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***A History of Baseball in China:
How America's Game Helped End
Educational Exchanges in the Late Qing
Dynasty, Taught Sun Yat-sen's
Revolutionaries to Throw Hand Grenades,
and Endured the Cultural Revolution***

In 1978, Allen Guttman argued that baseball was “neither uniquely American nor ubiquitously modern.” Yet he clearly endows the game with an inalienable, if not uniquely, American identity when he supposes that the reason baseball became popular in Canada, Japan, and the Caribbean during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was because those lands were inclined to embrace American ways. Guttman dubbed this phenomenon “the motive of imitation.”

But if there is a motive of imitation in some countries then, surely, there must be a corresponding “impulse of rejection” in others. While he doesn't use the term, Guttman gives repeated evidence of this in his 1994 book, *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism*. He notes, for example, that even as soccer was catching the fancy of schoolboys across Germany in the late 19th century, the game's English origins inhibited its expansion in a period of intense nationalism. These same forces—a motive of imitation and an impulse of rejection—occur repeatedly in the heretofore rarely explored history of baseball in China.

This paper shows that baseball was played regularly in China as much as a decade before the game was introduced into Japan. The Shanghai Baseball Club was founded in 1863 and while it catered to expatriates, the sport of baseball developed a strong appeal in the 1870s among students of the Chinese Educational Mission. Students of the Mission were supposed to spend fifteen years in the United States and another two years traveling to gain practical experience before returning to China to devote the rest of their lives in public service. But long before all-but one or two students were graduated, the mission was abandoned, in large part because its members succumbed to the motive of imitation.

They formed their own baseball team, called the Orientals, and were summoned home by the Imperial Court which was aghast that its best and brightest students had forsaken their heritage to embrace baseball. The student's motive of imitation was crushed by the impulse of rejection, imposed from afar by isolated ethnocentrics. The early foothold baseball had in China faded because-unlike Japan, Canada, and the Caribbean of the time-China's leaders never were impressed with the United States as a model of civilization.

Japan spent the last two decades of the 19th century adopting and learning western technology while China, with minor deviations, steered an anti-foreign course. Those competing philosophies, exposed so dramatically in 1895 when Japan overcame superior forces to defeat China in the first Sino-Japanese War, were crucial to the development of baseball in Japan and the game's hibernation in China. Events from the Boxer Rebellion to the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution stymied evolution of sports, particularly foreign sports, in China during much of the 20th century. But this paper shows that baseball survived all those cataclysms and even played a passing role in some. As, for example, when Sun Yixian (Sun Yat-sen) organized a baseball society in Hunan Province and used it as a cover to teach his students how to throw hand grenades on the eve of the 1911 Republican Revolution.

I believe Guttmann was correct in arguing that baseball is an American game, but not a "uniquely American" game. This paper is one chapter of a study of the history of baseball in Asia that will argue that the Japanese have done to baseball in the Orient what they did to McDonald's hamburgers in Japan. They have taken something that many, wrongly, considered to be "uniquely American," and turned it into something intensely Japanese.