eager to partake in the profit, came flocking, followed by the construction industry and the medium and small businesses that worked under them. Even the unions representing workers at these companies became willing accomplices to the nuclear enterprise. Vast sums were expended for publicity, and the media as well as the advertising industry trumpeted the safety of nuclear power. A centralized education system, in which the state plays a dominant role in setting curricula and selecting textbooks, has ensured that children are instilled with the rosy dream of nuclear power.

These parties spread the “myth of

nuclear safety” – that nuclear power plants would be immune to large-scale accidents. Japan represents less than 0.3% of the earth’s landmass, but it is situated in a region where four large tectonic plates jostle each other, 20% of the world’s earthquakes occur, and 7% of the world’s volcanoes are located. Constructing nuclear power plants on such unstable land is necessarily courting danger. Well aware of this, the government chose to locate them not in cities, but in less populated areas. Resistance from these communities was met by state-deployed police power.<sup>1</sup> With no other recourse, they then appealed to the courts. However, the judiciary, claiming that the disposition of nuclear power rested with the executive branch, refused to address plaintiffs’ grievances.

Just as happened in wartime, the state institutions that effected total mobilization of the country have directed the development of nuclear power. Eventually, 57 nuclear power plants were crowded within the borders of Japan. These are collectively known as the “nuclear village”.

## The Fukushima Disaster

On 11 March 2011, a huge earthquake and resulting tsunami assaulted the Tokyo Electric Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, triggering a catastrophe.

At the end of World War II, Japan experienced the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States. The two cities were devastated and more than 200,000 people lost their lives, while 100,000 survived but continued to suffer illness and discrimination as hibakusha (atomic bomb survivors). The mushroom



**Koide Hiroaki** worked at the Kyoto University Reactor Research Institute (presently the Kyoto University Institute for Integrated Radiation and Nuclear Science Research) from 1974 to 2015. Drawn to the potential “peaceful uses of atomic energy” in energy-poor Japan, he studied nuclear engineering at Tohoku University. But the Tokyo Electric Power Company’s decision to locate a nuclear power plant in a fishing village, rather than in a nearby metropolis, alerted him to the dangers such plants pose. He then sought to master nuclear science to prevent their construction. He is the most celebrated critic of nuclear power in Japan, and the author of numerous books in Japanese. One has been translated into English: *Rethinking Nuclear Energy: Autopsy of an Illusion* (2015).

cloud released into the atmosphere by the Hiroshima bomb contained  $8.9 \times 10^{13}$  becquerels of caesium 137, a radioactive material that has devastating impact on human health. The Fukushima Daiichi accident released  $1.5 \times 10^{16}$  becquerels of caesium 137, as reported by the Japanese government to the International Atomic Energy Agency. In other words, the Japanese government acknowledged that the amount of this dangerous substance released in Fukushima was 168 times that of the Hiroshima bomb. If Japan were a law-abiding nation that followed its own governmental regulations, the contamination resulting from the accident was such that not only Fukushima, but surrounding parts of eastern Japan – an area amounting to 14,000 square kilometres – would have to be declared a radiation control zone and as such, off-limits to the general public. The damage caused by the Fukushima Daiichi accident was not limited to Fukushima Prefecture. It was an accident that brought disaster to a large area for an extended period of time, and I have decided to call it the “Fukushima Disaster.”<sup>2</sup>

On the day of the accident the government issued a “Declaration of a Nuclear Emergency Situation” and later ordered more than 100,000 people to evacuate from an intensely contaminated area covering approximately 1,150 square kilometres. Evacuation was a necessary measure, of course, but it meant the uprooting of life and loss of home. As people were moved from abysmal evacuation centres to temporary housing to “disaster recovery housing”, the appalling conditions led to the death of some, chiefly the elderly. Robbed of their livelihoods, families, and communal ties, other evacuees took their own lives. There have been more than 2,000 nuclear disaster-

related deaths.

## The “radiation exposure safety myth”

The government, moreover, suspended laws and regulations pertaining to radiation exposure, and abandoned several million people to stay on in what should have been a “radiation control zone”. More than nine years have passed since the accident, but caesium 137, with a half-life of 30 years, has only been reduced to 80%, and the “Nuclear Emergency Situation” is still in effect. Many ordinary people, who by law should be restricted from this contaminated area, have had to carry on with their routines.

After the nuclear safety myth had crumbled, the nuclear village proceeded to disseminate the “radiation exposure safety myth”. Of course, exposure entails risk. That is why there are laws and ordinances limiting exposure. According to the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP), the level of public exposure should not exceed 1 millisievert (mSv) per year. The Japanese government, however, has set the level at 20 mSv per year, and has instructed those who were evacuated from contaminated areas to return. Their minimal housing assistance has been terminated. Under ICRP recommendations, 20 mSv of radiation per year is the level permitted solely for occupational workers, who earn a living by working with radioactivity and radiation. The current policy of using the 20 mSv per year standard to authorize the reopening of restricted areas invites impermissible levels of exposure to the public, including children, who are highly radiosensitive.

## Perpetrators who take no responsibility

Impacts of the Fukushima Disaster continue to the present day. Who, then, are the perpetrators? Fukushima Daiichi is a nuclear power plant owned and operated by the Tokyo Electric Power Company. Given that TEPCO was responsible for the accident, it is the immediate perpetrator. And yet, on 19 September 2019, the former head and others in positions of responsibility at TEPCO were all declared not guilty in a criminal proceeding.<sup>3</sup> The reasoning was that there is no such thing as accident-proof equipment and that to demand perfect safety would prohibit the construction of nuclear power plants. The judiciary had played a role in the nuclear village from its inception. This judgment was a bald display of its true nature.

As previously stated, nuclear power in Japan began as national policy and advanced through state mobilization. Even if TEPCO bears immediate responsibility, it was the government that pressed it into nuclear power generation and guaranteed the safety of the technology. It was Liberal Democratic Party governments and successive prime ministers that licensed all 57 nuclear power plants in Japan. But not a single member of the LDP has taken responsibility for what occurred at Fukushima. No one from the Ministry of Trade and Industry – the present-day Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry – which advanced the nuclear agenda in lockstep with the administration, has taken responsibility. The same is true of the nuclear power experts who conducted safety evaluations and issued guarantees that accidents would not occur. No one from the media or the education sector, both of which helped to spread the

nuclear safety myth, has stepped forth to take responsibility. All of them have been supported by the judiciary.

The lesson I have learned from the Fukushima Disaster is this: Even if chances are infinitesimally small, once an accident occurs at a nuclear power plant, the damage will be catastrophic. Given that, all plants must immediately be dismantled. The lesson the nuclear village learned, however, is entirely different: However catastrophic the accident, however numerous the victims, no one will be compelled to take responsibility. For the nuclear village that survived the Fukushima Disaster unscathed, there is nothing left to fear. Henceforth, should an accident occur, not a single person will have to take responsibility, and the power companies, with the generous support of the state, will be able to recoup their losses and start turning a profit in short order. At present, they are all at work on nuclear restarts. Believing that they constitute a criminal entity, I have begun to refer to them not as the “nuclear village” but as the “nuclear mafia.”

## The Tokyo Olympics as a distraction from the Fukushima Disaster

The nuclear mafia have worked to erase the Fukushima Disaster from the memory of our citizenry. The mass media have all but ceased to report on the event. The schools are providing a “supplementary textbook” to teach children that exposure to radiation is nothing much to worry about. And the ultimate weapon has been the Olympics.

In every era, to avert the eyes of the citi-

zenry from the real hardships that confront them, governments have had recourse to bread and circuses. In September 2013, two-and-a-half years after the Fukushima Disaster, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo won the Olympics for Tokyo by lying that the situation was “under control”. The Abe regime was using the Olympics to erase the memory of the Fukushima Disaster from citizens’ minds. Now, many Japanese have been driven to the brink of forgetfulness.

In early 2020, however, Covid-19 made its appearance and began to spread in Japan as elsewhere. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Abe, determined not to see his Olympic dreams thwarted, underestimated the spread of the virus and tried to ignore it. Domestic infections spread relentlessly, and on 7 April he was forced to declare a state of emergency. The Abe government decided to postpone the Olympics for approximately one year, but whether the spread of Covid-19 will have been contained within that time is unknowable.

In Japan, even as a Covid-19 emergency declaration was issued, the “Nuclear Emergency Situation” precipitated by the Fukushima Disaster was still in effect. Of the radionuclides released by that accident, caesium 137 is still of greatest concern. In 100 years’ time, caesium 137 will have declined to one-tenth of its original levels. But that will still leave a vast area that should be deemed a radiation control zone. The Covid-19 emergency declaration was lifted from all areas by 25 May. One hundred years hence, I will certainly not be here; indeed, even when the babies born today have died out, Japan will still be living under a nuclear emergency situation.

Concern about the spread of Covid-19

led to the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics for one year. As the virus spreads, not only in Japan but throughout the world, the view is growing that instead of clinging to the Games, with their wasteful expenditures, it would be wiser to declare their cancellation sooner rather than later. Given that the Olympics were meant to distract from the Fukushima Disaster, Japan should not have bid for them in the first place. Indeed, it is precisely on the grounds of the continuing tragedy of the Fukushima Disaster that the Olympics should be canceled. ■■■

Scan QR code below for a special video message of Koide Hiroaki.



<sup>1</sup> Instances of police repression of the antinuclear movement abound. Public hearings on the location of nuclear power plants and meetings for deciding on the surrender of fishery rights have been characteristic targets. The readiness of the police to arrest and detain antinuclear citizens for the slightest offense has led even the courts to acknowledge an “apparent readiness to deliberately repress the antinuclear movement”.

<sup>2</sup> [Translator’s note] “Fukushima” in this usage is written in a phonetic script rather than in the Sino-Japanese characters used to designate the prefecture. The implication is that the phenomenon cannot be grasped as bounded by a geographic-administrative unit, much as “Hiroshima,” written similarly, points to a vastly larger phenomenon than what befell a single city.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, David T., Hiroshi Fukurai and Mari Hirayama. 2020. “Reflections on the TEPCO Trial: Prosecution and Acquittal after Japan’s Nuclear Meltdown.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 18(2), no. 1 (15 January 2020).

# Asia at the Olympics

Ashish Khandalekar

The modern Olympic Games are the foremost international sporting events in which thousands of athletes from around the world participate in a variety of competitions. The Summer and Winter Olympic Games are each held once every four years, with an interval of two years between them. The first modern Olympics were held 124 years ago in 1896 in the Panathenaic Stadium in Athens, Greece. At those Games, 241 athletes from 14 nations competed in 43 events. Many economic, political and technological advancements later, a whopping 11,091 athletes from 216 nations were set to compete in 339 events at the latest edition of the Summer Games in Tokyo in 2020. Unfortunately, these Games were postponed to 2021, due to the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic.

## Asian Participation and Medals in Olympics

Population, participation and medals won, by continent, from 1896 Athens to 2016 Rio Olympics

### Population (in millions)

Asia	5,945	66.0%
Africa	1,331	14.8%
Europe	904	10.0%
Americas	791	8.8%
Oceania	42	0.5%

### Participants (in thousands)

Europe	77.7	57.2%
Americas	27.2	20.0%
Asia	17.4	12.8%
Africa	7.8	5.7%
Oceania	5.7	4.2%

### Medals (absolute)

Europe	12,006	63.5%
Americas	4,000	21.2%
Asia	1,848	9.8%
Oceania	652	3.4%
Africa	394	2.1%

The above bar charts show the population in the five continents of the world, as well as the number of Olympics participants and the number of medals won in each continent. It is worth noting that even though 66% of the world population today resides in Asia<sup>1</sup>, only 12.8% of participants have

come from Asia. On the other hand, more than half of the participants (57.2%) have come from Europe, which has only about 10% of the world population. A majority of the 12.8% of Asian participants have come from only three countries: Japan (24%), China (15%), and South Korea (13%).



**Ashish Khandalekar** is an independent data visualisation designer based in Pune, India. He creates interactive visualisations and infographics to explain, explore or tell stories about our complex world. He has a bachelor's degree in design from IIT Guwahati and has previously worked for Deloitte as a UX designer. Making sense of complex datasets, finding insights and effectively communicating them is what drives him. Besides creating visualisations, he loves to run long distance marathons. You can reach him at [ashishkhandalekar@gmail.com](mailto:ashishkhandalekar@gmail.com).

With respect to medals, Asia has won 1,848, or 9.8% of the total. The majority of these have gone to the same three countries: China with 595 medals (29.1%); Japan with 482 (23.6%); and South Korea with 316 (15.5%). Another interesting point is that, looking at the number of medals won relative to population, Oceania dominates every other continent by a huge margin, with 155 medals per 10 million people (chart below). Asia and Africa, where approximately 80% of the world population resides, have each won three medals per 10 million people.

The first athletes from Asia to compete in the Summer Olympic Games were two men who took part in the 1900 Olympics held in Paris. They were Firidun Malakom Khan from Iran and Norman Gilbert Pritchard from India<sup>ii</sup>. Pritchard won two Silver medals for India in the men's 200m and 200m hurdles events. The rise and fall in the number of participants over the years mirrors the major events of modern history. The Olympic Games were canceled in 1916 due to World War I. The Games were again canceled in 1940 and 1944 due to World War II. Participation dropped at the Montreal Games in 1976 and the Moscow Games in 1980. The slight drop in Asian participation in 1976 was because Iraq and Sri Lanka

joined 22 African nations in boycotting the Games, refusing to participate alongside New Zealand, whose rugby team had toured South Africa that summer, breaking an international sports embargo against that country due to its apartheid policy. Participation was further reduced in 1980 when 65 nations boycotted the Moscow Games in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The first woman from Asia to participate in the Olympics was Nora Margaret Polley at the 1924 Games held in Paris. She represented India in tennis. She was both the first and the only woman from Asia to participate that year. Women's participation rose rapidly after the 1980 Moscow Games, and by 2016, when the Games were held in Rio de Janeiro, the number of women athletes, at 892 (47.8%), was nearly equal to the number of men, at 975 (52.2%).

To explore the number of participants for the rest of the continents, please use the dropdown menu in the interactive version of the article. Also, hovering over any year in the interactive version will bring up a tooltip providing additional information, including the percentages of men and women participants for that year.

The first Winter Olympics were held in 1924 in Chamonix, France, where 258 athletes from 16 nations competed in 16 events. Among them were eight men from Asia. A group of seven men from India and one from Nepal, named Tejbir Bura, participated as a team in the mixed alpinism event and won a Gold medal! Interestingly, it is the only Gold medal that Nepal has ever won. However, since the medal was awarded to the mixed team, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) doesn't recognize it as an official medal of the National Olympic Committee (NOC) of Nepal.

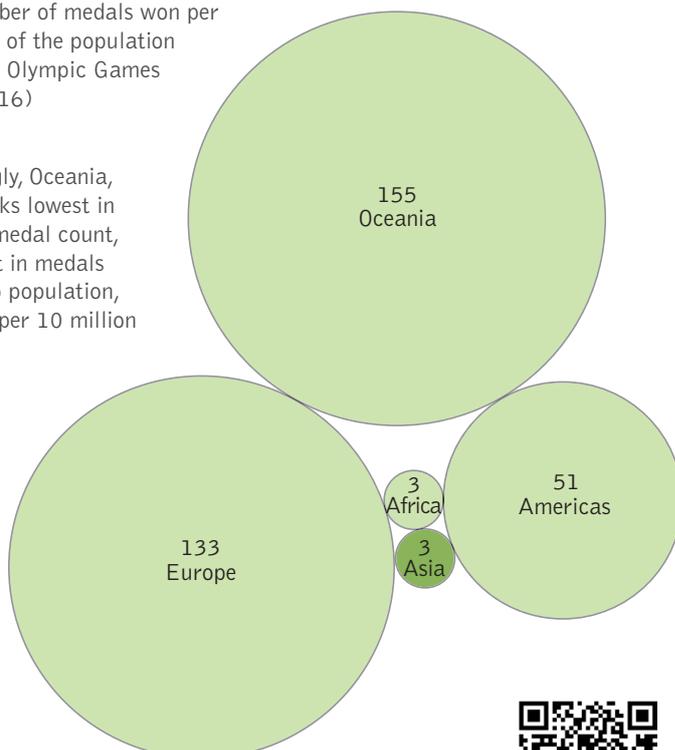
The first woman to participate in the Winter Olympics from Asia was Etsuko Inada in 1936, at the Games held in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. She represented Japan in figure skating, and was only 12 years old!

It should be noted that, over the years, the participation of Asian countries in the Winter Olympics has steadily increased as well. The participation dropped a bit at the 1994 Games in Lillehammer, Norway, as those were the first Games at which stricter qualifying standards were implemented. However, the number of athletes from Asia jumped from 144 in 1994 to 335 at the very next Games in 1998 in Nagano, Japan. A key reason for the rise was the addition of new

## Number of Medals in Relative Terms

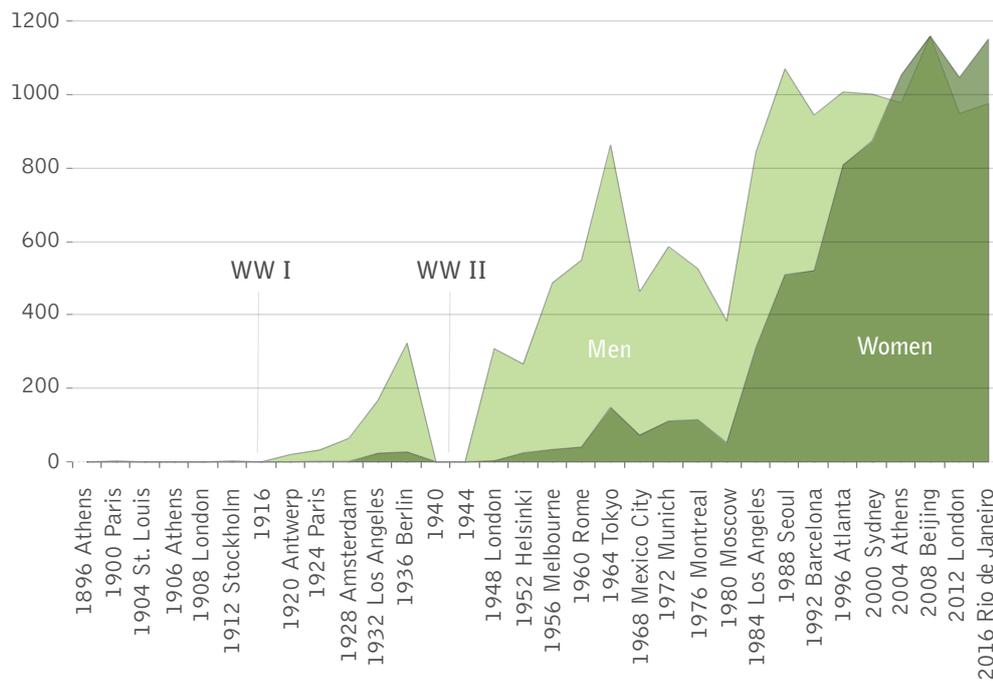
Total number of medals won per 10 million of the population in modern Olympic Games (1896-2016)

Surprisingly, Oceania, which ranks lowest in absolute medal count, ranks first in medals relative to population, with 155 per 10 million people.



Please use the QR code to access the interactive version and explore more related statistics.

## Participation in Summer Olympics

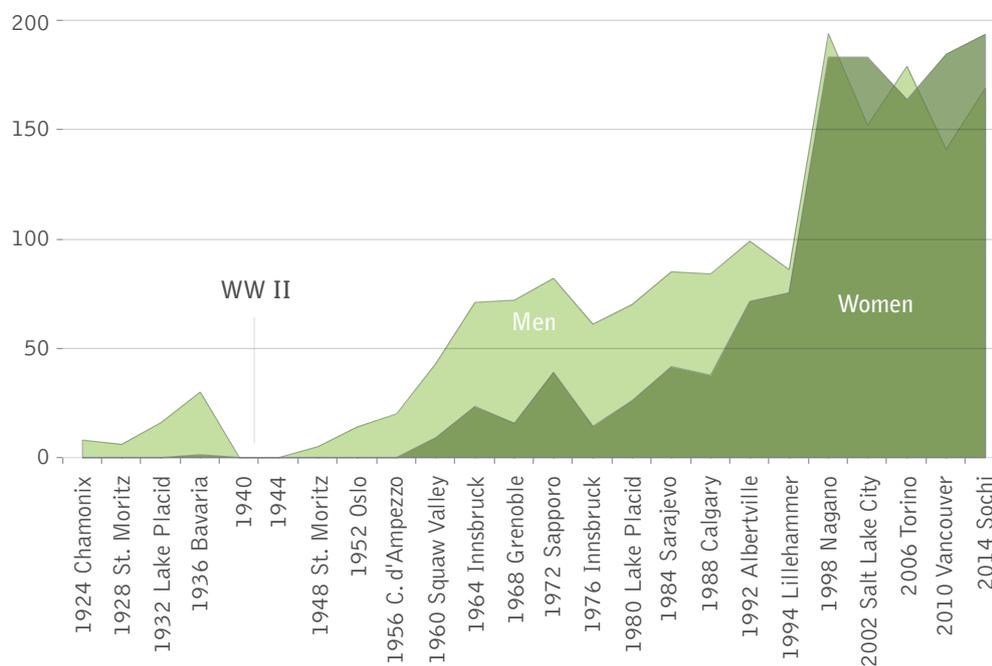


sports including women's ice hockey, curling and snowboarding. Just as in the Summer Olympics, by the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, the number of men and women participants had evened out, with 169 men (53.1%) and 149 women (46.9%) competing.

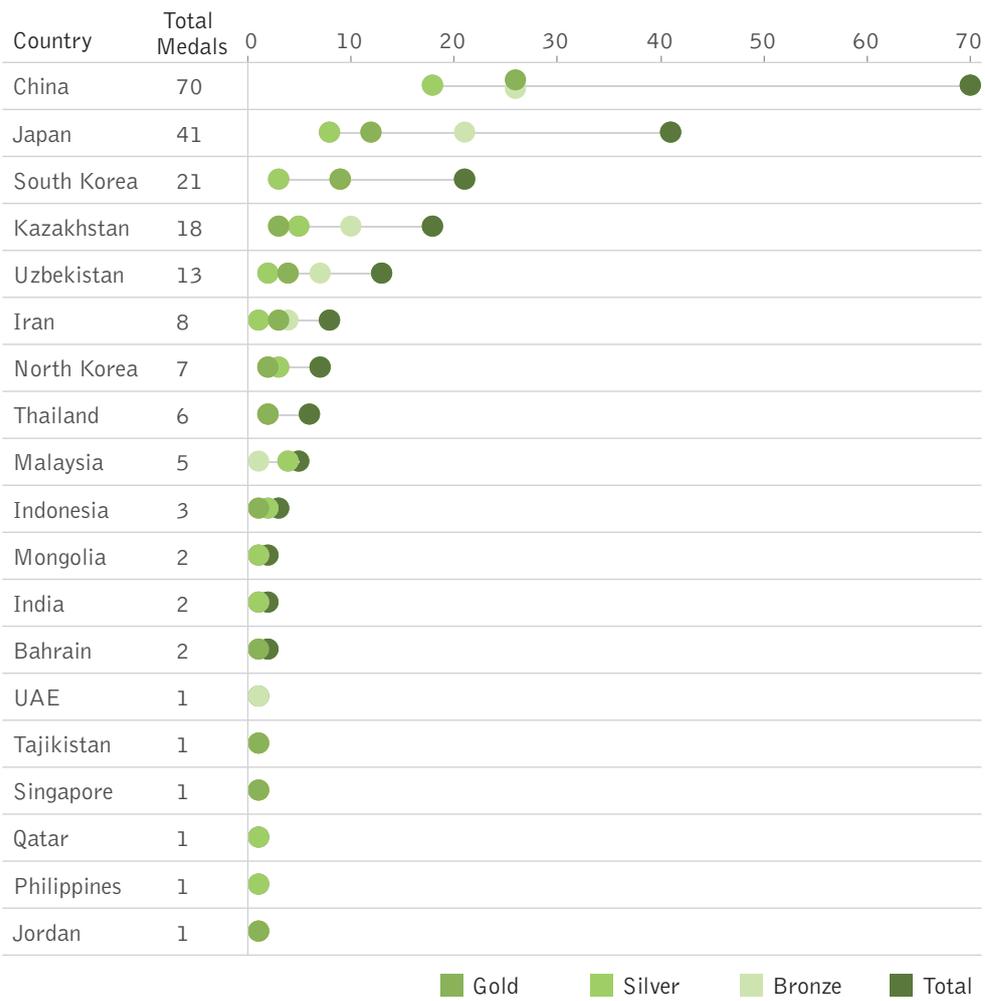
At first, the Winter Olympics were held in the same year as the Summer Olympics. But in 1986 the IOC voted to change the schedule and hold the competitions two years apart. This decision was officially endorsed in

1992 by the IOC, which was then headed by Juan Antonio Samaranch. Jason Stallman, a sports editor at The New York Times, said: "It (the separation) gave the Winter Games a chance to shine on their own. They had been somewhat overshadowed by the mighty Summer Games and it allowed for increased TV coverage, which means massive amounts of money for the IOC." Accordingly, the 1994 Games at Lillehammer, Norway, became the first Winter Games to be held separately from the Summer Games.

## Participation in Winter Olympics



## Medals Won by Asian Countries (2016)



The above chart shows the number of Gold, Silver and Bronze medals won by Asian countries at the 2016 Summer Olympics. Out of the 45 countries that are a part of Asia today, 19 of them won medals in 2016. China, Japan and South Korea dominated the medals count, as always, claiming 132 medals, or 64.7%, of the total won by Asian countries. Kazakhstan won 18 medals, while Uzbekistan won 13. The rest of the countries won medals in single digits.

In the interactive version of this article, use the dropdown Year and City to select any of the other Olympic Games since 1896. Similarly, use the other dropdowns to select the Continent, Season, Category or Sport to find each country's rank. ■■■

<sup>i</sup> The countries are categorised according to the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC). Countries which are no longer a part of the modern world are categorised according to United Nations Geoscheme classification.

<sup>ii</sup> Olympic historians separate Indian results from British ones despite India's lack of independence before 1947. Individual Olympic Athletes (IOA) are athletes who have competed under the Olympic Flag because of political transitions, international sanctions or suspensions of National Olympic Committees (NOCs). Refugee Olympics Team (ROT) is a part of the Individual Olympic Athletes (IOA) group. Historic identities of teams have been retained. For example, medals won by teams competing under the flag of the Soviet Union are counted separately from those won by teams under the flag of Russia. The data covers all the modern Olympic Games (Summer and Winter) from 1896 in Athens till 2016 in Rio de Janeiro. Source: <https://www.sports-reference.com/>

# From the Streets to Stadiums: Extreme Sports in China

An interview with Dr Ding Yiyin

Extreme sports, a type of strenuous risk-taking physical pursuit ranging from BMX racing and skateboarding to rock-climbing and snowboarding, arrived in China in the 1990s, promoted by the media and positioned as a western subculture. For Chinese people, it was a time when many started to benefit from economic growth and to have greater access to overseas cultures, with the spread of such sports moving in parallel with urban development, social change, and globalisation.

The “cool” image of young people engaged in the spectacular and risky routines associated with extreme sports, along with the self-expression they embodied, was totally unknown in China, attracting a group of youthful urbanites in major cities. These skateboarders, rollerbladers, and BMX enthusiasts became participants in the country’s first wave of extreme sportsX.

Below, extreme sports researcher Dr Ding Yiyin explains how and why this dynamic category of activities has followed its own developmental path in China and the social impact of this intrepid new sporting horizon.

What is the history of BMX and other extreme sports in China?

This is really the story of how a small number of young people in China adopted a western subculture. Take BMX freestyle, which came to China in the 1990s. Shenzhen and Guangzhou were the first places it landed because of the influence of nearby and highly internationalised Hong Kong. Later, Shanghai and Beijing also saw some developments. The “pioneers” learnt about extreme sports through websites and media, with television network ESPN playing a major role by hosting and broadcasting the annual X Games. From 2007-15, the yearly X Games Asia were held in Shanghai, nurturing the first generation of extreme sports fans in China.

How large is the extreme sports scene in China? What facilities are available?

I only have numbers for BMX riders. In 2017, a Canadian BMX sportsperson familiar with the scene in China estimated there were around 300 practising on a regular basis, spread across 10 to 20 cities. In fact, among those doing extreme sports in China, very few could be classed as “professionals” in the same way as traditional sportspeople. Most are enthusiasts, who rely on more than one source of income. In comparison, extreme sports professionals in other countries are more



**Dr Ding Yiyin** is currently a lecturer at Hangzhou Normal University, with a particular research interest in extreme sports. She holds a PhD in sports studies from Waseda University in Japan, and her paper, “Parents, Me & X-Sports: Mapping the BMX Culture in Contemporary China”, was the first on the country’s BMX activities to be published by the international *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (Vol 43, Issue 5, October 2019).

**Interview by:**

**Zhang Rou**, Heinrich Böll Stiftung  
Beijing Representative Office



*The first BMX cycling race in history was held in 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.*

committed and operate at higher levels of competitiveness.

In China, there haven't been any clear regulations on the use of public sports facilities for extreme sports training and practising. Riders and skateboarders also practise in public areas, including stairs and open spaces. We have seen more skateparks built in the past few years. Of course, space for facilities tends to be inadequate, given the size of the country's population. At the same time, the number of people engaging in extreme sports is not that big.

#### Are there any cities or state bodies focused on fostering extreme sports?

In recent years, Chengdu has promoted extreme sports by becoming part of the International Festival of Extreme Sports (FISE) World Series in 2014 and designating a space in the outskirts of the city as its FISE sports park. The Chinese Extreme Sports Association is China's usual official representative in the global arena, while the Chinese Cycling Association is the managing organisation for BMX in the Olympics.

#### What has changed since additional extreme sports were included in the 2020 Olympics?

The national BMX team was established in 2018, with members recruited from earlier try-outs. Less than half had previous BMX training. The rest came from other sports, such as cycling and acrobatics.

A greater number of people have also become aware of extreme sports and these activities have become more accepted by society. In major cities where BMX culture has a presence, equipment stores often serve as a hub for riders. According to my conversations with such shop owners, it seems that general understanding of different extreme sports has increased along with a deepening of interest among participants, thanks to greater media coverage. Based on sales, though, the number of new participants doesn't seem to have increased significantly.

Nor has a higher profile translated into much wider influence for the subculture behind these sports. While more BMX training courses for children are now available in major cities, providing additional income for BMX riders as trainers, this development has also distracted riders from their training and improving their own performance.

Some sportspeople have mentioned the dichotomy between a “free” sport and “standardised” training and scoring. How do you view this? And how do China's extreme sports teams position themselves in terms of mainstream vs minority?

Extreme sports in China have had a relatively short history and most people are unfamiliar with the attributes – trendy, thrilling, challenging – that young people attach to this subculture. Initially, some spectators even considered BMX freestyle just a type of acrobatics.

I don't have direct contact with members of the national team. However, some had been selected previously for provincial teams and left due to different expectations related to pay, rigid training requirements, among other reasons. In addition, public interest peaked at the time of the announcement that more extreme sports were to be included in the Olympics and this has since cooled down. Even though there are national and provincial teams, the professional capacity of coaches, design of training routines, and quality of equipment are not satisfactory.

In terms of mainstream vs minority, this is more a structural issue than a sports issue. Firstly, most BMX riders in the 16 to 24-year-old age range haven't received a lot of education. Their behaviour and perception of themselves are influenced by their educational level, which later shapes their image in the eyes of the public. Misunderstandings about this subculture, and even prejudice from those outside the scene, have led members to seek internal recognition within the group. Some also expressed willingness to behave in a more “conventional” way to improve the public image of BMX riders. It all relates to how this subculture wants to distinguish itself.

In your earlier research, you concluded that parents' attitude was a key factor when it comes to career choice. Could you elaborate on this?

Most BMX riders in today's China are from one-child families, with parents' top priorities being the health and safety of their only offspring. Extreme sports rely on in-depth knowledge, experience, and gear to protect participants, which may not be easily available for teenagers who start their training on the streets. Another important concern is economic: providing financial support is a way for parents to supervise their child before they become financially independent. In addition, as an only child, choosing a sports career could have substantial impact on the overall family and its economic position.

This strong economic interdependence means that extreme sports – which under most circumstances in China don't guarantee a stable income – are not going to be regarded as a good choice. Moreover, how a person defines his or her own identity often depends on their family background. Young sports participants without previous family ties to the field are especially likely to resort to their own family background to construct their self-identity and self-worth. As a result, some move to more “stable” jobs after just a few years of training.



*UCI Urban Cycling World Championships in Chengdu, China.*

### What are your observations from a gender perspective?

A few women undertake BMX training, but the number is small compared to men. In the national BMX team, for example, almost all of the female members come from acrobatics. In general, there are limited numbers of female participants in every extreme sport. Male participants also have a higher level of attainment.

But extreme sports could indeed play a role in promoting gender equality. A documentary about female skateboarders in Afghanistan has shown how teenage girls can benefit from extreme sports as they are based around individual capacity and performance. Compared to group sports that tend to be more confrontational and male-oriented, anyone interested in extreme sports, irrespective of gender, can give them a try. In addition, BMX activities and some other extreme sports do not require newcomers to train and practise in professional sports venues, making them less restrictive than they may appear.

### What are the differences with Japan's approach to extreme sports in the 2020 Olympics?

Inclusion of additional extreme sports in the 2020 Olympics was intended to make the whole event more attractive to the younger generation and, hopefully, increase viewing figures. As the host country, Japan was able and willing to recommend more such sports as "new" events because the skills of Japanese extreme sports participants are competitive enough to win medals.

Japan was the first country in Asia to accept western extreme sports. There is also more international exchange between top extreme sportspersons. Consequently, the popularity of extreme sports and participants' skills in Japan are higher than other Asian countries. In addition to land-based activities such as BMX and skateboarding, Japan also has high-achieving surfers, due in part to its geographic advantage. The fully-fledged development of a range of extreme sports and popularity of this subculture go hand in hand.

### Are some riders in China against the commercialisation of their sport?

There has been some controversy over this. The introduction of business elements may twist the original purpose of a sport to a certain extent. And, as a subculture, the social rebellion aspect tends to be watered down when commercial interests are involved. Similarly, some overseas participants are against inclusion in the Olympics, as they are afraid the core spirit of the sport will be lost. In China, a few BMX riders are uninterested in commercialisation, mainly those who really identify with the subculture behind the sport. However, most are fine with it, and ready to cooperate with business. Being a sponsored BMX rider by top brands is in fact an honour. As yet, though, a professional sponsorship model has not been fully established in China.

### Are there any other significant issues to help people understand more about the development and challenges of extreme sports in China?

First, extreme sports in China, as indicated by BMX and skateboarding, are still at an early stage. Participant numbers are small and skills need to be improved.

Second, a more globalised youth culture, originating in the US and Europe, has become increasingly recognised in China. However, to enhance extreme sports performance, a much larger group of people needs to be involved.

One way to see the current stage of China's extreme sports development is to look at how international extreme sports brands perceive the market. In their definition, extreme sports are among the type of leisure activities that rely for expansion on the growth of middle-income residents and improved living standards. Currently, in addition to a lack of cultural capital for extreme sports, the "middle class" that could incubate the market in China is not fully developed either.

Management and development would need different stakeholders to be involved as well as identification of a way forward that fits with local reality. However, given the low probability of attaining a gold medal, extreme sports in China may not receive much attention from the government. Overall, more social understanding of extreme sports and the culture behind them is still needed.

### What is your own favourite sport or activity?

Dancing! ■■■

# Sport in Southeast Asia: More than Medals, It's the 'We' Feeling

Johanna Son

Despite Southeast Asia's diversity and the tensions that persist among countries, sport has been able to transcend geopolitical boundaries and connect communities that have similar histories – and cultivate an appetite and appreciation for their native sports as well as their unique identities.

"We were really having a problem. The games were about to end, and Timor Leste still didn't have a single medal. People were asking: 'Is there a way they're going to win *anything?*'" Karen Caballero, an official on the Philippine Olympic Committee, was recalling how the hometown crowd at the 2019 Southeast Asian Games cheered for the tiny country and wanted it to bring home a medal. "When they won (one), we were almost in tears!" she added.

This camaraderie among sport rivals is familiar to Kerstin Ong, a 100-metres hurdler from Singapore who has competed in youth games in the region. "There is definitely a difference in atmosphere competing within the region as compared to events larger than the Southeast Asia region," agreed the 23-year-old Ong. For one, athletes who see one another in different meets become friends. "Off the track we would laugh and eat together," she said. A Malaysian rival once gave her advice when she confided her worries about her athletic performance, she recalls. "We hugged after."

These two stories show the different but connected threads that sport pulls together into an arena that nurtures the 'we' feeling among Southeast Asians. The region's more than 650 million people share histories and linkages that predate, and go beyond, the scope of the geopolitical entity that is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Ask a Southeast Asian about sport, and he or she will mention the SEA Games, as the Southeast Asian Games is called. Organised by the Southeast Asian Games Federation, the biennial event started in 1959. As a geographically defined event, all 11 Southeast Asian countries take part. This includes Timor Leste, whose application to join ASEAN's 10-member club remains pending.

In short, sport has been able to go beyond geopolitical restrictions. This helps explain why, apart from medal tallies, the biggest story at the last SEA Games was how Filipinos rooted for the underdog, Timor Leste. The country of 1.3 million people had sent just 48 athletes to compete in 10 out of the total 56 events. Timor Leste's athletes went home with six medals.

"Even if it's just in sports, they know they can identify with a certain bloc," remarked Caballero, who is also president of the Philippine Sepak Takraw Association, home of her country's national 'kick volleyball' team.

"By having participated in this SEA Games, we feel that we are part of ASEAN already," Elisa da Silva, counsellor in Timor Leste's embassy in Bangkok, said, sharing her personal views.

## Indigenous Sport

The SEA Games stands out for another reason: It is the only international sporting event that features indigenous sports from the region. Audiences will find sporting events and styles not seen elsewhere, such as barefoot athletes swinging swords and bladed weapons, in garb reminiscent of warriors from times that pre-date today's nation states in Southeast Asia.



**Johanna Son** is the Bangkok-based editor/founder of the Reporting ASEAN series, an independent venue for in-depth reportage of regional issues and capacity building among Southeast Asian journalists. She writes analyses for the *Bangkok Post* and contributes to the *Nikkei Asian Review*. Johanna is also a consultant trainer for the Fojo Media Institute (Sweden) in its work with media trainers in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam.

A former regional director for IPS Asia-Pacific news, she has edited 16 media-related publications and reports, and has written two journalism handbooks. Among these is *Reportage around ASEAN-related Issues: A Tip Sheet* (2019).

*Muay, sepak takraw and pencak silat* are the most high-profile native sporting events in the Games' lineup.

*Muay* is Southeast Asian kickboxing, shared by Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. The origins of *sepak takraw*, where players use strength, speed and acrobatic skills to kick a woven ball over a net, are said to go back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It has been included in the SEA Games since 1965. *Pencak silat* is a martial art form traditionally practiced in the Malay Archipelago, in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, the southern regions of Thailand and the Philippines. Inscribed by UNESCO as part of the 'intangible cultural heritage of humanity' in 2019, its popularity among Islamic communities reflects Malay identity.

There are other native sports, such as the Philippines' martial art *arnis*, that its proponents are trying to promote in regional circles. This is because *arnis*, which goes back centuries to pre-colonial times, is lesser known than other native sports in the region, even though it is the country's national sport. Athletes use bladed weapons or sticks and compete in traditional attire such as the *bahag* (G-string).

*Arnis* is much more than a sport, say trainers and coaches like Ronaldo and Jessielyn Baxafra. "It's not only the art itself that *arnis* promotes, but our culture. That's the beauty of *arnis*," said Jessielyn, a technical official in the sport. She added: "In these (regional) events, (you see how) camaraderie grows among the athletes. It's not like 'I'm a Vietnamese medalist' or 'I'm a Filipino medalist'. They become more friendly, their respect for each other is there whether you win or lose."

The high profile of combat in indigenous sports, for instance in kickboxing or martial arts, is a reference point for athletes and fans across borders. "The nice thing is countries like Cambodia and Myanmar have weaponry almost similar to *arnis*, though they may be more on bladed weapons," Ronaldo said.

Native sport is also carving out a space for cross-border – and cross-sport – exchanges in Southeast Asia, which go a long way towards expanding knowledge of one another's communities. Trainers travel to work with other countries' athletes. The coaching staff of the Lao football team, for example, includes a Myanmar trainer. Some coaches 'migrate' to other combat forms, such as *arnis* athletes learning to teach *muay thai*.

## A Fighting Chance

When athletes compete in Southeast Asia, they know they have a fighting chance, athletes, current and former sports professionals interviewed for this article agree.

"It's fun because most ASEAN countries are on par. That's what makes the (ASEAN Football) Cup attractive, the balance of competition and its (regional) identity," said Juan Miguel David, a former *futsal* (indoor football) competitions manager in the Asian Football Confederation. "There's no one country that monopolises all of the championships; like Malaysia has won a couple of times, Thailand, and Vietnam."

Football is unrivalled as the most popular sport across Southeast Asia, except in basketball-crazy Philippines. When Vietnam won the 2018 ASEAN Football Cup for



*It's fun because most ASEAN countries are on par. There's no one country that monopolises all of the championships.*

the first time in a decade, its streets erupted with flag-waving motorcades well into the next morning.

ASEAN has bigger football ambitions. At their 2019 summit, ASEAN leaders restated a plan to submit a joint bid to host a FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football Association) World Cup, with a 2034 target date. Last year, ASEAN signed an agreement with FIFA around sports development.

## Sports Diplomacy

For all the connections that sport makes, it has not been immune from tensions that arise from touchy issues such as which sport originally belonged to which country. Sports diplomacy has come into play in order to find the middle path through issues of nationalism, history and emotion. Try asking Southeast Asians whose sport sepak takraw is, or where muay came from among Thais, Cambodians, Lao and Burmese, and there may well be need for a referee.

But true to the regional habit of consensus, Southeast Asian sports bodies agreed to use '*sepak takraw*', which combines *sepak* or 'kick' in Malay and *takraw*, a Thai word for the rattan ball originally used in the game. The SEA Games uses the single word *muay* for kickboxing, without any adjective that attaches it to any country or tradition.

Caballero confirms that the *muay* issue has led to intense discussions in the SEA Games Federation, which comprises the

11 countries' federations. "They sometimes really end up arguing – banter, friendly debate – but you know they're getting on each other's nerves. (So we said) okay, we're all sports people here, we can agree on something neutral," she said. "You'd be surprised; these are elderly sports leaders!"

*Muay Thai* is described as having descended from *muay boran*, which refers to 'traditional kickboxing'. There is *muay Lao*, *kun Khmer* (Khmer boxing) from Cambodia and *let-hwei*, or full-contact boxing in Myanmar.

The friction is far from surprising: their kickboxing forms are the national sports of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. But analysts say the point is that when communities know one another, they find a way to get through these differences.

"The fact that there are similarities in several 'traditional sports' shows that Southeast Asia has more commonalities that stem from a shared source from the region's pre-modern past, than very stark differences," said Moe Thuzar, senior fellow at the Singapore-based ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. "There has been an increasing awareness and acceptance that sport can and does contribute to the 'we feeling' in Southeast Asia and that ASEAN could leverage those existing foundations," she said. "It is not under-used as such, but (it is) rather a matter of synergy between a long-established tradition and practice, before ASEAN formal mechanisms were established (SEA Games), and the current moves for an ASEAN com-

munity that seek to bring together the political, economic and sociocultural lives of Southeast Asian citizens.”

There are other ASEAN region-wide sporting events, such as games for university and secondary school athletes. The ASEAN Para Games, for differently abled athletes, is usually held soon after the SEA Games.

“Sport is more easily digestible and less sensitive as an issue. People can easily relate to it and it attracts mass audiences,” explained Siti Sumrit, head of the poverty eradication and gender division at the Jakarta-based ASEAN Secretariat.

“This is about getting to know each other, or realising there is something similar between you and me,” said Caballero. The SEA Games’ 2019 edition was its 30th, and the Games federation is 60 years old. “It’s very clear that it’s been a uniting factor,” she added.

## Investing in Women

Work lies ahead for Southeast Asia when it comes to more equal opportunities for women in sport, from athletes to leaders of sports associations. This has very real bearing on the region’s ambition to host a FIFA World Cup, since gender balance is becoming a norm in world events.

FIFA signed its first agreement with UN Women on gender equality and women’s empowerment only in 2019. Before the Tokyo 2020 Olympics was postponed, the International Olympic Committee was expecting female athletes to make up 49% of the total, up from 34% in 1996. Its goal is to have full gender representation in all 206 teams in Tokyo, and full gender parity by the 2024 games.

Before the 2019 SEA Games, Filipino sports columnist Joaquin Henson cited registration statistics showing that 61% of the nearly 6,000 athletes were male. The SEA Games do not have gender representation or parity goals.

On ASEAN Day in August 2019, the ASEAN Secretariat hosted an event on women’s football in majority-Muslim Indonesia. ASEAN’s Sumrit says she hopes that women’s football can help change attitudes towards gender equality as it can reach “wider audiences with simple messages as compared to political language or more official advocacy”. She added: “It should

start from a young age (that) girls can play football if they want to and should not be instructed, encouraged or confined to play Barbie, princess or even baby dolls that reinforce gender stereotypes and limit their understanding of ‘possibilities’ and ‘choices’ in life. We want to see them become norms and standards, and not exceptions, in the realm of sport.”

An exception is still what the Philippines’ Caballero is among Southeast Asia’s *sepak takraw* federations. Her 10 counterparts are male.

But women have been rewriting the story of Southeast Asian sport. Take the Philippines, whose four golds in the 2018 Asian Games were won by women – weightlifter Hidilyn Diaz (Olympic silver medalist in 2016, SEA Games gold medalist in 2019), golfers Yuka Saso, Bianca Pagdanganan and Lois Kaye Go, and street skateboarder Margielyn Didal.

Making it part of the ‘new normal’ to see more women across the sport ecosystem, along with the popularisation of native sports, would not only make the sports scene more interesting but reflect better what makes its communities Southeast Asian. ■■■

# We are the Champions

Photographs by Pho Thar

Myanmar is among Asia's poorest countries, with limited resources to promote sports. Disabled athletes form a particularly marginal group among sports enthusiasts in the country. But they work hard and some of them have been remarkably successful in international sports competitions, especially the ASEAN Para Games. This photo story tells of their lives in training. The images were taken at various times between 2017 and 2019 at the training facility of the Myanmar Paralympic Sports Federation in North Dagon Township, Yangon, which houses about 150 athletes.



All photographs of this photostory:  
© Pho Thar, all rights reserved

Athlete Sithu Htet, 22

In September 2017 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, hosted the 9<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Para Games. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) holds this regional sports competition every two or three years, after the regional Southeast Asian Games. In Malaysia, 384 Myanmar athletes participated in 29 events, winning 11 gold, 15 silver and 17 bronze medals. This was a major success for disabled athletes in a country that has little regard and little support for them.

The athletes are part of the Myanmar Paralympic Sports Federation, an independent organisation, mainly supported by the military community and the Ministry of Health and Sports. Many Paralympic athletes are former soldiers, wounded and disabled in battles with Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) – minority insurgent groups – fighting the central government for autonomy.

Some EAOs are part of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) concluded in 2015, which has ended hostilities in parts of the country. Further negotiations to end the conflicts continue until today, but a lasting peace, which would require a federal political structure acceptable to all sides, seems far away.

According to Halo Trust, an agency specializing in landmine clearance “[t]he people of Myanmar have suffered the longest-running civil war in history. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and displaced, and a deadly legacy of landmines stops farmers from cultivating their land and families from returning home... [A]pproval has not yet been granted for humanitarian landmine clearance. In the meantime, accidents continue to happen and children, unaware of the dangers, are most at risk.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2020, the Tatmadaw National Army declared a unilateral ceasefire due to Covid-19. However, the war in Northern Rakhine between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw continues even during the pandemic.



*Sithu Htet: "I had many girlfriends because they like athletic types like me. But they all eventually left me. My dream is to open a phone service shop."*



*Athletes train and have fun together.*



*Sithu Htet: "I come from a village in the Delta area. When I was a child, my friends called me 'monkey'. I was angry and told them I would come back when I was successful."*

<sup>1</sup> "Clearing Landmines in Myanmar." The Halo Trust. <https://www.halotrust.org/where-we-work/south-asia/myanmar/> Retrieved on 4 July 2020.

*"I was able to come back [to the training facility] because my parents can pay USD 10 a month. They do random jobs at Thanlyin Township."  
(Sithu Htet, 22, competing in the "Track and Field" category that includes running, jumping, and throwing.)*





*"The Malaysia games were the first competition I entered. I wore a glove which I had bought for 50 cents. I was ashamed when fellow athletes looked at me. Now, after learning from YouTube, I can make my own gloves."*





*Inkyin Khin, 20, has won a silver and two bronze medals in the "Track and Field" category that includes running, jumping, and throwing. She was born without her right leg. She is now preparing for her high school final exams. Only about 10% of the athletes training at the camp are women.*



*The basketball team performing a group ritual before training. "Nobody welcomed us when we came back with medals from international Para Games, but [in the future] we are still expecting even more medals than in the previous games." After the 2017 success in Kuala Lumpur, more funds were provided to allow the athletes to train throughout the year. They were keen to prepare for the games in the Philippines, scheduled for early 2020, but cancelled due to the Covid-19 crisis.*



*The Myanmar Paralympic Sports Federation provides a place to train and all the equipment, but the athletes must pay USD 10 per month for food.*



*Kyaw Kyaw Win, 31, was a soldier in the Tatmadaw. He lost his right leg when he stepped on a landmine in Kayah State twelve years ago. At three ASEAN Para Games he won three gold, one silver and three bronze medals in Boccia as well as Track and Field events. He also participated in the 2016 Brazil Paralympics.*

## About the photographer:

Pho Thar, 22, started his career as a photojournalist in 2016. He has been working for The Standard Time Daily since 2017. His photo documentary “We are the Champions” was nominated at the 11<sup>th</sup> Yangon Photo Festival 2019, just before he was sent to jail in April 2019.

Pho Thar is also a member of the satirical poetry troupe Peacock Generation. He and his team performed *thangyat*, a traditional art form that combines spoken word poetry, comedy and dance during the Thingyan Festival (Myanmar New Year). They wore military uniforms and made a *thangyat* satire about the military. The performers were found guilty of making fun of the military under the notorious Penal Code Section 505(a), a vaguely worded law often thrown at journalists and activists.

After 14 months in jail, Pho Thar was released from Insein Prison, Yangon, on June 26, 2020. As the Tatmadaw officials filed defamation charges in all the townships where the performance took place, five other members of the Peacock Generation were imprisoned. Su Yadanar Myint was released on August 19 but Kay Khaing Tun, Zayar Lwin, Paing Ye Thu and Paing Phyo Min are still in jail.

Pai Phyo Min, aka Deyay, is now serving a six-year sentence with hard labour. Amnesty International described these convictions as “outrageous”. Nicholas Bequelin, Amnesty International’s regional director, issued a statement: “It beggars belief that these young, brave people are behind bars for sharing videos and photos online. Their performances are all about aspirations for a better future.”

## Text by:

Pyay Kyaw Myint and Christophe Loviny (both: Yangon Photo Festival) ■■■



# Politics and Sports Capitalism in the Southeast Asian Games

Bonn Juego

The Southeast Asian Games has been negatively politicised since the 1950s. It has sported a complex interplay of colonialism, decolonisation, nationalism, geopolitics, patronage and capitalism. Repurposing it for the well-being of individual athletes and the regional sporting culture is long overdue. Yet, to depoliticise sports toward positive purpose necessitates collective political action.

## Introduction

The 30th Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in the Philippines from 30 November to 11 December 2019 was the biggest sporting event ever held in the region. Yet what should have been a showcase of athletic excellence became instead a reminder of the recurring political pestilence that has plagued this biennial competition since its 1959 inauguration. Controversies over the host country's alleged organisational incompetence, corruption, politicking, and human rights violations overshadowed stories of victory, individual triumphs and team records.<sup>1</sup> Again, politics won over athletics.

News and images featuring incomplete facilities and logistical mishaps abounded. Online bickering between loyalists and critics of President Rodrigo Duterte spilled over into public debate on the government's hosting performance. Elected politicians, state officials, and politically connected businessmen managed the Philippine SEA Games Organising Committee, which is facing investigations for misappropriation of the event's USD 150 million budget, notably its lavish expenditures for the cauldron and the grand opening and closing ceremonies. Then there were complaints from

activists about how the construction of a major venue, the 50-hectare sports complex within New Clark City, was used by the government and private investors to accelerate the forced displacement of some 500 indigenous Aeta families.

The politicisation of sports (i.e., the struggle for the allocation of power and resources between competing interest groups in the sporting community) is not exclusive to the SEA Games. This phenomenon is more pronounced in commercialised sports involving the exchange of big money sourced from states, corporations, and individual capitalists, like the Olympics, continental games, and many professional leagues. But its prevalence is not an excuse to normalise the commodification of the bodies and lives of athletes, or to continue tolerating corrupt practices of organisers from the public and private sectors.

Since its foundation, the norms and conduct of the SEA Games have been governed by political, security, economic and business considerations, rather than intercultural aspirations between neighbouring countries. After being held 30 times, the SEA Games is still in search of meaning and purpose.

## Colonial sports

Sport is both an individual and social endeavour. Individually, sport is the quest to realise the maximum potential of the human will, mind and body. Socially, sport entails complex relationships between players of a game, concerned institutions and other stakeholders within the body politic. The history of the SEA Games is very much



**Bonn Juego** teaches international development studies at the University of Jyväskylä, in Finland's Capital of Sport. He is a Filipino academic who has held research fellowships and teaching appointments at the Universities of Aalborg, Copenhagen, Helsinki, and City of Hong Kong. He has recently authored "IPE Scholarship About Southeast Asia: Theories of Development and State-Market-Society Relations" in *The Routledge Handbook to Global Political Economy* (2020).

a story of political power relations, rather than of memorable athletic achievements.

Sports politics, or the political capture of sports, in Southeast Asia has several dimensions. From a historical perspective, the evolution of sports in the region has displayed distinctive features of colonialism, decolonisation, geopolitics, nationalism, patronage and capitalism.

First, “Western” sports were introduced by European and American colonisers in Southeast Asia from the 16th century until the 1940s. Through mediation by local elites, imperial sports became tools to instil discipline and loyalty in the colonial subjects, aside from their entertainment value for the ruler and the ruled.<sup>2</sup> In the early 20th century, the US agenda in Asia, via its Philippine colony, incorporated amateur sports into the “modernisation” doctrine, which problematised the “backwardness” of Asian societies, politics, economies and cultures. From 1911 to 1913, the American branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association created the Far Eastern Championship Games and the Far Eastern Athletic Association, which reorganised into the Asiad and the Asian Games Federation after World War II. Colonialism constituted a “mass-based sportive citizenship training” with a certain “bio-political” aim to resolve “civilizational deficits of East Asian concepts of masculinity” through sports “as a healthy, rational, and scientific form of recreation” that could stop Asian vices of “promiscuity, gambling, cock-fighting, and boozing.”<sup>3</sup> Colonial sports promoted international games and physical education as a significant part of the “Western civilizing mission” to transition Asia into modernity, democracy, capitalism and “muscular Christianity.”<sup>4</sup>

## Geo-politics

From the 1940s through the 1960s, newly independent Asian countries adopted sport programmes as part of their respective national identity-formation and nation-building processes. Discourse on sports “decolonisation” included concepts such as Pan-Asianism, Asiatisation, and anti-colonialism in the organisation of regional games. Among Asia’s political elites, these ideas were interpreted differently as either new patterns of “dependent relationships” between former colonies and colonisers, or as articulations of a “variety of nationalisms,” based upon ethnicity, state or anti-

imperialism.

Secondly, the politicised nature of the SEA Games started with its precursor, the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games, established under the leadership of the Olympic Council of Thailand in 1958 during the Third Asiad in Tokyo. Though sports have served as a symbol of amity in the regionalism of contemporary Southeast Asia, it was an interesting mixture of national interests and friend/enemy distinctions in geopolitics that initially defined SEAP’s exclusivist membership. The decision of Thailand—as the pioneering host nation and overall administrator of the 1959 SEAP Games—to make the inaugural spectacle exclusive to its non-communist neighbours (i.e. Burma, Laos, Malaya, Singapore, and South Vietnam) and reject the participation of the more competitive sporting countries (i.e. Indonesia and the Philippines) “had the goal of containing [North] Vietnamese communism” and “undoubtedly favoured Thailand’s athletes” – thus reflecting a “mode of Thai-centric, anticommunist regionalism encompassing mainland Southeast Asia.”<sup>5</sup> Only in 2003 did all the peninsular and insular countries comprising Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) become participants in the SEA Games, namely: Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

---

Discourse on sports “decolonisation” included concepts such as Pan-Asianism, Asiatisation, and anti-colonialism...these ideas were interpreted differently as either new patterns of “dependent relationships” between former colonies and colonisers, or as articulations of a “variety of nationalisms,” based upon ethnicity, state or anti-imperialism.

---

Pursuit of national interest has been a persistent characteristic of ASEAN’s regional sporting culture. Instead of fierce competition between nations as in the Olympics, the distinct norms of tolerant reciprocity and cooperative exchange among participating states delineate the SEA Games. For example, the host country is given the privilege of selecting a list of events that play to its advantage and allow it to top the medal standings. This pragmatic approach is aimed at securing funds for the event, which are mostly appropriated from

the host government's national budget, to sustain the SEA Games.

## Patronage and Clientelism

Thirdly, the politics of patronage and clientelism is a permanent fixture in the history of sports in Southeast Asia. Business and political elites act as patrons to their clients among athletes, fans, consumers and voters. Their influential involvement in sports is present through various means: from owning teams and clubs, and having sponsorship deals, in commercial sports (e.g., in the old Philippine Basketball Association and the new Malaysian Football League), to organising and bankrolling local tournaments and matches in vote-rich grassroots communities, especially during an election season. It is also often the case in the region that national teams and athletes thrive on monetary contributions from wealthy private and corporate benefactors, not necessarily on government funding.

---

Business and political elites act as patrons to their clients among athletes, fans, consumers and voters. Their influential involvement in sports is present through various means... national teams and athletes thrive on monetary contributions from wealthy private and corporate benefactors, not necessarily on government funding.

---

Sport is woven into the fabric of society. It serves specific functions to different groups of people, though unequally in terms of class relations. For instance, some of the favourite spectator sports in Asia – like football, basketball, boxing and horseracing – signify the pursuit of personal ambition for athletes, a regular day job for staff, or simple leisure for ordinary fans. On the contrary, these games serve as pastimes, gambling opportunities, entrepreneurial ventures, tax credit strategies, or public relations occasions for sections of Asia's elite.

Sports are also a battleground of opposing tendencies in society. There have been historical moments when spectator sports and celebrity athletes have exhibited political resistance, notably the refusal of the legendary boxer Muhammad Ali to serve in the US military during the Vietnam War, the No Room For Racism campaign in European

football leagues, and the recent support to the Black Lives Matter movement in the National Basketball Association. However, in Southeast Asia, sports are less likely to provide a platform for opposition politics than for powerful social forces to exercise their patronage and clientelism.

## Sports Capitalism

Alongside nationalism and patronage, the logic of sports capitalism is shaping the sporting culture in Southeast Asia's emerging economies. Sports capitalism enables unequal social relations whereby sports generate profits for some while exploiting others through alienation, commodification and dispossession. The political economy of sports capitalism has multiple aspects and contradictory manifestations, which have critical implications for the future of the SEA Games and the evolving sports structure:

1. *Liberalist Individualism.* Sports capitalism exemplifies liberalist individualism – the ethos in which individuality, competitiveness and personal excellence against all institutionalised odds are celebrated. In the hegemonic US-style capitalism, in which social inequalities are peddled as a natural order, sports is promoted as a special sphere where even the poor, black descendants of slaves are qualified to compete in pursuit of greatness, despite lacking inherited property from rich parents, or the institutional advantages of white privilege, simply by having individual determination, skill and talent. The same individualistic path to success, like the rags-to-riches story of Filipino boxer Manny Pacquiao, is being popularised in the highly stratified and class-divided societies of Southeast Asia.

2. *Inequalities.* Under conditions of capitalism, there are stark inequalities in the allocation of value in sports. Though star players of spectator sports are paid astronomical salaries and talent fees, they may still be considered as workers for the owners of companies who profit from their work, and as labourers whose incomes are legitimately earned through their perceptible hard work and professionalism. In team sports, individual excellence is praised, while the game is presented as a process of teamwork. However, lower-tier workers who significantly contribute to the sports production process are often limited to subsistence or starvation wages.

3. *Alienation and Commodification.*

One of the contradictions of sport as a human and social activity is that, while it offers uplifting narratives about humanity, it also has painful stories of horrendous bodily abuse and attendant social pathologies. This includes the doping of athletes, a violent subculture of hooliganism between fans, and the sexual objectification and assault of promotional models. Discrimination based on gender, race, religion and other identities is also prevalent. Human strength, speed, creativity and elegance in the physical art and science of sports are commoditised to profit a few elites. Sports capitalism turns games into hyper-competition, play into corporate business, players into moving marketing ads, record performance into market value, the human body into a self-destructive machine, and athletes and workers into commodities.

4. *Negative Nationalism and Profitability.* In international games, the expression of nationalism may be healthy to the extent that supporting a national team will not engender extreme attitudes of jingoism, chauvinism, or mass hysteria oriented to winning over a perceived enemy at all cost. However, sports capitalism suggests that there are profitable opportunities in competing nationalistic loyalties. In this sense, sports nationalism and capitalism can have deleterious effects on the values of civility and sportsmanship.

5. *Financialisation.* Sports capitalism is clearly manifested in the way popular sports in the world today are sustained, connected and facilitated by digital technology in the global gambling industry. The opportunity to bet gives fans a financial stake in the outcome of a game. Oftentimes, betting in organised sports generates unfair behaviour and dishonest activities like game-fixing that undermine the integrity of sports. Moreover, sports betting and gambling are used as channels through which transnational crimes such as money laundering and other illicit financial transactions are carried out.

6. *Labour Exploitation.* Hosting international organised sports is mainly business, notwithstanding the host nation's agenda for cultural projection. The oft-repeated economic rationale for a host country is the opportunity to build infrastructure and amass foreign direct investment, but it has become evident that mega sporting events have also left behind white elephants and unsustainable sovereign indebtedness. On top of the extravagant financial cost to

societies, multinational games have often entailed poor labour conditions in the construction of sports venues and facilities. The occupational hazards of erecting innovative architectural projects, especially stadiums for the Olympics and FIFA World Cups, have resulted in the death and injury of workers.<sup>6</sup>

---

This experience in the construction of a state-of-the-art sports complex and athletic stadium signifies how modern sporting activities entail social exclusion, and specifically, how these investments are deeply entangled with the interests of government officials, real estate developers, architecture firms, and private investors in appropriating the concept of urban sustainability.

---

7. *Accumulation by Dispossession.* The accumulation of wealth through sports capitalism is usually accomplished by vested interests through coercion or co-optation to get the consent of the vulnerable yet rightful owners of the commons. This was coherently shown in 2018 when the USD 80 million Athletics Stadium of the New Clark City Sports Complex was being constructed as a central hub of the 30th SEA Games. It was reported that at least 300 families were initially evicted from their homes and soon after, during the Games itself, some 500 families from the Aeta tribe were served eviction notices by the government.<sup>7</sup> In effect, the brazen land-grab and displacement of the indigenous Aeta people, who have a collective history of exclusive and continuous possession of their ancestral lands, was actualised in the name of “inclusive, green and sustainable development” to decongest Metropolitan Manila by building a new “smart city.”<sup>8</sup> The indigenous people were also deprived of their traditional livelihoods and, to add insult to injury, some of them were co-opted to work on precarious and contractual terms doing menial jobs such as cleaning and security to maintain and protect this green urbanism project. Hence, this experience in the construction of a state-of-the-art sports complex and athletic stadium signifies how modern sporting activities entail social exclusion, and specifically, how these investments are deeply entangled with the interests of government officials, real estate developers, architecture firms, and private investors in appropriating the concept of urban sustainability.

## Depoliticising Sports

After sixty years, the SEA Games needs to face its existential crisis head-on by re-examining its nationalistic orientation and its current predisposition to the dehumanising essence of sports capitalism. On paper, the charter of the SEA Games Federation asserts a commitment to the life philosophy of “Olympism” based on the core values of excellence, friendship and respect. In reality, however, the systemic politicisation of the SEA Games is in contrast to the Olympic Movement’s principle of “political neutrality.” Likewise, the persistence of negative nationalism in Southeast Asia’s sports festival and the vicious encroachment of inhumane capitalism into the world sporting structure are in conflict with the desirable goal of the Olympics “to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.”

Repurposing the SEA Games to make it a meaningful and relevant sporting association is long overdue. While the SEA Games has been politicised from the very beginning, its depoliticisation towards positive change would require an intense political act. In particular, it would necessitate political will from decision-makers and/or an organised political movement among athletes, sports fans, taxpayers and active citizens.

There is scope for redefining the mission of the SEA Games and the purpose of sports for the peoples of Southeast Asia. The multi-sports events of the SEA Games should embody a healthy mix of cooperation and competition, teamwork and individuality, internationalism and patriotism. ASEAN, with the willing participation of all its member states, can forge a unique and humanist sports identity in its regionalisation process, in which the SEA Games provides an opportune space and moment to realise the broader objectives of human flourishing, community solidarity, democratic governance, social justice, and ecological sustainability. After all, sport is a contested human and social activity – as such, it is an arena where political struggles against exploitative, exclusionary and destructive dynamics along class, racial, gender and ecological dimensions can be advanced. ■■■

- <sup>1</sup> Ana P. Santos. 2019. “SEA Games: Medals and controversies for the Philippines.” *Al Jazeera*, 11 December 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/sea-games-ends-medals-controversy-philippines-191211050407590.html>; Jodesz Gavilan. “What do we know about SEA Games 2019’s Phisgoc?” *Rappler*, 28 November 2019. Retrieved from: <https://rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/things-know-sea-games-2019-phisgoc>.
- <sup>2</sup> Charles Little. 2010. “South-East Asia.” In *Routledge Companion to Sports History*, edited by Steven W. Pope and John Nauright. London: Routledge, 587–598; Lou Antolihao. 2015. *Playing with the Big Boys: Basketball, American Imperialism, and Subaltern Discourse in the Philippines*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- <sup>3</sup> See the seminal research by Stefan Huebner. 2016. *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.
- <sup>4</sup> Huebner, pp. 261–277.
- <sup>5</sup> Simon Creak. 2017. “Eternal friends and erstwhile enemies: The regional sporting community of the Southeast Asian Games.” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 5(1): 147–172.
- <sup>6</sup> See reports from global union federations that have followed the construction of mega sporting infrastructure in recent years, for example, ITUC. 2015. “Qatar: Profit and Loss – Counting the cost of modern-day slavery in Qatar: What price is freedom?” Brussels: International Trade Union Confederation; BWI. 2018. “Foul Play: FIFA’s failures at the 2018 World Cup Russia.” Geneva: Building and Wood Workers’ International; BWI. 2019. “The Dark Side of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics.” Geneva: Building and Wood Workers’ International.
- <sup>7</sup> Bernice Beltran. 2020. “The Philippines’ ‘Smart City’ Threatens Tribal Displacement.” *The Diplomat*, 8 January 2020. Retrieved from: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/philippines-smart-city-threatens-tribal-displacement/>
- <sup>8</sup> Tony La Viña and Joy Reyes. 2019. “Aetas and New Clark City: Trampling on human rights of our first peoples.” *Rappler*, 20 December 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/246881-analysis-aetas-new-clark-city-trampling-on-human-rights>

\* A longer version of this article is available at [th.boell.org](http://th.boell.org), or scan QR code below.



# Coming apart at the Seams: Why Women Workers in the Cambodian Garment Industry Need a Sporting Chance at Equality

Rachana Bunn

While Cambodian women's presence in the international sporting world may currently be limited, they are highly represented behind the scenes as the cornerstone of the country's garment industry, a significant supplier of global sportswear and footwear. Yet poor respect for human rights, discriminatory employment conditions, and a sexist workplace culture are combining to put the hundreds of thousands engaged in such factories at risk.

It should have been the highlight of the year's sporting calendar until the Corona crisis sprinted into action. But as the debate goes on as to when, if ever,<sup>1</sup> the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, will go ahead, many women in Cambodia will remain firmly focused on the world of physical exercise. They are the essential workforce racing under testing conditions to drive forward the country's garment factories. The factories that supply major sportswear and footwear brands, among others, with the "cool gear" they sell around the globe.

A series of structural changes made to Cambodia's economy in the 1990s, coupled with bilateral and multilateral trade agreements,<sup>2</sup> have given birth to the development of the garment sector in the form it exists today. Often referred to as the "backbone" of the national economy, since the industry's expansion in the 2010s, the garment sector has grown to employ some 700,000 workers, among whom 90% are rural migrant women.

Dominated by foreign investors from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore, with the majority of products exported to western markets,<sup>3</sup> the sector has become a crucial contributor to Cambodia's impressive rate of economic growth in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

However, the gender-based issues that many of these workers face, in particular sexual harassment, discrimination in the employment process, and childcare, require much more attention in the arena of equal opportunities. Indeed, swift action is needed by government and corporate actors to address the discrimination and labour practices that so often hold women back from realising full empowerment and self-determination.

## Pervasive Sexual Harassment

Recent research on women garment workers in Cambodia indicates high levels of workplace sexual harassment, with women regularly reporting to their union representatives that they faced harassment not only by their employers or supervisors, but also by peer male workers. Such women also report sexual harassment outside the workplace as a regular and daily risk, especially on the way home from factories. These findings are corroborated by an increasing volume of published studies on sexual harassment in the garment industry, in Cambodia and elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> For instance, a report released by Care International in 2017 found that nearly one-third of women workers in Cambodia had been sexually harassed at their workplace in the past 12 months.

Despite the common occurrence of sexual harassment in factories and in broader Cambodian society, the country does not have specific legislation to deal with such harassment or sex discrimination. As such, efforts are underway by women's rights civil society actors to amend legislation that cur-



**Rachana Bunn** holds undergraduate degrees in education and law, and a master's degree in international development from the City University of Hong Kong. She is a co-founder and executive director of Klahaan Organization, an independent, intersectional feminist organisation that uses research and digital-based campaigning to contribute to the development of a fair, just, and equal society in which Cambodian women of all backgrounds enjoy their human rights. *Klahaan* in Khmer means "brave".



Stating that "women's rights are human rights", these female workers request the establishment of preschools in communities and childcare centers in factories during a protest in Phnom Penh.

rently exists to bring it in line with the International Labour Organization's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, inadequate legal protection and subsequently low levels of prosecutions, combined with legal loopholes, the lack of gender equality culture, and poor respect for human rights have enabled corporate actors to pay less attention to addressing sexual violence at the workplace. This has resulted in repeated petitions demanding resolutions to address 11 priority problems affecting the lives of all Cambodian workers.<sup>7</sup>

While sexual harassment is often seen as a less serious crime compared with physical violence, harassment frequently results in prolonged psychological trauma for survivors. In the case of women workers, this hinders their ability to perform their work and subsequently affects their productivity levels. More importantly, many such women have also spoken of the lasting impacts of sexual harassment on their mental health, well-being, and personal relationships.

Employers should recognise and act upon their human rights obligations under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights to respect, protect, and remedy any human rights abuses. Growing consumer awareness of labour rights issues and a desire to purchase clothing from suppliers that are certified as providing ethical

employment to their factory workers also provide a business imperative among buyers and suppliers to ensure that workers enjoy a safe working environment, including taking steps, in close collaboration with government and civil society, to proactively prevent and address sexual harassment in garment factories.

### Fixed-term duration contracts and pregnancy-related discrimination

There are two types of labour contracts specified in the Cambodian Labour Law: fixed-term duration contracts (FDCs) and undetermined duration contracts (UDCs),<sup>8</sup> but in reality the former are commonly offered to workers in the garment industry and the latter rarely used.

While the use of fixed-term duration contracts has affected all garment workers, the severity is reportedly vastly different between men and women workers. Women workers have long reported experiencing discrimination at various stages of the employment process, including during hiring, promotion, and termination. A union activist, who spoke on condition of anonymity, claimed that many garment factories opted to hire women workers under fixed-term duration contracts so that fac-

tory owners did not need to renew the women's employment contracts if and when they became visibly pregnant. The length of such contracts varies between two weeks to one month, or one month to three months, or three months to six months, or nine months, or one year. She further noted that most women workers have been working continually for over two years, and in some cases longer than five years. Yet employers continued to hire them on fixed-term duration contracts.

In addition, forced overtime and the quota production system have been seen as contributing factors in compelling many pregnant women workers to leave their job. Working overtime is a common practice and also a tacit expectation of each worker from employers, especially during the high season and prior to the outbreak of the Corona crisis that has slowed market demand. Many pregnant women workers have claimed that they have been forced to work overtime, without adequate breaks to rest or use washrooms and those who refused to take on such long hours reportedly faced retaliation from supervisors.<sup>9</sup> This is in contravention of the Labour Law, which stipulates that "the number of hours worked by workers of either sex cannot exceed eight hours per day, or 48 hours per week" and, including paid overtime, the hours of work per day cannot exceed 10 hours.

According to the Labour Law, fixed-term duration contracts can be renewed one or more times, but cannot surpass the maximum total duration of two years. Any violation of this rule leads the contract to automatically become an undetermined duration contract. However, in 2010, Cambodia's Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training issued an instruction on determination of the types of employment contracts to clarify the matter. This stipulated that the maximum duration of the fixed-term duration contract could be up to four years, including the first contract and subsequent renewal.<sup>10</sup>

The use of fixed-term duration contracts has hugely impacted workers' rights, to the extent that they are even unable to form unions or join existing ones, as the use of such contracts makes it easier for employers to "let go" workers active in the union. When employment is more precarious, workers are less likely to "rock the boat" by demanding their rights to safe working conditions.

## Unpaid Care Work and Childcare Amenities

As documented in reports, over 60% of garment factories are located within or in close proximity to Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital city, and the rest are situated in bordering provinces.<sup>11</sup> This geographical distribution means that many women workers have had to migrate from their respective provinces to be closer to their work, living in a small shared rented room with their peers.<sup>12</sup> The situation has forced women workers, including new mothers, to leave young babies and older children with their mothers in their hometowns, only visiting at weekends and/or public holidays.

### Cambodia's Garment Sector

Cambodia's garment, textile and footwear sector overall had until recently appeared to be set for further expansion, with double-digit growth of 19% (footwear) and 17% (garment and textiles) over 2018, according to Cambodian government figures cited in a recent International Labour Organization Bulletin.<sup>20</sup> Its then share of Cambodia's merchandise exports was 74%. The EU and the US were Cambodia's most important trading partners in the sector, and the country was the world's ninth largest garment producer. However, 2020 has brought two major landscape changes: the Corona crisis that has cut through demand in its main markets and seen thousands of Cambodian factory workers laid off; and withdrawal of access to the EU's Everything But Arms tariff-free agreement. Under the agreement, countries can lose such access if they do not comply with core human and labour rights.<sup>21</sup> Such access was temporarily withdrawn for some Cambodian exports, including garments and footwear, effective 12 August 2020.<sup>22</sup>

On-going efforts are being made by the Cambodian government to enhance the accessibility, affordability, and quality of early childhood services. These efforts are reflected in article 186 of the 1997 Cambodian Labour Law<sup>13</sup> and the adoption of the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development in 2010, which led to development and implementation of the 2014-18 National Action Plan on Early Childhood Care and Development by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport. The plan's vision was that "all young chil-

## Kick-starting the Future

One Cambodian woman to take major steps away from traditional norms is international taekwondo champion Sorn Seavmey, who has travelled from teenage garment factory worker, where she sewed alongside her mother, to become the country's first Asian Games gold medallist in 2014. She was also chosen as flag-bearer for Cambodia's delegation at the opening ceremonies for the 2016 Rio Olympic Games and 2018 Asian Games.

Born in 1995, just as the garment industry started to emerge in Cambodia, the star athlete became the focus of an Olympic Channel online video series that explored her journey to the 2016 Olympics.<sup>19</sup> In these programmes, she recalls how her family and South Korean coach pushed her to aspire to a different way of life, and to persevere in achieving it. She, in turn, is now inspiring women and girls in Cambodia to think beyond home, factory, and customary gender roles.



dren, from conception to less than six years of age, especially disadvantaged, vulnerable and poor children, shall be provided with care and development services".<sup>14</sup> A new National Action Plan for 2019-23 is also being developed.

However, such a promise of childcare provision has yet to materialise. On the one hand, this is due to deeply ingrained unjust social norms and unequal gender roles placed on Cambodian women, who are traditionally expected to take care of everyone in the family, especially children and the elderly, whether the women work or stay at home. Women themselves usually strongly internalise such expectations, and it is only relatively recently that mainstream women's rights advocates have begun pushing hard on issues related to equal parenting responsibilities and the gendered burden of unpaid care work. On the other hand, poor and unevenly applied law enforcement enables many factory owners to circumvent their legal obligations under the Labour Law. Many factory owners have failed to set up a fully functioning day-care facility in factory premises or provide a substantial financial allowance to women workers to place their children in private childcare centres.

Furthermore, the Cambodian childcare landscape operated by state and private corporate actors is still limited – even if growing – and most childcare centres concentrate on provision for a privileged few. A 2019 survey conducted by Planete Enfants & Développement (PE&D),<sup>15</sup> a French NGO, highlighted that the average individual monthly fees for childcare service in Phnom

Penh were around USD250. Only a few providers targeted middle-income families, charging around USD150, while others concentrated on rich districts, targeting international families and setting fees of up to USD400 per month per child. As such, even the cheapest childcare is an unaffordable expense for many working families in the garment sector, with a minimum wage of USD190 in 2020.<sup>16</sup> The majority of low and middle-income women therefore rely on their mothers or other women relatives to take care of children while those without family capital for childcare have to leave the labour market to take care of their newborn child.

It is thus imperative that top brands, including sports brands such as Adidas and PUMA, and other major clothing chains, such as H&M and Marks & Spencer, which have been sourcing their products from Cambodia and making gigantic profits from the Cambodian workforce, look at this matter as a top priority. As cited in a recent World Bank report,<sup>17</sup> research shows that a lack of childcare options for workers can translate into high employee turnover and absenteeism, and low work satisfaction and productivity.

To help the situation, the World Bank has undertaken a community-based childcare initiative, funded by the Japan Social Development Fund and implemented by PE&D in collaboration with 22 garment factories across Cambodia.<sup>18</sup> This is expected to create an opportunity for women to go to work and provide sufficient care to children. A similar type of childcare service should

also be made available in all factories. However, this will need cooperation from the government and employers.

## Looking ahead

The Cambodian government needs to take swift and decisive action to protect garment workers, who are producing goods for international apparel brands. This means amendments to existing legislation, the drafting of new specialist legislation, and the upholding of international human rights treaty obligations. Another crucial action is to strictly regulate and regularly monitor the working conditions and environment inside garment factories.

On the employers' side, garment sector employers, buyers, and other actors should build on recent efforts, such as the World Bank's childcare project, to enable workers in Cambodia to strike a better work-life balance while improving child development. Supporting childcare can also help companies enhance their reputation with international buyers and access higher-value markets.

Regarding harassment, complaint mechanisms that are available and accessible to factory staff, and other initiatives, such as a women's contact point, should be initiated and a comprehensive training package rolled out, accompanied by clear guidelines that are comprehensively communicated.

Employers who violate the labour rights of garment workers must face swift penalties to reduce the culture of impunity, and the unethical use of fixed-term duration contracts must cease immediately.

In this way, Cambodian women might not only find a way to better garment factory working conditions but also the confidence to strive for other ways to race ahead.



\* A longer version of this article is available at <https://www.klahaan.org/publications>, or scan QR code below.



- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/08/20/business/majority-japanese-firms-against-holding-olympics-2021-according-poll/>
- <sup>2</sup> The Most Favoured Nation (MFN) and the Everything but Arms Preferential Trade Agreement
- <sup>3</sup> The United States of America (24%), European Union (46%) and other (30%) in 2017.
- <sup>4</sup> Shah, 2010; Hun, 2008
- <sup>5</sup> Care International 2017, The Solidarity Center, and the International Labour Office
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/declaration/thedeclaration/textdeclaration/lang--en/index.htm>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.klahaan.org/take-action>
- <sup>8</sup> Article 66 of the 1997 Cambodian Labour Law
- <sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch, Work Faster or Get Out, page 8, 2015/
- <sup>10</sup> [https://www.camfeba.com/legal/Announcemet.%20Notification%20\(LL\)/2019/Instruction\\_on\\_Determination\\_of\\_Employment\\_contract\\_Eng.pdf](https://www.camfeba.com/legal/Announcemet.%20Notification%20(LL)/2019/Instruction_on_Determination_of_Employment_contract_Eng.pdf)
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/cambodias-garment-manufacturing-industry/>
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/76384/garment-worker-housing-survey-disputed/>
- <sup>13</sup> Article 186 of the 1997 Cambodian Labor Law: Managers of enterprises employing a minimum of one hundred women or girls shall set up, within their establishments or nearby, a nursing room and a crèche (day-care center). If the company is not able to set up a crèche on its premises for children over eighteen months of age, female workers can place their children in any crèche and the charges shall be paid by the employer.
- <sup>14</sup> National Action Plan on Early Childhood Care and Development 2014-2018, p.1
- <sup>15</sup> <https://planete-eed.org/en/the-association/history/>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://cambodianess.com/article/garment-workers-to-get-us190-minimum-wage-in-2020>
- <sup>17</sup> <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/404631569817435376/pdf/Project-Information-Documents-PID-Community-based-Childcare-for-Garment-Factory-Workers-Project-P171063.pdf>
- <sup>18</sup> [https://planete-eed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CBCC-project-summary\\_2020.pdf](https://planete-eed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CBCC-project-summary_2020.pdf)
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.olympicchannel.com/en/original-series/detail/cambodia-s-search-for-glory/cambodia-s-search-for-glory-season-season-1/episodes/restoring-cambodian-pride/?uxreference=playlist>
- <sup>20</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms\\_714915.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_714915.pdf)
- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/12/cambodia-will-no-longer-benefit-from-the-european-unions-s-preferential-trade-program>
- <sup>22</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_1469](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1469)

# From Mud to Mat: How Kabaddi Recaptured the Public Imagination

Shripoorna Purohit

The team sport of *kabaddi* has managed to resurface as part of Indian pop culture through big money deals and a touch of Bollywood bling. However, its history has deep nationalistic roots. The continuous chanting without drawing breath, the raw aggression, and the grappling on the floor helped in scripting brief interludes in India's Olympic history and freedom struggle as well. A sport which was left in the shadows is now once again becoming part of popular folklore with the potential to affect societal development.

Stand outside any Pro *Kabaddi* League (PKL) venue and you can hear the roaring of the crowds, all the way to the streets. Take a walk inside and you will find everyone fidgeting in their seats with bouts of excitement and nerves. You will then notice seven burly men standing on one half of the court looking mean and tenacious. Another player, known as the raider, stands at the halfway line. The raider bends down, touches the white lines, quickly touches his chest and forehead and steps into the opposition's half. "*Kabaddi, kabaddi, kabaddi, kabaddi...*", the compulsory nonstop chant can be heard faintly amidst the noise echoing in the stadium. The raider moves deeper into the court and crosses the baulk line to ensure the validity of his raid. He then prowls from one side of the court to the other, briskly, on his toes, staying in no spot longer than a few seconds. He swings his hand, attempting to tag one of his opponents, and immediately lunges back towards safety before he is encircled and pinned down to the floor. If he makes it back to his half of the court, the battle is won and a point is secured. If he doesn't make it back, the other team clinches a point.

That is the game of *kabaddi*, a sport with no supporting document declaring its origins. Its roots, however, can definitely be found in India. One theory says it was first played in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, and was called "*kai-piddi*" (holding hands, in Tamil). Another theory suggests that the game originated in the northwestern state of Punjab, where it was practiced to keep the men fit and ready to defend against enemy attacks.

Another popular theory connects the sport to the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. Elements symbolic of *kabaddi* can be found in the story of 16-year-old Abhimanyu fighting through the "*Chakravyuh*" (a maze of warriors standing ready to fight in seven layers of concentric circles). The similarity between this instance and the sport of *kabaddi* is the uncanny unfairness that is deeply embedded in the two. One against seven. No other sport can boast of such a (no) contest.

In Buddhist scriptures it is also said that the revered Gautama Buddha played kabaddi to develop physical strength and mental fortitude, and to practice control over his breathing.

However, despite so many theories depicting the sport's Indian roots, not many considered it to be an actual sport. *Kabaddi* was thought of as a leisure game for "*pehalwans*" (amateur wrestlers) and young boys in villages.

Surprisingly, despite the patriarchal character of the country, women were encouraged to take part in the game soon after the All India *Kabaddi* Federation (now known as the Amateur *Kabaddi* Federation of India) was established post-independence. This liberal and forward thinking back



**Shripoorna Purohit** is a sports management professional, currently working at GoSports Foundation in India. Having been bitten by the sports bug very young, he has been deeply involved in India's sporting scene. Combining his passions for communications and sport, Shripoorna took up sports journalism before eventually migrating towards management. He now leverages his talents to help build India's sporting ecosystem, to turn the nation into the next sporting superpower.

in 1955 helped to empower and promote Indian women in sport, eventually with global impact.

## Kabaddi, Olympics, and Nationalism

*Kabaddi* became a popular physical activity among the youth during the British Raj thanks to an institution named the Shree Hanuman Vyayam Prasarak (HVP) Mandal, in the town of Amaravati back in 1914. The objective of the establishment was to promote physical education, at a time when the public was generally apathetic towards physical well-being. It was a challenge though, as such institutions were considered hot spots for anti-British revolutionary movements, and thus viewed with suspicion by the British. The colonial establishment surely understood the intricate relationship between sport and politics, and the power of sport in bringing people together for a larger cause.

Traditional Indian sports found themselves in the global limelight during the 1936 Berlin Olympics when Shidhnath Kane, vice president of both the HVPM and the Indian Olympic Association (IOA), expressed an interest in bringing a group of *pehalwans* to perform at the Olympics. The Indians' *kabaddi* performance at the International Physical Education Students Congress and their display during the Olympics brought extensive coverage in the international media.

Shidhnath's son, Padmakar Kane, shared how the HVPM members disregarded the anthem played for the "official" contingent during a banquet organised by the host country. "Individual teams rose to

their feet and remained standing for the duration of their song. Yet again our self-respect was challenged, as the Indian contingent stood up to the British anthem," says Padmakar. Noticing that the HVPM members did not stand up, the officials intervened. "The German Education Minister Bernhard Rust asked my father why their group did not rise. He replied that they considered 'Vande Mataram' their anthem. Rust asked if they were carrying a recording with them; they said yes. That evening, 'Vande Mataram' was played at the Olympics banquet ceremony," recounted Padmakar.

---

The attempt to standardise the sport and create a universal rulebook can be seen as ... an effort towards popularising kabaddi.

---

This event linked the physical education system with the national independence movement, which had by then gained momentum through the non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements of the 1920s and 1930s. Indian gymnasiums became meeting venues, and even hosted important figures like MK Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, and Rajendra Prasad. When Gandhi raised awareness of the importance of physical education, it helped the Mandal spread across the country and conjoin their cause with the independence movement. Thus a deep-rooted sense of nationalism and patriotism attached to the sport of *kabaddi*.

Unfortunately, India's rise to dominance in hockey and cricket overshadowed *kabaddi*, and the sport was all but forgot-



The Finals of the Delhi State Kabaddi Champions in 2017.

ten. To date, the 1936 spectacle remains the only time *kabaddi* was demonstrated on the Olympic stage. The sport is virtually non-existent in non-Asian countries. It is played in only 34 countries; the official requirement for an Olympic sport is that it is played in 75 countries across four continents. In this respect, the sport has a long way to go and is unlikely to become prominent in the near future.

---

The key to the spread of kabaddi across the globe, however, lies in the Indian community and diaspora.

---

## Indianness and Internationalism

The key to the spread of kabaddi across the globe, however, lies in the Indian community and diaspora, be it in nations as close as South Korea, Japan, Pakistan or Bangladesh, or as far away as the United Kingdom, Poland and the United States.

“It is now well accepted that sports are intimately linked to the complex politics of colonialism, decolonisation and nationalism,” writes Joseph S Alter in his paper, ‘Kabaddi, a National Sport of India: The Internationalism of Nationalism and the Foreignness of Indianness’. As a sport, *kabaddi* has often been compared to other

physical contact sports such as the Rugby Sevens. However, the major differentiator between the two – barring the dimensional differences of the playing field – is the Indianness that is innate to *kabaddi*.

This Indianness lies in the fact that, despite various versions of it being played across the country since colonial times, under different names with varying rulebooks, the crux of the sport remains the same. Another aspect is its “theoretical and practical links” with the ancient Indian practice of yoga, thereby “making it not just an Indian sport, but an important feature of Indian culture linked to one of the most distinctive features of Indian civilisation,” writes Alter. Interestingly, he also notes that in outlining regulations for the sport, CV Rao in 1971 claimed that holding one’s breath was a mechanical technique that was introduced to limit the time per raid, and had no association with yoga.

Even the attempt to standardise the sport and create a universal rulebook can be seen as a colonial touch that has left its mark on the game, as well as an effort towards popularising *kabaddi*. Despite being eclipsed towards the end of the millennium by India’s outstanding performance in the mighty colonial sports of hockey and cricket, *kabaddi* did manage to create a small place for itself on the international stage. The International Kabaddi Federation re-started the Kabaddi World

Cup in 2016, with earlier games held in 2004 and 2007. Several non-Asian countries – the United States, Australia, Poland, Argentina, and Kenya – were represented in the 2016 event.

## The Pro Kabaddi League (PKL)

The advent of the league system in India began in 2008 with the Indian Premier League, a franchise cricket tournament that attracted the biggest names from across the globe. The success of this celebrity-filled tournament made stakeholders in other sports sit up and take notice, giving them a public blueprint on how to market their sport. A few years later, almost all mainstream sports had a league of their own.

However, almost no one imagined that a league based on an indigenous traditional sport would become the second most popular league in the country. Repackaged and rebranded, *kabaddi* recaptured the public imagination once again. A country that had taken little notice of the gold medals won at Asian Games or World Championships suddenly was learning the techniques and strategies of *kabaddi*.

In this author's opinion, the real draw of the PKL was the sentiment attached to the sport. Many of us had played *kabaddi* at some point in our lives, mostly in school. It struck a chord deep in our hearts, and watching it aroused a sense of nostalgia and wistfulness. It may have been a different set of rules in a completely different environment, but the crux of the sport remained intact. Here was our childhood, slightly rehashed, playing out on our television screens.

In this author's opinion, *kabaddi* has a promising future. In rural India, where there are major cultural stigmas, taboos, and stereotypes, the sport and its athletes can serve as vehicles for social change. Given its popularity with the rural masses, *kabaddi* can spread important messages.

Lastly, the conundrum over a binary outlook towards the sport, the Indianness versus the internationalism of *kabaddi*, can be put to rest. Modernisation across the globe is a mixture of past and present, and similarly *kabaddi* has found the right balance between its rich cultural past and the modern requirements of mass appeal, fast-paced action, and celebrity bling, in order to ensure that its legacy will continue. ■■■

## Further reading

- Chaudhary, Vivek. 2018. *Kabaddi by Nature*. New Delhi: Palimpsest Publishers.
- Gole, YA. 1978. *Handbook on Kabaddi*. Maharashtra State Kabaddi Association.
- Alter, Joseph S. 2000. "Kabaddi, a National Sport of India: The Internationalism of Nationalism and the Foreignness of Indianness." In *Games, Sports and Cultures*, edited by Noel Dyck. Oxford: Berg.

- 
1. Banerjee, Sudeshna. 2017. "History and Origin of Kabaddi." *Sportskeeda*. 27 July, 2017. <https://www.sportskeeda.com/kabaddi/history-and-origin-kabaddi>
  2. Wikipedia. 2019. "Women's Kabaddi Challenge." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s\\_Kabaddi\\_Challenge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_Kabaddi_Challenge)
  3. HVP Mandal. <https://www.hvpm.org/About/History.htm>
  4. Kamath, Amit. 2016. "The Forgotten Story of Kabaddi's Tryst with Hitler, the Olympics." *Hindustan Times*. 20 October 2016. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/other-sports/the-forgotten-story-of-kabaddi-s-tryst-with-hitler-the-olympics/story-XE8Vtgk99UEm7T8DZn32uN.html>
  5. Jaisinghani, Bella. 2012. "When Hitler Awarded Amravati Pehelwans." *The Times of India*. 22 July 2012. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/When-Hitler-awarded-Amravati-pehelwans/articleshow/15085448.cms>
  6. Pradhan, Snehal. 2018. "How an Indian Ensured that India Didn't Win the Asian Kabaddi Gold for the First Time Ever." *Economic Times*. 25 August 2018. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/sports/how-an-indian-ensured-that-india-didnt-win-the-asian-kabaddi-gold-for-the-first-time-ever/articleshow/65538291.cms?from=mdr>
  7. Gehlot, Saransh. 2017. "The Birth and Rise of Polish Kabaddi – How Abhishek Sharma Overcame Insurmountable Odds to Start a Kabaddi Revolution in Poland." *Sportskeeda*. 17 February 2017. <https://www.sportskeeda.com/kabaddi/birth-rise-polish-kabaddi-abhishek-sharma-overcame-insurmountable-odds-start-kabaddi-revolution-poland>
  8. Malvania, Urvi. 2014. "Pro Kabaddi is 2nd-most Viewed Tournament." *Business Standard*. 9 August 2014. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/companies/pro-kabaddi-is-2nd-most-viewed-tournament-114080900493\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/companies/pro-kabaddi-is-2nd-most-viewed-tournament-114080900493_1.html)
  9. Bansal, Aman. 2019. "How Popular is Kabaddi Outside of Asia." *Sports Mirchi*. 12 March 2019. <https://www.sportsmirchi.com/how-popular-is-kabaddi-outside-of-asia/>

# Skateistan: Empowering Girls to Follow their Dreams

An interview with Zainab Hussaini

A pioneering skateboarding NGO is building child-friendly urban spaces in conflict-affected cities and widening young people's opportunities.

What is Skateistan? And your current role?

Skateistan is a non-profit international skateboarding and education organisation founded in Afghanistan by Australian skateboarder and researcher Oliver Percovich in 2008. The NGO's first Skate School was established in the country's capital, Kabul, in 2009 and it expanded to the city of Mazar-e-Sharif in 2012. Skateistan has also established Skate Schools in other countries, namely Cambodia and South Africa.

I am the country manager for Afghanistan. With further plans to open in Bamyan, my responsibilities will involve coordination and alignment of resources for the country's Skate Schools, given they are located in three different areas.



## Zainab Hussaini

Zainab Hussaini joined Skateistan's Mazar-e-Sharif Skate School in Afghanistan as an education coordinator in 2013. She went on to become the school's programmes officer in 2015 and general manager in 2018 before taking up her current position as country manager. Hussaini is an ambassador for Free to Run, and was the first woman in Afghanistan to run a marathon. She was also the first Afghan to run an ultra-marathon (250km), which she undertook in the Gobi Desert in 2017.

## Interview by:

**Alessandra Monticelli and Chok Tsering**, Heinrich Böll Stiftung India Office

## Additional input:

**Ali Al-Nasani**, Heinrich Böll Stiftung Cambodia Office

How does Skateistan reach out to Afghanistan's young people?

We empower children, both girls and boys, through skateboarding and creative education. We reach them through our strong relationships with local communities. All our Skate Schools have a full-time community educator, who is responsible for communicating what Skateistan does and building relationships with influential people in the community, other organisations, and our students' families. It is through our community educators that families know they can trust Skateistan and our programmes are beneficial to their children. We also run outreach sessions for children from socially disadvantaged groups to let youngsters know that Skateistan is a safe place.

The Skateistan website (<https://skateistan.org/>) states: "The daily skate lessons in the empty circular fountain attracted dozens of local youths, including many street-working children selling trinkets or washing cars nearby." Could you expand on this and how Skateistan has contributed to urban renewal in some parts of Kabul?

Skateistan does not specifically set out to boost urban renewal. That said, the presence of our organisation in cities such as Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif does represent a safe space in locations that are often unsafe for children due to the on-going conflict in the country. These are child-friendly spaces in cities that can feel hostile to children, especially girls. Skateistan aims to help children overcome bounda-



*A girl is attending a skateboarding class.*

ries in our society, for example, economic status, gender, and ethnicity. Providing a safe space allows children to reimagine how the outside world could be.

Actually, “urban renewal” might apply more to our schools in Cambodia and South Africa. In the former, the Skate School is in a renovated garment factory called Factory Phnom Penh, located in the country’s capital. We took up a disused space and turned this into a skate park that can be used by the wider community, as we hold public sessions here when our lessons are over. In the latter, the Skate School is located in downtown Johannesburg in an area with lots of disused buildings and informal housing. Skateistan has been part of the regeneration of this area [now known as Maboneng] with our state-of-the-art Skate School made from old shipping containers.

How have the political and “post-conflict situation” in Afghanistan defined your approach to Skateistan and how have developments in the country affected this during your time at the organisation?

From the outset, we could see that skateboarding had a role to play in building up Afghanistan. As a new sport in the country, it served as a leveller. None of the children had experience so regardless of gender, ethnicity, being rich or poor, they were all beginners. There is also a huge amount of trust needed to skateboard. You must trust your board, your trainer, the people around you, and yourself. It was this element that was often missing and, by building up trust between children, we saw a way to overcome these social divisions.



*Girls are waiting to skate.*

Sport can be a powerful tool for children who have experienced hardship. It relieves stress and gives them a chance to excel outside the classroom. Skateboarding takes determination, resilience, and an understanding of how to navigate risk. These are all vital skills for our students growing up in tough environments.

In the Afghan context, it is important that Skateistan is seen as a local organisation and all our staff are Afghan. This makes it safer for students as we are not seen as a foreign organisation. When Skateistan was first set up in Kabul, staff were mainly volunteers from overseas. Nowadays, this would be a security risk. Thus, we changed our model and don't employ international staff in Afghanistan anymore.

What has not changed is that right from the beginning we wanted to be inclusive, safe, and encourage children to explore their creativity.

As conflict has become part of life for many children in this country, it is highly important that Skateistan feels different by being secure and nurturing. In Mazar-e-Sharif, we also provide mental health support for children who have experienced trauma, including counselling with experts and the provision of a sensory room, a space which stimulates and relaxes the senses through lights, sound, and soft furnishings, such as carpets, curtains, and cushions.

Could you explain the social context that girls face and how they benefit from this programme?

There are a lot of challenges for children in Afghanistan and these are often exacerbated for girls. Many girls are excluded from education. Around 40% of primary-age children in Afghanistan do not attend school and around 60% of these children are girls. Sport is often seen as inappropriate for girls and exercising in public is frowned upon in many communities. In addition, early or even forced marriage is a real issue for many girls, further restricting their freedom and opportunities to pursue their own interests.

Your website also notes that Skateistan’s “Youth Leaders from Kabul spoke at [the] Afghan parliament, UN events, and travelled internationally for opportunities in Indonesia, South Korea, and the UAE”. Which issues did the young leaders raise with the Afghan parliament? What are the outcomes from such presentations?

Our students have been given the opportunity to speak at many significant occasions in different locations. At the Afghan parliament, for example, students talked about the importance of education and safe spaces. They requested that all families allow their children to go to school, as children are the future of the nation.

In terms of outcomes, opportunities such as representing Skateistan at a national level in the Afghan parliament, or at a regional skate training camp in China, build children’s confidence by developing their public speaking skills. They position Skateistan as an organisation that families can trust and respect, and this again assists us to grow within the community and reach more children. Lastly, it raises our profile internationally, which can enhance fund-raising.

What are the links between Afghanistan, Cambodia, and South Africa? Why did you decide to focus on these three countries?

This was a combination of circumstance, need, and opportunity. When our founder and executive director Oliver Percovich came to Kabul in 2007, he did not arrive with the intention of starting up a skateboarding NGO. But once he was in Afghanistan, he realised there was potential to make a real difference to the lives of the children he met, and responded to that need.

Expansion to other countries, and the setting up of our offices in Cambodia in 2011 and South Africa in 2016, was based on meeting people in those places who were passionate about starting something amazing. Knowing that we had the right people on the ground helped to get things going, while recognising a need among the young population of Cambodia and South Africa for safe spaces where childhood can be celebrated.

Are there any similarities or differences between Afghanistan and Cambodia, with regard to socio-political setting?

Culturally, they are very different and we adapt our programmes for each place. However, the need is similar. In all the locations, there are:

- gender stereotypes that prevent girls from seeing themselves as equal
- a lack of safe spaces for children to play
- many children from low income backgrounds, who may not have access to quality education.

What are your thoughts about skateboarding making its debut in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games? Is there likely to be a representation from Afghanistan at the Olympics?

We are excited to see skateboarding recognised by the Olympics. Our students will be pleased to see a sport that they engage in every week on the global stage and it will make them feel like they are part of something bigger. We don’t know if Afghanistan will be represented in 2021 when the Olympics will now be held as a result of the Corona crisis. But we look forward to this when it happens!

Do you think the Olympics could be an occasion for further empowerment of Afghan, Cambodian, and South African young people?

Yes – it is important for young people to have role models and inspiration. The Olympics will provide this and show them that anything is possible.

What goals has Skateistan achieved since it was established and what future aims does it have?

Right now, we reach over 2,500 students per week and around half are girls. Along with our four Skate Schools in Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Phnom Penh, and Johannesburg, we have just begun work on our fifth in Bamyan in central Afghanistan.

Regarding the longer term, we have a 10-year strategic plan to increase to 10 Skate Schools around the world and increase participation of children with disabilities to 20%. We will always have our goal of 50% participation by girls. We also hope to reach 8,000 children per week. These aims are ambitious but we are confident that our strategic plan will enable us get there.

Are there any other areas, regions, or countries you would like Skateistan to explore?

Our roots are in Afghanistan so this will always be a focus for us. However, we do want to expand Skateistan all over the world, especially to places where we can make a positive difference to children's lives. Our next school will be Bamyan (2020-21) in Afghanistan, and then another in Jordan (2021-22). The Jordan Skate School will help us to respond to the refugee crisis and serve some of the refugee population there.

Many attending your classes and courses have been young girls, who were able to interact with peers and gain access to an educational setting for the first time. Do you feel Skateistan can contribute to gender equality in conservative societies such as Afghanistan?

In Afghanistan, we put a huge amount of effort into reaching girls. Our community educators enable us to build close relationships in the locations where our schools are based. It is their job to meet families, encourage them to allow their daughters to attend classes, and to understand the benefits of girls' education and sport.

We have girls-only days to make the classes appropriate for young girls. Girls have female educators, and we also provide them with safe transportation. Some families don't want their daughters to participate at first. But we work with them on recognising that it is safe and beneficial. Sometimes there are also social concerns. But we liaise closely with community religious leaders, and they then encourage families to let girls attend.

In view of your work at Skateistan, is there any other issue that you feel is important to mention in relation to sport and politics?

Skateistan is a non-political organisation. All we want is an environment where all children can feel safe to have fun, express themselves, and create a better future. ■■■

# Shaping up Sport for all Genders

## An Interview with Law Siufung

This year, the Corona crisis has deprived many people of the opportunity to exercise and compete in sports competitions. However, for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) communities, that possibility has never been easy, even in unexceptional times, especially for Asian professional athletes. In the following interview, gender fluid bodybuilder Law Siufung discusses the hurdles facing LGBTI athletes in Hong Kong and beyond, and explores possible directions towards gender diversity, inclusion, and self-acceptance.

Away from the scorching June heat of downtown Causeway Bay in Hong Kong, Law Siufung meets us in a private library where she is working over summer 2020. “I am a professional bodybuilder, an academic on gender research, and an advocate on gender possibilities,” she explains. “I am a biologically born female, but socially I would prefer to live like a guy. I am gender fluid, which means not conforming to the typical binary of male and female.”

With a broad grin that we soon realise is Siufung’s signature expression, and her muscular frame comfortably – and appropriately – seated alongside shelves of critical theory books, she then starts to unfold her perspective on the issues facing LGBTI people in sport.

### Inequalities in the arena

Siufung notes that, as an unwritten rule, most sports federations in Hong Kong would not choose LGBTI athletes who have openly declared their gender identities

to publicly serve as representatives. This in turn implies reduced opportunities for future training, selection for competitions, and sponsorships. In addition, while more Hong Kong LGBTI athletes have come out in both professional and recreational arenas in recent years, discrimination and bullying can still be serious for gay men, especially those in team sports such as football and basketball. While lesbians are relatively less stigmatised and pressured, from what Siufung has observed, Asian LGBTI athletes are in general much less visible than their western counterparts.

The difference arises from a more conservative sporting environment, lack of support from coaches and teammates, and different cultural viewpoints on gender and sexuality. Religious factors in some Asian countries may also pose extra challenges. As a result, many Asian LGBTI athletes are willing to support the Hong Kong-hosted Gay Games 2022 (see box) as individuals, but would prefer not to be recognised or be vocal in the public sphere.

### Intersex and transgender competition controversies

As most sports competitions are established around the binary gender categories of male and female, the emergence of intersex and transgender athletes has posed complex challenges to existing regulations and controversy over “unfair advantages”, especially in female sports, as such athletes may possess different muscle mass, hormones, and bodily proportions.

The case of South African middle-distance runner Caster Semenya illustrates the



**Law Siufung** is a professional bodybuilder, academic researcher, and genderfluid advocate from Hong Kong. S/he identifies herself as genderfluid, and is active in promoting gender inclusion and diversity in Hong Kong and Asia. S/he has competed as a professional female bodybuilder since 2015 and won several international championships, including Ms International Classic, Vancouver Pro Qualifier, and Arnold Classic Asia (Hong Kong). S/he lectures on gender and transgender studies in universities, community colleges and high schools, and advocates on gender fluidity in local and international media, companies, and NGOs. S/he is currently an Ambassador and Sports Lead of the Gay Games Hong Kong 2022, and ambassador for Pink Dot Hong Kong 2020.

#### Interview by:

**Lucia Siu** and **Clemens Kunze**,  
Heinrich Böll Stiftung Hong Kong  
Office



© Lloyd Terry Jr, with the permission of Law Siufung, all rights reserved

*When competing in bodybuilding competitions, Law Siufung turns conventional expectations of a female physique into a "performance of femininity".*

dilemma for intersex people, born with a physical makeup that does not fit the typical criteria for sports organizations' gender categories. Caster was assigned as female at birth, and has identified as a girl and woman throughout her life. Yet she bears both X and Y chromosomes and has exceptionally high level of the male sex hormone, testosterone. After winning the women's 800 metres at the World Athletics Championships in 2009, she was barred from competition and required by sports bodies to undertake gender verification testing, only being allowed to start competing again in 2010.

Meanwhile, US transgender bodybuilder Janae Kroc, whose story has been made into the Netflix documentary, *Transformer*, is an illustration of the issues surrounding male-to-female sportspeople. If Janae is to compete in female strength sports such as bodybuilding, other competitors, who typically weigh around 90kgs (200lbs) might have to take on Janae, who weighs over 135kgs (300lbs). In light of this and despite Janae's new gender identity and appearance, in 2019 she stated on social media that she had decided to go back to competing in men's category contests.

Earlier in 2015, new guidelines on transgender athletes were agreed and adopted by International Olympic Committee officials, in consultation with medical experts, to serve as recommendations for the 2016 Rio Olympic Games and for

other international sports bodies to follow. In the new guidelines, no surgery or hormone therapy requirements were placed on transgender female-to-male athletes competing in men's events. For male-to-female athletes seeking to enter women's competitions, the testosterone level in their blood had to fall below 10 nanomols per litre for at least a year before being eligible.

Compared to chromosomes, self-identity, or genitalia, a hormonal threshold appears to provide clearer and more practical criterion from Siufung's perspective, seeing the testosterone entry guideline as progress. However, the situation has remained fluid for intersex athletes. In 2018, the International Association of Athletics Federations introduced new eligibility rules for female athletes with differences of sexual development (e.g. intersex athletes), specifying testosterone levels of less than 5 nanomols per litre. Caster Semanya challenged this change but lost her case in 2019.

## Muscling in on the female form

Meanwhile, in the bodybuilding world, there are other differences in norms that female athletes need to consider when they set out to compete. While some sports have objective winning criteria, for example, time for track events and weight in lifting,

others such as figure skating, gymnastics, and bodybuilding have brought gendered aesthetics into rules and judging criteria, with LGBTI bodybuilders having to cope with mainstream standards of masculinity or femininity to win.

In women's bodybuilding contests, for example, all the six regular competition divisions relate to muscle symmetry, proportion and mass: bikini, wellness, figure, fitness (which is a combination of figure poses and a fitness routine), physique, and bodybuilding. At the lighter end of the female bodybuilding categories, bikini athletes parade around in high heels and "look feminine" through their long hair styles and matching skin tones, among others. In-between categories of figure and physique have requirements such as "full round body and legs", but such descriptions are kept unspecific. The bodybuilding category, which is where Siufung competes, has the highest level of muscle requirements but in recent years has attracted criticism internationally for the "masculine" appearance of the competitors.

Indeed, to stay competitive requires Siufung to undertake continuous training and constantly watch her diet. However, she finds the results definitely worth the effort. As a highly visual sport, Siufung finds satisfaction in seeing "a perfect version of the self" in the mirror. Well-balanced, symmetrical muscles and a body shape resembling an inverted triangle all contribute to a visible physical identity of which she is proud.

"From my point of view, muscles are genderless. Powerful muscles exist in both men and women. I love [bodybuilding]. It is part of my life... For me it's never [been] just a hobby, it is part of my identity."

## Selling femininity in the sports market

However, pressures to conform continue to make their presence felt among female bodybuilders. While no formal checklist exists for judging "femininity" in contests, such criteria often seem to play a part in judges' decision-making, Siufung believes. Many female bodybuilders also appear willing to go along with this. While it is a requirement in bodybuilding and physique to compete barefoot on stage, competitors often choose to walk on and off stage in high heels, alongside their makeup, bikini choice, hairstyle, and accessories – readily associating themselves with more traditional images

of women. Likewise, as training progresses, muscles gradually stack and replace breast tissues. This leads many competitors to have implants to keep looking feminine which, from competition outcomes, seems to be what judges prefer, Siufung says.

She sees competitive female bodybuilding as largely market driven, with judging criteria, rules, and norms influenced by the preferences of the thousands of people who since the late 1970s have bought tickets or tuned into TV sports channels to see the "bikini girls" on stage. Helped out by sports promoters who saw the business potential in such competitions, female bodybuilding contests enjoyed a golden period from the 1980s up until recently when international debates over "muscular femininity" and a decrease in audience numbers brought changes to the sport.

### Gay Games 2022

In November 2022, the first Gay Games to be hosted in Asia are scheduled to take place in Hong Kong, with Law Siufung serving as a member of the organising team. The Gay Games is a nine-day international world-class diversity festival, arranged by the

lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) community and featuring multi-sports, arts and culture events. Held every four years since its debut in 1982 in San Francisco, US, the festival's goal is to foster equality and social integration between LGBTQ+ and straight communities, and provide a space where LGBTQ+ people can enjoy sports in a safe and accepting environment. The Gay Games 2022 will encompass 36 different sports, including dragon boat, e-sports, and trail running. The festival is open to the public as both spectators and volunteers, with organisers expecting to attract 12,000 participants and 75,000 spectators from 100 countries.



In 2015, Ms Olympia, one of the leading international female bodybuilding competitions, removed its bodybuilding division in line with voices demanding less muscular contestants. As a result, younger women athletes have tended to move to lighter categories, such as physique or figure, which are more closely aligned with the fitness industry in terms of body image, and it is mostly older female athletes in their 40s and 50s that have stayed with bodybuilding, accord-



*In sharing sessions with students, Law Siufung can talk frankly about identities and possibilities beyond binary gender categories.*

ing to Siufung. However with the announcement in 2019 that the female bodybuilding category was to be reintroduced at the 2020 Olympia, she has noticed more women in their 20s to get back into bodybuilding. And the strong following that the sport still musters is indicated by Instagram, she notes. While she has 3,400 followers, some of her US counterparts number up to one million.

## Personal vision for the future of bodybuilding

With regard to her own career, it was initially a struggle to wear a bikini as she began her professional sports life, but postgraduate studies on post-feminist and post-modern theories have given her extra room to turn apparent restrictions into fulfilling and fun experiences. Instead of being defined or constrained by “a piece of feminine clothing”, she now sees herself actively “performing femininity” when wearing such outfits during a competition. “I do conform with the rules. I am not going on stage to take off my top. If you want femininity and bling, I will give you femininity and bling.” In line with this attitude, she has even accepted a magazine interview including a photo shoot involving high-heel shoes, bikini, and glamorous headpiece. However, usually when she is off stage, she returns to her “normal self” and gender fluid existence, where “you have no rights to control my life or judge me”.

Being gender fluid can sometimes cre-

ate conflict, given that many other female bodybuilders are heterosexuals who want to retain their femininity, and some see Siufung as disruptive of the public image they are trying to promote as she does not fit in with their perspective of the sport.

In Siufung’s ideal society, there would be more gender diversity, where women are allowed to choose to be feminine or not, and live by their own choices. On a longer term basis, as society changes, markets will change accordingly. “Let the market decide,” she says. “If you never try out [alternative possibilities], how will you know what people really prefer?”

## Epilogue

Unlike many social minority advocates who find the fight against mainstream social forces a cause of anxiety, Siufung spoke calmly and spontaneously throughout the interview. We were intrigued how she managed to be so at peace with herself and the world despite the complexities of gender identity and stigmas often attached to “being different”. She gave her characteristic broad grin and then explained how valuing yourself can be a highly effective answer to discrimination, bullying, and depression. “You really gotta love yourself, and be honest about who you are. Never mind what other people think... With love and honesty, you will attract like-minded people to love you.”

This edition of **Perspectives Asia** is available in English and can be ordered from:

#### Hong Kong Office

##### – Asia | Global Dialogue

Unit E 22/F, Derrick Industrial Bldg  
49 Wong Chuk Hang Rd  
Hong Kong, China

**P** 00852 28698900  
**E** [info@hk.boell.org](mailto:info@hk.boell.org)  
**W** <https://hk.boell.org>

#### Southeast Asia Regional Office

75 Sukhumvit 53 (Paidee-Madee)  
Klongton Neua, Wattana  
Bangkok 10110, Thailand

**P** 0066 26625960  
**E** [info@th.boell.org](mailto:info@th.boell.org)  
**W** <https://th.boell.org>

#### Delhi Office, India

C-20, First Floor  
Qutub Institutional Area  
New Delhi – 110016, India

**P** 0091 11 26854405  
**E** [in-info@in.boell.de](mailto:in-info@in.boell.de)  
**W** <https://in.boell.org>

#### Beijing Representative Office

Office C704, Beijing Lufthansa Center  
No. 50, Liangmaqiao Road,  
Chaoyang District,  
100125 Beijing, China

**P** 0086 10 84004265  
**E** [info@cn.boell.org](mailto:info@cn.boell.org)  
**W** <https://cn.boell.org>

#### Phnom Penh Office – Cambodia

#8, Street 476,  
Sangkat Toul Tompoung I  
Khan Chamkar Mon,  
PO. Box 1436 Phnom Penh, Cambodia

**P** 00855 23210535  
**E** [info@kh.boell.org](mailto:info@kh.boell.org)  
**W** <https://kh.boell.org>

#### Yangon Office – Myanmar

No. 45/A, Kan Lane 3  
Kan Road, Kamayut Township  
Yangon, Myanmar

**P** 00959 31 685 846  
**E** [info@mm.boell.org](mailto:info@mm.boell.org)  
**W** <https://mm.boell.org>

#### Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V.

Asia Department

Schumannstraße 8, 10117 Berlin,  
Germany

**P** 0049 (0)30 28534 361 / 362  
**E** [asiaperspectives@boell.de](mailto:asiaperspectives@boell.de)  
**W** <https://boell.de/asia>

#### Publication information

Publisher	Heinrich-Boell-Stiftung Asia Limited
Publication Date	September 2020
Editors	Clemens Kunze, Kevin Li, Lucia Siu
Copy Editors	Sally Course, Kathleen Hwang
Layout Design	Ky Design, Hong Kong
Printed by	Mangraphic Production Company, Hong Kong
	Recycled paper with soy ink



#### Image copyrights

© All rights reserved for images on front and back cover, p5, 11-14, 22, 24-29, 36, 45, 46, 50, 51, 52; plus all profile photographs.

© Images on p16, 18, 38 and 42 are subject to Creative Commons Licenses.

#### Cover illustration by Kaitlin Chan

This issue's front and back cover illustrations are by Kaitlin Chan. On front cover from left to right, the winners podium includes: Law Siufung, the genderqueer bodybuilder from Hong Kong; a Cambodian worker in the sports manufacturing industry; a Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant worker in a hazmat suit; an ASEAN athlete with a gold medal; and Zainab Hussaini, the Afghan marathon athlete and skateboarder. On the back cover is a stadium with robot fans (due to the Covid-19 pandemic) cheering on four athletes: two *kabaddi* wrestlers from India, a Paralympic Games athlete from Myanmar playing basketball, and a BMX extreme sports biker from China.

**Kaitlin Chan** is an illustrator from Hong Kong. You can find more of her work at [www.kaitlinchan.com](http://www.kaitlinchan.com).



Opinions expressed in the articles are those of their authors and not of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

All articles in this publication are subject to Creative Commons License CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

