The pursuit of hosting major (or ‘mega’) sports events has become increasingly popular among governments, corporations, and civic ‘boosters’ worldwide. They argue that major economic, developmental, political, and socio-cultural benefits will flow from them, easily justifying the costs and risks involved. Numerous studies fuel the popular belief that sport is a generator of national pride and identity building; assessing the costs and benefits for developed and newly industrializing economies; identity politics and political identities; evaluating the economic and sporting impact of sports events and promoting activities, and case studies of impacts and outcomes.

The papers were arranged in sessions according to the following topics: failed bids and successful bids; nation and economy building; assessing the costs and benefits for developed and newly industrializing economies; identity politics and political identities; evaluating the economic and sporting impact of sports events and promoting activities, and case studies of impacts and outcomes.

Nicholas Aplin (National Institute of Education, Singapore) described local sporting traditions and the influence of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew as the main reasons for Singapore’s resistance to the allure of sports mega events. In some ways this was similar to the People’s Republic of China’s previous resistance to competitive sport. Yet in Singapore, the alternative choice of a sports policy for all policy failed to realize sustainable mass participation rates. Yi Jiandong (Beijing Sport University) presented a roadmap to 2020 of sports events’ hosting in China. Data never seen before outside China provided ample evidence of China’s pursuit of the Beijing 2008 Olympics for both status and economic investment purposes. In discussion it was questioned how long the investment would last and how even the benefits would be spread. While hosting certainly is popular with the political elite, larger parts of the Chinese people might have different ideas.

Gerd Ahlert (Institute of Economic Structures Research, Göttingen) outlined a robust econometric forecasting model that has been applied to the Football World Cup 2006 in Germany. The calculation based on the Sport Satellite Account predicts huge pre-event investments and low direct economic impacts. But economic benefits can be made indirectly through marketing and tourism branding. Sonbhat Karnjankit (Chulalongkorn University) argued that Thailand has already reached a saturated level of modernity, allowing the city to host and perform credibly in multi-sport events, as demonstrated by the Asian Games in 1990, 1998 and 2007. The problem for countries such as Thailand already established on the global tourist route is the unpredictability of economic benefits.

Salomé Mariëvoet (University of Ghent) outlined research on the European Football Championships held in Portugal in 2004 and introduced the media with the workshop’s discussions. Her paper considered the impact of the mediated event on the internal image of major sports events. Research into ten events in five cities in Britain suggests that a European model where events are staged in existing sports facilities is more cost effective than the North American model of building facilities in the hope that events or franchises will be attracted to them.

Wolfram Manzenreiter (University of Vienna) discussed the winners and losers among cities in Japan that hosted half the 2002 FIFA Football World Cup. While the regional impact was overestimated in most economic dimensions and in each of the ten host regions, the social benefits received overestimated positive appraisal. With the increase of size of the conurbation hosting the event and its rise of importance on the national map, satisfaction with the impact of the multi-site event decreased. Most participants, Manzenreiter noted, were in favour of more transparency in the bidding process and more research to explore the possibilities of expanding social benefits deriving from the mega-event experience. Mustafa Ishak (National University of Malaysia) demonstrated that events such as the Commonwealth Games in 1998 and the Grand Prix (Formula One) car racing had put Malaysia on the global sporting map. He argued that these events helped the country to acquire modern state-of-the-art sports facilities, spurred huge infrastructure investments and fostered an enhanced sense of national pride. Hence he emphasized the importance of sport to processes of economic development in newly industrialized countries and nation building in multi-ethnic societies. Finally Francesca Muñoz Ramírez (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain) identified the importance of place in determining success or failure in hosting sport events. An illustrated guide to pre-Olympic Barcelona, Olympic Barcelona and post-Olympic developments in the city revealed the importance of partnerships – public and private, and across different sectors of public life – to create ‘transversal synergies’ and to include the whole community in every mega-event context. Barcelona has benefited from continuity in strategic thinking on revitalisation and architecture as a means of urban redevelopment.

The final discussion summed up the issues presented in the papers. First, there was a need to distinguish more clearly between increasingly commercial international sport mega-events such as the Olympics and the Football World Cup, ‘big sports events’ that generate large national audiences and media audiences abroad but are closed to competitive bidding, and other ‘major sport events’ with different scope and effect. Second, the dichotomies of post-colonialism (such as ‘Asia-Europe’) were reflected in differences in approach towards mega-events by developed and newly industrialised economies, established and emerging nations. Third, mega-events were considered of utmost importance for the projects of modernity as well as post-modernity, albeit with distinctive goals. For modernizing nations, hosting a mega-event is a clear marker of international esteem for developmental achievements; in post-modern societies, events large and small fulfill the role of image generator. Fourthly, economic gains are less likely than social benefits, though this kind of legacy is difficult to plan and control.

While the subsequent direction of the research agenda stimulated by the workshop, participants at the workshop stressed the necessity of multi-disciplinary research and international collaboration to go beyond the limits of one’s own research perspective. Our view was that the workshop succeeded in that it enabled all to share greater awareness and recognition of the differences and similarities between the experience of hosting major international sporting events in newly industrializing and developed nations, modern and post-modern cultures, and post-industrialized and newly industrialised economies.

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The ASEF/Alliance Workshop ‘Hosting Major International Sports Events: Comparing Asia and Europe’ was convened by John Horne, Hirsoa Ichino and Wolfram Manzenreiter, and was held at the University of Edinburgh on 1–2 March 2005. A publication of the papers will be available in J. Horne and W. Manzenreiter, eds. Sports Mega-Events in Blackwell (forthcoming).