2 1970s–1980s “Chinese” Little League Baseball and its discontents

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No single sport has established itself as the Chinese favorite. Soccer draws the largest crowds...

James Wei, Government Information Office Chairman, 1972 (3:30)

Baseball is everywhere in Taiwan.

Leonard Pratt, Associated Press, 1972 (D-1–2)

Taiwanese Little League teams won 10 Little League World Series titles between 1969 and 1981, and 17 in the 28-year period from 1969 to 1996.1 As if this were not enough agony for the youth of America and their often-racist parents (of whom more follows), the Little League Baseball (LLB) establishment also began inviting Taiwan to send teams to the Senior League and Big League world championships held every summer, respectively, in Gary, Indiana and Ft Lauderdale, Florida. Taiwan’s teenage representatives—essentially national all-star teams drawing from talent across the entire island—were even more dominant in these competitions. In the Senior League division for 13-to-15-year-olds (Qingshaohang 青少年), Taiwan’s teams won nine straight world championships from 1972 to 1980, and 17 in all over a 21-year period. The 16-to-18-year-olds on Taiwan’s Big League (Qinghang 青棒) teams won 17 world championships in a 23-year period (Yu 2007: 170–171).

If James Wei above and the government he served were unaware, every summer during the 1970s became a moment for extravagant celebration with massive parades, scholarships, TV appearances and presidential visits of the latest world baseball titles won by Taiwanese boys and young men.

Each of these championships won or lost bears fascinating stories that reveal much about the standing and worth of the once-Japanese game of baseball that now won the “Free China” regime such recognition abroad. Here I will look at two main elements of this baseball history introduced above: the tensions and contradictions between nationalist and dissident uses (both ideological and diplomatic) of the game, and the intense culture of loss and shame that actually grew around the unending triumphs on the baseball field.
Little League Baseball and a Chinese/Taiwanese nation

Overwhelming yearly victories achieved in Pennsylvania, Indiana and Florida had very little impact on official Nationalist support for what they saw as the Japanese game of baseball. Official media and state-friendly intellectuals did their best to maximize the ideological impact of these teams’ dominance, but it seems that it was truly difficult for the Nationalist regime to actually support the game. For example, an official 1974 volume on *Amateur sport in the Republic of China* included just four pages (out of 112 pages total) on the island’s favorite sport (Republic of China Olympic Committee: 1974). In 1976, the International Baseball Association, in recognition of the island’s excellence in the game, awarded Taiwan the right to hold the 24th IBA World Cup. There were no funds forthcoming from Taipei, though, so it was eventually held in Colombia instead (Gao 1994: 170). And that same year, baseball coaches did not get to join the track and field, soccer, swimming, handball, boxing and gymnastics coaches who each were sent abroad for four months of technical training (Taiwan Provincial Education Department 1988: 806).

This refusal to fund baseball further could only have been a function of the state’s utter inability to understand the historical (read: Japanese) uniqueness of the game. One official chronicler repeatedly tried to describe the significance of Taiwan’s baseball victories by using an essay written by Chiang Kai-shek in September 1942 for the national Sports Day holiday back in Sichuan Province (Yao 1977: 1; Yao 1978: 1). In 1971, Chiang’s only advice for the Taiwanese Giants (*Tainan Juren 台南巨人*) before they left for America was to “be true and pure Chinese” (*tangtang zhengzheng de Zhongguoren 堂堂正正的中國人*).

This team won the world championship in Williamsport—an event viewed on early-morning (2:00–5:00 a.m.) television by some 10 million people in Taiwan, a staggering two-thirds of the island’s population. (This audience did not include Chiang Kai-shek, who, according to the team’s coach, went to bed in anger after a first-inning home run put Gary up by three runs. Song Meiling, accompanied by other officials, did watch the entire game, rousing the President-for-Life only after victory was sealed in the 9th inning [Children of Baseball: Giants 2000].) But even with the benefit of all this rest, Chiang could only phrase his enthusiasm by pointing out, “I trust that all the compatriots of the nation will be moved and excited by the Giants Little League team, in each person’s own way, to work to quickly retake the mainland and restore glory to the motherland” (Appleton 1972: 37; Lin 1995: 47).

Chiang’s hubris was matched by members of his official media. One columnist leapt from the 1971 Giants’ extra-innings championship win to the current “standoff” across the Taiwan Straits in a piece called “Revelation: Victory”:
The officers and troops of the Nationalist Army are defending Taiwan, Penghu, Jinmen and Mazu [islands], in a situation that could be said to be like the sixth inning. We trust that the ninth inning of our seizing of prisoners, capture of the capital, and retaking of lost territory is not too far away[...]. We will be victorious because our benevolence is unrivalled[...] All the people of the nation, Overseas Chinese, and all members of the armed forces await the coming victory.

G. Peng 1971: 12

Members of Taiwan’s intellectual class were not left out of the national (and even racial) self-congratulation that these boys’ baseball skills helped them to understand. One author wrote in The Intellectual that the 1973 Taman Giants’ sweep of their opponents proved that Chinese people had higher moral standards and enjoyed better inherent physical development and leadership skills than did Westerners. Reveling in this “smashing [of] white feelings of superiority,” he continued wildly: “We are the most outstanding nation and race (minzu 民族) in the entire world[...] Chinese leadership of the world begins with Little League Baseball[...] Now begins the glorious moment of our Chinese people rewriting the history of the world” (Chen 1973. 24–26).

An author in the government’s Central Monthly began his commentary with an awful poem that resolved:

I warmly love my country.
I promise to abide by the umpire’s decisions
Listening, listening, this is the grand vow and the heart of the new generation.

This fantasy of the benevolent authoritarian regime was followed by maudlin and prideful chest-beating that of course also betrayed decades of self-pity and anxiety about the fate of the Chinese race and Republic

The Chinese nation-race is a superior nation-race!
The ROC must become a first-rate power[...]
The descendants of the Yellow Emperor always as one heart[...
The Chinese Republic and the Chinese race must be revived!
Finally we will be giants of the world[...

W. Ji 1973. 40–42

These discussions, or as they often were, chants, beg two different questions about these boys’ baseball skills and the central role imagined for them in these irredentist dreams of a revived ROC empire. On the latter, it is important at least to understand how loyal Nationalists in Taiwan may have seen as realistic the goal of “retaking the mainland,” considering the often brutal, failed and disastrous record of the PRC state over two decades of Maoism.
All the publicity directed toward the mainland just miles away seemed valid steps toward ultimate victory: if only they could alert enough "compatriots" about the tremendous victories won by the boys of the ROC on Taiwan.

For that matter, then, the Taiwanese boys dominating world baseball fit perfectly within these dreams of empire—but not simply for the instrumental reason that the boys could be imagined to be future leaders of the ROC. There is also the fact that boys in particular have been good for thinking about nation-states, in the same way that Darnton makes the case that cats happened to have a particular "ritual value" (as opposed to cows or sheep, perhaps) that made them "good for staging ceremonies" in early modern Europe. Like cats do, boys occupy an "ambiguous ontological position, a straddling of conceptual categories" (Darnton 1984: 89). Boys are both the fruit of citizens' reproduction and almost male citizens themselves, and therefore present a fertile site for the imagining of work and conquest. Jonathan Rutherford has reflected on the British Empire as one of "mother's boys," a culture that was taught to fetishize the "boyishness" that bridges conservative domesticity and imperial fantasy (Rutherford 1997: 19, 26); this is a useful tool in understanding these Taiwanese boys' position in dreams of the ROC empire. Paul Hoch's explanation of a puritan "production ethic masculinity," one of duty and disciplined toil (Hoch 1979: 134, 137), also helps us—especially considering Taiwan's cult of industry at this moment—to fill out a picture of the pressures, desires, and fantasies that centered upon these baseball players of Taiwan's 1970s and 1980s. As another author in Central Monthly concluded from the perspective of the longue durée, the Tainan Giants' baseball skills, strong bodies and "refined dignity" were merely the "newest fragrant" product of thousands of years of Chinese culture. In this piece titled "The Baseball Movement, The National Movement," the writer also took the opportunity of these victories to engage in that most lasting and longing Chinese dream of the twentieth century—unity, finally, and a society that "would not be divided by age or hometown" (Yang 1973: 43).

To most of the people of Taiwan, the attraction of this Little League championship run had little to do with these ideological performances. The glory won by Taiwan's Little, Senior, and Big Leaguers during the 1970s came at the exact same time as two other significant developments—the flowering of Taiwan's "economic miracle" and the island's increasing isolation on the international stage. Taiwan was becoming an economic powerhouse in its own right, a proud Little Dragon that had made the most of the billions of dollars of American aid sent its way, and these triumphs helped feed this hubris. However, the Nationalist regime was also quickly learning that fewer and fewer people around the world viewed their rule of Taiwan as legitimate, let alone moral or humane. The greatest humiliation came in 1971, when the government forfeited its seat in the United Nations, sending Taiwan into four decades of near-total diplomatic isolation from which it has little hope to emerge even today.

The sting and disgrace of leaving the UN was lessened somewhat by the
fact that, at the very least, Taiwan’s teens and pre-teens played the most skilled and disciplined baseball the world had ever seen. And, of course, these youth were winning international glories that Taiwan could not hope to match in any other cultural field. What other groups of Taiwanese people ended up with annual invitations to the White House to meet with Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew, or Gerald Ford? The Nationalist government’s reluctance to embrace baseball, then, can only be explained by the game’s complicated history and the utter impossibility of essentializing it as an artifact of “Chinese” tradition or endeavor. (Perhaps the only exception to this was the Taipei Municipal Baseball Stadium, which in 1971 “was rebuilt for [the Far Eastern LLB playoffs] and became the only ball park in the world with a handsome Chinese palace-style exterior” [Chang 1971: 27].)

Nevertheless, in their annual predawn Little League jubilation, the flags the people of Taiwan waved were ROC ones, the nation they wished 10,000 years to was the ROC, and so on. Clearly, in just a matter of years, and truly despite itself, this mainlander-dominated regime had managed to achieve a total identification with the Japanese legacy of baseball. How can we account for this seeming paradox?

Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, in his important book Cultural Intimacy, predicts the result of this experiment; however: “the state so fully adopts the cultural signs [...] in order to permeate the oppressed citizens’ every sentient moment that it exposes itself to greater day-to-day manipulation by these same citizens, who are familiar with the capacity of those signs to bear subversive interpretations” (Herzfeld 2004: 25–26). Taiwanese poet Lin Huazhou (林華洲), a former political prisoner, took biting measure of this ideological overreach with his sarcastic poem “Little League Baseball.”

Little League Baseball! Little League Baseball!
Saving stars of the race, the new hope of the nation.
Little League Baseball! Little League Baseball!
The modern Chinggis Khan, the young Boxers United in Righteousness.
How much national shame we are counting on you to wash away.
How many national disasters we are counting on you to reverse.

T. Jiao 1998 41, Yu and Bairner 2008 235

Unfortunately, one assumes that not every reader got the joke. But the source of material was rich, when Taiwanese youth took the field at Williamsport almost every year, these “subversive interpretations” became the subject of a whole new contest.

The activities by anti-Nationalist and pro-independence activists above, who seized precisely and aggressively on these very contradictions between a “Chinese” state and a game learned from the Japanese and played almost exclusively by Taiwanese, became even more audacious and antagonistic as the decade progressed. In 1971, the Tainan Giants swept to a world
championship, defeating opponents from Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and Gary, Indiana by a collective score of 30–3 to capture the world title. Meanwhile, above this field of American nightmares, an airplane hired by Taiwan Independence forces flew over the stadium brazenly towing a bilingual banner that read, “Taiwan duli wansui (台湾独立万岁) [Long Live Taiwan Independence], Go Go Taiwan” (WUFI: A History 2000: 58; Taipingshan 1971: 54–55). Raising the stakes even further, the Chinese on the banner was written in PRC-style simplified characters that were illegal to use in Taiwan!

Pro-Taiwanese supporters clearly had arrived in Williamsport ready to take full ideological advantage of their island’s baseball superiority. The provocation was successful, and the fighting that erupted between the two sides was so vicious that state police had to bring in reinforcements by helicopter in order to gain control of the facilities—until the following year, when the two sides would face off again, celebrating another Taiwan/ROC Little League triumph by fighting with baseball bats outside the left-field fence (Van Auken and Van Auken 2001: 164).

The Taiwan teams’ games attracted fans from all points of the political spectrum, so that each Taiwan Independence flag or banner (for example, “Taiwanese Brothers, We Love You,” “Overthrow the Chiangs, Build Taiwan,” “End Martial Law in Taiwan,” “No Secret Police,” and “Chiang Get Out, Mao Stay Out” [Jin 1974: 6]) was matched by a pro-Nationalistic mainland fan waving a national flag and chanting, “Go Go China.” The pro-state forces had an advantage, however, in the dozens of paid spies and New York Chinatown thugs hired by the KMT to intimidate the “Taiwan” (instead of “ROC”) fans in the stands. In 1971, the championship game was interrupted when a dozen of these toughs ran across the field to rip down a banner reading in English and Chinese, “Team of Taiwan, Jiayou Taiwan dui (加油台灣隊) [Go Team of Taiwan]” (WUFI: A History 2000: 58; Taipingshan 1971: 54; Van Auken and Van Auken 2001: 167).1

In 1972, when the Taipei Braves challenged for the world title in Pennsylvania, the KMT was better prepared, renting every single commercial aircraft for miles around to keep the Taiwanese Independence crowd from repeating their airborne coup of the year before (WUFI: A History 2000: 58). Some 70–80 ROC military cadets training in the US were also recruited to Williamsport to, as they shouted while beating Taiwanese male and female supporters with wooden clubs, “Kill the traitors (Shasi Hanjian 殺死漢奸)!” This war was only quelled by the intervention of police helicopters, but not before making a distinct impression on fans around the world just how hotly and violently disputed Taiwanese/Chinese identity was at the time. (The author of one account in Viva Formosa urged Taiwanese fans to consider bringing guns to Williamsport the next year [A Taiwanese 1972: 45–46; Van Auken and Van Auken 2001: 164].) The joy and determination that Taiwanese fans seemed to exhibit in challenging Nationalist hegemony in Taiwan reminds us that more was at stake here than Chiang Kai-shek’s dated “Free China” ideology; these fans were continuing a contest over the deep
significance of Taiwanese baseball that had begun half a century earlier under Japanese colonial rule.

One interesting difference between these yearly battles and European football hooliganism, the best studied field in the larger genre of sporting crowd violence, appears within “the play through which people try to turn transient advantage into a permanent condition” (Herzfeld 2004: 26). English football hooligans, as Buford describes them, for example, seem to take part in grand acts of street and stadium violence simply for the sake of violence, “the exalted experiences that by their intensity, their risk, their threat of self-immolation exclude the possibility of all other thought except the experience itself” (Buford 1991: 193). There seems to be no sense that their brutal fighting would lead to a new social order or condition. Indeed, these English hooligans need their rival club supporters, their “foreigners” and “wogs,” against whom to fight again even more bestially next time. The Taiwanese case at Williamsport was much more clearly about using this unique annual stage to make their best argument against the KMT regime and hopefully to “turn transient advantage into a permanent condition” of a Taiwanese-led Taiwan.

The variety of methods that Taiwan Independence and anti-KMT activists used to spread the message about the Chiang dictatorship is again explained very well by Herzfeld’s recognition of “creative mischief [that] both subverts and sustains the authority of the state” (Herzfeld 2004: 36). The “ignorant and shameless” “traitorous thieves” (mangaozi 賊國賊) who “humiliated the people of Taiwan” with these stunts, one official magazine stated, would pay the price at the hands of “patriots [...] rising as a group to denounce and drive [them] away” for their clever subversion (Talpingshan Accllmdrive 1971: 54, Acclaim For the ROC 1969: 3).

Taiwan’s continued victories in Williamsport and Gary, each seemingly more decisive than the last, seemed only to invigorate dissidents and critics of the Chiang regime thirsting for tangible measures of uniquely “Taiwanese” accomplishment. It turns out, though, that these Taiwanese activists often also had to deal with American authorities in Williamsport who were taking instructions from their Free Chinese allies in the KMT. In 1969, the Taiwanese had been able, by appealing to American history and constitutional liberties, to shake the “ignorant security officers” sent to take away their provocative flags (Taiwan Little League Baseball Team Wins Glory 1969: 8). Later, however, the American youth baseball establishment toed the Nationalist line. In 1973 at the Senior Little League Championships in Gary, Indiana, ROC officials present were able to have arrested as “terrorists” four activists wearing T-shirts reading sequentially, “Long Live Taiwan Independence” (Taihwa wansui 台独万岁). Two years later in Gary, Taiwanese activists floated a balloon with this same independence message, and thanks to the generous and curious ABC cameramen on the scene, this sky-high subversion flashed across millions of Taiwan’s television screens for the first time in history. But, again, the ROC was able to force ABC Sports to stop
broadcasting any Chinese-language messages after this disaster (WUFI: A History 2000: 59). These activist fans were able to take advantage of the “ROC” entries in the US, where the liberty to criticize the hated KMT was supposedly protected, in order to embarrass the regime. But this tension between opposing the state and invoking and provoking it at every turn (Herzfeld 2004: 2) became an inseparable part of their yearly Williamsport physical and psychological experiences, perhaps even making the KMT even more of a hegemonic force from half a world away than it ever could have been before.

Finally, the world of baseball also continued to serve as an important site for the expression of strength and pride among Taiwan’s Austronesian Aboriginal tribes. Many of Taiwan’s early youth championship teams featured players originally from the Aboriginal areas of eastern Taiwan. These youngsters and their adult followers could only have taken an ironic pleasure in winning such great honors for, and being feted by, the oppressive KMT state, which only continued to ignore and impoverish these representatives of a pre-Chinese Taiwan past. In fact, their baseball and sporting success in general became one of the most important ways in which Taiwan’s Aboriginal citizens represented and understood their identity and position in Taiwan society (Guo 1998: 26; Kendzulak 2000: 18).

Yet this gratifying annual attention paid to the original inhabitants of Taiwan and their baseball prowess unfortunately was not enough to truly sustain the Aboriginal populations. It is telling that Taiwan’s two greatest exports to Japanese baseball, Guo Yuanzhi (Kaku Genji 郭源治) and Guo Taiyuan (Kaku Taigen 郭泰源), were both Little League icons of Aboriginal descent. Both Guos left Taiwan as very young men, settled and married in Japan, and only returned to the Taiwan baseball world in the late 1990s after their careers in Japan came to a close.

“Fellowship of the Flawed,” Part I: Murderers

In 1971, after collecting Taiwan’s second LLB championship, the Tainan Giants enjoyed the American celebrity life for the next several days, posing for photos with Vice President Spiro Agnew in the White House and baseball legend Ted Williams in Yankee Stadium, and feasting at Chinatown banquets from New York to Los Angeles to San Francisco. On their way home, they made one more stop in Tokyo, where they were greeted by several hundreds of ethnic Chinese residents, and then formally received by ROC Ambassador Peng Mengqi (彭孟緝) (History of the Struggle 1972: 19; Tokyo Overseas 1971: 3). These boys perhaps had no idea who this kindly ambassador was, and even those precocious enough to know would surely have been too polite to bring up the activities for which Ambassador Peng was known by their parents’ generation as “The Butcher of Gaoxiong” and “The Murderer King.”

Peng Mengqi had been Commander of the army garrison at Gaoxiong
surprising of producing been government army's even some summers and winter, logic baseball that serving invasion in China China Kai-shek appreciated Peng's loyalty, however, and the Butcher enjoyed a long and prosperous career in the Nationalist army and government. But one does wonder whether, as he greeted these southern Taiwanese children whose parents' teachers, doctors, and community leaders he had commanded shot 24 summers earlier, Peng's thoughts drifted at all to the public and private executions he had conducted back down south during his rise to the top.

This was just one event in the busy lives of these child champions; after this visit there were still parades, TV shows, press conferences, more banquets, visits to martyrs' shrines, and gifts to receive humbly (including a scholarship totaling NT$3 million [US$75,000]) presented by Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT Central Committee, to be distributed every year on the Generalissimo's birthday [History of the Struggle 1972: ii]), and a future military invasion to inspire (this was the team whose victories Chiang hoped would inspire all "to quickly retake the mainland"). In Ambassador Peng, what was one more funny-talking mainlander who knew nothing about baseball showering the team with gifts and speeches? Yet to the historian, this chilling incident cries out for more analysis.

One wonders if there was in fact a crueler irony that the Nationalist government could have perpetrated upon the game of baseball—this modern legacy of Japanese colonialism—than to fold it into the same KMT world that honored those (like Peng) who had massacred thousands in 1947 for serving as walking legacies of modern Japanese colonialism. It was one thing to deny the Japanese-ness of the game, either in print, which the official Free China Review did that month (Chang 1971: 27), or physically, as in the "handsome Chinese palace-style exterior" on the Taipei Stadium. And it was not surprising that the government would hire dozens of New York Chinatown thugs to beat up Taiwanese activists at the games in Pennsylvania. But introducing young Taiwanese boys to the Butcher of Gaohiong?

This incident clearly explains much more about the Nationalist uses of baseball than do the iconic pictures of poor Aborigine children playing baseball barefoot or smiling in victorious celebration. The gambit could not have been that no one would remember what Peng had been up to 24 summers before; indeed, the point almost seems to be that any conscientious adult would know that Peng had been behind the murders of a previous generation of southern Taiwan standouts. Yet to write this event as a cruel flaunting of Peng's murderous guilt and the Nationalist government's total complicity in letting him walk (and in fact ascend), seems to miss an important prop in this production. Only an understanding of how, again in Herzfeld's words, "[n]ational embarrassment can become the ironic basis of intimacy and affection, a fellowship of the flawed" (Herzfeld 2004: 29), can explain the true logic of such a gesture.
The Chinese rock star Cui Jian (崔健), in his powerful song "A Piece of Red Cloth," sang, "I want to always accompany you this way, because I know your suffering best" (Cui 1991). While the modern histories of the PRC and Taiwan are unmistakably different, Cui's vivid language explains very well the "fellowship of the flawed" that existed between the Nationalist regime and the Taiwanese public for four decades, through the 1980s. If we begin with presumptions of some sort of "authentic" Taiwanese state of rebellion against the KMT, or its converse, a profound inauthenticity characterized by "selling out" to this mainlander regime, it is simply difficult to understand the workings of, say, martial law-era Taiwanese ROC nationalism, anti-communism, and pride in the economic "miracle" presided over by the KMT.

Instead, we imagine the complexities, but ultimate convenience, of this relationship between actors who know each others' suffering best. This new logic renders much more clearly the ways in which this island of former Japanese colonial subjects became the KMT's "Free China." And instead of a rupture in the early 1970s discourse about baseball and ROC history, this visit to the butcher served as the ultimate capstone to this championship voyage and reinforcement of what baseball really meant to Taiwan.

How can a loser ever win?

The researcher of Taiwan's baseball history is blessed by a Taiwanese population that seems as one to love recollecting the old days when people experienced as one these many triumphs and defeats. However, an accompanying problem is the fact that these memories are almost inevitably phrased in explicitly nostalgic terms of family, community, and nation—staying up all night, eating instant noodles while listening to or watching the games, listening to the firecrackers outside after the near-inevitable victories, and all those national flags. Even those who use language usually associated with critiques of this nostalgia—like professor and former national team coach Lin Hua-wei's talk on baseball and Taiwanese "collective memory" (jitti jitti 集體記憶) at the Presidential Palace in July 2004 (Chen 2004)—often employ it only to encourage this nostalgia even further. Indeed, this longing for such state-centered artifice—even if one understands that it also marks a nostalgia for the "simpler" era of Nationalist rule—is fascinating.

Above was discussed the championship won in 1971 by the Tainan Giants. The chronology of this triumph is even more revealing: it was followed by six weeks of Nixon's announcement of his upcoming visit to the PRC, and preceded by eight weeks the ROC's withdrawal from the United Nations. If ever "national embarrassment" and humiliation was palpable in Taiwan, this was that moment. Few Americans likely were stung by Chiang Kai-shek's speech lamenting "an age of agony in which there is no distinction between justice and injustice [...] when some people have even lost their moral courage [...] and] become the lackeys of Mao Tse-tung" (Wei 1972: 1). But many in
Taiwan hoped the Yanks would feel for once the sting of the ROC team beating the American team led by “that big gorilla Mc-Something” (star Lloyd McClendon of the all-African-American Gary team, as a wistful China Times piece described him in 1993) (Shoujuzi 1993, 27).

This “embarrassment” trope in memories of Little League baseball is so strong that it sometimes trumps actual chronology. In his 1997 memoirs, cartoonist Cai Zhizhong (蔡志忠) remembered, “During the summer of 1970, my third year in the military, the worst disaster for Taiwan was not our withdrawal from the United Nations, but the [Huayi] Seven Tigers Little League team’s loss at Williamsport to Puerto Rico.” (Chang 2000: 58) The fact that Cai seems to remember so clearly (if doubly incorrectly, the ROC left the UN in 1971 and not 1970, and Huayi lost to Nicaragua and not Puerto Rico), these humiliations both occurring during the same summer hints at how the most “intimate” national memories can be those of failure.

The Huayi Seven Tigers, winners of the ROC national championship in 1970, were one of many “all-star” teams compiled for victories abroad. The ROC Baseball Association made much of the fact that the children were all under age 12, after satisfying an official LLB delegation’s investigation in June. (The United Daily News also proudly cited LLB head Peter J. McGovern’s delight that, unlike in the US, he did not see any Taiwanese boys with long hair [McGovern Leaving 1970, 3].) Instead, the Seven Tigers merely still were cheating in another way, the squad included only seven boys from the baseball-mad town of Huayi, supplemented by live standout rngers from nearby Taiman and two more from Gaoxiong.

The Seven Tigers’ 12–0 victory over the Japanese champions from Wakayama clinched the Asia Pacific title and showed them to be yet another world-class entry in the LLB World Series in Pennsylvania. The team returned to Taipei for more training, and were treated as the latest champions of Chinese Nationalist heroism. One psychologist saw in their recent wins a “renewal of the promise of the [Chinese] nation and race.” This could only be achieved, though, with a strong-willed coach able to guide his charges away from the cowardice, dishonesty, irresponsibility, and wildness that they were too ignorant to avoid on their own (Luo 1970: 56). A more patient and transparent paean to authoritarian rule has seldom been written, but we see once more a striking willingness to co-opt baseball for the express purposes of the state.

Official media also took the time to issue all 14 boys comic book-style nicknames, like “Tornado Tiger” (third baseman Huang Yongxiang 黃永祥), “High-Flying Tiger” (pitcher Huang Zhixiong 黃志雄), and “Lightning Tiger” (catcher Hou Dezhiheng 侯德正) (Huayi City’s Seven Tigers 2007). Three decades later, star player Lu Ruji (盧瑞琪), the “Concealed-by-a-Ridge Tiger,” remembered the hundreds of fan letters he received and the beautiful and forward Taipei girls who followed the team around for days (Children of Baseball, Seven Tigers 2000).

But in their first game in Williamsport, the Seven Tigers ran into another...
fine team from Nicaragua, who topped the Seven Tigers 3–2, the painfully close game ending on a hard ROC line drive caught with the bases loaded. Taiwan Television broadcaster Sheng Zhuru (盛竹如) cried on air, joined in tears by Nationalist loyalists and Taiwanese nationalists in the Williamsport stands sharing the pain for once, shedding tears underneath their flags of enmity (Xu 2004: 111). Once in the loser’s bracket in Williamsport, the Seven Tigers took out their revenge on opponents from Tennessee and West Germany, dominating both to capture the least satisfying fifth-place finish in LLB World Series history.

This loss in the 1970 Little League World Series was experienced in Taiwan as the truest, yet most profoundly bonding, form of embarrassment. The next day’s “In Black and White” column in the United Daily News began this narrative. Titled “Sorry,” the column issued both the faintest yet most fervent praise for Coach Wu Mintian’s (吳敏添) dignity in immediately apologizing to the nation after the loss: “This spirit of taking responsibility for a national humiliation and insult is truly moving!” (In Black and White 1970: 3) A film on Taiwanese public television in 2000 showed the painful details of the 3–2 loss, set to background music by the Bee Gees: “How can you mend this broken man? How can a loser ever win?” (Children of Baseball: Seven Tigers 2000) While Taiwan’s Little League teams won seventeen world titles about which to boast, this loss in fact remains at the heart of nationalist memories of Taiwan baseball’s golden age.

Since then, the official Little League narrative in Taiwan—shared by Chinese Nationalists and Taiwanese separatists alike—has come to center on the artifacts of the fifth-place Seven Tigers’ return to Taipei. Chiang Ching-kuo greeted the children at Songshan Airport in the rain, doing his best to cheer them up with kind questions and comments: “Did you have fun in America?” “Did you make some new friends?” “Losing is OK; there’s always next year.” The Tigers’ players behaved with stoic dignity, presenting to the Generalissimo’s son deep bows that would be cited in Taiwan for decades to come (Shoujuji 1993: 27; Yao 1977: 27).

But the most moving event was to follow. Coach Wu apologized once more for the team’s loss, only to have Xie Guocheng, head of the ROC Baseball Association and the “father of Taiwanese Little League baseball,” seize the microphone, his eyeglass frames dripping with tears, and (ignoring a certain Nicaraguan pitcher’s preternatural expertise) state that “Responsibility for the Seven Tigers’ loss is mine and not the coach’s” (Yao 1977: 28; Vice Premier Chiang 1970: 3). Indeed, a writer for the China Tribune two full decades later, in a piece titled, “The Beauty and Sorrow of Baseball,” identified this noble fight to accept blame as the moment when youth baseball truly became part of ROC nationalism (Weng 1992: 29–30). Or, to cite another medium, the only picture of a Little League player in Taiwan’s official baseball “Digital Museum” is one of these sullen Seven Tigers players, Li Zongzhou (李宗洲) (the “Beastly-Fanged Tiger”), sheltered from the rain by Vice Premier Chiang’s umbrella and wide smile.5
Finally, even more spectacular was the speech that the Jiayi losers received from President Chiang Kai-shek three days later. The United Daily News account started predictably enough, given the personality cult of the day: “The children stood on their toes and craned their necks in order to see the greatest leader and man residing in their hearts.” But his thoughts that day were on matters that the UDN seldom would have mentioned in this age of the “economic miracle”—Chiang’s own defeats.

The President pointed out, for anyone and in any matter, the road to success will inevitably include some failures. Only one who has failed can truly appreciate the precious value of victory [. . . ] Winning every time would only have taught you arrogance, and that is the biggest failure.

President Gives Encouragement 1970: 2

Chiang was not in the habit of publicly reliving his failures of 25 years earlier, when he ruled all of China and the stakes were much higher. And it is hard to imagine him truly believing that he would live to appreciate the “value” of success in retaking the mainland. But his candor in this meeting with a fellow band of losers represents one more unlikely example of his cultivation of a “fellowship of the flawed.” It seems that, while anyone can win a championship, the ability to lose with grace and still stand as a team for only the purest of motives became the quality of which Taiwanese people and their Chinese government were most proud.

Loss and Litost in baseball fiction and film


Wei ends up performing good deeds for the baseball world and the larger community all over Taiwan, but the most stunning part of the story comes in Part 3 of the comic, when the mysterious hermit reveals his story to Wei. His name is Wang Yuanxuan (王元選), meaning literally “King of the Original Players,” and 30 years before (that is, 1940) he had been one of the many Taiwanese students in the colonial metropole of Japan. In an impossibly chronologitized and strangely imagined episode, Wang was inspired to join a Japanese all-star baseball team that would be playing a visiting American
squad. For this reason, he moved back to Taiwan (!), where he met Wei's father. Tragically, though, all nine of the players on this team were drafted by Japan's warlords into the military. They all were wounded, lost arms and legs, and were no longer able to play baseball. But they all had sons, and Wang's mission now was to keep his promise to Wei's dead father—to find these eight remaining boys in order to form a baseball team that could win revenge once and for all. (And for assistance in this—not to mention ideological cover for the magazine—hermit Wang is accompanied in the woods by Mr Zhang, a bespectacled bureaucrat from the ROC Baseball Association [Little Baseball Hero (Part 3) 1970: 62–66].)

This storyline amazes as it tries to traverse territory between Chinese (anti-Japanese, even anti-US.) nationalism and statism (see also Wei's "China" jersey) and Taiwanese collective nostalgia of community and struggle as Japanese subjects. The wild-haired Wang's character—which combines Rip Van Winkle, the ultimately assimilated colonial subject, and the avenging anti-Japanese mensch—was a brilliant way for Prince Magazine to sell a story of such postcolonial pathos to a Chinese Taiwan. One also might wonder about the reasons for a children's magazine to include such a heavy story—unless, of course, the only story that one could tell through baseball was one of alienation, longing, and loss.

The year 1977 saw the first formal entries into what would become a burgeoning field in Taiwan, baseball literature. It is also telling—given the incredible performance of Taiwan's youth baseball teams for almost a decade now—that both of these short stories were written from within explicit notions of humiliation and loss.

"Forced Out," an imagination of a poor boy's traumatic participation in elite-level baseball, won first prize in the United Daily News Literature Competition, and its author, Xiaoye (小野), won that year's Belles-Lettres Medal from Taiwan's China Art and Literature Association. In other words, this story did not appear as a minor work, but clearly spoke to dominant notions of how baseball fit into national and personal imaginations at that moment.

The entire story takes place during the course of a single at-bat, as the reader experiences with protagonist A-cai (阿財) his painful recollections and reflections on his involvement in the game. When A-cai comes to bat with the chance to win the Taiwan championship for his Divine Eagles, he has much more on his mind. There is A-cai's understanding that winning this title would be his only chance to ever visit America. But much weightier were the knowledge that his father had bet NT$200,000 (US$5000) on the opposing team to win, and also the horrible memory of his sister being given away to an evil neighbor to settle his father's previous gambling debts, only to die a horrible death soon after. A-cai seethes with feelings of powerlessness, regret, humiliation, and dreams of revenge as he finds himself in a full count.

Even after he hits the ball into far left field, though, the horror pursues him
all the way around the bases—"Far away America [. . .] I’m going to whip them all!" "Father don’t blame me. I’ll be a good filial son," "ox-headed and horse-faced demons [. . .] calling home the souls of the dead," "a terror of death, like looking at A-Jin’s mutilated little corpse [. . .]" (Y. Hsiao 1982: 139–151, Xiaoye 1979: 72–87). [until he is, of course, tagged out at home plate]

The story is a painful one to read. But our main concern is the thoroughness with which the many miseries and humiliations suffered by those residents of Taiwan not lucky or savvy enough to take advantage of the island’s “economic miracle” can be understood, and in medal-winning ways, through baseball

Finally, the author’s notes in a 2005 anthology clarify even more. Twenty-eight years after the publication of this landmark story, Xiaoye came clean with an apology for technical mistakes he had made in the story. He admitted that he had since learned that in the situation he had imagined, A-cai could only have been tagged out at home plate and not “forced out” (an awkward mistake since this was the title of the story). He also had “learned” that baserunners are not allowed to leave their bases until after a ball hit in the air falls to the ground (Xiaoye 2005: 32). I include this point here only for its absurdity, no one with the slightest acquaintance with the game could think that this was true. The author who wrote as “Xiaoye” (the Chinese pronunciation of the Japanese surname Ono), was a graduate biology student from Taipei named Li Yuan (李遠) who seemed to know nothing about baseball, other than its unmatched power in summoning the humiliations, fears and violence of Taiwan’s recent history.

Another important baseball short story—"The Invader," by Hsen-hao Liao (廖咸浩), now a renowned professor of literature at National Taiwan University—was published during this same year of 1977. This story is also written from the perspective of a standout young pitcher, whose childhood is scarred forever by baseball in a different way. This boy is named Taisheng (Tai Sheng), literally “born in Taiwan,” a common name for children of postwar mainland emigrants, and he has a child’s awareness of the postcolonial tensions in Taiwan surrounding the Japanese and their lasting cultural presence in Taiwan. The story is set in 1970 (the year of the Seven Tigers’ epic Williamsport defeat described above) in a Taipei military housing complex (juancun 賢村)—likely a literary device that allowed this second-generation “mainlander” to come into contact with the “Taiwanese” game of baseball

The main narrative follows Taisheng over the course of his preparation for a big game with a visiting Japanese youth baseball team from Ise, and over the blossoming of a childhood romance with the Taiwanese girl next door. He hurts his left shoulder practicing, and prays at the household altar that he will still be able to pitch well and to “awe” Yingzi next door. She dresses up like a beautiful bride for the big game, which Taisheng’s team loses. At the post-game party, Yingzi has little to say to Taisheng and ends up talking to the
winning pitcher of the Japanese side. When he can take no more, Taisheng screams at her, in Taiwanese, to go marry the guy. Soon after, his father is transferred to Banqiao, and he never sees Yingzi again (Liao 2005: 48–77).

A Taiwanese author in 1992 went so far as to sum up the history of Taiwan baseball with the Czech word *litost*, defined by writer Milan Kundera as “the synthesis of many [feelings]: grief, sympathy, remorse, and an indefinable longing. . . .] a state of torment caused by a sudden insight into one’s own miserable self” (Kundera 1981: 121–122). Only this concept of *li-tuo-si* (力脱死), the author claimed, could help us make sense of a history that included Taiwan’s love for and resistance against the Japanese, and so many players’ later suicides and deaths due to alcohol and drug abuse. Even Wu Mintian, the celebrated championship coach mentioned above, died estranged from his family, poor and alone on the island of Jinmen, to the everlasting *litost* of his hometown Jiayi (Yan 1992: 32–35). This China Tribune piece was titled “A New Formulation for Identity”; it is telling that this author seeks to frame Taiwanese history, culture and identity within this Kunderan condition.

One can also profit from this analysis in looking at two baseball-related films that were released in Taiwan in the mid-to-late 1980s. The first is “Taipei Story” (Qingmei zhuna 青梅竹馬), a 1985 film made by Edward Yang (Yang Dechang 楊德昌) about Taipei modernity and its discontents. The film co-stars singing idol Tsai Chin (Cai Qin 蔡琴) as A-zhen, an employee of a modern architectural firm who is laid off and soon engages in a seedy affair, abortion- and alcohol-soaked race to the bottom of Taipei’s “miracle.” What is interesting is the choice to have such a depressing scenario also revolve around the saga of this woman’s boyfriend A-long, a washed-up former Little League Baseball hero played by the legendary director Hou Hsiao-hsien (Hou Xiaoxian 侯孝賢). A-long is useless, good for little more than dreaming of moving to Los Angeles, watching old videotapes of Japanese and American professional baseball games, and starting fights with yuppies who ask him about his former stardom. He passes his time visiting another washed-up loser, an old teammate (played by director and screenwriter Wu Nien-jen [Wu Nianzhen 吳念真]) who destroyed his arm throwing curveballs as a young boy. They play sad games of catch in empty concrete rooms, and the friend, who is being cuckolded conspicuously and who has problems even feeding his many children, can only remember: “Practice! Practice! Williamsport! . . . Been all downhill since I left the army.”

Hou plays this sadness and alienation well (although shots of him swinging imaginary bats in quiet melancholy reveal truly poor technique), and Tsai’s own sad and flawed beauty seems appropriate to the story. Shots of a Presidential Place lit up for national celebration and of wild youth riding motorcycles and frolicking to Kenny Loggins’s “Footloose” create an image of Taipei: prosperity and happiness that evades the losers of 1985, represented revealingly here by former baseball players. For a film that contains such long and probing shots, A-long’s end comes fairly suddenly; he is stabbed twice in
the back by a young man who is stalking A-zen. Stuck out in the suburbs that of course represent this new prosperity, all A-long can do is sit down on the curb, bleed, smoke a cigarette, and, as he imagines images of his Little League victory parade 15 years previous playing on the TV set left out for garbage pickup, die (Taipei Story 1985).

Edward Yang was not ethnically Taiwanese, and it is possible that as such, he had little personal engagement with the game of baseball. The film “Taipei Story” in itself had very little to do with baseball; the story of loss and alienation that Yang wants us to understand as a real part of Taipei’s miraculous modernization could have been told perfectly well using any number of professions or back stories. It is interesting, then, that it made such perfect sense for Yang and screenwriter Chu Tien-wen (Zhu Tianwen 朱天文) to give A-long this particular experience. Again, why have loss and pain in modern Taiwan been imagined and remembered so effectively—and often by Taiwan’s “mainlander” artists—through its own “national game”?

A final example to investigate here is the Taiwanese film “Struggle,” made in 1988 as an oddly conceived fictional biopic of Taiwanese baseball star Guo Yuanzhui, the former Golden Dragon LLB star then in the eighth year of his career with the Chunichi Dragons in Japan (and who played “himself” in the film). The film begins with an extended shot of a man watching bitterly Guo’s (known there as Kaku Genji) pitching and hitting exploits on television. We soon learn that the voyeur is Guo/Kaku’s fictional childhood friend and longtime catcher A-de (阿德), who is quitting baseball after being cut by Chunichi. The next Guo/Kaku hears about his friend is from their childhood teacher, who has to break the news that down-and-out A-de has committed two gang murders back in Taiwan and has been sentenced to death.

Most of the film consists of long flashbacks of the two men’s childhood friendship and baseball toils, and plays as a much more typical rags-to-riches, poor-kids-hitting-a-tire-with-a-bat version of the Taiwanese Dream. We learn how the two learn true discipline (mirroring, of course, the capitalist narrative of individual effort and success so dominant in 1980s Taiwan) from a crusty old coach and come to excel in baseball as a pitcher-catcher battery for all time. Once more, though, the viewer is amazed to see how this more staid “baseball” story is shoehorned into such utter tragedy, the film ending with Guo/Kaku falling to his knees on a Japanese beach when he “hears” the government’s bullets fired into his lifelong friend back in Hualien in eastern Taiwan (Struggle 1988).

These examples are cited once again to provide a full reading of the baseball triumphs of the 1970s–1980s. Beyond the predictable triumphalism of the state and its ideologues, Taiwan’s artists and consumers seemed most comfortable with narratives that included within baseball the pain, loss and humiliations that members of modern Taiwanese society had experienced over the last several decades—“equal treatment under the emperor,” “Free China,” “economic miracle,” or not. In the case of modern Taiwan, it should seem quite clear that the only honest narrative would be one that included
sadness, regret, violence, hubris, and lies. Could any subject encapsulate these “secret spaces” and national embarrassments more than baseball?

"Fellowship of the Flawed," Part II: Cheaters

"1981: Taiwan credits their fifth Little League World Series championship in a row with their ability to retain most of the same players from their 1977 squad."

the third of eight “Great Moments In Little League World Series History.”

The Onion (2006)

In 1971, “Legendary Lloyd” McClendon and his team from Gary, Indiana, faced the Tainan Giants in the championship game in Williamsport. The five-foot-eight-inch-tall McClendon put Gary in front with an early home run (his fifth in five World Series at-bats!), but the Giants’ own phenom, five-foot-four-inch-tall pitcher Xu Jinmu (許金木), known throughout Taiwan as “Buckteeth” (neg-khi-a 兩齒仔), was able to overpower his opponents and lead Tainan to a nine-inning’s victory.

The lanky Xu towered over his teammates, and with his big black thick eyeglasses was an imposing presence on the mound. He was a familiar presence as well for Taiwanese fans; he had played on Taiwan’s 1970 LLBWS representative Seven Tigers squad as well, when he was dubbed the “Descended Demon Tiger.” Xu, from Tainan, was not one of the seven Tiger players from Jiayi that year, where the team had been supposedly based; in 1971 he was no longer a ringer, but leader of his hometown Giants. But one of his former teammates explained to me that Xu’s 1971 participation in the Little League World Series was dubious as well. In the rural, not-yet-“miraculous” Taiwan of the late 1950s, many families were late to report births to the state, so that even before world Little League dominance was a gleam in the eyes of any in Taiwan, the island happened to have a surfeit of rural boys and girls older than the official records said they were. By the 1970s, this common rural resistance to state surveillance was coming in handy for Taiwan’s youth baseball program (Yu 2007: 69–71). Xu never grew much at all past his Little League height, an indication that he had enjoyed more days and years in the Tainan sun than said the official records. And it is perhaps for this reason that Xu is now so famously a recluse today, a factory worker who refuses to talk to the media or even to admit that he was the legendary “Buckteeth” Xu of 1971.

Xu was not the first Taiwan player to enjoy several turns in the spotlight. Yu Hongkai starred on both the 1968 Maple Leaf and 1969 Golden Dragons teams, supposedly representing schools on opposite sides of the island, and then in 1970, for good measure, played for two different Taipei school teams challenging Jiayi for the title. This “all-star team” trend, despite the gentle warnings from American Little League officials, would not end soon. As late
As 1979, the Puzi Elementary School Tornadoes world championship team included two ringers from elsewhere in Jiayi County (Su 1996, 55, 71).

These teams generated great and deserved suspicion on the part of an American public unable to fathom the source of this invincible Taiwan baseball dynasty. The phrase "Taiwanese Little League baseball," like "Texas high school football" or "East German women's swimming," became a standard metaphor for those who would use youth sports to achieve victory with no regard for the rules of fair competition. Yet this skepticism about their Little League program mattered little to the Taiwanese public of the time. Baseball stardom became an almost universal aspiration among the boys and young men of Taiwan. Li Kunze (李坤哲), who starred professionally for the China Trust Whales in the late 1990s, remembered.

I grew up watching baseball. I remember the days when everyone would wake up in the middle of the night to watch our national teams perform in international competitions. They were national heroes. We all wanted to represent our country and be a hero.

P. Li 2000, 8

These triumphs were especially thrilling for Taiwanese people given the island's unique geopolitical squeeze described above. The sight of these Taiwanese boys annually making mincemeat of the strong and confident American teams was pure bliss to anyone hoping to strike back and prove the strength and general worth of Taiwan to their American "allies" so busy selling out Taiwan in favor of relations with the PRC during the 1970s.

Originally, Americans in Williamsport had cheered on enthusiastically the Taizhong Golden Dragons and Jiayi Seven Tigers, proud that, as The Sporting News put it, the great American game had "reached base in another nation" (Keyes 1969). No doubt also influenced by cold war notions and horror stories of Chinese communism, they took to the ROC teams and their "classy" spirit (Sundeen 2001: 257). But, by 1971, American fans were beginning to boo the Taiwanese Little Leaguers for winning in such expert fashion (Van Auken and Van Auken 2001: 169). A cute "Oriental" (also The Sporting News) underdog seat by a reliable cold war ally was fun to root for; a "big yellow machine" (as the New York Times saw the Taiwan Little League program [Van Auken and Van Auken 2001: 176]) that rolled over American 12-year-olds every summer was a different story.

By 1973, it was altogether too much to take, as that year's Taman Giants swept their three Williamsport opponents by a total score of 57-0, and on three no-hitters! (Just days earlier, in the Senior League world tourney at Gary, the team from Huaxing Middle School in Taipei won their five games by the combined score of 26-0.) Now, American fans booed these Taiwanese youngsters as they took the field against boys from Tucson who, along with devastated players from Bitburg and Tampa, just seemed to be playing the game more fairly. The losing Tucson manager stated, "There's no way they're
that good following the rules,” and “bitter” LLB officials planned to investigate whether Taiwan’s program was violating rules on “eligibility, district size, and practice time” (Little League Plans 1973: 42; Taiwan Little Leaguers 1973; Taiwan, on 3d No-Hitter 1973: V.3). We now know, of course, that they were, and that little effort was made even to hide these practices. An article by Fang Junling (方俊靈), who had coached the Giants in 1971, described his club’s workout schedule as they prepared for that year’s championship run. He ran his 12-year-olds through what was quite simply a daily regimen of child abuse: ideally practicing for 9 hours and 20 minutes a day, and his pitchers throwing up to 300 pitches a day (including, on some days, 100 curveballs) (Fang 1971: 39–40).10

The official LLB probe somehow turned up none of the serious violations of rules that we now know to have occurred; Taiwan’s baseball officials were let off in exchange for promises to run their baseball program “in close conformity” with LLB regulations (Little League Clears Taiwan 1973: V.8). But allegations of cheating were regular for the next two decades as Americans remained suspicious of Taiwanese supremacy in the game. Indeed, a Philadelphia Inquirer columnist put it most memorably, racially and comically in a piece titled, “Taiwan Plays Ball Like It’s Tong War,” citing a popular belief that “Chiang Kai-Shek had hired a band of professional midgets just to humiliate the U.S.” (Lyon 1974: 1-E)

In 1974, Rolling Stone featured an article on this “Chinese juggernaut” that every fall provided the rare “moments of glory Chiang Kai-shek’s government had[d] experienced of late.” That year’s world championship (Taiwan’s fifth), won by Lide (“Establish Virtue”) School in Gaoxiong, brought Taiwan’s record in Williamsport over the last six years to 15–1 (including 13 shutouts); they had outscored their opponents 171–11. This was no longer cute; now LLB officials used predictable analogies to the “sneak attack at Pearl Harbor” to describe Taiwanese perfidy. Now, white fans shouted “Beat those chinks!” at the (mostly-black) New Haven team that faced Taiwan in the first round (and lost 16–0). Before the final game (Lide 12, Red Bluff, CA, 1), one fan avowed, “This is where we make our stand. We’ve got to stop the Yellow Peril now” (Lukas 1974: 58, 63).

However, influential journalist Anthony Lukas provided an appropriate Rolling Stone twist to this piece as he also worked to find the voices of resistance to this white racist discourse. He described the “roving pack of 30 Williamsport girls [. . . who] transferred their allegiance to the mysterious Chinese,” following the Taiwanese boys around and chanting “Taiwan, Taiwan is the best. you can forget about the West.” And after absorbing a thorough first-round defeat, the coach of the New Haven squad became another convert. He and his players figured out quickly that the same Williamsport fans who called the Taiwanese “chinks” were the same ones who would usually be calling his team “niggers.” By the day of the championship, he was wearing a Taiwanese-style “coolie” hat, waving an ROC flag, and fully enjoying an ironic version of the international friendship that LLB professed to
promote (Lukas 1974: 63). As was Lukas’s point, though, this coach was in the minority. Americans became obsessed with Taiwanese “hyperconformity” that they fantasized as being the opposite of the healthy upbringing they provided their children in the US (Sundeen 2001: 257). In 1975, the American Little League establishment even went so far as to ban all foreign teams for a year in 1975 in order to guarantee an American “winner” (Little League Bars 1974: 1, 51).

These questions of cheating and utter deceit do not usually emerge in Taiwan’s glossy official narratives of “Chinese baseball world champions.” However, besides the many literary and filmic examples cited above, most historical and analytical studies do bring up the question, often, in Michael Herzfeld’s words, as “a source of external embarrassment [. . .] that nevertheless provide[s] insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (Herzfeld 2004: 3). This discourse often borders on the masochistic: one Taiwanese PhD student wrote in a 2002 online book review:

I am writing a thesis about Taiwanese amateur baseball under which many appalling conditions occurred, including over-training, fabrication scandals, vicious under-the-table recruitment, lack of education, just to name a few, all of which will subvert the beautiful (sic) images held by common people. [. . .] my intention is to expose the dark sides of Taiwanese amateur baseball.

C. Yu 2002

The cutting humiliations and guilt associated with Taiwan’s Little League Baseball program have made this outwardly glorious era one that can only be remembered in terms that tie into the degradations and abuses suffered by Taiwanese people under both of its twentieth century authoritarian regimes.

Conclusion

The many jumbled and precarious directions along which Taiwanese baseball developed under KMT rule did not resemble in the least the neat white straight lines of the baseball diamonds that hosted this movement. Under the Nationalists’ martial law rule (1948–87), baseball was an important realm for Taiwanese people, especially the poorer residents of the south and east, to register their own contributions to Taiwan culture and society. A provocative and fun mixture of mild pro-Japanese nostalgia, resistance against KMT hegemony in Taiwan and American hegemony in East Asia, and even Aboriginal resistance to the double oppression of the manlander and Taiwanese Han presence, could all be voiced in the language of baseball. And what made this dissent safe was the Nationalists’ own understanding of the role of sports in modern society. Their standard two-part philosophy, developed when the party ruled China in the late 1920s and 1930s, was that popular
participation in sport served to integrate a diverse population into a single nation-state, and that outstanding sporting performances on international stages were valuable opportunities to win national face, sympathy, and even allies in the ever-changing world of the twentieth century (Morris 2004b: 100-237). Thus, in many ways baseball represented a table of negotiation, where Taiwanese baseball communities exchanged measures of integration for measures of independent expression, measures of “Chinese” identity for measures of pro-Japanese nostalgia, and measures of the martial-law autocratic Nationalist state for measures of an independent Taiwanese culture and society.

The KMT’s “Chinese culture” was based on myths of shared ethnic-cultural origin, fantastically irredentist education and images of the world, and the protection of mainland antiquities. However, its doppelgänger, the “Taiwanese” culture that grew within it, and which was centered to a large degree on the culture of baseball, was a much more personal, intimate, even existential affair that gained much of its power from the shared pain and humiliation of its members. This “national” culture of baseball for decades has possessed a unique power to bring out and recall the worst (as well as the best) in its participants for over a century.

Notes
1 This chapter first appeared (in a slightly different format) in my book Colonial Project. National Game: A History of Baseball in Taiwan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
2 The KMT also kept on payroll “professional students” who spied on and infiltrated pro-Taiwanese organizations including baseball and softball teams (Dang 1991: 163).
3 The New York Times reported, “A brief fistfight broke out among the spectators during the game.... between two factions of Chinese fans, one group composed of people born on Taiwan and another of those born in mainland China” (Taiwan Wins 1971: V.2).
4 Using the 1971 exchange rate of US$1:NTS40.
5 There are 53 pictures in all featured at National Council on Physical Fitness and Sports: 2005.
6 Chiang’s wife Song Mei ling was less forgiving. Huaxing Middle School, which enjoyed her generous support—to the tune of NTS3 billion [US$75 million]—was founded for the education of the children of revolutionary martyrs. In 1969, in special recognition of the Taizhong Golden Dragons’ world championship, those players too were awarded enrollment. The Seven Tigers players received no such invitation, and instead enrolled en masse in Meihe Middle School in southern Pingdong, creating an instant baseball rivalry which captivated the island during the 1970s. Interview with Lin Huwei, Taizhong, Taiwan, 30 July 2004.
7 Interview with anonymous former Little League player, Taiwan, summer 2007.
8 The good (if short-lived) American sportsmanship mentioned above also drew comment in Taiwan (Welcome the Seven Tigers 1970: 2).
9 For good measure, the Giants’ utter domination can be seen in the following statistics: They had a team batting average of .417. Their pitchers faced only 26 batters in the three games (the minimum would be 54), striking out 46 and walking
two. One of these attempted to steal against the Giants, and was cut down at second base. Their opponents committed 13 errors, 10 wild pitches and 15 passed balls. Taiwan had only one error overall (Carry 1974: 66-67).

10 For more factual information on brutal training of young teams in the 1970s 80s, see Yu 2007 84-90.

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