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Spinning the Rings: The Media and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics

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Abstract: Olympic organizers have used a mix of spin and patriotic arm-twisting to sell the 2020 Games in their attempt to rebrand Japan as open and multicultural. But another Japan - chauvinist and fretting about its place in a globalized world – keeps showing through.

It has become something of a running joke that Tokyo's pitch to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to host the 2020 Games lauded the city's "ideal climate" with its "many days of mild and sunny weather," allowing the world's top athletes to "perform at their best" (Foster, 2018). The organizers were indeed referring to Tokyo's suffocating, occasionally lethal summer (the submission cites the "ideal dates" from July 24th to the closing ceremony on August 9th), when the morning walk to the train local station becomes a sweaty test of endurance, let alone running a long-distance competitive race. The only conceivably worse places to stage the event, joked author Robert Whiting (2016) would be, "say, Death Valley, California or the Horn of Africa."

Lies and spin are as much a part of Olympic tradition as flag-waving and tears on the medal podium. Governments trumpet the shared prosperity and great swell in national pride that supposedly comes to the host, but not the corruption, environmental and architectural vandalism, or eye-watering costs. Japan's navigable waterways were obliterated in the run-up to the 1964 Games, which also stoked a boom in shoddy construction and bid rigging. The 2004 Games have been blamed for contributing to the economic collapse of Greece (which may have exceeded its original bid estimate by 16 times). Not a single Olympics since 1960 has met its cost target. The average overrun has been 179%, according to a study by Oxford University's business school (Flyvbjerg et al, 2016). The 1964 Tokyo Games cost about 10 times more than the Rome Olympics in 1960 and started Japan's fondness for issuing bonds to pay for construction projects. The price tag for the Sochi Olympics, in Russia, has been put at least $51 billion and up to $66.7 billion (Roberts, Whiting, 2016).

And so it continues. The Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC) initially promised a "compact" Games, with 85% of the competition venues within an eight-km radius from the athletes' village on the city's waterfront. About 40% of the venues have since been yanked out of the capital. When Tokyo was awarded the Olympics in 2013, the bid committee projected total costs at ¥829 billion (then $7.3 billion). In December 2019, the organizers admitted that spending would hit ¥1.35 trillion (about $12.6 billion). *The Nikkei*, Japan's normally staid business daily, projects overall spending at about four times the initial estimate: ¥3 trillion, or about $28 billion (Nikkei, 2019). The modern Olympics seem to invariably leave the host cities' citizens with a whopping hangover.

Selling these vast sums to taxpayers is not easy. It's hardly surprising that as the cost of the Games has spiraled, the more difficult it has become to find willing hosts. Local opposition has upended bids, for example, by Hamburg, Budapest and Rome for the 2024 Games. Japan's previous Olympic pitch was undone by tepid popular support: most ordinary people knew only too well about the budget

overruns and, in a nation with pubic debt equivalent to roughly 250% of GDP, staging the event seemed to many like an indulgence. Public intellectuals and journalists widely distrusted the motives of Olympic boosters such as Ishihara Shintaro, Tokyo's governor (from 1999-2012) who invoked 1964 as part of a nostalgic quest to rouse Japan from its post-bubble torpor. Some even detected echoes of the mass coercion techniques of the militarist past: critic Nagao Toshihiko branded the campaign to host the Games "Olympic fascism" (Ren, Ikeda, 2019).

The successful pitch in 2013 rode a wave of patriotism, amid the agonizing recovery from the March 2011 disaster (earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown) in the country's northeast (Tohoku). According to one poll, support for the bid peaked in 2013 at 83%. Much of the mainstream media, in an echo of the self-restraint that was evident during the 2011 crisis, pulled in its horns. Local people in Tohoku who grumbled that the "recovery Olympics" would do little to revive their communities found their voices drowned out (in reference to the ongoing cleanup from the Fukushima nuclear meltdown, journalist Saito Minako memorably pondered the wisdom of "inviting someone to your house when your toilet is broken"). Critics who questioned the festive mood were branded unpatriotic or "anti-Japanese" (Brasor, 2013).

The 2013 bid dovetailed with the revivalist narrative championed by the government of Abe Shinzo, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which retook power in late 2012 with a big-statist program for recovery after three years in the political doghouse. "Japan is not, and will never be, a tier-two country," Abe said in his first major policy speech to a foreign audience in early 2013…"I am back, and so shall Japan be." Dentsu, the country's largest advertising company – and which incidentally coins LDP catch-phrases such as "Japan is Back", "Proactive Pacifism" and "Creating a Society in which All Women Shine" - was put in charge of marketing the games in 2014. By the end of 2019 it had raked in a record $3 billion in sponsorship (twice what the organizers initially hoped for). Dentsu did this, notes *The Financial Times*, by convincing the bosses of corporate Japan "to dig deep by a campaign that tugged on patriotic heartstrings" (Lewis, Harding, Inagaki, 2019). Bitter competitive rivalries among the country's largest firms were temporarily suspended in the national interest.

This nationalist arm-twisting may at least deflect domestic criticism that taxpayers are being treated like cash machines. The Games will harvest perhaps another $1billion in fees for global television broadcast rights (Sport Business, 2019). It has been noted that the demands of global TV are behind the mid-summer timetable (in 1964, when television was much less powerful, the Games began on October 10th). The July start means they will not clash with the schedule for American Football. The starting times for much of the swimming and track-and-field competitions (where American athletes are expected to excel) have been fixed for mid-morning, to meet the needs of US networks and the large advertisers who will help foot the Games' bill.

Dentsu's outsized role in molding not just domestic news and popular culture, but also public perceptions of Japan's ruling party, has lent itself to conspiracy theories. It is Asia's largest advertising agency and controls about a third of all traditional advertising in Japan (The Economist, 2015). The LDP contracts Dentsu exclusively to work on its political campaigns and the company's ties to the ruling party are long-standing and deep. The LDP hired it in the 1960s to smooth the passage of the deeply unpopular Japan-United States Security Treaty, which was seen by some as a betrayal of Japan's pacifist constitution (Coleman, 2018). Dentsu has helped shepherd the party through several major public scandals since and has

been probably the key beneficiary of the LDP's massively expanded PR budget since 2012.

Yet, despite the omnipotent powers ascribed by some to Dentsu, the Olympic PR effort has often seemed hapless. A string of bad-news stories have plagued the organizers since 2014. The original plan for the new Olympic Stadium, by Zaha Hadid, was universally panned: it was compared to a giant bicycle helmet and a potty, and at nearly 290,000 square meters the stadium would have been the biggest in the history of the Games. When it was scrapped in 2015, Japanese architect Kengo Kuma was asked to step in and save the nation from global humiliation, but embarrassingly his stadium was not ready in time for the Rugby World Cup in 2019. The organizers were forced to tear up the Games' official logo amid claims of plagiarism against the designer. There have been repeated accusations that Tokyo's bidding committee bribed the International Association of Athletic Federations, a Monaco-based governing body for track and field athletics. Stories about the danger of Tokyo's summer heat grew so insistent that the marathon event had to be shifted north to Hokkaido. The image of Dentsu itself was badly sullied by the suicide of an overworked young employee in 2015 that was heavily featured in the domestic media (McNeill, 2016). As I write, the media is speculating that the entire Games might be under threat amid the growing health emergency around the coronavirus.

It might be said, then, that the big media has rediscovered its questioning cynicism toward the Olympics. Social media has added another layer of oversight (it was Internet users, for example, who appear to have uncovered the logo plagiarism). It's hard to overestimate the need for independent scrutiny, given the real concerns about overspending, corruption, mass surveillance, overreach by the state and more besides. Jules Boykoff (2019), a political scientist as Pacific University in Oregon, points out that lawmakers justified Japan's controversial conspiracy law, rammed through parliament in 2017, by asserting the need to protect the Olympics from terrorism. Yet, how much faith can be placed in the media's watchdog role, given that all the major media groups are official Olympic sponsors, as are most of the big companies that advertise in those media? Moreover, online criticism is diffused and absorbed on social media, where reactionary nationalism also runs rampant.

The 1964 Olympics were, famously, an opportunity to turbo-charge new infrastructure projects and showcase Japan as a modern (and reformed) nation state. They were also plagued by cost overruns, missed deadlines and scandals. In the end, they were among the most successful Olympics in history, symbolizing Japan's transformation from wartime pariah to economic superpower. Half a century later, the Games are being spun partly as an attempt to transform the capital into a world city. Mori (2019) points out that the choice of Christel Takigawa, a bicultural, multilingual TV presenter, as "Cool Japan Ambassador" to the IOC in Buenos Aires, was a nod to multiculturalism, "a new role model for Japanese-ness in the 21st century." The "Cool Japan" show at the closing ceremony of the 2016 Rio Olympics, with its parade of manga and anime stars such as Hello Kitty and Prime Minister Abe as a cosplay Super Mario was a conscious show of soft cultural power to the planet.

This attempt to rebrand Japan as global, open and multicultural is rooted in economic and political developments. A record 2.8 million foreign nationals live in the country, including about 1.46 million foreign workers. The government has pledged (though with questionable success) to bring in hundreds of thousands more, amid a potentially dramatic demographic plunge. Abe has become an unlikely champion of free-market capitalism, issuing full-throated appeals to shun protectionism. Some of this is aimed at

counterbalancing China, and driven by fear at losing out to Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Seoul, and other Asian cities that have emerged as Tokyo's competitors thanks to the transformations in the global economy (Mori, ibid).

But another Japan – chauvinist, homogenous, fretful about its place in a globalized world – has not gone away. It was this Japan that Aso Taro, the deputy prime minister (and a former Olympic athlete) alluded to in January 2020 when he waxed lyrical about the nation's uniqueness: "where a single race has spoken a single language at a single location and maintained a single dynasty with a single emperor for over 2,000 years" (Kakihana, 2020). It was a less tolerant Japan on display in 2016, when Mori Yoshiro, a former prime minister (and head of the JOC) angrily berated athletes on their way to Rio for singing the Kimigayo, Japan's national anthem, with insufficient gusto (McCurry, 2016). It's notable that a cultural performance by Ainu, an indigenous group that claims a century of forced assimilation and discrimination (and which gives the lie to Aso's claims) was cut in January from the opening Olympic ceremony, ostensibly because of a "lack of time." Yet, the rise of bicultural athletes, such as Osaka Naomi, Abdul Hakim, Sani Brown and Asuka Cambridge, shows that Japan is changing irrevocably, whatever the old guard thinks.

These two competing nationalisms: one reinvented to include transnational identities under the pressure of global capitalism; the other reactionary, chauvinistic and even racist – are hardly unique to Japan. The same forces helped drive Brexit, "America first" and the rise of Donald Trump and authoritarian governments across the world, from Brazil to Hungary. None of these places will be under the same global scrutiny, however, this coming summer. The 2020 Olympics is where these "sometimes contradictory, but interrelated nationalisms coexist and will play out," says Mori. If nothing else, it should make for an interesting spectacle.

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