27 Volunteering Japan-style

“Field cast” for the Tokyo Olympics

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Selection process: step 1

On a day in March 2019, a slight drizzle accompanies me on my way to the newly-named Tokyo Sports Square, a large two-storied building in downtown Yurakucho. My appointment that day is to be interviewed for becoming a Tokyo Olympics volunteer, in response to my online application from October 2018. The ground in the middle of the large entryway is painted like a racetrack and I am told to line up on the left side, prominently displaying the large sign “Field cast,” whereas the right side is labelled “City cast.” 38,000 volunteer applicants had voted in favor of these names that differentiate between those working at the Olympic sites and volunteers guiding foreigners around the city. This morning, only the left side is busy.

With a barcode on my phone, received through the online application site, I am quickly processed and assigned a room in the back of the building. Room names are clearly visible through huge signs hanging above, featuring names of former Olympic cities. Inside “Rome” an MC guides a roughly 200 applicants, all grouped in tables of six, through the first hour. Except for a four-minute PR video, the event is entirely in Japanese. A few foreigners are dispersed throughout the room, who, according to the MC, should be helped by those sitting next to them – a good practice of their English and preparation for what they would be doing anyway at the Olympics. The MC also highlights the concept of *omotenashi*, “Japanese style hospitality,” and how much fun volunteering is. After this, we engage in some light activities to demonstrate our skills in communication, flexibility, and decision-making.

I share the table with four women and one man, reflecting the gender imbalance in volunteers who applied, as more than 60% of applicants are women. The man at my table is in his late 30s, works for a global IT company, mostly from his home office allowing him the flexibility needed

to take time off from work for the required minimum of ten days – extraordinarily rare for male full-time employees in Japan’s labor market. Two of the women are recent high school graduates, who have been living abroad for an extended time. They are ideal candidates for the job: young and with bilingual skills. The ages of the people at my table also reflect the overall applicants, as the majority of volunteer applicants (29%) turned out to be in their 20s and 30s. Also at my table are one woman in her 30s, an English teacher, and a woman in her 60s, a retired apothecary interested in doing medical work as a volunteer. Healthcare is one out of ten fields of action for which one could register upon applying. Volunteers are also needed for distributing uniforms, orientation, staff checks, and security. Most popular, however, are personal support to athletes and the IOC, or working with the media.¹

Eventually we are split into teams of two to head to the second floor, where we are questioned about our commitment and motivation. After a thorough ID check, then trying on samples of uniforms for the correct size, we are given a token of appreciation in the form of a clear folder with the Tokyo Olympics imprint, a social media ready photo-op and the possibility to leave a friendly message to the Games on a flag, said to be used in future promotional events for the Olympics.

The changing face of volunteering

Superlatives and breaking records are a big part of what the Olympics eventually are all about. The same goes in recent years with the number of volunteers aiding in the smooth operation of the world’s largest mega-sporting-event: Tokyo 2020 will top London’s 70,000 and Rio’s 50,000 volunteers with the highest number ever recruited: 110,000 volunteers, including 80,000 Field cast plus 30,000 City cast.

This record-breaking number is surprising for a country where volunteering so far has not been overly popular; well below OECD average in international comparison. The history of volunteering in Japan has been shaped by the heavy hand of the government to facilitate and encourage volunteering and to create an image of volunteering most beneficial to the state, resulting in unfavorable stereotypes about volunteering in the public.

The history of volunteering and respective state policies can be divided into three phases. The first “conceptualization” period from 1945 to 1972 mostly sees governmental efforts for local volunteering, such as neighborhood associations (*chōnaikai*). It is often pointed out that there is no inherent Japanese term for volunteering, instead the English loanword *borantia* is used. This term was first used in Japan in 1964, the year of the first Olympic Games in Japan, but took until the 1980s to become ubiquitous.

The growing knowledge about volunteering went hand-in-hand with a significant image shift from volunteering as “self-sacrifice for others to volunteerism as a means for self-realization and self-fulfillment.”² In particular, the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in Kobe, which occurred on January 16, 1995, inspired a large wave of volunteers to an extent that had not been seen before. Local volunteer groups managed to respond faster to aid the people affected by the earthquake than the government. Since then, subsequent disasters, such as the Tohoku triple disaster of March 11, 2011, and the large earthquake in Kumamoto prefecture in April 2016, also drew large numbers of volunteers.

Besides “disaster volunteering,” volunteering to support the state in social welfare work, e.g. elderly care, is the largest field where volunteers are needed. A third category of volunteering is that of crime-prevention volunteering. Despite Japan’s remarkably low crime rate in international comparison, a growing media discourse on crimes committed by foreigners aided in mounting fears and anxieties in the population, and thus the number of neighborhood watch groups grew, often born out of the members of neighborhood associations.

Volunteering so far has often not been voluntary in the usual sense of the word. Japan has a large number of neighborhood associations, yet even though in theory participation is on a voluntary basis, in reality, people have an obligation to join and they become members more or less automatically.³ Research finds that participation in neighborhood associations does not increase the well-being of the participants, whereas participating in “actually voluntary” groups of one’s own choosing has a positive effect on well-being. Sports volunteering is such an option. As the fourth main volunteering category, it is still in its comparatively early stages in Japan. As stated above, the term “volunteering” was first used at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, but the number of volunteers was small. The Winter Olympics, Sapporo 1972 and Nagano 1998, also used volunteers, but on a very different scale. Since 2007, Tokyo holds an international marathon each spring, an event that after ten years draws more than 30,000 runners and more than 10,000 volunteers annually.⁴ The foundation of the Japan Sport Volunteer Network and the positive experiences of volunteers in recent years has made recruiting volunteers easier.

Nonetheless, it was doubted if the 2020 Olympics would manage to attract the desired number of applicants, as the Olympics require a very different level of commitment: contrary to the one-day event of the Tokyo marathon, the Olympics guideline is that volunteers have to work for a minimum of ten days. The Olympics are held at the hottest time of the year, making volunteering physically strenuous and challenging. Therefore, campaigns to mobilize volunteers were manifold. One of them was

an event I attended in August 2018. Opened under the label “2 Years to Go,” many local Olympics sponsors had booths showcasing themselves. At the booth to advertise volunteering one could write a small message supporting volunteering on a sticky note, receiving in return a summer fan with the Olympics logo. The booth was decorated with campaign posters and photos from the 2016 Rio Olympics, showing happy volunteers at work (see Figure 27.1).

In order to mobilize more than a 100,000 people working for free in Tokyo’s subtropical midsummer, a change in discourse about what volunteering is and brings to the volunteers themselves was needed. Previously volunteers were motivated by philanthropic motives and aspects of self-development. What is now openly advertised, however, is the element of pleasure: volunteering should be understood as a fun and pleasant leisure activity – an idea very much common elsewhere but for Japan still a new line of argument. The 2020 Olympics wants all social groups, young and old, to participate: from university students to the elderly, from those employed to housewives.

Figure 27.1 Volunteering for the Tokyo Olympics: promotional materials and events, 2018.

Source: © Barbara Holthus.

Eventually, in total, 204,680 people applied for the 80,000 positions as Field casts (the 30,000 City cast positions only drew 36,649 applications). Among them were 81,000 applications filed by non-Japanese, approximately 40%. Time and resources to interview those living abroad proved difficult or impossible in many cases. Results of those chosen to be Olympic volunteers were announced in September 2019, with training sessions beginning soon thereafter.

Shifts in public discourse: between the best period of one's life and the injustices of "black volunteering"

Japanese newspapers have discussed volunteering for the Tokyo Olympics since 2013, and the frequency of reporting started to pick up in 2018. Some articles are nostalgic and refer back to the 1964 Olympic Games, and critical voices are often balanced out with more positive voices. Volunteering is discussed as a possibility to show Japan's spirit of *omotenashi* (hospitality) and as of particular value to introverted Japanese. Also, providing translation and language support as part of volunteering is seen as an opportunity for universities teaching foreign languages.

One of the poster boys of the positivist discourse, highlighting the "once-in-a-lifetime" experience, is Nishikawa Chiharu. In his book and lectures, he emphasizes his positive, valuable, and life-changing experiences as an Olympic volunteer.⁵ Yet whereas his and other's reports describe the experience of being a volunteer as positive, the organization, recruitment, payment, and working conditions have become increasingly criticized. These critical voices began to increase in mid-2016. Non-fiction writer Honma Ryu is one of the prominent critics. His evaluation of the unacceptable working conditions for Tokyo 2020 volunteers appeared in numerous magazines as well as in his 2018 book *Black volunteering*.⁶ His main points of critique are: (a) the 1,000 yen (\$10) per day travel allowance is insufficient for volunteers coming from outside of Tokyo; (b) the working hours of the volunteers (eight hours per day for a minimum of ten days) is equivalent to full-time work – yet without pay; (c) recruiting techniques were emotionally manipulative – and reminded him of Japan's wartime recruiting efforts; (d) the exceptional summer heat and humidity pose a severe health risk to the volunteers and makes for dangerous working conditions.

Outlook

Japan's government hopes to use the Tokyo Olympics to revolutionize the image of volunteering in Japan, to allow for it to also be "fun," to construct

it as something positive and to create a “Volunteer legacy.” Japan aspires to London’s success in creating an active Olympics volunteer alumni network. In such an aging society as Japan, with dwindling funds in the National Pension system, having larger numbers of volunteers can be highly beneficial, particularly, but not exclusively for elder care. “Volunteer legacy” as part of the 2020 Olympics’ “soft legacy” tries to make Japan a happier, more social place through “happy volunteers.”

However, some journalists in both Japan and abroad have pointed to the stark contrast of the economic interests of the Olympics and their sponsors, versus the “ideal” of the Olympics. Within the ideal of a spirit of friendship and solidarity, having volunteers is “natural” and of utmost necessity to keep the Games running. Yet in a profit-driven world with billion-dollar sponsorships and scandal-ridden Olympic business, to have over 100,000 people work for free with just the “honor” of making the Games a success leaves a bad aftertaste.

Notes

- 1 <https://tokyo2020.org/en/special/volunteer/activity/>.
- 2 Avenell, Simon. 2010. “Facilitating spontaneity: The state and independent volunteering in contemporary Japan.” *Social Science Japan Journal* 13(1): 69–93. Page 71.
- 3 Taniguchi, Hiromi. 2013. “The influence of generalised trust on volunteering in Japan.” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 42(1): 127–147.
- 4 <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20160229/p2a/00m/0na/014000c>.
- 5 Nishikawa, Chiharu. 2018. *Tokyo orinpikku no borantia ni naritai hito ga yomu hon* [Book for aspiring Tokyo Olympic volunteers]. Tokyo: Ikarosu.
- 6 Honma, Ryū. 2018. *Burakku borantia* [black volunteering]. Tokyo: Kadokawa.