

# Cultural (Mis)translation of the African American Hero: Jackie Robinson and Japan

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## Introduction

Jackie Robinson, the first African American to break the baseball color line in 1947 and to play in modern Major League Baseball (MLB), is remembered as a hero who made history. MLB honored the memory of Robinson by retiring his uniform, number “42,” in 1997 and established April 15th as “Jackie Robinson Day” in 2004. Why does Robinson, whose accomplishments paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement 50 years ago, still remain an inspiration both to athletes and people of color even today?

Yet the more pressing question that emerges from this is: why did the story of Robinson recently make inroads into moral education books and English-language textbooks for junior high schools in Japan?<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the simplest but most important answer is that the Japanese found in the story of Robinson “universal” moral values—such as perseverance—across cultural and historical divides. It is quite possible that Japanese textbook publishers may have wanted to present Robinson, a legendary American hero, as a cross-cultural role model to uphold the ideal of patience—an ideal that Japanese culture traditionally shared.

If this reading is tenable, it is the unarticulated gap in cultural translation—rather than the assumed commonality of moral values between the United States and Japan—that emerges to demand our critical attention. Transplanted on Japanese soil, the story of Robinson, I would argue, has significantly lost its original narrative power. No longer is it about equality, democracy, and individual success, but it has instead mutated into a wholly different story in Japan. This paper proposes to shed light on the process of this cultural (mis)translation by closely examining textual representations of Robinson in the United States and Japan.

## 1. Robinson Rediscovered

With his debut in MLB in 1947, Robinson broke the major league color barrier and garnered attention from the public and media in the United States. Curiously though, the Japanese-language media in Japan—then under American occupation—did not find Robinson’s epoch-making accomplishments newsworthy. A leading Japanese newspaper, *Asahi Shimbun*, commented on it in a matter-of-fact tone: “The first African-American major leaguer will debut. The name of this made man is Jackie Robinson.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, Japan did not begin to import

Robinson's story until after 1972, the year of Robinson's death.

Put another way, Robinson was "rediscovered" as a hero only in the 1970s. In the many publications dealing with Robinson and his contribution published in the Japanese language in the 1970s, Robinson was "rediscovered" as a black man of perseverance rather than the person who broke the color barrier in the United States. Robinson's perseverance was seen as a historical product of the institution of slavery and Jim Crowism, but it gained yet another layer in the Japanese media. Perseverance was traditionally regarded as a great virtue in Japan, associated with bushido, the way of the samurai life. The media presented Robinson not only as a contemporary African American hero, but also, with some nostalgia, as an ideal model of a noble man of patience, as a black samurai. This sentiment is best expressed in the following remarks by Kazuyuki Matsuo, a professor of American history:

Robinson's revolutionary point was to show his value of existence, enduring persecution with "the courage not to retaliate." The courage not to retaliate needs a mind of steel, and African-American people have cultivated this old and new mental construction under the slavery which lasted for many hundreds of years. In Japan, a similar thought has been expressed with the example that the willow is bending with the wind.<sup>3</sup>

Matsuo's remarks show us that Japanese people have typically accepted Robinson as a black American sharing in the Japanese moral values.

This hybrid image of the black samurai may come as little surprise, given the fact that the concept of bushido—as formulated by Inazo Nitobe in *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1900)—was partially based on the beliefs of Christianity and practices developed in Western societies. Nitobe was converted to Christianity after enrolling in Sapporo Agricultural College under the influence of William Smith Clark, an educator from the United States. This factor arguably made possible the cultural (mis)translation of the African-American hero, whereby Robinson's story of individual success and racial equality was read in Japan as a story of the noble black samurai with perseverance.

## 2. Black Samurai in the 1970s

Jackie Robinson was thus posthumously imported into Japan in the 1970s as a hero of perseverance, a moral value associated with bushido that Japanese people traditionally upheld. And yet, we might ask: why did such an anachronistic transplantation of Robinson happen in 1970s Japan? Nitobe's *Bushido* was published 70 years previously at the turn of the twentieth century. I would argue that the figure of the black samurai was an imperative then because of

the emergent cultural conflict between imported US baseball players and Japanese baseball fans. Robinson was enlisted to play an important role in mediating them in baseball, one of the most popular sports in Japan.

The economic growth of Japan in the 1950s and 1960s altered the landscape of Japanese baseball. As Japanese people recovered from the defeat in World War II, they gradually had a vested interest in baseball, a bat-and-ball game that originated in the United States. It was on the baseball field where the Japanese sought to regain national pride that they had lost in the battlefield in World War II. It was no longer a game but a sort of martial arts with a bat and a ball—if not with a sword—imbued with the Japanese spirit of samurai, bushido and perseverance. (Recall how, even now, a Japanese baseball hero is referred to as a samurai, as is shown in the case of Ichiro—a representative Japanese MLB player—who is also portrayed as a samurai.<sup>4</sup>) At the same time, Japanese professional teams began to hire US-born players as “foreign helpers” to make the teams stronger with ample funds after the economic growth.

The roots of US players as “foreign helpers” can be traced back to 1951, when Wally Yonamine, a Nisei Japanese American born in Hawaii, was hired as the first US baseball player to play in American-occupied Japan. This was because the Japanese government and the Occupation authorities were against hiring typical blue-eyed white American players after World War II.<sup>5</sup> They were afraid that the employment of white Americans—the enemy until recently for Japanese—would agitate and embitter Japanese people since memories of the war were still fresh. But as Yonamine was a successful player, Japanese professional baseball teams subsequently began to recruit other talented US players, regardless of their age, color, race and appearance. They did well and commanded respect for their contributions to their teams. However, this was not always the case. According to Robert Whiting, an American journalist and author of *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat*, some players were dubbed “problem foreigners” as they did not abide by Japanese social rules and protocols. They were “Ugly Americans” in the words of Whiting. Whiting remarks:

The American import has often been a source of agitation to his Japanese teammates over the years, even when his performance on the field has been good... The American player, for example, often fails to understand, much less appreciate, the wisdom of the Code. The Japanese concepts of “pecking order,” “established procedure,” “sameness,” “fighting spirit,” “hard training,” and “face” are alien to him, and he seldom makes the effort to adapt that Yonamine did.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually, on the baseball field, Japanese and imported US-born players had clashes, giving rise to the international, cross-cultural tension in the 1970s.

It was precisely in this context that Robinson—a black samurai—emerged as an important cultural figure in Japan. Robinson did not only serve to offset bad impressions of US-born

players but eased the tensions that “Ugly Americans” created in Japan. What I have termed the cultural (mis)translation of Robinson in Japan took place in this process of negotiating and resolving cultural conflicts between Japanese and white American athletes, between foreign players and Japanese baseball fans.

There was more to this story, however. Shigeru Mizuhara, a baseball critic, wrote a preface to Robinson’s autobiography—originally published in the United States in 1972, the year of his death, and translated and published in Japan two years later—extolling him as a hero who was a gentleman player, intelligent and respectable, endowed with spirit, strength and techniques.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Mizuhara was also interested in the fresh insight into American society and history that Robinson’s autobiography afforded: “This ‘*Autobiography of Jackie Robinson*’ reveals two lives of Robinson—in baseball and society. To know US baseball and think about the present society, this is the best book.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the book was not only an autobiography of an athlete but an educational material to understand baseball as America’s national sport—and by extension, America.

Traditionally, Japanese baseball teams tended to consider that “sameness” and “harmony of a team” were important factors to create a good and strong team, but as Japanese baseball was internationalized, they needed to learn to get along with “Ugly Americans.” Robinson was a role model to emulate because he was also an athlete of color—and with a spirit of samurai. His story conveyed an (unarticulate) message that people of color, Japanese, could play on an equal footing with white people, no matter how contemptuously the latter behaved on the baseball field.

Robinson’s posthumous autobiography also served its ideological mission in 1970s Japan in the context of the Cold War, by disseminating the superiority of the American way of life—namely, America’s liberal democracy and freedom that makes individual success possible. This was a reassuring answer to the threat of Communism and its bloody revolution within Japan as typified by a rise of the establishment of the Japanese Red Army. The Japanese Red Army was a communist militant group founded by Fusako Shigenobu, a woman who was active in the student movement in the 1970s, and orchestrated terrorist attacks. The most notorious attack was the Lod Airport massacre in Tel Aviv, Israel, in 1972, creating an international scandal as *Asahi Shimbun* reported under the headline, “The Taint on Image of Japanese.”<sup>9</sup> The Japanese Red Army believed in the global socialist revolution through terrorism—which was not fair play—and the Japanese government and people wanted to contain it.

How did Robinson’s story work in 1970s Japan in such a context? Scholar Damion L. Thomas argues that Jackie Robinson became a worldwide symbol of American success in the Cold War era. Damion remarks: “For an African-American man to play in the national pastime had ramifications that extended far beyond the playing field... Robinson symbolized the accessibility of the ‘American Dream’ to African Americans. As the symbol of Cold War integration, his success was advanced to support the notion that aligning with the United States

as the 'leader of the free world' held forth a realistic chance that people everywhere would be able to live the American Dream."<sup>10</sup> Robinson's was a success story of an African-American man who realized his "American Dream" under the American way of life, not under the Soviet Union's. In the end, success is only possible through America's liberal democracy and freedom, not through Communism and its violence.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the process in which Jackie Robinson was posthumously transplanted into Japan in the 1970s. He was not only cast as a black samurai who achieved success and respect within the oppression of US white supremacy, rather than retaliating against it through violence, but the cultural (mis)translation of Robinson's story also performed ideological work in Japan in the context of the Cold War. In the end, it significantly upheld and reinforced the supremacy of America.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance *Hajimete No Dotoku Kyokasho* [The First Moral Education Textbook] (Tokyo: Ikuho-Sha, 2013). In the preface to Robinson's story, the text says, "Do try to be fair and impartial to achieve justice, and do not discriminate and have any prejudices against anyone" (154, my translation).

<sup>2</sup> "The Black Athlete Who Is a Made Man," *Asahi Shimbun*, October 29, 1945, 2. My translation.

<sup>3</sup> Kazuyuki Matsuo, "Jidai No Sentan De Homerun Wo Utta Otoko" [The Man Hitting a Home Run in the Frontier of the Era], in *The True Story of an American Legend* (Tokyo: Shochiku Kabushiki Kaisha, 2013), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Shigeo Momose and Isao Shinohara, *Bushido and the Sports: Moving Japan with the Spirit of Samurai*, (Tokyo: Soei-sha, 2012)

<sup>5</sup> Robert Whiting, *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat: The Game Japanese Play*, trans. Midori Matsui (Tokyo: Hayakawa Shobo, 2005), 202.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>7</sup> Shigeru Mizuhara, foreword to *The Autobiography of Jackie Robinson*, by Jackie Robinson. Trans. Tsuyoshi Miyagawa (Tokyo: Baseball Magazine, 1974), 2. My translation. "Spirit, technique and strength" are believed to be essential factors to be a samurai for Japanese. Mizuhara deliberately used these terms to emphasize that Robinson was an excellent player.

<sup>8</sup> Mizuhara, foreword to *The Autobiography of Jackie Robinson*, 3. My translation.

<sup>9</sup> "The Taint on Image of Japanese," *Asahi Shimbun*, June 1, 1972. My translation.

<sup>10</sup> Damion L. Thomas, *Globetrotting: African American Athletes and Cold War Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 10.

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## Periodicals

Asahi Shimbun

Yomiuri Shimbun

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