

# ***The Construction of National Identity Contributed by Sports in Japanese Modernization--The Comparative Analysis of Baseball and Kendo***

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**Abstract:** In the progress of modernization, Japan experienced massive changes in society and culture, and the development of athletic sports was one significant factor that influenced the construction of national identity after Meiji Restoration. This work uses the methodology of comparative analysis and case study of baseball and kendo to discuss the different pathways of national identity construction. In this work, the development of baseball and kendo is first introduced respectively, then the significance of the two sports in a historical context is discussed with reference to the interdisciplinary concept of invented tradition and cultural reproduction, and finally the similarities and differences between the two sports' role in Japanese national identity construction are discussed. The work concludes that the pathway of national identity construction is not constrained by specific factors of a sport.

**Keywords:** baseball, kendo, National Identity, Modernization, Japan

## **1. Introduction**

The influence of modernization on Japanese culture and national identity has been widely discussed. Among the new cultures, sport as athletic competition was newly imported to Japan as the product of western ideology, and various social reforms acted alongside the invention and maturity of sport in Japan. G. Cameron Hurst made a detailed explanation of modern alterations from kenjutsu to kendo [1]. Alexander C. Bennett believed that kendo was an example of invented tradition, linking the Japanese cultural past and present [2]. The imported sport baseball also once served the construction of national identity. Donald Roden recognized the baseball matches between Ichikō and Yokohama Cricket and Athletic Club to be closely related to the quest for national dignity [3]. From Christopher T. Keaveney's view, it was the idea of "Samurai baseball" that made baseball a representative culture in Japan during modernization [4].

Based on the previous research, this essay is going to be a case study, making a comparative analysis between baseball and kendo to study the construction of national identity contributed by sports in the process of modernization in Meiji and Taishō Japan.

## 2. Background

Entering the Meiji era, with the mass introduction of foreign ideology and the goal of realizing the “Meiji dream” [5], the process of *bunmei kaika*, Civilization and Enlightenment, was adopted by the Meiji government to foster the westernization of Japan. One idea that was imported during this period was Social Darwinism, the theory that people and groups in society are subject to the principle of “survival of the fittest”. According to this theory, competition is irreplaceable in cultivating social elites, and sports as physical competition are effective in combating laziness [4]. Thus, the development of modern sports as athletic competition in the Meiji and Taishō period was one critical element in *bunmei kaika*.

Westernization had an adverse effect to the country’s indigenous culture. Civilization and Enlightenment brought the country various exotic cultures while decreasing the concentration of traditional fashions. The problem of “over westernization” was concerned during modernization. In 1880, the prime minister Itō Hirobumi and people of dignity at that time held a ball at Rokumeikan, in which Japanese at the ball dressed up like Westerners from different cultures and social status. The ball was once notorious, criticized for being too chaotic in culture and seemed absurd when participants mimicked people of other cultures. The revival of appreciation for tradition started in the next decade. The mixture of westernized and traditional culture was the main cultural theme in early modernization.

How people viewed their national identity was changed during Meiji and Taishō period. Before Meiji Restoration, the sense of identity varied from domain to domain, and the idea of “being Japanese” was not as expressive as “being people from the domain,” due to the incompatible political views each domain had during *bakumatsu* period, the time when shogunate reign was having its last decade. During the early Meiji era, the sense of Japanese identity was gradually strengthened in respond to the vast westernization. Japanese culture was believed to be inferior; the government advocated for westernization and took the lead to adopt western culture onto Japanese land and into Japanese life. The balls of Rokumeikan mentioned above were the examples. Thus, it can be deduced that during modernization of Meiji and Taishō, the construction of national identity for Japanese people was to prove that the Japanese were not inferior to other cultures, and that their people should not be discriminated against by other countries. This required the result of modernization to some extent so that Japanese could win the essential respect from westerners, and traditional culture that showed typical Japanese values was necessary to make Japanese identity consistent within the country and become convincing to citizens. Also, victories against westerners could promote the confidence of Japanese people and make them better accept the concept of Japanese identity and increase their appreciation for their own culture. Those mentioned above were elements in the construction of Japanese identity. To be brief, in Meiji and Taishō period, the Japanese identity was composed of the confidence with the nation, the appreciation for traditional culture and the result of modernization.

## 3. Baseball

### 3.1. The Early Development of Baseball in Japan

Baseball was one of the sports that helped constructed national identity during Meiji and Taishō period. It was first introduced to Japan from America by an employee at Shinbashi Station, and later he and his colleges formed Shinbashi Athletic Club to play baseball together, which attracted many more people, including teenagers who were going to become social elites in Tokyo. Simultaneously, in 1872, several foreign teachers introduced baseball to their class as physical education lesson to strengthen their students’ physical ability. Besides, as a foreign game, baseball was played by

people at ports, especially Americans in Yokohama. Even though the groups of people mentioned above were playing baseball enthusiastically, baseball remained nearly completely unknown to other people in society at that time.

### 3.2. The Influence of Ichikō

The game was first played only by young social elites, then became popular with the series of Japanese victories in matches with Americans from 1890s to 1900s. Despite the sport being recognized as a foreign game, it was welcomed by students in Tokyo. By 1890, there were 10 higher schools in Tokyo that had reputable baseball teams that held matches with one another, and among these school teams, The First Higher School, Ichikō, had the strongest baseball club. In one match between Ichikō and Meiji Gakuin, one American teacher named Imbrie irritated Ichikō students for scaling Ichikō's school fence, and this "Imbrie Incident" in spring 1890 drove the relationship between Americans staying in Japan and Ichikō students hostile [4], leading to greater discrimination towards Japanese students. In Yokohama there was Yokohama Cricket and Athletic Club (YAC), in which Americans gather and play baseball. Japanese were not allowed to enter the field of YAC, and the foreigners played exclusively. After winning all other baseball teams of higher schools in Tokyo, in 1891, Ichikō baseball club asked YAC for an international match. However, YAC refused to have the match with Ichikō students. Receiving such reply, Ichikō students became more determined, and they kept requesting for the match with YAC for five years. If YAC accepted the match, it would be the message that YAC admitted the cultural equals [3] Japanese had with Americans, and Americans would lose their sense of superiority [3]. The continuous refusal of YAC to Ichikō indicated the heavy discrimination against Japanese. On the sixth year, 1896, YAC finally acquiesced to Ichikō's request, and the match was held on YAC's field. This was the first-ever Japan-America baseball game. Although the Ichikō players were laughed at in the field of YAC, they won easily and gave YAC an embarrassing defeat, with the score Ichikō 29 and YAC 4 [3]. This result not only attracted society's attention to baseball and boosted the popularity the game in Japan, but also raised national honor and increased national confidence of Japanese. As the student president of Ichikō said, the victory was more than a victory for Tokyo Higher School; it was the victory for all Japanese [3]. There soon were more matches between Ichikō and Americans in Yokohama in the following decade, and Ichikō won almost all of them. This result continuously attracted social attention, and the confidence of Japanese identity rose rapidly. The baseball matches of Ichikō and YAC gave a powerful push on the popularity of baseball. It also gave Japanese the chance to prove that they were not inferior, since defeating Americans in an imported game indicated the fact that they had cultural equals with Americans. This idea strongly raised national dignity and strengthened the national identity by increasing cultural confidence.

### 3.3. The Concept of "Japanese Baseball"

Newspapers, magazines, and literature played an important role in delivering the idea of "Japanese baseball", which contributed greatly to the construction of national identity. Newspapers and magazines started in early Meiji era, and by the time Ichikō-YAC matches were having the greatest social attention, many newspapers were already widely circulated. With the help of newspapers and their frequent front page coverages, the Ichikō players became national heroes, and baseball became a focal point of national pride. Newspapers also spread the word "Samurai baseball" into the whole society. After one match between Ichikō and YAC, Nippon Shinbun commented that, despite size differences of players of two teams, Ichikō players' hearts were filled with the spirit of the stout Japanese warrior [4]. One famous yakyū seinen (baseball teenager) who made Japanese baseball

known as a distinctive sport with Japanese values was the poet, Masaoka Shiki. Graduated from Ichikō and one member of Ichikō baseball club, Shiki believed that a baseball player had similar virtues with a samurai [4]. For example, the batter in a baseball game should wait patiently until the moment the ball flies to him and hit the ball with all skills and effort, and a samurai should be patient to wait for the best chance to wave his sword during a duel. The teamwork in baseball was interpreted as devotion to the whole team to reach the final victory, and this required dedication to one's own work in the field, coinciding with the idea that a samurai should devote himself in the interest of his master and be beneficial to his clan. In Shiki's introduction to baseball, the essay *beesubōru* that he published on a newspaper, he claimed that it was the value of "Bushido" that made Japanese baseball different with American baseball [4]. Those virtues showed in baseball matches were especially found on Japanese players, because baseball was beyond entertainment in Japan. "Bushido" that had guided Japan for centuries made adoption of baseball more palatable for a wider range of Meiji thinkers than would have been the case had the sport been solely associated with modernity and the West [4]. Also, baseball literature helped baseball establish a strong root in Japanese culture. As a poet, Masaoka Shiki started a brand-new trend in the history of Japanese poetry by using symbolic descriptions related to baseball in haiku and tanka, the traditional forms of poetry. Starting baseball from teenage years, the talented poet combined baseball concepts and poetry rules naturally in his work and had a profound influence on literature. Through the influential traditional poetry, people gradually found baseball as familiar and friendly as native culture, and baseball was widely accepted as a daily activity that Japanese teenager enjoyed, as if it had always been so in Japanese history. Novel characters of Meiji and Taisho era playing baseball was common, and baseball served as a cultural background. In Natsume Sōseki's famous work *Wagahai ga Nekodearu* (I Am a Cat), students in the neighborhood often accidentally hit their ball into the main character's garden when they were playing baseball [4]. Under such cultural influence, this sport helped Japanese construct the national identity naturally.

From the aspect of modernization, baseball was seen as the example of embodiment of Civilization and Enlightenment. Baseball not only contained the western value of significance in physical competition, but also embodied traditional values of "Bushido." It was the perfect cultural vessel [4] to convey the idea of Japan as both traditional and modern, with culture not inferior to that of any other countries. In this way, the sport baseball played a significant role in the construction of Japanese national identity.

## 4. Kendo

### 4.1. From Kenjutsu to Kendo

Kendo was another sport that contributed to the construction of Japanese identity in the process of modernization. It was derived from a martial art, kenjutsu, the swordsmanship mastered exclusively by samurai, a useful skill to protect oneself, and an aggressive skill in duels and wars. Since theoretically all samurai had access to kenjutsu, it was seen as the spirit of samurai, representing Bushido. Under the peaceful reign of Tokugawa shogunate, samurai were living without concerns for warfare, and entering the bakumatsu period, samurai only had an abstract concept of war, and martial arts were more like a symbolic spiritual sport than a warfare skill [2]. In 1856, Kōbushō, the Academy for Military Training was established by the shogunate. It was the defense initiative that shogunate adopted, and in many ways, it transformed martial arts into modern forms. In Kōbushō, students used short bamboo sword *shinai* to practice, and this kind of sword later became the standardized sword used in matches of modern kendo [1].

The society and government had changing attitudes towards kenjutsu during Meiji period, and these obscure actions urged kenjutsu to be transformed into a more modernized form to fit in the

new era. Meiji Restoration was an aristocratic revolution that was started by samurai to put an end to samurai's high social status to realize modernization. Concerning about social safety and having the goal to limit the privileges of original samurai, the new government once tried to put an end to swordsmanship. But after the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877, in which battōtai, samurai soldiers from Aizu domain, used kenjutsu to defeat their enemies, the Meiji government changed its hostile attitude towards kenjutsu [1], because it saw possibilities of strengthening national defenses and enhancing the police force. Around the same time, from 1872 to mid-Meiji times, the kenjutsu master Sakakibara Kenkichi held Gekiken Kōgyō, the fencing demonstrations in which samurai of different kenjutsu ryūha (school) fight each other. Such public demonstration attracted many people to buy tickets to watch, especially people who were not samurai. Sakakibara's action was condemned to be "selling one's art" to make a profit, but in the sense that kenjutsu was at that time on the edge of disappearing, he did put this martial art back to society, and successfully prolonged the life of swordsmanship. After Satsuma Rebellion, kenjutsu was added to the training of the police force. There were many different ryūha of kenjutsu, and one unified form was necessary for police so that they could use them better when they were on duty [1]. To achieve this goal, the police guidelines combined several ryūha into one formal way of swordsmanship for police to master, and this attempt was an important contribution to the creation of modern kendo. Through the fencing demonstrations and the practice of police, kenjutsu was remained in society, waiting for the further development that could fit it into modernization.

Conservative organizations promoted the transformation of kenjutsu into kendo with great effort. Dai-Nippon Butokukai, the Association of Virtues of Martial Arts in Great Japan, was a conservative organization that held tournaments of martial arts. The Butokukai had many fencing instructors and tried to design the universal teaching method of kenjutsu that combined various ryūha. This new teaching method, together with the standardized practicing method, became instrumental in modern kendo [1]. In 1912, the Butokukai formally designed the sport kendo. Whether kendo should enter classrooms also underwent a long discussion. From 1882, conservatives and many higher schools had been requesting the government to add martial arts into school curriculum so that the physical education could be improved, but the government kept rejecting it for almost forty years [1]. The reason was that some research at that time showed that martial arts was hazardous to students' body if added to school curriculum. Also, it could be understood that during the bakumatsu period and early modernization, martial arts was greatly discredited, and the government favored modern military technology more than martial arts. In the process of modernization, schools that follow western education system completely was more eagerly wanted than schools teaching traditional arts [1]. However, after the formation of modern kendo and the further advocates, kendo was finally added to the curriculum as compulsory in 1917. With the influence of education system, kendo as a modern sport that conveyed traditional values became widely accepted. Serving as a cultural vessel of samurai virtues, the sport kendo established its roots into young generations and became one of the symbols of national identity.

## 4.2. Cultural Reproduction

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explained his theory of cultural reproduction, which can be used to analyze the aim of conservative organizations and government adding kendo to curriculum. According to the theory of cultural reproduction, on the one hand, culture reproduces itself by educating younger generations, so that culture is repeated without sudden disappearing, and that the society is maintained to be in balance; on the other hand, culture is continuously changing when being reproduced, and this provides society with chances to alter the existing system and results in evolution of society [6]. To be more specific, according to Bourdieu, education reproduces culture by being constructed in favor of the ruling class: the culture delivered to students by the educational



system is designed to be closer to the culture of the ruling class, and the habit of the ruling class is transformed into a kind of cultural capital that is taken for granted in the school [7]. As a result, people who are already living with the culture of the ruling class adapt to such intellectual pattern easily, so they are more likely to achieve academic and political success. In this way, the society and ruling class achieve dynamic stability. The transformation from kenjutsu to kendo and adding kendo into curriculum can be seen as a process of cultural reproduction. In the case of kendo, both Meiji government and the conservative groups were from the ruling class—the original samurai and the new social elites, and the revival of love for traditional culture, including martial arts such as kendo during this period, can be interpreted as the attempt to reinforce cultural reproduction that aimed to maintain the culture of samurai, so that students who received such education at school could take the virtues of samurai for granted. This shows the incompleteness of the aristocratic Meiji Restoration, for some of the old ruling class still sought gaining power and expressing their own culture. Nevertheless, with such effort of cultural reproduction, the sport kendo indeed contributed to the establishment of Japanese national identity among the young generation.

### 4.3. Invented Tradition

The theory of invented tradition is suitable to interpret the construction of national identity through the transformation from kenjutsu to kendo as well. According to Eric Hobsbawm, “invented tradition” is taken to mean a set of practices that seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the historic past [8]. The creation of kendo is an example of “invented tradition.” Kenjutsu was the ancient art containing Bushido values and was representative in this ideology, and it was abandoned on warfare when gunnery replaced it during bakumatsu period. Later, kendo was recreated during the process of modernization, and by relating kendo with kenjutsu, kendo obtained the cultural and historical link with the past [2]. Thus, kendo can be seen as an invented tradition. Kendo’s prevalence provided a continuous cultural memory in Japanese society [2], and this made people more willing to accept it and its values, delivering the traditional Bushido values to society. Through the practice of kendo, people learned about the cultural past and understood traditional values better. In this way, kendo successfully contributed to the construction of national identity.

## 5. Comparing Baseball and Kendo in National Identity Construction

### 5.1. Differences

There are many differences between baseball and kendo in the way they contributed to Japanese identity. To begin with, their origins are different. Baseball was imported from the US and was a foreign sport. Kendo was Japanese, created from a traditional martial art. Although baseball did not become widely known until 1890s, the acceptance of baseball into Japanese social life catered for the need of being modern. On the other hand, although kendo was invented rather late, its popularity signaled the long existence of active attitude towards traditional arts and values in Japanese society. Since the construction of national identity during modernization required being modern and being traditional Japanese, in this sense, baseball fulfilled the former, and kendo fulfilled the latter. Besides, the group of people who first had access to the sports in Japanese society were different. Baseball was first known among the young social elites; kenjutsu and kendo were first mastered by original samurai family, the police, and the conservatives. The different impression on the groups of people in the society to some extent influenced the society’s attitude towards the two sports. Baseball was played by students, and this relationship made baseball seemed energetic to the society, and naturally this sport represented battles and victories, the national honor, and cultural confidence. This also coincided with the fact that the educated young

social elites were deemed as the nation's hopeful future. In contrast, kenjutsu and kendo was first practiced by respectable groups of people at that time, among which were the martial arts masters and the highly respected police. This made kendo associated with the impression of the noble past of Japanese tradition, especially samurai and Bushido. When the government made kendo into school curriculum, with cultural reproduction, the idea of Bushido was spread to students, which naturally stressed the Japanese identity represented by kendo. Finally, the government played different roles in the process of popularizing the two sports. Baseball experienced nearly no government intervention, while in the case of kendo, the government seemed to be fundamentally influential. Only when the society became so enthusiastic about baseball matches that social issues emerged during *sōkeisen* (the matches between Waseda University and Keio University) in 1920s, did the government intervene. Kendo, on the other hand, experienced rapid changes in government's attitude. Government showed concerns in early Meiji era, used the skill to strengthen police force, acquiesced the conservatives' attempt to revive the sport and finally promoted the education of kendo. Compared to baseball, kendo was much more closely watched by the government, and both its disappearing and flourish did depend on the government's attitude. To be brief, the origins of the sports, the groups of people who accessed the sports and the government's attitude towards the sports were all different. With these differences, the two sports contributed to the construction of national identity during the period of modernization with different pathways.

## 5.2. Similarities

There were aspects from which baseball and kendo are similar. First, as cultural vessels [4] to deliver certain messages, the sports both conveyed the traditional idea of Bushido. Due to the cultural significance of Bushido, relating the sports to this concept was effective in highlighting Japanese identity. Secondly, the two sports were both transformed from another sport. In the case of baseball, American baseball became Japanese baseball when people interpreted the game as "Samurai Baseball" that contained specific cultural values. Kenjutsu was transformed into kendo during modernization as the result of invented tradition and cultural reproduction. The link with modern international society was created during the process of localizing American baseball into Japanese baseball, and the link with tradition was obtained by transforming kenjutsu into kendo. This similarity indicates that modernization needed the corresponding element to construct the national identity.

## 6. Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. To begin with, the gender difference was not considered in this essay. Both baseball and kendo were recognized as sports for male, and the construction of national identity, in this sense, didn't include female. Lacking the aspect of female made the study incomplete. Besides, the case of baseball and kendo cannot directly represent other sports during Meiji and Taishō period. If the case study had used other sports, the conclusion may have been otherwise. Also, the time that the two sports flourished respectively is not compared. Further research is needed to solve the problems mentioned above.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, despite the difference in origin, the way of gaining popularity and existence of government intervention, different sports successfully created different pathways in the construction of national identity. Baseball was imported from America and became popular after Japan-America matches. With the assistance of media and literature, it delivered the concept of "Samurai Baseball", national confidence, and modernity, which helped construct national identity. Kendo was

transformed from the martial art kenjutsu and experienced the attention of government, conservative organizations, and education system. As the outcome of cultural reproduction and invented tradition, kendo delivered the traditional virtues and enhanced the concept of Japanese identity. Baseball and kendo were distinctively different in many ways, and with different pathways, they both contributed to the construction of national identity during modernization.

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