

Cultural export of Japan: A Case Study of Japanese Men's Rhythmic Gymnastics

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The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Men's rhythmic gymnastics has been developed uniquely in Japan since late 1940s. It gains a certain amount of domestic reputation to be adopted as the main motif of the dance performance at the Olympics handover ceremony in Rio 2016, though it is neither recognised as Olympic sport nor competed in the world championships. At the ceremony, Japanese pop culture was represented in the video and at the venue Japan's prime minister played Super Mario and men's-rhythmic-led dance performance was delivered to the audience. This implies men's rhythmic is possibly one of 'Cool Japan' exports rather than just a kind of gymnastics. However, men's rhythmic once failed as an export. In the early 2000s, the committee sent coaches overseas with the aim of promoting men's rhythmic globally. World championships were held in 2003 and 2005 as a result, but since the project was aborted in 2006, men's rhythmic has not practiced in the countries with a few exceptions in Canada and Russia. In this study, the authors overview the reason why the coach dispatch project was not successful at least on a long-term basis, and then focus on an example in Canada where men's rhythmic is still practiced but as a slight different style, to describe what modifications the interviewees regard men's rhythmic needs to accomplish global success. Through these analyses, the authors consider men's rhythmic in terms of three pairs of concepts: spectacle – gymnastics for all, global – domestic, and sport – culture.

Keywords: Rhythmic Gymnastics, Sports and Globalisation, PAC Analysis

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Introduction

In this study, the authors consider men's rhythmic gymnastics in terms of three pairs of opposing concepts: spectacle – gymnastics for all, global – domestic, and sport – culture.

Men's rhythmic as a separate form of gymnastics has been developed uniquely in Japan since the late 1940s. Women's rhythmic gymnastics and men's rhythmic have something in common, such as giving a performance to music, but rules, apparatuses and the floor are different. In individual competitions, Stick, Double Rings, Rope, and Club are performed along with dance and tumbling. Group competitions are without apparatuses and teamwork and synchronisation of all the six members are key components. Both competitions regard completeness and artistic quality as important as technique.

It is neither recognised as Olympic sport nor competed in the world championships. Still, it is grabbing international attention as a style of physical performance. Some highly respected entertainment companies such as Cirque du Soleil adopt men's rhythmic as a part of their shows. Also, it was adopted as the main motif of the dance performance at the Rio Olympics 2016 closing ceremony. At the Olympics handover ceremony, first Japanese culture was represented by Super Mario, Hello Kitty, and Doraemon (a well-known cartoon character) in the video, and then at the venue, Japan's prime minister played Super Mario and men's-rhythmic-led dance performance was delivered to the audience. This implies men's rhythmic is possibly one of 'Cool Japan' exports rather than just a kind of gymnastics.

Therefore, we consider men's rhythmic from the viewpoint of culture as well as sport¹). Before the Olympic handover ceremony, men's rhythmic once failed to be globalised. However, there are a few exceptions, such as Canada, where men's rhythmic are still practiced. Through a case study of this, we also think about this sport from 'global – domestic' perspective. As for 'spectacle – gymnastics for all,' again we consider the case in Canada.

Previous Research

Men's rhythmic gymnastics has not been researched with a few exceptions in sports medical science. Some research focuses on male gymnasts who practice women's rhythmic gymnastics such as Chimot and Louveau (2010) and Béki and Gál (2013).

Kamberidou et al. (2009) look at men's rhythmic, but in the argument 'the Japanese version of men's rhythmic gymnastics' is distinguished from 'men's rhythmic gymnastics' done in some countries in Europe. As Kamberidou et al. (2009) implies, there are differences men's rhythmic gymnastics in European countries from that in Japan. We focus on the latter in this presentation.

The previous research regard rhythmic gymnastics as female sport, and then focus on male gymnasts who do what women do. The viewpoints of the previous research are critical and fruitful in terms of gender studies; still, it is unnecessary to presume that rhythmic gymnastics (especially the Japanese one) is essentially feminine and male

gymnasts who do men's rhythmic offer food for thought for considering gender order in our society.

In particular, at least in Japan men's rhythmic gymnastics has been practiced not as feminine gymnastics but as a unique form of gymnastics. Therefore, in this presentation we don't look at Japan men's rhythmic under presumption that this sport is done by men even though it is not for men. Instead, we consider this sport from the three sets of concepts we already mentioned.

International Promotion by the Japanese Committee – Coach Dispatch Project

Before showing the results, we overview what the Japanese men's rhythmic gymnasts did for promoting the sport, and how the project was aborted.

In the early 2000s, the men's rhythmic gymnastics committee of the Japan Gymnastics Association (MRGC hereinafter) sent coaches overseas with the aim of promoting men's rhythmic globally. Because there are not so many men's rhythmic gymnasts except Japan, men's rhythmic gymnastics has not been accepted as Olympic sport. Even in Japan, where men's rhythmic gymnastics has been developed for over fifty years, the existence of this sport has been endangered since around 2001, when global success came to be considered essential for every competitive sport. For all competitive sports done in Japan, it is a top-priority issue to be adopted in National Sports Festival (Kokumin Taiiku Taikai, KOKUTAI). Men's rhythmic had already been adopted, but it was always said to be jeopardised. In fact, this sport has been excluded from National Sports Festival since 2009. To bring this sport to more athletes and a wider audience, MRGC sent top men's rhythmic gymnasts to some countries from 2001 to 2006. As a result of this initiative, international competitions were held in Japan.

The coach dispatch project was interrupted in 2006 mainly due to insufficient operating expenses. MRGC carried out this project with the endowment fund, but the committee wasn't successful at increasing the number of supporters of the project. Some of the dispatched coaches also think that the project failed due to lack of planning. They think that they weren't fully informed about the objectives of the project or the missions of the dispatched coaches. World championships were held in 2003 and 2005 as a result, but since the project was aborted in 2006, men's rhythmic has not been practised in the countries with a few exceptions in Canada and Russia (Noda et al., 2017).

Other reasons why the project was aborted were assumed to be that men's rhythmic became excluded as a sport of National Sports Festival and that MRGC decided that they needed to spread this sport to all prefectures in Japan before exporting outside Japan. Men's rhythmic has not been practiced in some prefectures, and this has been made their top priority.

Case Study in Canada

In Canada in particular, a unique program called MartialGym was formed. MartialGym consists of a combination of men's rhythmic gymnastics and Chinese martial arts. The representative of MartialGym is Mr Mario Lam, who the most

actively accepted the Japanese men's rhythmic coach dispatch programme. To prepare for the project, Mr Lam started MartialGym in 2002. Even after the project was aborted, Mr Lam has been continuing the MartialGym programme.

Currently, around 200 people participate every year. In classes for kids (the youngest is 5 years old), both boys and girls practice men's rhythmic gymnastics. The class for adults is more about martial arts. Each lesson is usually 1 hour long, or 1.5 to 3 hours for the advance, once a week. Kids attend lessons for fun, not for rigorous workout. For elderly people, lessons are more health-conscious. There are no championships of either MartialGym or men's rhythmic in Canada, so these lessons are more 'gymnastics for all' than competitive oriented sports. The quote below shows how Mr Lam regards competitive gymnastics and gymnastics for all.

"It is my view that competitive gymnastics is just one possibility or one stream. A lot of the details like toe pointing, extension is much needed to be at the high level. However, it is not relevant to normal ordinary folks. To encourage participation, we have to put some of the competitive aesthetic details as secondary. The primary being the foundations of movement / physical literacy." (Mr Lam)

'Gymnastics for all' in MartialGym means not just about practice levels but also about gender. Mr Lam pointed that as follows:

"We offer to both genders because as Canadians, we believe in the equality of genders. What is good for one gender should be available for the other gender. Just like karate, swimming, tennis and other sports. The rules can be different for competition, but as a sport offered to both." "It is the choice of clubs and gymnasts to decide if they want to train in the sport."

Methodology

This study used the Personal Attitude Construct (PAC) method to analyse the interview data of a case in Canada. Two Canadian coaches were interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Analytical procedures were carried out in accordance with the methods published by Naito (2003).

(1) The contractual relationship with subject was based on informed consent. Before interviews, subjects were briefed regarding the background and purpose of the study via e-mail, and were informed that they may freely terminate their participation in the survey at any time before and after the preliminary examination, regardless of cooperation/non-cooperation with the survey, without disadvantage to them. Subjects' personal information was handled in accordance with the study plan and interview schedule after informed consent was obtained. On interview dates, subjects were briefed regarding the same contents again in writing and informed consent was obtained through written signature.

(2) Regarding rankings of association and relative importance, the subjects were asked to write freely on notecards what they associate with men's rhythmic gymnastics and to then arrange them in order of importance. Each subject was also asked to describe the contents using the quantifiers plus (+), minus (-), and neither (0).

(3) To create a degree of similarity/distance matrix, subjects were asked to sort their notecards by importance to see the matrix of the cards and to describe the distance between all cards in a range of 1 (nearest) and 7 (farthest).

(4) Cluster analysis was performed using Ward's method in SPSS as a subordinate technique. The precipitated dendrograms are shown in Figs. 1 and 2. Numerals written on the right side of each card in the figure represent importance rankings. Regarding Interviewee A's cluster, it is assumed that the interval distance is divided into seven sections with the interval distance being approximately 2.5. Regarding Interviewee B's clusters, the interval distance was divided into seven as a draft proposal by the experimenter.

(5) Regarding subject interpretation and reporting, subjects were first asked to check the interval distance in the dendrograms. Next, subjects were asked what meaning/intention they had with each card, why they attributed plus/minus/neither quantifiers to each card, and what name would be suitable for a particular group of clusters, for each group of clusters. The subjects were then asked to think about the structure holistically. Audio was recorded using an IC recorder and transcriptions were also taken.

(6) Comprehensive interpretation was performed by two transcribers. In addition to interpretation by the subjects, we also interpreted the interview information such as importance rankings that the subjects themselves did directly elucidate.

Results

The dendrograms are shown in Figs. 1 and 2. Numerals written on the right side of each card in the figure represent importance rankings.

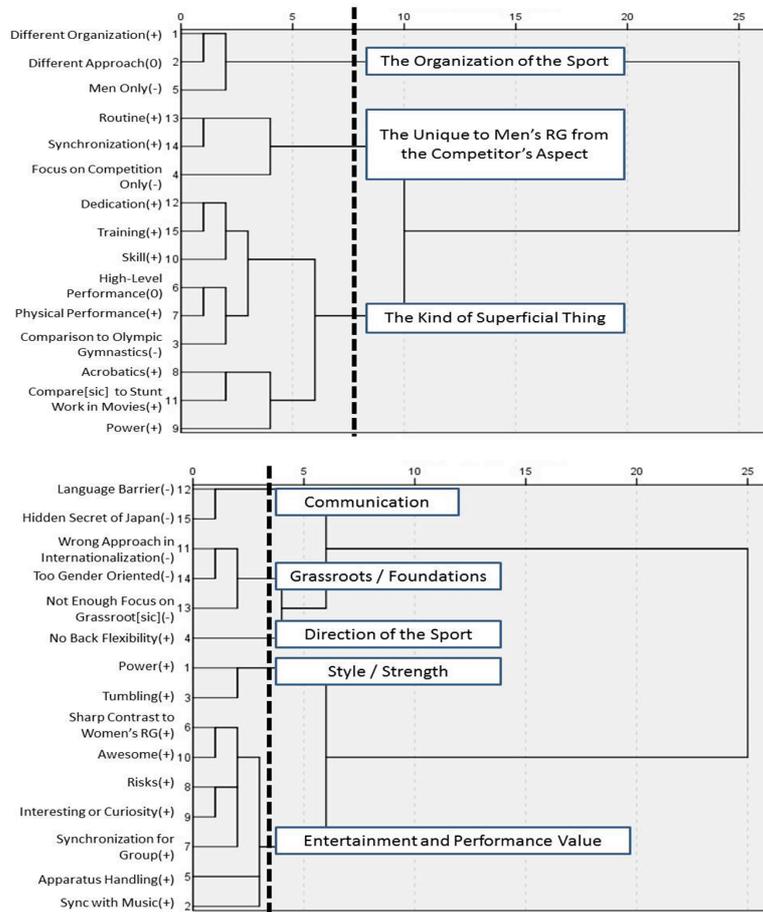


Figure 1: Dendrogram (Interviewee A)

Based on our results, it can be seen that Interviewee A strongly recognizes the identity of men's rhythmic gymnastics. Cluster 1 and Cluster 2, in particular, were responses that emphasized the identity of men's rhythmic gymnastics. The overall importance ranking also shows that the top three items account for the fact that men's rhythmic gymnastics are different from other gymnastics. The uniqueness of men's rhythmic gymnastics was recognised positively and the hypothetical situation that that uniqueness was lost and the content of the competition becoming more similar to women's rhythmic and other gymnastics were negatively evaluated.

In the previous research (Noda et al., 2017), some instructors dispatched from Japan to overseas were concerned about changes in the sport and its rules as the sport was promoted abroad, and there were also some who believed that there was no choice but to accept changes even though they don't want the sport change. Interviewee A's viewpoint, which insists that the identity of men's rhythmic gymnastics should not be lost, is a view that was shared by the Japanese instructors and no cultural differences were found based on this result.

Interviewee B's impression of men's rhythmic gymnastics consisted mainly of critical considerations regarding the dispatch of instructors from Japan during the 2000s. Unlike Interviewee A, Interviewee B's answer is more about strategically internationalising the sport than perceptions of each performance or the sport itself. This is presumably because Interviewee B's involvement in the sport is mainly as an instructor and a promoter, rather than as a gymnast.

Interviewee B also mentioned that he had great concern regarding the issues associated with the internationalisation of men's rhythmic gymnastics and that it would be necessary to spread the sport globally in a manner different from those utilised in the past. Regarding these different methods, Interviewee B offered the idea of opening the sport to both genders, and having a competition 'at the grassroots level'; that is, Interviewee B regarded the sport is at a little too extreme level.

Like Interviewee A, Interviewee B also recognized the great importance of the identity of men's rhythmic gymnastics and also recognized strength in being distinct from women's rhythmic gymnastics. As expressed specifically in cluster 4, men's rhythmic gymnastics have a strength component to Interviewee B.

Discussion (1) Spectacle – Gymnastics for All

According to the results, both interviewees regard men's rhythmic gymnastics as a unique sport and they consider the sport to be independent rather than merged into other sports like women's rhythmic gymnastics.

They also think that grass-roots level practices need more attention. They consider more opportunities for beginner are necessary to develop this sport.

We already mention the recognition of men's rhythmic gymnastics as spectacle in some examples such as Cirque du Soleil and the Olympic handover ceremony. The interviewees don't underestimate those accomplishments the gymnasts and coaches achieved, but just suggest diversification of this sport. This implies that to be spectacle and to be gymnastics for all are not in conflict. At least for the interviewees, men's rhythmic can develop by including both concepts.

Discussion (2) Global - Domestic

The Canadian interviewees have the idea of opening the sport to both men and women. Also, they changed the name of the sport into a new one. This doesn't mean that the essence of the sport is lost. They are really interested in and respect what has been done as men's rhythmic gymnastics in Japan, but they think the sport needs modification to be globalised.

Men's rhythmic gymnastics is only for men in Japan. This is because this sport is the counterpart of women's rhythmic gymnastics. To take a part in rhythmic gymnastics is necessary both for men's and women's rhythmic, because including both genders have importance for a sport to join national-level sports competitions such as the interscholastic athletic meet.

Although men's rhythmic and women's have very different rules, if men's rhythmic was positioned to be an independent sport, this would decrease opportunities for taking a part in competitions. This makes difficult for men's rhythmic to stress their originality and the difference between women's and men's rhythmic gymnastics. In a way, men's rhythmic becomes independent only after this sport was exported to another country. Changing names could mean changing the sport drastically. However, the modification can also make the sport independent, which was impossible when done under the Japanese organisation.

This example shows that globalisation might change the sport drastically and at the same time can realise the essence of the sport.

Discussion (3) Sport - Culture

The Canadian interviewees think this sport should focus more on participants at the grass-roots level. On the other hand, because the sport is highly appreciated as amusing and spectator genre of physical performance, the Japanese coaches are likely to think that they should attract people with highly skilled professional performance.

When regarding the sport as a culture, or an art form, it is an effective way of making men's rhythmic survives to attract the audience with a skilled performance. On the contrary, as a sport, not only practices at advanced levels but also at introductory levels are necessary to be done to increase participants.

Here, we take another example from previous research by the authors (Hata and Noda, 2015).

According to the research, fans of men's rhythmic first knew the sport on TV. Watching TV might be an ordinary way to recognise a sport, but men's rhythmic is not the same as other sports because the fans watched not the sport programme but an entertainment documentary show which featured high school boys who practiced men's rhythmic.

Some said that they were attracted to the sport they never knew about, but there were many comments online that said they were attracted to the boys striving for their goal. This is because of the character of the show. Men's rhythmic was introduced in a section of the show, which features unique club activities at high school. In the show, men's rhythmic was rather an activity of boys than a sport. For the audience of the entertainment show, men's rhythmic might be more like a kind of cultural practice than just a sport. Championships and showcases of men's rhythmic hardly ever be broadcast on TV, thus it is a little difficult for most people to get to know about men's rhythmic as a sport.

However, developing as the sport by enhancing practices at different levels means desterilizing people's interests to this sport for the growth of this sport. If the grass-roots level was not well organised, people would not be able to join the sport even if they are attracted to this sport and become interested in doing this sport. Therefore, strengthening each level of the sport and emphasising its magnetism in its cultural practice are both not to be lost.

To be a sport and at the same time to be a culture makes men's rhythmic unique, attractive, and original.

Conclusion

This study considers men's rhythmic gymnastics from the three sets of concepts: global – domestic, sport – culture, and spectacle – gymnastics for all. In conclusion, we describe the sport according to these three sets of concepts. Men's rhythmic gymnastics has been tried to be promoted to be a global sport, and in doing so, the characters of the sport can be supposed to change in tune with a global market. For example, as we look at a case in Canada, it is possible that the sport will be open to both gender and different levels of practitioners. Also, for both fans and gymnasts, men's rhythmic gymnastics is a kind of a form of physical performance as well as sport, and this characteristic makes men's rhythmic gymnastics unique, attractive and original.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by Sasakawa Sports Foundation (Grant-in-Aid for Encouragement of Young Scientists, 2016).

Footnotes

1) Gymnastics is sometimes distinguished from 'sports', but the authors understand the meaning of 'sport' in a broad sense and position men's rhythmic gymnastics as a part of 'sport.'

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