

**Did the Japanese dream of a muscular body? :
Western style of physical training in the *Meiji* era**

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Abstract: In this research, we clarify what was regarded as a physical ideal in Japan, when Sandow style physical training was accepted in the latter half in the *Meiji* era. At that time, we paid special attention to the following points. First, many variants were created from the Sandow's system. Secondly, if the physical ideal for the West were ancient Greek heroes, what was equivalent in Japan? Because the body of Sandow imitating the heroes of ancient Greece was a muscular one, this question can be paraphrased as follows. Did the Japanese also dream of a muscular body?

The conclusions of this paper are as follows.

First, in Japan at that time “modern pathology” similar to that of the West was held, and was aimed at overcoming it. There was a foundation where the Sandow's methods were popular in Japan. Several variants were created from there.

Secondly, Sandow was often expressed as *Nio* in Japan. However, although *Nio* was the subject of worship in Japan, it was not a physical ideal that I should aim for. That is, in Japan, Sandow and their variants methods are prevalent, but an ideal body for the Japanese had not been historically localized.

Third, however, attempts to find an ideal body have not been compromised. Rather, the Japanese body which becomes alternative to Sandow \cong *Nio* was “discovered”, but it was rather unnatural because it pretends to be “Japanese”.

Fourth, most of these new physical exercise methods were not implemented as collective units in public institutions such as schools and military, but as a method of targeting individuals' bodies at least in philosophy. In this sense, such a physical exercise method became an opportunity for individuals to consciously ask what kind of body is suitable for the Japanese nation.

In other words, Sandow's physical exercise method was a mirror that came from the West, and Japanese formed the body of individuals as “nation” through this mirror.

Key words : Eugen Sandow, *Jigoro Kano*, Physical Culture, Ideal body, *Nio*

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I . Introduction¹

1. *Soseki's* melancholic dream

Yume Jyuya (*Ten Nights of Dreams* in English)

was published in 1908 by *Soseki Natsume* (1867–1916), one of the greatest writers of modern Japanese literature. This work is a collection of short stories based on *Soseki's*

own dreams. Here is an outline of the sixth night.

In his dream, *Soseki* is in a Buddhist temple in Japan around the year 1200. There, he finds a well-known sculptor of Buddhist statues fully absorbed in sculpting *Nio*, the guardian gods of Buddhism who stand at the entrance gate of Buddhist temple. Together with others—people from the *Meiji* era like *Soseki*—, he watches the sculptor working. The spectators comment, “The sculptor is not creating *Nio* but carving out the statue of *Nio*, which is embedded in the wood”. In other words, though the sculptor is certainly creating a statue of *Nio*, he is not proceeding according to trial and error. He had already seen the ideal form of *Nio* in the wood, and because he is following that given form carefully, there is no hesitation in his work. Upon hearing this, *Soseki* wants to sculpt *Nio*; he tries several times but never succeeds. When he realizes that “there is no more *Nio* embedded in the wood of the *Meiji* era”, he wakes up. Drawing from this fable, let us examine why “there is no more *Nio* embedded in the wood of the *Meiji* era”.

The *Meiji* era started in 1868 and ended in 1912. What was present 1,200 years ago, but not during the *Meiji* era, was the belief in the existence of ideals and truth. In other words, the sculptor could carve *Nio* without hesitation because he had already been convinced of its ideal form; *Soseki* could not create *Nio*'s likeness because the belief in that ideal had been lost by the *Meiji* era. *Soseki*'s story ironically describes the tragedy of the Japanese in that they were no longer seeking ideals and truth before their encounter with the West and the comedy in that they were still seeking *Nio*.

2. Did the Japanese dream of a muscular body?

In *Meiji* era, conventional values and meanings were completely shaken as result of rapid Westernization and modernization. This tendency became more apparent at the turn of the last century for many reasons. For instance, Japan fought two major wars with other countries during this period, and consequently, nationalism rose in reaction to Westernization at the beginning of the *Meiji* era. On the other hand, Western thoughts and lifestyles remained as objects of people's longings. Furthermore, during this period, foreigners could live among the Japanese, which made the relationship between the West and Japan—previously a matter for the state—more focused on social and individual issues. In other words, interest in and fear of Westerners joining the same society as the Japanese produced social anxiety. The situation produced the absence of certain types of ideals and truth; as a result, people were keen to find them.

In the latter half of the *Meiji* era, a new physical exercise culture targeting families and individuals in the private sphere emerged. It was different from existing physical education programs and sports that were practiced in public, including among the military and in schools. In the background, ideas of health, hygiene, and morality that prevailed at the time slowly started to invade the private sphere. In this context, the first physical training method for individuals emerged. It was imported from abroad, though. The importer was *Jigoro Kano* (1860–1938), the founder of *judo* and one of the leading educators of the era. What was imported was the training method developed by Eugen Sandow (1867–1925). The Sandow method of training was first published in 1898 in the newsletter for *judo*-related organizations with

a view toward complementing *judo*. It was published as a textbook for physical training in 1900.

In this research, it will be clarified what was regarded as a physical ideal, when Sandow style physical training was accepted in Japan at the *Meiji* era. At that time, the following points are considered. First, many variants were created from the Sandow's system. Secondly, if the physical ideal for the West were ancient Greek heroes, what was Japan's ideal equivalent? Because the body of Sandow imitating the heroes of ancient Greece was a muscular one, this question can be paraphrased as follows. Did the Japanese also dream of a muscular body?

II . Acceptance and development of Sandow's method in Japan

1. Sandow as the ideal body

Sandow was responsible for starting a major craze for training methods for individuals in the West at the turn of the last century. There were roughly three reasons for the craze.

First, Sandow's argument that "modern illnesses" such as racial degradation, weak minds and bodies, and social anxiety were to be overcome with "modern principles," such as eugenics and social Darwinism, reflected the major concerns of the time.

Second, commercialization pursued by Sandow, in the form of the sales of equipment and magazines and the organization of bodybuilders' competitions, matched the interests and lifestyles of the "consuming masses."

Third, Sandow's body concretized "the ideal body." Sandow achieved legitimacy in that his body represented the Western ideal; it was modeled after mythical heroes of ancient Greece (against the background of populist

Romanticism). What is important here is that any Westerner could acquire the ideal body through diet/nutrition and training; in other words, this ideal was an achievable dream. Put differently, Sandow was the embodiment of the ideal body, which could be copied by anyone in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.

2. Popularity of the Sandow method of physical training in Japan

Then, textbooks on Sandow's training method in Japan produced by *Kano* were reissued five times within a year, with the 64th edition published 10 years later. In addition to *Kano*, physical educators and doctors published textbooks on the Sandow method one after another. In sum, physical training books took hold in Japan, and the boom tells us that just as in the West, Japan was troubled with the question of "how to overcome modern illness." For example, "modern illness" in Japan can be found in a mentally ill called *shinkei suiijyaku* (neurasthenia) that infected from the intellectuals to the masses. It is also the similar illness as *hanmon* (agony) in which *seinen* (young people) who emerged newly at that time have fallen.

However, these illnesses are not unique cases in Japan. Rather it has a logical structure very close to ennui and decadence in Western society of the same period. In other words, Japanese *shinkei suiijyaku* and *hanmon* were variants of western ennui and decadence, that is why the coping method for such illnesses were also demanded by Western modernity. In this context, the Sandow method attracted attention as a physical exercise method which could be practiced by anyone regardless of age, gender, or class.

3. Increasing varieties

This boom in Japan triggered production of numerous similar books. Among the books

Table.1 Japanese Textbooks on physical training related to Sandow's method

No.	Author	Title	publisher	year
①	Zoshikai(ed) (造士会編)	Sandau Tairyoku Yosei Ho (サンダウ体力養成法)	Zoshikai (造士会)	1900
②	Yasutaro Kitamura(ed) (北村安太郎編)	Sandā Shi Tairyoku Yosei Ho (サンダー氏体力養成法)	Ogawashoeido (小川尚栄堂)	1903
③	Sozo Takamizawa(ed) (高見澤宗蔵編著)	Wīnburū Shi Kan'i Tairyoku Yosei Ho (ウィーンブルウ氏簡易体力養成法)	Daigakukan (大学館)	1903
④	Nihon Taiikukai(ed) (日本体育会編)	Shinsen Taiso Ho (新撰体操法)	Ikueisha (育英舎)	1903
⑤	Boeckmann Paul (パウル・フォン・ペークマン)	Kyohai Jutsu (強肺術)	Bunmeido (文明堂)	1903
⑥	Kishiro Sato(ed) (佐藤喜四郎編)	Sandau Shiki Taiiku Ho Shokai (サンダウ式体育法詳解)	Kaishinsha (快進社)	1905
⑦	Ikujiro Obata (小島幾次郎)	Tairyoku Zoshin Ron (体力増進論)	Kokkosha (国光社)	1905
⑧	Michiaki Nagai (永井道明)	Bunmeiteki Kokuminyo Katei Taiso (文明的国民的家庭体操)	Bunshokaku (文晶閣)	1911
⑨	Zoshikai(ed) (造士会編)	Sandau Tairyoku Yosei Ho (サンダウ体力養成法)	Dobunkan (同文館)	1911
⑩	Harumitsu Kawai (川合春充)	Jikken Kan'i kyoken Jutsu (実験簡易強健術)	Bunmeikaku (文明閣)	1911

listed in the table 1, only three of them (①, ⑥, ⑨) are faithful to the Sandow method. The characteristics can be categorized into several.

The first category—though different from the Sandow method—includes methods for growing muscles, which was also an objective of the Sandow method.

The second category included methods for adopting different Western-style training methods while pointing out the shortcomings of the Sandow method.

Third are methods inspired by Western-style physical training methods that propose physical exercise methods that are unique to the textbook's author.

The fourth category includes methods that combine Western-style physical exercise with breathing methods from Japan and the East.

The fifth category includes methods based on nationalism, which rejects all connections with Sandow—from his body to his character—and which encourage traditional Japanese training methods.

What is common among all categories is that

the uniqueness of each method is justified by using the Sandow method as the standard. In this sense, the Sandow training method has served as a reference point for training methods that followed.

Ⅲ . The ideal of Japanese body and its absence

1. Sandow and *Nio*

Some of the text books mentioned earlier describe Sandow as *Nio*. In Japan, the owner of a muscular and powerful body is often expressed as *Nio*, which Japanese can say that this simile is appropriate. However, the term is typically used in the positive sense, whereas these textbooks argue that “the body of *Nio* is not what the Japanese should aspire to.” This premise is odd upon first sight.

The roots of *Nio* trace back to ancient Greece. It was believed that ancient Greek deities and heroes were transformed into *Nio* during the process of transmission from the Hellenic world to China and then to

Japan. However, when it is compared ancient Greek statues with *Nio*'s features, differences between them are quite evident. Greek statues are realistic in that they can be copied by human beings, but statues of *Nio* differ from actual human physiology.

For example, the most popular figure of the *Nio* imagined by Japanese people is a statue of *Kongo Rikishi* of *Todaiji* temple. At first glance it looks anatomically to the owner of a body like a human, but no matter how much training it is, anyone cannot acquire that body. It is obvious if Japanese look at the structure of the abdominal muscles of *Nio* where bumpy elevations line up, the body of it is different from a human being. In other words, the relationship between humans and gods is quite different between ancient Greece and Japan. Therefore, the body of *Nio* is not a sensible aspiration for human beings in Japan that does not aim to get the similarities of the gods.

In Japan, protection and health are prayed to *Nio*, hoping to benefit from *Nio*'s strength. In this sense, *Nio* is an object of folk faith without special fables that show ideals for human beings, as with ancient Greek deities and heroes. *Sumo* wrestlers were often seen as embodying *Nio* in the human world, and their religious bodies were not those that ordinary people would actually aspire to. To sum up, though *Nio* certainly has a strong and muscular body, his essence is transcendent and abstract, separate from human beings.

2. Rejection of Sandow as *Nio*

Sandow's body became authoritative in the West because he could borrow the proof that his body resembled the ideal of the ancient Greeks. Even if a romantic historical view is based on fiction, its fundamentals cannot be shaken easily. However, regardless of the extent to which it dedicates itself to Westernization, Japan cannot fundamentally

share a history with the West. Therefore, in Japan, Sandow's body remains a mere mass of muscles embodying "the superior West." Consequently, if one tries to forcibly understand Sandow in the Japanese context, especially with regard to appearance, he may be understood as *Nio*, but because the Japanese do not have a history of *Nio*'s body as a concrete objective, Sandow as *Nio* is rejected.

Sandow certainly became a certain standard, reference point, or goal in Japan. In other words, Sandow is a relative index that changes according to Japanese attitudes toward the West. To incorporate different cultures into one's own, it is needed to recapture the different cultures within our own framework. Therefore, Sandow, the Westerner, was reinterpreted as *Nio* in Japanese culture. However, because *Nio* is not permitted to have the Japanese version of the qualification that Sandow—or ancient Greek statues that Sandow mirrors—had, he became the object of rejection.

There is a paradox here: in the age in which individuals are targets of physical training, the image of the ideal body is absent. This paradox easily leads to the following question: "Then, where is the Japanese body?"

3. Unnaturalness of oriental/Japanese body

As one of the examples of answers to the above question from that time, *Okada*'s still-sitting method is mentioned in this section, which was in vogue for a while following the end of *Meiji* era. *Torajiro Okada* (1872–1920), the creator of the method, thought the body with excessively developed chest muscles represented Western unnaturalness; thus, *Okada* rejected the Sandow method. He aimed to acquire an Eastern body, attempting to create harmony with nature and the universe,

and placing its essence in the *hara* (the abdomen). Certainly, for the Japanese, *hara* has a different meaning from the biological *hara*. The former use of the term is as a body part that expresses one's capacity and character.

In a sense, *hara* can be an antithesis to the view of the modern body view including Sandow. Because the body of Western modernity is nothing but an anatomical body, and this is made up of a set of visible organs. As far as this point of view there is no organ called *hara*. And there are no physical methods to train this organ that does not exist. *Okada*, conversely, called for harmony with the stability of the ego and the nature through a correct posture and breathing based on the sense of *hara*. The large pectoral muscle of Sandow and *hara* of *Okada* are the same in terms of enlarging specific parts, but the contents of instructions are different. That is, if the pectoralis muscle is a symbol of armor to fight from the front as "modern illness", *hara* is like a balloon to float from the modern times.

If a Japanese person sees a body with a protruding *hara*, he or she would easily be reminded of *Daruma* or *Hotei*. *Daruma* is a fabled monk and *Hotei* is a deity, and both are good luck charms assumed to attract fortune. Their likenesses can be found in many Buddhist temples and homes. However, the protruding *hara* common to both *Daruma* and *Hotei*, which represents both material and spiritual fulfilment, is only a symbol, just as in the case of *Nio*'s muscles. It is not part of an ideal body to aspire for. In this regard, *Okada*'s body—representing the attempt to overcome Western unnaturalness—is, in fact, also unnatural. In other words, the location of the oriental or Japanese body was "discovered" by encountering with the West, and therefore invisible *hara* was the answer that had been

prepared from the beginning as a visual pectoralis antithesis.

IV. Conclusion

This paper began with *Soseki*'s dream. He was extreme sensitive to the ambivalent relationship Japan had with the West. He did not support easy Westernization or "the return to Japan" as a reaction to it; rather, he was engaged throughout his life with the fate of Japan as being unable to escape from the West. His unique cynicism can be found in his view of Western-style physical training methods, which were in vogue at that time.

For example, *Wagahai wa Neko de aru (I Am a Cat)* in English), one of his well-known novels, through the cat, the protagonist of the story, *Soseki*, completely enjoys exercises that are in fashion, just as new diseases spread from the West, like the plague and tuberculosis. Still, the cat never misses daily various exercises. On the contrary, *Soseki* himself was also very interested in physical training. In 1909, a year after the publication of *Yume Jyuya*, he recorded in his diary that he purchased the 'Exerciser', Western-style equipment. He probably did not expect that his weak body and mind would achieve true recovery by training because he regarded such weaknesses as symptoms of the chronic disease of modernity. Nevertheless, he could never ignore physical training.

Did the Japanese dream of acquiring muscular bodies at all? There is no simple answer to the question. However, it can be certainly argued that the new body portrayed by the West at the beginning of the 20th century served as a prompt for asking each Japanese person the following question: "Should Japanese aim for this kind of body?" This new ideal body was not just for the elites like *Soseki*, but also for individuals

regardless of age, gender, or class because it was distributed commercially in the form of a textbook as a commodity. In other words, the Western-style training methods that came to Japan in the late *Meiji* era were not dreams that could end upon awaking; instead, they were “realistic” problems fostering urgency and tension and compelling the Japanese of the period to answer.

note

This research is based on my presentation at the international workshop ‘Cultivating the Body: Martial arts and Sports as Physical Education’, held at Ghent University on February 21, 2018. This workshop was organized by Ghent University, faculty of arts and philosophy. Coordinators were Andreas Niehaus (Ghent University) and Kotaro Yabu (Sendai University). For details of the program, refer to the following URL. <http://www.japanese-body-cultivation.ugent.be/program/> (Last view date: May, 30, 2018.)

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