

# Is the Oriental Notion of “Using Sports to Nurture Guts” Understood in the Globalized World?

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In the globalized world, sport exchanges and competitions are held extensively all over the world, international championships and the Olympics to name a few. However, there may be cases where purposes or philosophy behind sport are not necessarily shared in the world. In Japan, for example, not only sports are connected to physical abilities but also to mental strength or more precisely, *konjo* (guts or strong-wills). This kind of mentality and a training method can be traced back to the Meiji Era (1868-1912) when new European sports were brought to Japan. In the 1960s and 70s, it became a fad to read comic books depicting how poor heroes-to-be painstakingly became famous players mastering skills while nurturing their guts. In the previous study, 39 college students out of 46 felt sports can nurture guts or strong wills even today. However, in the 9th FIEP European Congress in Bulgaria, some participants from the Eastern Europe expressed that this kind of Oriental notion was hard to grasp because it is so different from theirs. In this paper, we will show the results of a questionnaire, administered to 83 International students in Japan, investigating whether this notion of “Using Sports to Nurture Guts” is shared among them. Also, in the following study, we asked 23 non-Asian participants the same question via SNS and their answers will be shown qualitatively. Finally, we will suggest a new role of sports in this globalized world.

*Keywords:* Oriental notion of sports, Japanese sport comics, non-Asians views of sport mentality

## Introduction

“A sound mind in a sound body” is a widely known phrase. In Japan, not only sports are connected to physical abilities but also to mental strength or more precisely *konjo* (guts or strong-wills). When the author was in High School, she failed the volleyball test because the teacher noticed her smiling. According to the teacher, she was not serious enough and her mind or attitude was slacking saying “You are not putting your heart into it”, therefore he failed her. It is said this kind of mentality and training method can be traced back to the Meiji Era (1868-1912) when new European sports were brought to Japan and only mastering new skills and winning were valued. As a result, especially in the 1960s and 70s, schools started to encourage sports with group-oriented attitude and spiritualism. As the same time, among students and adults, it became a fad to read comic books depicting how poor heroes-to-be painstakingly became famous players mastering skills while nurturing their guts. However, in 1980s, instead of taking sports too seriously, people started to see sports as something enjoyable, and young people started to prefer other types of comic books.

The motive of this research traces back to the 9th FIEP European Congress in Bulgaria when one of the authors did a presentation on whether young college students today still feel that sports can nurture *konjo* (guts or strong wills) even today. Some participants from the Eastern European countries expressed that this kind of Oriental notion was hard to grasp because it is so different from theirs. Therefore, in this paper, after Introduction, first we will mention what *konjo* is, and then demonstrate the result of the pilot study presented at the FIEP Congress, and will show the results of a questionnaire administered to International students from various countries investigating whether this notion of “Using Sports to Nurture Guts” is shared among them. Then finally, results of qualitative data will be shown taken from the participants in non-Asian countries. This study is hoped to suggest a new role of sports in this globalized world.

### **What Is *Konjo* and How It Is Related to Sports in Japan**

*Konjo* in Japanese was originally a Buddhism term that means “a nature that you are born with”. In the field of Japanese sport’s world, it means guts or fighting sprits or strength of mind, with which you go through difficulties without giving in (Morita, 2011). Some of the phrases in which *konjo* is used are, “This person has good *konjo*”, “has no *konjo*”, or “has a rotten *konjo*”. This kind of mentality and a training method can be traced back to the Meiji Era, when the Meiji government opened up its door to the world and imported many European sports. At that time, sports were thought to pursue only skills and winning, and a training system and mental strength were emphasized accordingly (Nakamura, 1997). According to Kawabe (1980), though *konjo* is usually translated as guts, it is very peculiar to Japanese spiritualism that consciously or unconsciously affects Japanese people’s attitude to sports. Kenyon (1969) describes this as “Ascetic Experience”. Investigating the first interuniversity rowing competition in 1887, McDonald and others mentioned that as Western sports assimilated in the (Japanese) education system, rowing was reshaped to reflect an identity appropriated by the now “swordless Samurai” class (McDonald & Hallman, 2005).

Historically, two coaching ideologues have had a particularly significant impact on the continuing discourses of *konjo* (guts) and *seishin* (spirit): Suishu Tobita and Hirofumi Daimatu (Otomo, 2007). Tobita, a baseball coach at Waseda University believed that baseball coaches should inculcate the values of samurai promoting the idea of *konjo* in baseball (Miller, 2009). Daimatu, with the extremely hard physical and mental training led the women’s national volleyball team an Olympic champion in the Tokyo Olympic games, and with the victory *konjo* became solidified as the dominant postwar narrative of hard work in sports (Otomo, 2007, pp. 119-120).

#### ***Konjo* Depicted in Japanese Comic Books**

Accordingly, some mangas (comics) started to depict sport stories emphasizing to nurture *konjo* as well as athletic skills. Training methods were pursued to enhance these skills as 1970s Starts of Giants (a baseball cartoon), and Attack No. 1 (a female volleyball team cartoon) depicted how poor heroes-to-be painstakingly became famous players mastering skills while nurturing their guts (Ishikawa, 1991). These comic books became a fad and at one time there were more than 20 of them that were popular among both children and adults.

In one cartoon, the father who once was aiming at becoming a professional baseball player put all his time and effort to develop his son’s skills. He himself invented a special equipment to compete with major leaguers who had more strength than Japanese players. In one scene, the father, wanting further to train his son, threw the burning baseball to see whether his son could duck (avoid) the ball.

In another cartoon, aiming at an ace player (No. 1 player), in which this girl is trying to be a super player. In one incident, her coach, thinking back his past, saying when he lost a game he went to meditate in the falls in order to endure and overcome all the hardship against him. In another, he was meditating at a temple for her to be a better player. Are these comic books popular in other countries?

### **Attitudes to Sports and Sport Cartoons in the U.S. and Germany**

Takamatsu (2014), a sport journalist residing in Germany, feels a bit uncomfortable hearing that “sports are playing in Japan according to these Popular Japanese Cartoons he saw when he was a child”. Comparing sports in Germany and in Japan, he has found that in Germany “Sports should be enjoyable and fun” due to the fact that the German government promoted people to relate sports to health, leisure and social events rather than winning and keeping good record. He suggests that in Japan we should promote in words that sports has many different values other than competition, and sports is one part of the society.

As for American attitude to sport cartoon, some people analyzed why Americans did not particular care about those Japanese sport cartoons, saying there are two kinds of people in the U.S. those who play sports and those who like cartoons, since Americans are realistic, they may not be able to accept fake sport cartoons. And in the U.S. talented people are born talented and not to be made like the cartoon heroes. They like strong players and strong teams in the first place. In Japan, sports are to nurture guts, and weak people to be stronger that is why weak people like to watch or see those cartoons (Sport Blog, 2010). On the other hand, in the U.S. sports should be played by strong talented people and to prove that strong people are justice. In Japan sport is thought to be “do”—something you need to pursue and master (to make a profound study) and stories about young people who are pursuing this “do” can be depicted as cartoon heroes (Sport Blog, 2010).

In 1980s in Japan, however, young people started to see the values of “efforts”, “single-minded”, and “konjo (guts)” as something not fashionable or neat, and gradually, they began to prefer cartoons in which, instead of taking sports too seriously, the heroes and heroines see sports as something enjoyable, and together with the economic growth in Japan, that kind of sport cartoons were no longer popular (Yonezawa, 2002). However, konjo continues to be perceived as important in some sports contest, and in one example, in the summer of 2006, a women’s basketball coach in Sikoku made his junior high school team “run naked on three occasions”, and his justification for doing so was that was to “infuse fighting spirit (konjo)” (Otomo, 2007, pp. 119-120).

## **Present Study Investigating Opinions on “Using Sports to Nurture Konjo (Guts)”**

### **Motive Behind the Present Study**

As one of the authors was curious whether the recent college students have read sport-guts related cartoons and whether they believed that sport could nurture konjo (guts) or strengthen minds. The pilot study result of the questionnaire surveyed in June of 2014 showed that among 46 sophomores in two Japanese colleges, 39 have read them but 7 have not. Also, while 39 (85%) students agreed that sports can nurture konjo and strengthen minds, 6 (15%) did not think so. Opinions include, “I am impressed if you want to achieve skills in sports, you will have to go through difficulties and suffering. As long as a person wants to achieve something, he/she can achieve it in any field”, “If students are forced to do so or coaches are bad, it does not work anyway”, “I overcame bullying by trying hard at sports”, “If you go through hard training continuously, you can nurture konjo (guts)”. However, when one author gave a presentation on this topic at the 9th FIEP European Congress

in Bulgaria, she realized that this kind of Oriental notion was not necessarily shared with Eastern Europe participants. This became a motive to investigate further on other Asian and non-Asian participants.

### Method

**Participants.** In the first group, a total of 83 International students in Japan completed a questionnaire and 23 participants overseas in the second group participated in a questionnaire by Social Networking Service (SNS). The first group of students belongs to the course called Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language, which is an exchange class for International students and Japanese students. Table 1 shows participant nationalities and numbers.

Table 1

#### *Participants Nationalities and Numbers*

|         | <i>Original Country</i> | <i>Number<br/>(percentage)</i> |         | <i>Original Country</i> | <i>Number<br/>(percentage)</i> |
|---------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Group 1 | Japan                   | 20(24%)                        | Group 2 | German                  | 11(46%)                        |
|         | China                   | 41(49%)                        |         | Egypt                   | 7(29%)                         |
|         | Taiwan                  | 8(10%)                         |         | Austria                 | 1(4%)                          |
|         | Vietnam                 | 4(5%)                          |         | Turkey                  | 2(8%)                          |
|         | Mongol                  | 2(3%)                          |         | Kurdish                 | 1(4%)                          |
|         | Malaysia                | 2(3%)                          |         | Egypt                   | 1(4%)                          |
|         | Korea                   | 2(3%)                          |         | Jordan                  | 1(4%)                          |
|         | Thailand,               | 1(1%)                          |         |                         |                                |
|         | Egypt                   | 1(1%)                          |         |                         |                                |
|         | N/A                     | 2(3%)                          |         |                         |                                |
| SUM     |                         | 83(100%)                       | SUM     |                         | 24(100%)                       |

*Note.* Percentage is rounded.

**Procedure and Instruments.** The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first part, the participants' background information is gathered. It included the questions asking nationality, first language, gender, age, length of stay in Japan and experience in learning martial arts such as Judo or Karate. In the second part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to answer questions such as (1) which sport do you like best to play or to watch, (2) experiences in belonging to sports clubs, (3) Were you good at P.E. at school?, (4) Did you like P.E. at school? Why or why not?, (5) Do you feel sports can nurture *konjo*?, and (6) What is the significance of sports?

The questionnaire was conducted in the class in July of 2015 and collected by the teacher, in this case the second author. For the purpose of this study, we analyzed only data in question 5, and data were analyzed quantitatively. For the second group, participants were asked to answer the background information in the part 1, and asked to answer only one question “Do you think sports nurture *konjo*? Why or why not?”. Data were collected through SNS and analyzed qualitatively. For the second group, questionnaire was translated into English and participants answered in English. In case of participants in Egypt, the questionnaire was translated into Arabian and answered were translated back from Arabian to English.

### Results and Discussion

For the question “Do you think sports nurture *konjo* (guts)?”, 63(74%) participants in Groups 1 answered Yes, and 15 answered No, and 5 no answer. Table 2 shows the ratio of Yes and No by each country.

Table 2

*Ratio of Yes and No to the Question “Do You Think Sports Nurture Konjo (Guts)?” by Country*

| Country   | Participants | Percentage of Yes | Percentage of No |
|-----------|--------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Japan     | 20           | 85%               | 15%              |
| China     | 41           | 88%               | 12%              |
| Taiwan    | 8            | 87%               | 13%              |
| Vietnam   | 4            | 50%               | 50%              |
| Mongol    | 2            | 100%              | 0%               |
| Malaysia  | 2            | 100%              | 0%               |
| Korea     | 2            | 50%               | 50%              |
| Thailand, | 1            | 0%                | 100%             |
| Egypt     | 1            | 100%              | 0%               |
| SUM       | 81 (NA 2)    |                   |                  |

Note. Percentage is rounded.

Since Chinese students accounted for 49% of the participants in Group 1, we compared what or what kind of words they associate sports with to Japanese students' answers. Table 3 shows these answers.

Table 3

*Comparison of What Sports Mean Between Chinese and Japanese Students in Group 1*

| Country | Generally  | Socially  | Personally  |
|---------|--|---|---|
| Japan   | For health<br>Develop physical strength<br>Mental strength                     | Cooperation with peers*<br>Share feeling with others*<br>Behave as group*<br>Communication through sports<br>To learn team work | To learn manners*<br>To learn importance of greetings*      |
| China   | Physical training<br>Nurture konjo*<br>Mental strength<br>Nurture strong wills | Cooperation<br>Learn how to work together*<br>Develop good relationship with peers, making friends*                             | Challenge*<br>Excel oneself*<br>Look cool*<br>Diet<br>Hobby |

Note. \* indicates answers that the authors felt salient.

The result showed that the word *konjo* was used among Chinese participants but not among Japanese participants. As for Japanese participants, although 20 (85%) thought sports can nurture *konjo*, they commented sports could develop cooperative work and communication skills, and could learn manners and the importance of greetings on a personal level.

Overall, we could say that in Group 1, the concept of *konjo* (guts), that more precisely, sports can nurture *konjo* is shared among Asian students.

Since the motive of this research was to investigate whether the notion of *konjo* (guts) can be understood not only among Asians but also among non-Asians, the researchers tried to contact non-Asian participants through SNS within limited time and availability. Table 1 shows the participants original countries and the numbers in Group 2: 11 German, 7 Egyptian, 2 Turkish, 1 Austrian, 1 Kurdish, and 1 Jordanian. Except the Egyptian participants, the other participants use German as their first or second language.

This time we asked only one question “Do you think sports can nurture *konjo* (guts or strong wills) and strengthen minds?” To this question, all of the 29 participants answered “Yes” to this question. However, the reasons they gave among German-speaking participants were different from those of Egyptians. Table 4 shows some of the reasons they gave.

Table 4

*Comparison of Reasons Between German-Speaking and Egyptian Participants in Group 2*

| Country                                      | Reasons Why Sports Can Nurture Guts  |
|--|--|
| German<br>Austrian<br>Turkish<br>Kurdish     | Building a strong mind   |
|  | Body and mind go together. If you work with your body, you also work with your mind.       |
|  | The defeats and the achievements teach how to cope with life.                              |
|  | Strengthen the mind and will power because one is forced to reach and surpass his/her mind |
|  | I feel better at work and my mind becomes also very strong.                                |
|  | Sport has positive effect in our lives, more importantly makes us more disciplined.        |
|  | Losing weight.   |
| Egyptian<br>Jordanian                        | Can improve your will.   |
|  | To aim something and try to reach it   |
|  | Strong will  |
|  | Excel yourself   |
|  | Nurture patience, persistence, endurance   |
|  | Challenge to myself  |
|  | Sport is a challenge for your own abilities  |
| <i>Konjo</i> bears victory                   |  |
| Sports can nurture endurance and persistence |  |

From Table 4, we can conclude that although all the participants agreed that sports can nurture guts, German speaking people use will-power and mind perhaps due to German way of looking at sports as “Sports should be enjoyable and fun” due to the fact that the German government promoted people to relate sports to health, leisure and social events rather than winning and keeping good record mentioned by Takamatsu (2014). On the other hand, Egyptians expressed that sports can nurture patients and persistency which is close to the concept of *konjo* with which poor heroes-to-be in comic books that painstakingly became famous players mastering skills while nurturing their guts as mentioned earlier.

### Conclusion and Implication

This study was to investigate whether the oriental notion of *konjo* (guts) could be understood by non-Asian people. Though *konjo* is usually translated as guts, as mentioned before, it is very peculiar to Japanese spiritualism and forms the idea or value of Japanese attitude to sports consciously or unconsciously. Following the historical view, one author presented how sports-related comic books depicted heroes who painstakingly became famous players, which was beyond comprehension of the participants at the 9th FIEP European Congress. The questionnaire results of the participants in groups 1 showed that this concept was understood and shared among International students in Asia. However, the participants in group 2 gave different reasons from each other. Perhaps because of so called “lost in translation” and cultural differences, the participants had different images of *konjo* (guts or strong will).

Investigating the reasons for their “Yes” answers revealed that the purposes of sports were different between German-speaking participants and Egyptians though all of them said “Yes” to the question “Do you think sports can nurture *konjo*?”

In the globalized world where sport exchanges and competitions are held extensively, to investigate meanings of sports in different parts of the world and to share them or at least to understand them is quite important for true globalization. In that sense, we hope it will be a new role of sports in this globalized world.

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