

The political economy of baseball developments in the United States, Japan, and Taiwan

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Taiwanese baseball has long been plagued by the under-development of 12k baseballs, medals and trophyism, game fixing and over-training and overuse of baseball players at all levels of the baseball sports (Yu, 2004). We try to look for solutions to these problems by first comparing features of baseball developments in Taiwan, Japan, and the U.S. We then try to develop a structural theory that allows us to explain the varieties of baseball development in these three countries. Finally, based on the theory constructed, we will also make policy and management recommendations to tackle the aforesaid problems.

Adopting the approach of neo-institutionalism, our paper will focus on looking for factors molding differences in baseball developments and interactions between actors and institutions in the wider political and social context of the countries under our investigation. We argue that the development of the baseball sports contains endogenous and exogenous dimensions. The former corresponds to the formation of baseball skills, the accompanied risks and management practices. The latter includes variables such as social capital and public policies. We will rely on secondary sources and semi-structured interviews for collecting information relating to variables of the above two dimensions. We will adopt the approach of comparative case studies based on 'analytical generalization' for the construction of a grounded theory.

With respect to the endogenous dimension, we assume that knowledge and skills in baseball sports are tacit and require tremendous investments of time and resources to excel (Berman, Down & Hill, 2002). In addition, the highly industry- or even team-specific nature of these knowledge and skills, plus the susceptibility to injuries, all make the human capital of baseball players, especially the pitchers, highly vulnerable. Particularly, pitchers are exposed to risks associated with sustained micro-trauma, which differs greatly from the risk inherent in other sports or from random injury. Therefore, how to adopt measures to protect the physical condition, knowledge and skills of baseball players has become a core aspect in the management of baseball sports.

For example, the existence of minor leagues composed of six levels of baseball teams in the U.S. allows both baseball teams and players to enter into the extremely

intense and risky major league baseball in a rather incremental and more manageable fashion. In minor league teams, suspended MLB players can revive or recuperate and potential MLB players can be trained and evaluated all carefully with the help of sports physiology, kinematics, nutrition, orthopedics and sports medicine. This is in stark contrast with the Taiwanese case where professional baseball teams exist alone without any reserve teams. Consequently, professional baseball teams and players rush into annual contracts without sufficient mutual trust. This in turn results in the rampant game fixing problems by players and the popular overuse of players by professional teams.

In terms of the exogenous dimension, social institutions and public policies of each country will have to be examined. We argue that the existence of intensive social capital and social groups is the precondition for high levels of demand for sports activities (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008). As pointed out by Fukuyama (1996) and Putnam (1993), in countries like the U.S. and Japan where local governments have enjoyed high levels of autonomy, local elite have to be responsible for the long-term development of the whole locality. To engage in long-term development, local elite will initiate a large number of spontaneous social groups, baseball groups at all levels of the sport included. Intensive participation of social groups in community baseball will then become the foundation on which the supply of baseball players, baseball infrastructures and audiences develop.

In sum, we argue that the major concern of baseball management is how to strike the balance between better performance and the vulnerable human capital while maintaining a certain level of intensity in the games.

We expect to be able to surpass the varieties of sports management in different countries and explore the possibilities of bridging the gap of the different institutions within which these different styles of management are embedded. By doing so, we will be able to trace management problems back to their roots and make better policy and management recommendations. Thus, we expect our research will be able to generate more meaningful interpretations of the different management practices in different countries.

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