

# Symbolic Transformation: The 1964 Tokyo Games Reconsidered

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**Abstract:** The 1964 Tokyo Olympics facilitated Japan's symbolic rebirth in the wake of World War II. Infrastructural projects like the Shinkansen were intentionally blended with remnants of ultra-nationalism into a new type of post-war patriotism. The games sanctioned Japan's redemption and reinforced a sense of national purpose and collective identity while providing a stage for Emperor Hirohito's rehabilitation. In subtle ways the Olympics created an opportunity to rebrand Japan as modern and cutting edge while also symbolically embracing a history and traditions that had been implicated and discredited by wartime depredations.

Discussion of the 1964 Summer Olympics tends to focus on the massive infrastructure projects and Japan's pell-mell postwar modernization, but it is also important to examine the symbolic implications of the games. The infrastructural improvements were due to happen anyway, but were accelerated in light of the Olympic deadline. By invoking the international limelight, and the potential for embarrassment, advocates could use the games to bulldoze over any opposition. The games also served to sanction Japan's redemption, and reinforced a sense of national purpose and collective identity, while providing a stage for Emperor Hirohito's rehabilitation. In subtle ways, the Olympics created an opportunity to rebrand Japan as modern and cutting edge, while also symbolically embracing a history and set of traditions that had been implicated and discredited by wartime depredations. Moreover, there was a subversive narrative

that began with the torch relay in Okinawa, which remained under US administration until 1972, and ended with a 'victim' of the Hiroshima atomic bombing lighting the Olympic cauldron in Tokyo.

After the Tokyo Olympics ended, Ishihara Shintarō wrote, "It is a bit frivolous to dwell on the Olympics regarding the fate of the state and its people, since the relationship between both is substantially weak. But since we have this opportunity anyway, why not start by slowly reconsidering ourselves, and our present situation?" (Ishihara 2014 [1964]: 303) The games taught Ishihara to respect and appreciate the beauty of athletes' relentless struggles. He admired their discipline and willingness to sacrifice, virtues he believed were lacking among his postwar Japanese compatriots.

In 1999, Ishihara Shintarō was elected governor of Tokyo. By then, he had morphed into a staunch rightwing nationalist, but his enthusiasm for the Olympics persisted. He hoped hosting the games would rouse the Japanese people from their torpor and overcome an economic slump. His campaign to host the 2016 games failed miserably, however, due to a lack of public support (Tagsold 2009). In 2013, however, there was a degree of vindication at the 125th IOC session in Buenos Aires, where Tokyo won the right to host the 2020 Summer Olympics. At the time, Japan attracted global sympathy and goodwill, in light of the March 2011 triple-catastrophe (earthquake, tsunami and nuclear reactor meltdowns), which had devastated the Tohoku region in northern Japan. Ironically, the plight

of remote Tohoku helped establish a compelling narrative for the Tokyo games, the absence of which had doomed the first attempt.

While Ishihara was skeptical about the transformative power of the Olympics in 1964, the *Tokyo 2020 Games Vision* is absolutely clear that: “Sport has the power to change the world and our future. The Tokyo 1964 Games completely transformed Japan. The Tokyo 2020 Games will bring positive reform to the world” (The Tokyo Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games 2018). Yet, I argue that the 1964 games did *not* “completely transform” the country. Certainly, they helped the world appreciate the economic strength of a nascent country and provided Japan with international validation. In addition, the games facilitated a different type of patriotism, which blended the remnants of ultra-nationalism with the economic and technological progress of the two post-war decades. However, most of the new infrastructure, such as the bullet-train and highways, would have been built even without the games, while conservatives would have found other means to instill national pride among the Japanese population. Rather than transforming Japan, the games symbolized an ongoing evolution—and did so very efficiently, to an astonishing degree. In this article, I elaborate on this *symbolic* transformation in three ways. First, I explain how the capital was rebuilt to align sport, patriotism, and modern infrastructure to the utmost effect. Then, I take a closer look at the freshly emerging economic patriotism in Japan. Finally, I ask how and why the spectacle of sport in the capital was able to captivate the minds not only of Tokyoites, but also of all Japan, including its most remote and rural areas.

When looking at Tokyo’s rapid metamorphosis in the run-up to the 1964 Olympics, it is easy to understand how the games might be perceived as the magic wand of transformation. Within only a few years, the city’s infrastructure was substantially modernized and reinforced for the

needs of a quickly urbanizing and heavily industrializing country. Plans and processes which would usually have been spread out over more than a decade were implemented in less than five years; at the time, the period between selecting the host city and hosting the games was two years shorter than it is today.



**The swimming arena at Tange’s National Gymnasium**

The new sports facilities announced that the Olympics were coming to the East. The land chosen for these facilities hinted at what was symbolically at stake. The venues were built on lots which either belonged to the *tennō* (Emperor) or had been used by the military before the games (Machimura 2007: 13). The new national stadium, for example, was erected on the grounds of the Outer Meiji Shrine. This area was transformed into sports grounds a decade after the Meiji *tennō* had passed away, and a new shrine was dedicated to him. These developments highlighted the importance of sports in nurturing the bodies of an emerging imperial(ist) nation (Tagsold 2010). A few hundred meters away, next to the Inner Meiji Shrine, the Washington Heights housing complex was returned by the US army to make space for the athletes’ village. Adjacent to the

athletes' village, opposite the shrine's grounds, the architect Tange Kenzo designed his highly acclaimed National Gymnasium. In particular, the swimming arena stood out with its boldly curved roof and concrete structure.



**The National Gymnasium and the Meiji Shrine**

Seen from above, the arena looks like a giant sun with the roof's main axis exactly corresponding to the main axis of the Meiji Shrine (Tagsold 2010: 298). Thus, Tange linked the new gymnasium with the imperial past. Prior to his Olympic designs, Tange was famous for designing the Hiroshima Peace Park a decade earlier, which had turned him into a sort of "state architect" (Cho 2012: 74f.). His stunning gymnasium designs explicitly evoke Japan's efforts to overcome its imperialistic past under wartime, all the while retaining links to it - much like all the Olympic venues built on former military sites or *tennō*-grounds. The games symbolized Tokyo's rebirth, overcoming a militarist past while remaining faithful to the institution of the *tennō*. Hirohito, the reigning emperor in 1964, had been spared

prosecution by the US occupation forces, but this did not diminish controversies over his war responsibility. As a sort of countermeasure, the games helped sanctify the repositioning of the *tennō* as a symbol of peace and national unity, presenting him to the world as a benevolent monarch.

Here, the Olympic organizers had to overcome some hurdles, especially the expectation that a nation's head of state would preside over the opening ceremonies. The *tennō*, however, was not the head of state. Under the 1947 constitution, the Emperor was the symbol of the unity of the Japanese people, and was barred from exercising any political role. Rather than confront this restriction, the emperor was turned into the patron of the games, and it was in this capacity that he gave the opening speech (Tagsold 2002: 78). Attendees in the stadium and television viewers worldwide were thus led to believe that the *tennō* was indeed Japan's formal head of state.

Tokyo was not only transformed by the new stadia and arenas, but also, and more so, by a number of infrastructural projects, which had been badly needed to keep up with the demands of rapid industrialization and the increasing use of motorized vehicles. The first kilometers of a new web of inner-city highways were laid down in 1962, followed by other stretches in the lead-up to the games' opening in October 1964. A state-of-the-art monorail connecting Haneda Airport to the inner city also opened shortly before the games, though Whiting (2014) notes that due to the lack of funds, the line ended at an inconvenient station some distance away from the city center. Land was simply too expensive to extend the monorail all the way to Tokyo Station. Whiting, who lived in Tokyo during these tumultuous years, also vividly recounts the extensive renovations: "When I first came to Tokyo in 1962 with the United States Air Force, the level of construction was simply off the charts. Everywhere you turned it seemed there was a



building being erected or another one being torn down. Crumbling sidewalks were being ripped apart, roadways air-hammered into rubble, trucks whizzing by carrying dirt and building materials” (Whiting 2014). There was also a scarcity of hotels to accommodate tourists, so the New Otani was erected next to the Imperial Palace, along with many other high-rise hotels. This new infrastructure merged with familiar symbols of nationalism, with the *hi no maru* flag omnipresent throughout the city. As a result, Tokyo became a festival-like space where post-war modernity in architecture and infrastructure, facilitated by surging economic growth, went hand in hand with the flags and imperial symbolism rooted in 19th century nation-building. The latter had been severely tarnished during World War II, but were rehabilitated in association with the Olympic Games.

The massive infrastructural improvements were not limited to the capital, but extended throughout all of Japan and captured the imagination of people everywhere. These developments enjoyed an added boost when Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato, who assumed office in 1960, introduced a new political language that stressed economic growth in terms of what it meant for citizens’ welfare (Tsurumi 1991: 15). The economic policies of conservative politicians before Ikeda had focused on raising the GNP, a policy that stoked national pride, but had yet to affect daily life. Ikeda promised to double the national income within a decade, and citizens interpreted his promise as a doubling of their personal income. Ikeda’s rhetoric helped smooth over the social tensions from the bitter struggle over the renewal of the US-Japanese Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke’s support for renewal had sparked massive protests, but after the Diet’s approval under controversial circumstances, he had been forced to step down. In the aftermath, Ikeda sought to shift attention away from divisive security issues by

focusing on GNP and the income doubling plan.

New railway lines and national highways were part of the massive pre-Olympic infrastructure program. They offered everyday citizens enhanced mobility throughout the country. Most of all, the Shinkansen (bullet train), which was inaugurated just before the games, not only enhanced transport links between Japan’s major cities, but also reinforced Japan’s credentials as a high-tech powerhouse. After all, the bullet train was the fastest in the world, with a sleek design intended to evoke an airplane (Fujishima 1964: 111).



**Inaugurating the Shinkansen**

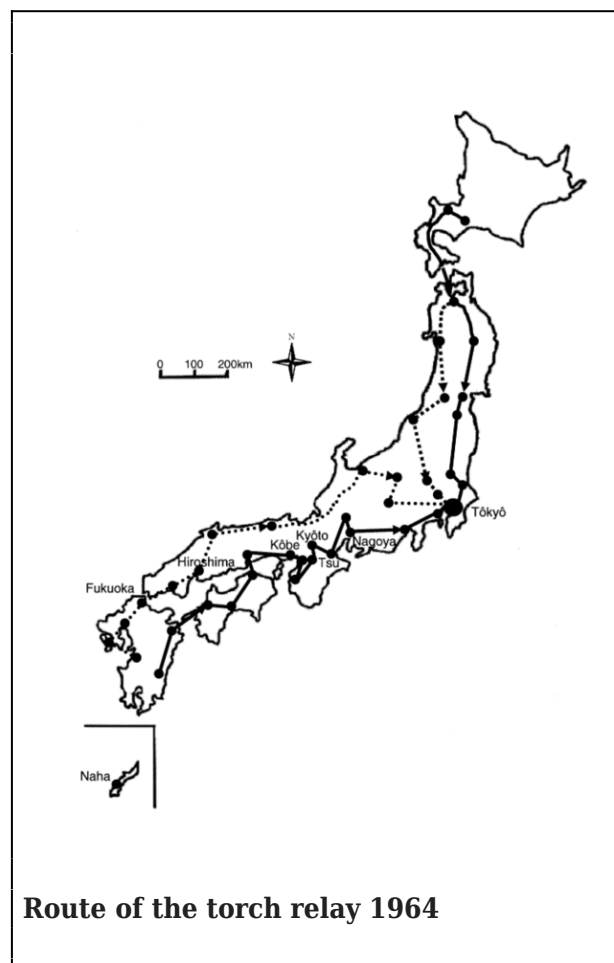
In addition to the Shinkansen, the first stretch of the highway between Osaka and Tokyo was built, connecting Osaka with Nagoya, but ultimately falling a few hundred kilometers short of the capital. Even so, there was a sense that getting to Tokyo would be easier than ever before. A daytrip from Osaka to Tokyo was now possible—something previously inconceivable. Color televisions were another symbol of progress based on consumerism. Many people had bought black-and-white sets to watch the crown-prince’s wedding in 1958 (Irokawa 1990:

90), but they replaced these sets with color TVs in anticipation of the games. The Tokyo Olympics were the first games to be transmitted live and in color globally, an outstanding feat that attested to Japanese ingenuity (crucially enabled by the American satellite Syncom). In September 1964, weeks before the start of the games, Tokyo also hosted the Annual Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group, and in so doing, established itself as one of the world's financial centers.

All in all, the Japanese people had every reason to be proud of their economic progress over less than two decades after the devastation of World War II. Patriotism was no longer based on military success or imperialist adventures. Though it was still deeply rooted in classical symbols and institutions like the *tennō*, patriotism now drew largely from economic and technological progress. Japan had joined the ranks of the Western nations according to all economic indicators, and hosting the Olympics garnered international recognition for Japan's achievements and rehabilitation.

The Shinkansen, in particular, helped bring the periphery into the games. Olympics are hosted by cities not countries, but the 1964 games were obviously the pride of the nation and not just Tokyo, all the more so since the federal government played a pivotal role in funding the games. Yet, how did people in the periphery connect to the events at the center? This is not a trivial question, since all the fuss over Tokyo had the potential to alienate people in rural Japan. But several oral history interviews I conducted in Mie Prefecture two decades ago suggest that the Shinkansen did indeed change people's lives and increase their national pride over the course of the Olympics. One interviewee told me that his honeymoon in 1964 ended with the couple's first trip on the Shinkansen, while his cousin used the Shinkansen to attend the Tokyo Olympics for their honeymoon. Even more directly than the

Shinkansen, the route of the Olympic torch relay connected Mie to Tokyo.



The torch relay began in Okinawa, an American military-occupied island under US administrative control until 1972. This starting point was thus of major symbolic importance, reminding everyone of Japanese sovereignty and the push for reversion, which was realized eight years later (Shimizu 2011). The Olympic flame was then split into four torches, and carried through every prefecture, reinforcing a strong sense of national unity fed by breathless media coverage. Fujitake Akira (1967: 48) wrote that, "the discovery that the Olympic flame passed through every region and its actual arrival in these regions were indeed bigger events than the Olympic Games themselves." This certainly holds true for Mie

Prefecture.



**The Olympic flame at the Mie Prefectural Government Office**

On September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1964, the flame entered the prefecture and hundreds of thousands of spectators thronged the route leading to the prefectural office. There, a cauldron, similar to the one at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo, had been set up to house the flame for one night. Hamashima Kuni, a student at Mie University, was the prefecture's last runner of the day and lit the flame (Tagsold 2002: 137). The crowd's experience would anticipate that of the spectators in the national stadium two weeks later.

The importance of the Olympic torch was expressed vividly by an interviewee who told me that he had made an Olympic torch out of bamboo for his three-year-old son. His son ran around the garden carrying the torch while shouting "*sheika, sheika*," since he could not yet pronounce the Japanese term *seika* (holy flame) for the Olympic flame. Local and regional youth sport festivals in Mie Prefecture also used torch relays for the opening ceremonies, ensuring the ubiquity of the torch's image in Mie.

Eventually, the four routes converged on Tokyo, intensifying a sense of national belonging and collective endeavor. The last runner of the relay praised the performances of his national and international colleagues who had carried the flame to Tokyo. Sakai Yoshinori, who ignited the cauldron in the stadium at the opening ceremony, was born on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945 in Hiroshima, roughly one hour after the atomic bomb had destroyed the city center and killed tens of thousands of people. He metaphorically embodied Japan's ascent from the ashes of defeat. It should be noted, however, that the Hiroshima of Sakai's birth referred to the prefecture, not the city itself, as his actual birthplace, Miyoshi, is tucked away in the mountains, some 60 km from the epicenter of Hiroshima City. This distinction between Hiroshima-shi (city) and -ken (prefecture), however, was lost on the international press, who introduced him as an iconic survivor of the atomic bomb.

Japanese audiences in Mie were able to watch Sakai's lap through the stadium and his lighting of the torch on television—indeed nearly all of them did. Some of them, as one interviewee told me, had bought new color television sets, if only to keep their children from running over to and causing "*meiwaku*" (nuisance) among the neighbors who owned one. Those who had no direct access to color television sets were invited to watch in town halls. In the small town of Oase, in southern

Mie Prefecture, the number of citizens and children who attended far exceeded what was initially expected. Some had to stand outside the hall on their car roofs, trying to peak through the second-floor windows so they could get a glimpse of the opening ceremony in color (Tagsold 2002: 146). Last but not least, the 1000-yen commemorative coin played a highly significant role in connecting the periphery to the center in 1964. Each of my 15 interviewees presented this coin to me during our conversations. Back in 1964, 1000 yen was hardly a trivial sum. The coin was proof that people were willing and able to spend that amount purely for symbolic purposes.

In conclusion, it is safe to say that the 1964 Olympics helped accelerate a transformation of Japan that otherwise may have taken much longer. Citizens at home and spectators worldwide were introduced to new realities that defied common stereotypes about the country and its people. The Olympic Games were ideal for relaunching Japan in the popular imagination, while the associated rituals sanctified the transition into a new era.

It is, however, highly unlikely that the 2020 Games will live up to Ishihara Shintarō's hopes of re-generating a sense of national purpose, largely because these games do not promise anything fundamentally new. The many scandals and problems that arose while preparing for the games, such as the controversies about the Olympic stadium or the corruption surrounding the bid, have significantly dampened the mood. Moreover, the compelling narrative of recovery from the 3.11 disasters has been all but abandoned. Instead, Tokyo has diverted resources and attention away from Tohoku, which has been largely counterproductive for the region's recovery. This time, the center and periphery are not aligned in a united effort, but rather, are competing for sparse resources.

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