

Cultural Struggles on the Body in Japan and Asia **: When should we use ‘modern’ or ‘traditional’ body techniques?**

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Thinking of the body as the arena of cultural struggles

This paper discusses multiculturalism from the viewpoint of focusing on the cultural and historical body, where memory and the representation of various body cultures exist. Within the body of Japanese people the following body cultures exist: *Ki* (spirit), *Hara* or *Tanden* (the lower abdomen), *Tanden* Training, *Taisō* (gymnastics), *Radio Taisō*, modern sports and X sports like snowboarding and paragliding, which are popular among younger generations. These body cultures are complicatedly intertwined in the body. To study the history of the body and the political power that influences it, it is necessary to study the body cultures present in Japan before the introduction of modern sports from England and America.

In addition to the body cultures in Japan, it is necessary to recognize the histories of body cultures in other countries and regions as well. In Asia, people in countries that were previously ruled under Japanese colonialism (e.g., Korea, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, etc.) were forced to practice not only modern sports, but also *Taisō*, *Radio Taisō*, Physical Education in school and military discipline. This process was utilized as a nationalistic system to foster the spirit of “We are Japanese” through the medium of the body. It is political power that controls the process of creating “national culture”, taking advantage of the sense of solidarity through representation and bodily experiences. National cultures today were created based on the political characteristics represented as “Japaneseness” and “Asianness” from the geopolitics of Japan, Asia, Europe and America.

The body has been described as a “blank screen” or “sign receiving system”, ever open to be constructed and reconstructed by external texts or discourses (Shilling 1993, 39). However, there arise a lot of struggles concerning the signification, form, and role of the body, and these struggles change from one historical situation to the other. The body is more and other than just a “blank screen”, it is “arena of struggles”. Therefore we must understand the microphysics of power and its transformation in accordance to the socio-political overtones of society today.

The human bodies are living by utilizing the physical and spiritual “mosaics” built in them through years of cultural and environmental stimuli. Therefore, attention has to

be directed towards the complicated and multi-layered bodily aspects of the “people”, which are latent behind “sports” and its history.

Which body in which sport?

Before British modern sports spread throughout the world, there were many more festivities in communities. If sport is “*something that unbends the mind by turning it off from care*” (Malcolmson 1973, 4), it is not only what we know from modern times.

The situation of early British sport can be described as follows: A profane and pleasure-seeking atmosphere dominated the wake. In a great many parishes the feast must have been one of the main occasions each year for good eating and abundant drinking, for music and dancing, for sports and entertainments, and for hospitality. A wake normally included several of the familiar sports and pastimes of the period: wrestling, or boxing, or cudgeling; perhaps donkey racing, a wheelbarrow race (while blindfolded), a smock race for women; contests might be arranged in hot hasty-pudding eating, grinning through a horse collar (the funniest won), chasing a greased pig, running in sacks, or smoking pipes of tobacco; at some wakes bull-baiting, cock-fighting, or badger-baiting were featured. The wake was a community's own petty carnival. Often there were stalls with gingerbread, nuts, and fruit; sometimes a traveling fiddler attended to play for the dancers; and housewives usually made special preparations for the entertainments, which were expected of them (Malcolmson 1973, 19).

However, to men who especially valued industriousness, frugality, and prudence, many of the traditional diversions were apt to appear scandalously self-indulgent and dissipated - wasteful of time, energy and money (Malcolmson 1973, 89). On the other hand, it was argued that sport was the training ground for courage, perseverance, physical vigour, and group loyalty (Malcolmson 1973, 167). Athletic sports were said to be “*an excellent preparation for the military exercises, and render men fit to become defenders of the country*” (Lawrence 1747).

We can see the transformation of the meaning of ‘body’ through a historical perspective and cultural contexts (Mauss 1968, Lévi-Strauss 1968, Fairs 1976, Bourdieu 1980, 1987, Heinemann 1980, Yamaguchi 1982, Eichberg 1991, 1993, Harvey et al. 1991, Theberge 1991, Loy et al. 1993, Maguire 1993, Shimizu 1993). The “sporting body” was understood on the base of the control of violence (Elias 1939), of the

‘disciplined body’ (Foucault 1975), and of market economy, puritanism and capitalism as well as vanishing traditional habits in local communities in the Westernized regions in the World.

Then, what is the meaning of “body”(and “sporting body”) in Japan? What elements have shaped and redefined the meaning of physicality? In this paper, I first note the plurality of meaning in *Taisō* and *Radio Taisō* in relation to body culture in Japan (Korsgaard 1986, Shilling 1991, Eichberg 1996, Shimizu 1998). Second, I discuss how *Hara* (or *Tanden*, the lower abdomen empowered), *Ki* and *Nanba* (special coordinated movement of hands and legs) and their development have been stifled through Western doctrines and methods of physical being. The practice of *Taisō* creates struggles with traditional bodily skills, which people have obtained through the long-term evolution as the name of their ‘modernization’. Third, I discuss the meaning of today's physicality and the Japanese body as seen through education and Japanese sports.

***Taisō* in Japan**

It was Amane Nishi, a founder of Japanese philosophical jargon and author of soldier's moral law by the Ministry of Army, who originally introduced the Japanese word *Taisō* as an equivalent to the foreign words *gymnastiek*, *gymnastics* and *gymnastique*, in Dutch, English and French respectively (Ohba 1991). Nishi most likely translated the expression “*art d'exercer le corps*” in the 1868 edition of Noël's French-Japanese Dictionary (which carries the seals of both the Army Library and Army College of Japan) into *Taisō-jyutsu*, which later became *Taisō* or *Taijyutsu*.

At that time, the Japanese Army introduced the “*art d'exercer le corps*” as a method to train soldiers physically in combination with military drill commands as a means of improving their basic physical strength. Some of the books written on this form of training carry the seals of the Numazu Military School, the Army College or the Army Library. Such records are meaningful for studying the origin of *Taisō* in Japan.

The first university established in Japan, Nankō (1871), used the word *Taisō* in its *Shatyu-Taisō-Hōzu* (Illustration of Body and *Taisō*), published in May 1872, and in July 1874, the Ministry of Education and Culture published *Taisō-Sho* (The Book of *Taisō*), in which the word *Taisō* is commonly used. Compulsory use of the word *Taisō* began with the *Revised Curriculum of Elementary Schools* implemented on 19 May 1873.

Thus, *Taisō* was in the beginning deeply associated with military drills as a result of Nishi's official positions as a concurrent member in the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Army. In this sense, it *Taisō* was linked to the issue of how

to build a modern army structure nationwide.

The primary theme in constructing a modern nation at that time was to improve bodily physique and to nurture strong modern soldiers. For this purpose, it became a great theme for the nation to improve the physical strength of its citizens. As a result, *Taisō* became deeply associated with disciplinary education and physical training in schools in particular. Arinori Mori, who became the first Japanese Minister of Education and Culture in 1885, adopted a policy of disciplinary education and physical training, and introduced *Taisō* as a required subject at schools in the *School Laws* promulgated in 1886. In the same year, he issued the *Normal School's Law* “for the purpose of training teachers how to educate students in a fashion that nurtures a serious disposition yet obedience and friendship” (Taga 1960, 191). Under this law, all students that attended Normal Schools received military *Taisō* training and were required to live in dormitories to experience disciplined lifestyle. Mori believed that being obedient to rules and orders and friendly to others while maintaining a serious attitude were the three essential elements to be realized in education. Therefore, he attached importance to physical training complemented by discipline. Article 11 of the *Curriculum for Elementary Schools* (enacted in 1891) prescribes, “*The objective of Taisō is to provide balanced growth for school children, enabling them to maintain their health and have cheerful, strong spirit. And it is also to provide habit of obeying rules*” (Takenoshita 1951, 30). *Taisō* became a tool for improving health and hygiene in society as well as heightening group consciousness and strengthening the awareness of obeying rules and superiors. The first Japanese *Teachers' Curriculum of Taisō as a Subject* was made by Michiakira Nagai and others in 1913. He studied Swedish gymnastic exercise and sports in America, Britain and Sweden, and to make disciplined body more popular in school education that originated from Arinori Mori. He obtained professorships at Tokyo Higher Normal School (University of Tsukuba now) and Tokyo Womens Higher Normal School (Ochanomizu University now) after studying abroad. There, he introduced Swedish gymnastics with *Taisō* as the core. He wrote also *Teaching Book of Taisō in School*, in which he described the following four objectives for *Taisō* as a subject of learning:

- (1.) *To achieve well-balanced development of every part of the body,*
- (2.) *To achieve complete development of each function,*
- (3.) *To develop the capacity of quick and lasting action,*
- (4.) *To form the habit of maintaining discipline and a high regard for cooperation.*

These four objectives can be achieved only when combined, not individually
(Nagai 1913, 11-12).

Furthermore, Nagai emphasized that, in terms of anatomy, it is important to keep the chest straight because it is the most fundamental and important part of the human body (Nagai 1913, 38).

It was Nagai who created the word command, *Kiotsuke!* (Attention!), and the attitude of attention which we often hear and see in classes of physical training and various parts of a school in Japan. He gave a detailed explanation of the way to deliver a command and the way to come to attention, using various illustrations (Nagai 1913, 54-55).

Nagai's ideologies did not only deal with *Taisō* in general, but were commonly applied to military *Taisō*, military discipline, marching, field day (*Undō-kai*) and fieldtrips, when teachers and students visited, for example, the Imperial Tomb of Emperor Meiji (1852-1912) on Tenchō-Setzu, 3 November, the birthday of Emperor Meiji, and shrines. In Japanese schools, one of the major purposes of the fieldtrip was to visit the Imperial Tomb (Nagai 1940, 4-28; The Editorial Committee, 1997, 41-43).

The regulations of school culture interacted deeply with the social conditions at that time, such as the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). A school is a place where education is provided, but more than that, through disciplinary education and physical training, it can also function to mold one's body and spirit into a form desired by the nation while skillfully hiding the original purpose. *Radio Taisō*, from 1928 to now, was another tool for making the disciplinary body, especially in the time of war.

Radio Taisō

Radio Taisō was established in Japan in November 1928, as one of the memorial enterprises at the time of the enthronement of Emperor Showa (1901-1989). It was introduced by the Department of Simplified Insurance of the Ministry of Mail and Communication together with the Japan Broadcasting Association, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Association of Life Insurance Companies (Editorial Committee, 1979, 27).

The *Radio Taisō* movement was created by students of Kikuo Mihashi, who was forced to resign from the Tokyo Higher Normal School because of frictions between Jigorō Kanō and Michiakira Nagai. Until today, *Radio Taisō* contains many elements of Danish gymnastics. There was some influence of Kikuo Mihashi, who worked, against the Minister of Education and Culture, for the popularization of Danish gymnastic exercise.

The use of *Radio Taisō* spread throughout schools, factories, corporations and local organizations. In 1931, *Radio Taisō Clubs* came into fashion, a trend that expanded quickly in juncture with block associations and National Youth Association groups. They first became popular in the Tokyo metropolitan area, but soon afterwards they were widely accepted throughout Japan, sponsored by the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Education and Culture. In 1933, *Radio Taisō* participants numbered 44 million in total, 75 million in 1935 and some 122 million in 1937. Although *Radio Taisō Clubs* were primarily formed to assemble people for *Taisō* in the morning of summer vacation, these clubs also performed when hoisting the National Flag, bowing towards the Imperial Palace, singing the National Anthem and during patriotic marches (Editorial Committee, 1979, 93-94).

Under the name of *Radio Taisō*, the formation of everyday life was configured and the awakening of self-awareness of nationality through physical drills and calisthenics was reinforced. Furthermore, as the Japanese war machine accelerated, patriotism rose at a fevered pitch, and *Radio Taisō* was held at shrines throughout Japan, including the famous Meiji Shrine. It was then that *Radio Taisō* was elevated to the heights of spiritual ceremony to worship the Late Meiji Emperor through bodily movement and became a “prayer performance” to overcome national crises. It was considered the pinnacle of patriotic spirit when the nation concurrently performed *Taisō* together without the accompaniment of the *Taisō* music, which commonly lead people into mobilization.

In order to acclimate the citizens of occupied countries, such as Manchuria, Taiwan, New Guinea, to Japan's colonization, *Radio Taisō* dominated the airwaves. Even today, the Japanese overseas practice *Radio Taisō* to confirm some parts of their identity whenever they gather.

A man who participated in *Radio Taisō* at his company at that time expressed this as follows: “*May the day come as soon as possible when Radio Taisō is practiced all over Japan in accord with the sound of ‘one, two, three...’ and also its universal application! It will be proven to be the greatest boon for the national health. The crystallization of the consolidation of the people will thereby be soon revealed as the spirit of substantial strength without ornament. The Japanese spirit, loyalty to the Emperor and love of our country will imperceptibly gradually reach our glorious Land of Rice in harmony*” (Niisato 1930, 99).

Apart from the contribution to ‘national identity’ building, *Radio Taisō* can be seen as a bodily expression of modernity. “*Radio Taisō is the means of mobilizing an individual's body for society as a blind effort towards modernity, decorated with such*

key words as health, rationality, efficiency and home” (Kuroda 1996, 111-112). It will be necessary more closely to investigate the connection of body and identity, modernity and nationalism in *Taisō*.

Radio Taisō is currently practiced widely at kindergartens, schools, factories, corporations, hospitals, prisons, meetings and festivities. Its main practitioners are primary school pupils during summer vacation at schools, shrine gardens and local festivities.

Taisō and *Radio Taisō* became convenient tools to create subordinate spirit through physical exercises to unify the nation under the Emperor. This was emphasized particularly during the wartime, and *Taisō* and *Radio Taisō* became effective tools for colonization during the Japanese invasions, though their effect may have remained superficial.

It has been said that “power is in hiding itself and usually takes the form of a norm to represent itself as something realistic and concrete” (Yamamoto 1984, 200). There exist some states of different nature in each individual's body. One of them is the “body” as nurtured by school culture especially through the process of disciplinary education and physical training such as *Taisō*.

The fact that the sports culture of Japan grew through school culture, means that the physical characteristics obtained under this particular influence are closely related to each individual's sporting body.

Hara or Tanden, the lower abdomen

There exists some bodily property that Japanese have traditionally safeguarded deep inside their body while practicing *Taisō*. It is the movement of *Nanba* and the recognition of *Hara* (or *Tanden*, the lower abdomen). *Nanba* is a “body technique” in which the right leg is moved forward together with the right shoulder, followed by the left leg together with the left shoulder, without swinging the arms back and forth widely. This body technique is used in martial arts and can also be found in other Japanese cultural contexts such as in the *Oshi* (pushing) of *Sumo* wrestling and in movements of *Kabuki* theatre. Japanese, who used to walk and run in the way of *Nanba* by their own, had to be forced to change this practice by walking and running in groups, synchronizing the movement of their right leg/left arm and the left leg/right arm with arm swing. This was effected by disciplined group walk training developed in the army and in the modern educational system (Takechi 1989; Kohno 1990).

At the very foundation of *Nanba* we find the recognition of *Hara*. What is *Hara*? There are three *Tandens* as they are also called: the upper *Tanden* is the space between

the eyes, the middle *Tanden* in the center of the chest, and the lower *Tanden* in the lower abdomen. The latter is in the focus of this paper. Whilst the Japanese naturally comprehend where and what the lower *Tanden* is, physically speaking it is located approximately two inches below the navel and a third of the way into the inner abdomen. This cannot be anatomically determined, but people consider this to be the center of the body.

It is therefore very important for the followers of *Wushu* (martial arts) and *Budō* to be explicitly aware of *Tanden*. It is the central point at which the spirit and body converge. In particular, following the Mujushin School, Tōru Shirai (1783-1843), who later developed his own unique school, perfected the training method. According to the *Tenshinden-Ittoryu way of sword*, Shirai denies the dualistic concepts of polarity in everything. According to Shirai, since one is conscious of oneself, the enemy exists for one. Thus, if one is not conscious of oneself, the enemy vanishes. Therefore, the opposition disappears once one is no longer conscious of one's own body and the sword to kill the enemy and in consequence, the conflict also vanishes. If one forgets one's own body and its opposite altogether and one's mind attains serenity, everything will be harmonized into oneness. Thus the mind becomes profoundly serene and every delusion vanishes, allowing one to attain the spiritual state, in which one's self and the entire universe are one and the same. It is very significant that, in this flow of nature, one moves and acts naturally. By concentrating the *Ki* into *Hara (Tanden)* and emptying the mind of distractions, one can reach the condition in which oneself and the opposition become equal (see Kohno 1991, 223-224).

It is said that one can exercise this very stable power when one concentrates one's *Ki* and *Hara (Tanden)* so that the mind and the body form an absolute unity. In the concept of *Hara (Tanden)*, the mind becomes a blank slate, tranquil and undisturbed. That was why Japanese people in competitions were urged to, "Concentrate your power in *Hara*", "Settle your *Ki* down in *Hara*", "Place your spirit in your loins".

***Ki*, the energy of the body**

Then, what is *Ki*? *Ki* flows through the entire body in balance, and one is able to exercise one's optimal physical ability when this energy is summoned equally from all points in the body (Kohno 1991, 310-312). *Ki* is to be distinguished from the mind. It can be regarded as the medium connecting spirit, emotion and the body. Thus, the utmost power is produced when the mind, *Ki* and the body are fully one.

Keikaku Hakuin, the famous Japanese Zen master, originally called public attention to *Tanden* and circulated its idea widely by his book *Yasen Kanwa* (Idle

Evening Talks on the Ship). Hakuin taught “the way of training *Tanden*” to young monks who became physically ill or mentally neurotic during the Zen training. It was essential to teach *Tanden* to the warriors who lived every moment ready to die so that they could live a healthy life in the concurrence of mind and body, and not be daunted at times of peril.

This method of training *Tanden* became a folk remedy and means of maintaining health. Pondering how to solve the various ailments of the body, the search was in Japan directed towards this method of training the intangible, *Ki* and *Tanden*, opposed to the scientific approach of Western medicine and psychology.

It was Harumichi Hida (1883-1956) who adhered to, mastered and popularized the “way of health” by means of *Ki* and *Tanden* training. Hida himself was in feeble health since his childhood and constantly on medication. At the age of 17, Hida determined to create his own unique “way of health” and wrote books on physiology and anatomy, which were widely read. His goal was to develop the utmost potential in every aspect of the human body including internal organs, physique and physical power. At the age of 20, through his assiduous endeavors, he was able to create and transform himself from a frail child into a robust, confident physical specimen maintaining a finely tuned constitution, physique and physical power. The core of this approach was to strengthen *Tanden*.

“The strength derived from Tanden is not a mechanical, physical force. It is a force interwoven with ‘life’, ‘the light’ and ‘the way’. It is strong and yet flexible. It is heavy, and at the same time light. It is brilliant and yet subdued.... This strength is no other than the ultimate unity of all forces.

This is the force of Hara and Koshi (the loins) unified, which arises out of perfect posture. One cannot attain this state of physical enlightenment with a clouded mind. On the contrary, when this force is born, every function of thought stands still. The spiritual process instantaneously ceases. It is ‘clarity’, ‘serenity’ and ‘harmonious beauty’....

The strength of Hara (Tanden) is not a mere, insipid mechanical force. Rather it is a spiritual force, a vital force emanating throughout the entire body. It is a strong and radiating energy. At the very moment, the center of the body and spirit are unified, the force becomes so intensely focused that one properly channeled stomp of a foot will drive a foot-shaped floorboard into the ground or shatter a log with a 1-foot circumference” (Kohno, 1991:108).

Traditional body in the context of present-day education and sports

The concept of *Hara (Tanden)* has not yet been practiced in educational systems for

reasons related to political power, but it has been practiced in popular body culture. However, facing the deteriorating of educational quality and the danger that children are losing their physical strength, some observers recently have begun to advocate the training of the traditional concept of *Hara* (Saitoh 1999, 2000).

In the field of sports, for example, a high school basketball team trained its players in the techniques of *Kobujutsu*, the ancient Japanese martial arts, improved their agility, and the team went on to rank as one of the top 16 teams in a All Japan High School Basketball Tournament (Educational TV, 19 September 2001). In another case, a high school baseball team trained its players attaching importance to *Hara (Tanden)* so that they could focus their thoughts more easily, and the team placed third in the prefectural high school baseball tournament (*Asahi Shimbun*, 30 June 2001).

Thinking of body cultures from the standpoint of the future

As stated above, an abundance of history exists within the human body. Each moment of history is the result of encounters where the proper body technique to adopt was decided by those wielding the political power at the time and the ensuing struggle with the body cultures already ingrained in the people.

In every country and region, the individual body is formed of various body cultures that overlap and intertwine with one another in a complicated manner. Of those body cultures, some are considered and represented as “traditional” body cultures, which help establish the identity of “one’s people” or “one’s nation”. This is the same process utilized to foster the “We are Japanese” nationalistic system using the body as a medium, and political power controls the process of creating “national culture” by taking advantage of the sense of solidarity through representation and bodily experiences.

Particularly in Asia, Japan once had much influence on body cultures, including *Taisō* and various sports, through its colonization politics. Some of those body cultures are viewed as “Asianness” from the standpoint of Europe or America. In Asia, some countries have attempted to establish its own identity while, at the same time, having a sense of inferiority to Europe and America in terms of its position and body cultures as it strives for superiority among Asian nations.

However, as it is clear from the history of body cultures in Japan as argued in this paper, the history of the body and its representation are always subject to political power, and is thus very arbitrary. We must not forget that our bodies are formed from various cultures that overlap and are intertwined with one another in a complicated manner (Maffesoli 1996, Eichberg 1998).

While realizing how our bodies have been formed, it is necessary to study how to

handle cultural essentialism and the concept of identity closely connected to regional cultural essentialism. Taking the history of body cultures in each country and region into account, we must study what body cultures are proper for Asia in the future. In short, we must now think of body cultures from the standpoint of the future.

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