Fakeball
The Taiwan baseball world has been rocked by yet another game-fixing scandal, this time involving the dmedia T-Rex team. A total of three players (including a former MLB pitcher) are out on bail, while some bookies, gangsters, and team officials (including coaches, the assistant manager, and the team spokesman) have been detained. The guilt of those involved has yet to be proven, but there have certainly been some suspicious incidents. During one game on July 11, the dmedia’s normally accurate U.S. hurler lasted only three innings, managing just 32 strikes out of 84 pitches (an almost unheard of ball-strike ratio), walking 7 batters, hitting an 8th, giving up a home run, and surrendering a total of 6 earned runs. Five days later, the T-Rex blew a lead by committing 5 errors, including 2 by the pitching staff (for a list of other “tricks” used to throw games, please click here).

While Taiwan’s major leagues (currently referred to as the “Chinese Professional Baseball League” or CPBL) have long been plagued by gambling woes (10 scandals in the last 11 years), the current crisis has reached new lows, with the T-Rex’s owner being either persuaded, tricked, or blackmailed into surrendering control of the team to members of the Heavenly Way Alliance (天道盟) and Four Seas Gang (四海幫). Gang leaders doled out player salaries, while other “brethren” actually lived in the players’ dorm, doling out wine, women, and song to those who cooperated, and harassing or beating up those who refused. According to the team owner, when he alluded to this problem on his blog, he was also subjected to a thrashing (prosecutors have cast doubt on some of his stories, however).

Baseball has long occupied a special place in the hearts of Taiwanese sports fans, beginning with its introduction during the Japanese colonial era (see Yu Junwei 孟峻瑋’s Playing in Isolation: A History of Baseball in Taiwan). The history of Taiwan’s professional leagues dates back to 1989, but the first scandal did not strike until 1997, with nearly all the members of the China Times Eagles (now known as the “Black Eagles”) being indicted on gambling charges. Despite the subsequent introduction of harsh penalties such as lifetime bans for crooked players, similar incidents have continued unabated, and may be linked to the growing influence of organized crime in postwar politics (including dirty money referred to as “black gold” or 黑金). Just last year, 5 members of the China Trust Whales were implicated in a game-fixing scandal, prompting representatives of the league’s 6 teams to swear an oath promising to stop such behavior. All to no avail. Even baseball’s staunchest supporters are losing heart, with the prosecutor investigating the latest scandal (also a fan) proclaiming that he does not see any hope for the game.

Now, as we approach the 20th anniversary of professional baseball in Taiwan, the main questions are: 1) Who is responsible for this mess? 2) What can be done to clean up the game? Clearly, the players deserve some share of the blame for being greedy, but the owners and league officials have failed to forcibly address this issue. While they have been quick to bow low and apologize (repeatedly), no leading figures have ever stepped down as a sign of taking responsibility. Fan anger is now being directed at these individuals, with some circulating an on-line petition to force the CPBL Secretary-General to step down. Other fans are making the more constructive suggestion of reorganizing the league so that owners have less control over its operations, including the investigation of gambling schemes. Finally, the government needs to do more, not only in terms of supporting the CPBL but also launching an effective and long-term crackdown on organized crime, something that is especially problematic for KMT given its historical links to various “dark societies” (黑社會). When asked to comment on the current scandal, the vast majority of players and coaches refused to be quoted on the record for fear of offending the “brethren”. It is time to put an end to the pernicious leverage that organized crime exerts over so many facets of Taiwanese life.