

(SP) GOVERNMENT POLICY AND MEGA-SPORTS EVENTS IN TAIWAN

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Introduction

It is widely accepted that sport and politics have historically existed within some form of “interdependent” or “symbiotic” relationship, especially mega-sports events (Dauncey and Hare, 1999; Hargreaves, 2000; Sugden and Tomlinson, 1994). Many nation-states have frequently been shown to use mega-sports events for a variety of purposes including enhancing prestige, securing legitimacy, compensating for the other aspects of life within their boundaries and pursuing international rivalries by peaceful means (Hargreaves, 1992: 119-37). Along with this line, the problematic political status of Taiwan in the international arena has not made it easy for Taiwan to have many opportunities to host important mega-sports events such as the Olympic Games or the Asian Games. However, it can be seen from many examples in the past that sports, especially mega-sports events, have been a very useful means for many nation-states to manipulate and achieve their political intentions. The aim of this case study, therefore, is to address the role of the 2001 Baseball World Cup (BWC) as a significant ‘player’ in the political power struggle process of the new political regime in Taiwan, the Democratic Progressive Party (the DPP government); at the same time to look at theorising the role of mega-sports events in socio-political analysis.

Methods

The empirical data gathered for this study came from three main sources: official sports organisations’ reports and meeting minutes, newspapers and journals, and interviews. The semi-structured interview method was used in this case to explore the views of official sports governors (the chairman and vice-chairman of the National Council of Physical Fitness and Sports) and non-governmental sports organisers, who were involved in the bid for the 2001 BWC, on how and why the Taiwanese government became actively involved in the 2001 BWC. Documentary analysis was also used to analyse the official reports and minutes, which were from the NCPFS, the Chinese Taipei Baseball Association (CTBA) and the international and domestic media reports. The most important documents used in this study to identify the relationship between baseball and politics and the strategies for these policies’ implementation were published by the Education Act of the Education Ministry from 1945 to 1997 and the NCPFS from 1997 to 2002. The other significant documents for this study are papers, which cover all areas in sport, published in the Physical Education Quarterly by the Ministry of Education and in the National Sports Quarterly by the NCPFS.

Results

Hosting the 2001 BWC undoubtedly gave Taiwan’s society most of what Taiwan’s government had intended that it should. There were three main positive impacts. First, the BWC came to be understood as a hallmark event – the first of its kind to be hosted, and exploited, by the new Taiwanese authorities. Beyond the spiritual and emotional benefits such as a stimulus for socially desirable capital spending on new projects and rejuvenating sporting and urban infrastructure and as a direct stimulus to international tourism... etc. Second, the BWC as a diplomatic resource, since the mid-1990s Taiwan’s government started to change their foreign policy, no longer insisting that the ROC was sole legitimate rulers of all of China. Under this policy, sport was no longer to be a means of ‘territory claiming’ for Taiwan, but has become one means to seek an ‘acknowledgement of Taiwan’s existence within the international system’. Although, the consequences of the 2001BWC were not as prominent as the Olympics, they still played an important role for the new

Taiwanese government in expanding Taiwan's diplomatic contacts and further signalling its re-admission to the international community. Finally impacts, the BWC in the reconstruction of a Taiwanese identity, baseball has been seen as one of the significant forms of Taiwanese culture and has become crucial as a cultural marker distinguishing Taiwan from mainland China (Krich, 2002: W1). As Bairner (2001: 18) indicates, sport is useful not only in aiding and abetting state sponsored nationalism, but also in its capacity to help to provide a vehicle for the expression of alternative visions of the nation. This is evidenced in the 2001 BWC case. The new Taiwanese government tried to use the BWC as a vehicle to manipulate the passion of Taiwanese people onto the sport of baseball to associate with its new hegemonic conception of 'Taiwanese-ness' and 'Taiwan nationalism' and to bid against the old conception of 'Chinese-ness' proposed by the ex-government (KMT).

Discussion / Conclusion

Roche (2000: 9) states that mega-events are nationally-based, involving national power elites in the 'host nation' in their production, the official 'invented traditions' of host-state nationalism, and official versions of the host-state 'public sphere' (public spaces, publics, 'citizenship', etc.) and populist 'inclusion' strategies in this public sphere (which nonetheless typically contain important and distinctive divisive and exclusionary features and dynamics in relation to class, gender, and ethnicity). Certainly, in the cases of the 2001 BWC, it provided powerful media opportunities for the new Taiwanese government and allowed the politicians and the elites to network amongst themselves and with the elites of the international communities, and to project and disseminate its new hegemonic and 'official' ideologies (Taiwan nationalism) to 'the masses' (Taiwanese and 'overseas' Chinese). It also provided an opportunity for the DPP government to demonstrate the presence of and 'recognition' by the representatives of many foreign nations in the host nation's event-site, Taiwan. The relevant chapters of this thesis illustrate how the DPP government manipulated this event to project Taiwan's emerging new international status, i.e. its emergence as a new independent and democratic 'Taiwan nation'. The DPP's use of mega-sports events indicates a full awareness of the powerful nature of sport and the critical role it can play in local, national and international affairs.

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