

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Japan's Olympic's Summer Games -- Past and Present, Part I

**Jeff Kingston**

A mega-event like the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics justifies a monumental special issue of two volumes. This is an inter-disciplinary effort involving Japanologists from around the globe. The call for papers elicited a rapid and robust response by scholars, translators and writers who have taken to heart my instructions to write accessible, jargon-free essays that distill their knowledge and insights without compromising rigor and reliability. Our targeted audience is educators and their students who need access to high quality, free online resources at a time when interest in the Olympics runs high. We also hope that curious general readers, visitors and journalists will benefit from and enjoy this compilation as they scrutinize the PR spectacle, messaging and branding, and delve deeper into Japan's dilemmas and simmering challenges.

With over two dozen essays ranging from 2,000 to 5,000 words, and numerous images, this is a collection that will appeal to a wide range of interests. It is difficult to do justice to such a rich trove and the array of topics and themes. There are essays on branding, diversity, LGBT rights, ethnic identity, immigration, the environment, economic issues, Olympic opposition, nuclear concerns, the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the Paralympics, visual culture, design, exploitation, personal memoirs and even on the actual sporting events. Inevitably there is some overlap, but this is not so extensive and allows each essay to be a stand-alone reading. I want to thank all of the

contributors for sharing their insights and sticking to our tight deadlines, and also the editorial staff at the Asia Pacific Journal Japan Focus—Mark Selden, Yayoi Koizumi, Joelle Tapas and Connor Griffin- for overseeing, supporting and indulging this unusually large production so efficiently.

## Nightmare scenarios

As we go to press the Wuhan coronavirus is spreading, sowing global alarm and sparking speculation that a pandemic might disrupt the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Japan Olympic Committee (JOC) maintain that there are no plans to cancel the games, but already some qualifying competitions that were to be held in China have been cancelled. Much depends on how the coronavirus scales up (see [Johns Hopkins University real-time mapping of infections and deaths](#)), but even the limited travel restrictions currently in place will cause confusion and inconvenience, and if they expand significantly, could wreak havoc. With the games due to open in six months, the uncertainty has raised concerns among Tokyo organizers. Chief Executive Officer Toshiro Muto told officials of the International Paralympic Committee that, "We are extremely worried in the sense that the spread of the infectious virus could pour cold water on momentum for the games." ([Japan Times 2020](#))

The SARS outbreak lasted nine months, from November 2002–July 2003, but this doesn't provide a meaningful timeline for the current outbreak; it could abate sooner but the longer it lingers the worse the potential impact on the Tokyo games. The Zika outbreak prior to the Rio 2016 games didn't have a significant impact on the games or attendance, but there were no travel bans and the disease wasn't perceived to be as risky as the current coronavirus. There is a lot of time for public perceptions to change, but this public health crisis is spooking people and the Japanese government has come under heavy domestic criticism for its slow response. The Chinese government has also been widely criticized by its citizens for mishandling the outbreak—denying and downplaying until it was too late—a perception shared by the global community. The Wuhan origins also amplify anti-Chinese prejudices in Japan and elsewhere that make it difficult to manage the situation based solely on scientific criteria. For Japan, the nightmare situation ranges from cancellation of the 'Pandemic Olympics' to a curtailed or postponed 'Mask Olympics' that will diminish the feel-good factor. Of course, the outbreak may abate, but clearly prospects for Tokyo 2020 involve many imponderables and risks.

Natural disasters also pose a significant risk. Japan is overdue for a major earthquake and tsunami in the Nankai trough region that would probably not impact Tokyo directly, but could devastate wide swathes of Honshu and Shikoku islands to the west of the capital. Systems for disseminating information and assistance to foreign travelers and residents have improved over the years, but nobody claims they are adequate. A seismic event of the expected magnitude during the games would surely close them down.

In September 2019 visitors witnessed just how devastating typhoons can be and how poorly prepared Narita International Airport is for such disasters as 17,000 travelers were stranded due to disruption of transport links, a major hassle endured by 1,500 more the following month in the wake of another typhoon. But even in good weather Narita has trouble handling the recent massive surge in tourism, and long lines at immigration are the norm; from time of landing to arrival at destinations in Tokyo can take about three hours, on top of the lengthy flight time many visitors endure.

Assuming Japan can dodge these imagined nightmares and pull off a successful Tokyo 2020, it faces another actual nightmare that shows no signs of abating. The impact of hosting the Olympics on inbound tourism remains to be seen, but many Japanese already lament that over-tourism is a scourge careening out of control. Can Japan maintain its famous tradition of *omotenashi* (hospitality) while meeting the government's ambitious tourism target of 40 million in 2020, up from 28 million in 2017 and 6.7 million in 2005? It will certainly fall short of that number due to a sharp decline in arrivals from South Korea due to escalating tensions in 2019 related to forced labor under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), and the corona-virus driven plunge in Chinese visitors, who account for about one-third of all inbound tourists. But these are temporary setbacks and with plans for opening gambling casinos, Japan's tourism industry will rebound. This is one of those situations where the Old Chinese adage comes to mind: be careful what you pray for.

With all facilities ready, Japan is primed for an Olympic-size party and has high hopes that its athletes will harvest a bumper crop of medals. It is also doing its utmost to ensure that the

Paralympics, often the neglected afterthought of this extravaganza, will be a success, one that hopefully will leave a lasting legacy in Japan that benefits those with a range of disabilities. But in the category of what can go wrong, wheelchair basketball, one of the most popular events, may be cancelled as relevant sports bodies squabble over eligibility. The International Paralympic Committee that governs the event has demanded that the International Wheelchair Basketball Federation comply with its standards laid out in the IPC Athlete Classification Code. It has set an end of May deadline for the IWBC to reassess the Tokyo 2020 eligibility for a few dozen athletes with the most upper body mobility and has already cancelled the event for Paris 2024 until there is full compliance. Surely this bureaucratic tiff will be settled, and the games will go on, but it serves as a reminder of all the dramas, crises and logistical headaches organizers face along the way that must test their faith in the Olympic spirit of building a peaceful and better world.

On behalf of the contributors to *The Tokyo Olympics: Past and Present* I invite readers to browse through this special issue knowing you will discover nuggets of insight and inspiration. Clearly, the Olympics is much more than a major sports spectacle and shoulders many hopes and expectations. In this collection of essays by leading experts and skilled writers, Tokyo 2020 provides a window on a society that is often misunderstood and distorted through the lens of misleading stereotypes. Thus, after the closing ceremony hoopla fades, these essays will have an enduring value for anyone interested in Japan and its prospects. The Olympic scrutiny helps illuminate a nation navigating a riptide of change with divided aspirations. Many seek to manage and limits the forces of transformation even as structural shifts and changing norms make this revamp ever more imperative. To the extent that the 2020 Olympics can serve as a catalyst for diversity and inclusion, I believe that the people of Japan will be the winners.

## Winning?

This article is the introduction to the **Special Issue: Japan's Olympic Summer Games -- Past and Present, Part I**. See the Table of Contents [here](#).

For the Table of Contents of Part II, see [here](#).

For an update as of 3/29/2020 reflecting the postponement of the 2020 Olympics, see [here](#).

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