

Social Change, Power Configuration and Global Governance



Beyond the Olympics: Power, Change and Legacy

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Abstract

The Beijing Olympic Games of 2008 threw into sharp relief questions not just about how China could manage such a sporting mega-event but also about whether it could cope with the longer-term social, economic and political implications and legacies. Sport, including such mega-events as the Olympics, can be used by governments for internal purposes, such as encouraging national solidarity, driving the economy or even raising political popularity. It can equally serve as an instrument of external relations, such as promoting an image internationally or developing new sporting/diplomatic contacts. This article examines the expectations, immediate results and potential longer-term legacies of the 2008 Olympics for China, its leaders and its people, and also for its external partners. It argues that although the commercial and infrastructural benefits were important, Chinese sporting prowess was confirmed and the Olympic movement influenced, China was not completely successful in winning the hearts and minds of the (Western) world.

Keywords: China, Beijing Olympics, legacy, sport, soft power

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1. Introduction

An Olympic year means that the host city, and country, are rarely out of the international media headlines. For the three Asian cities which have hosted the summer Olympics – Tokyo in 1964, Seoul in 1988 and Beijing in 2008 – such global attention, which needless to say they had expected to be positive, was part of the attraction of hosting such an event. For all three countries, these Games acted as a kind of “coming-out party”, either to re-establish a place in the international community (1964) or to confirm their emergence (1988 and 2008). Yet, at the same time, in all three cases the decision to award the

Games to those cities/countries, the run-up to and even the Games themselves were not without controversy. In 2008 the success of the Beijing Olympics in terms of the spectacular opening ceremony, record-breaking Chinese sporting achievements, and a generally well-regulated mega-event brought praise for China's capabilities. Yet, at the same time, the flame relay around the world – the unharmonious “journey of harmony” to all the world's continents – and the heavy-handed security presence in and around Beijing certainly provoked a measure of controversy. The Beijing Olympic Games, therefore, threw into sharp relief questions about not just how an economically-transformed China could manage this mega-event in terms of sporting organization, but also the manner in which it has coped with the political, economic and social implications and legacies.

Although sport can be seen as one facet of the contemporary phenomenon of globalization, at the domestic national level it can perform a number of political, economic and sociocultural functions. Sport can be used for internal political purposes, such as encouraging national solidarity or political leadership popularity, just as much as a means to improve the health of a country's citizens, forge social cohesion or provide an additional source of employment and income (Girginov and Parry, 2005: 162). China has been no exception to this general rule. Despite the ideal espoused by the founders and some early leaders of the Olympic movement that “sport has nothing to do with politics”, scholars and observers have frequently noted and commented on the deep linkages between sport and politics. Therefore, it would be naive to expect the Olympic Games, the premier international sporting event, to be free of such political influences. As one senior International Olympic Committee (IOC) official has recorded, “in practice, it is evident that sport and politics do indeed mix, at many different levels” (Pound, 1994: 50). Sport can equally well serve as an instrument of external relations and “nation branding”, for in the words of Richard Espy, “sport can provide a malleable foreign policy tool indicating various shades of political significance depending on the intent, and perceived intent, of the parties concerned” (Espy, 1979: 4). In a world still characterized by tensions between ideologies and states, it is not surprising for “participant units in transnational institutions like the Olympic Games to behave as if these are, to paraphrase Clausewitz, an extension of politics by other means” (Hargreaves, 2003: 21).

The Olympics have been characterized in many ways, but their use as a demonstration of “soft power” has become more critically observed in recent times. Since Joseph Nye first coined the term in the early 1990s, “soft power”, which he saw as more intangible form of attraction when contrasted with the hard power of coercion and inducement, has come to extend and expand its meaning so as to become rather amorphous in practice (Nye, 2004). Nonetheless, broadly culture, values and institutions are said to constitute

this soft power. In his keynote speech to the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2007, President Hu Jintao stated that the CCP must “enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people’s basic cultural rights and interests” (Nye, 2008), thereby casting it in a domestic context, but the concept clearly has external policy implications as well.

2. Sport in China

The Chinese take pride in a physical culture that dates back centuries, even millennia, but from the late 19th century there was an increasing influence of so-called “Western” sports. Although the 2008 Olympics have been frequently depicted as China’s “coming-out party”, it should be noted that Chinese athletes have been involved in the Olympics, albeit intermittently, for many decades. China’s first IOC member was elected in 1922 and sporting delegations participated in the Olympics from 1932 onwards. After 1949, Mao Zedong’s slogan of “New Physical Culture” implied both mass sporting activities and anti-imperialist mobilization. Sport served several purposes: domestically, making all Chinese healthy and physically fit would boost the economic productivity and the security of the country, while internationally sports could demonstrate the superiority of the socialist system. The Cultural Revolution severely damaged elite sports in China, but, as the open door policies began in the late 1970s, Chinese athletes returned to international competitions and once again Western sport, especially commercial sport, began making increasing inroads into Chinese popular consciousness (Close *et al.*, 2007: 145-155). Moreover, as Xu Guoqi observes, “No more ‘friendship first, competition second’ – instead, winning in international sports became the Chinese obsession” (Xu, 2008: 197). Consequently, sport came to act both as a “tool” for the Chinese government to uphold Chinese nationalism against Western “economic and cultural imperialism”, and also as an “agent of postcolonialism in Chinese cultural centrism” (Hwang and Jarvie, 2003: 90).

Mainland China’s involvement in the post-war IOC was handicapped by the long-standing dispute between the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan (Republic of China) about which National Olympic Committee (NOC) represented China. There were several confrontations within and outside the IOC over representation during the 1950s, but from 1958 China effectively withdrew, while Taiwan competed at the various subsequent Olympics under different names. However, in the early 1970s, as the Cultural Revolution wound down and new diplomatic openings to the West and Japan occurred, mainland China returned first to the Asian Games and then began to lobby for re-joining the IOC (Xu, 2008). This dispute was not finally settled until 1981

when the PRC's NOC was accepted as representing China and the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee came to represent Taiwan.

The award of the 2008 Olympics to Beijing was decided at the IOC meeting in 2001, with the eventual winner becoming clear at an early stage in the voting. Given the frustration that the Chinese had felt with their failure in an earlier bid to host the 2000 Olympics (when they felt they had lost unfairly to Sydney, in part because of concerns over China's human rights record at a time when memories of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre were still relatively fresh (Close *et al.*, 2007: 158-159; Xu, 2008: 232-242)), it was not surprising that the decision was greeted with euphoria inside China, both by leaders and by citizens. But there were more mixed reactions from the outside world. In particular, some foreign media, politicians and non-governmental organizations focused on China's poor human rights record and whether it was appropriate for such a country to host the Olympics; these concerns were to find louder echoes as the date for the Olympics grew closer.

3. Living with Legacies

Answering questions just over a year before the Beijing Olympics began, the IOC President Jacques Rogge argued that "the Olympic Games will have a positive, lasting effect on Chinese society".¹ Is it possible yet to judge whether that is so? This leads us to consider the concept of "legacy" which has now become such an important part of the Olympic movement's lexicon. As J.A. Mangan reminds us: "legacies can be benign or malign, advantageous or disadvantageous, intended or unintended" (Mangan, 2008: 1869). They can also be either tangible or intangible. In considering the short-term impact and longer-term legacy of the Olympic hosting by China, a broad tripartite framework will be used. The three components of this framework are: economic, sociocultural, and political-diplomatic.

Firstly, economic and environmental legacies. The Chinese government devoted considerable financial resources not just into the construction of Olympic facilities, such as the famous "Bird's Nest" stadium for the opening ceremony and athletics as well as the "Water Cube" for the swimming, but also into the construction of related infrastructure, such as roads and expressways, underground railway lines, a new airport terminal, and environmental improvement. As a result, Beijing, which would have developed anyway, received what Victor Cha has described as an accelerated "physical facelift" (Cha, 2009: 104). The original budget for the sporting activities themselves was US\$1.6 billion, but officials from the Beijing Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG) later admitted that that figure was not realistic and that the final cost was closer to \$3 billion (including the Paralympics probably around \$2.8 billion, compared to the Athens Olympics

cost of \$2.4 billion). The related infrastructure improvements are estimated to have cost around \$40 billion, the largest amount ever utilized by an Olympic host (Lee, 2010: 210). Foreign companies complained about the murky bidding processes for some of these construction and infrastructure processes and one Beijing Vice-Mayor was sacked because of corruption.² Nonetheless, foreign companies, with dreams of greater access to the huge China consumer market, were keen to become Olympic sponsors and suppliers. Over 200 broadcasting companies from around the world paid an estimated \$2.5 billion for the television rights.

In conducting its cost-benefit analyses, China expected wide-ranging economic benefits from this new infrastructure development, high technology progress and tourism. The Olympic-related activities were said to have added the equivalent of 0.3 per cent to China's national gross domestic product (GDP) and 2 per cent to Beijing's own growth every year since 2001 and, if all the infrastructure developments are included, then Beijing's economy grew by around 12 per cent annually during the 2002-2007 period (Dong and Mangan, 2008). Foreign tourism to Beijing had been growing at an annual rate of around 5 per cent during the 2002-2007 period and continued to rise in 2008 and subsequently. While increases in tourism receipts may have been tempered in 2008 by the widespread international coverage given to air pollution and to the failure to make sufficient tickets available to international audiences, nonetheless the overall impact is to at least add the two iconic Olympic venues to the list of must-see sights for overseas (and indeed domestic) visitors to Beijing. Taking the "High-Tech Olympics" as one of its three key Olympic slogans signalled China's ambition to showcase its technological advancement and maybe, as the 1964 and 1988 Olympics had respectively done for Japanese and Korean companies, provide a springboard for Chinese companies to go global. Certainly the technological wizardry of the opening and closing ceremonies impressed the world, but it is too early to say yet whether companies like Lenovo can yet emulate, for example, Samsung after 1988 in radically transforming their global presence and branding.

The "Green Olympics" had been another one of the three key elements of the Beijing Olympic slogan. Aware of the air quality issues, the government instituted drastic measures in the run-up to the Olympics, including adjusting the industrial structure of the city, physically removing seriously contaminating factories, heightening pollution monitoring, publicizing recycling regulations, planting trees and forcing motorists to use their cars only on alternate days for the duration of the Games (Cha, 2009: 114-117; Dong and Mangan, 2008: 2032-2034). In the view of Wolfram Manzenreiter, China demonstrated "its capability to respond to international expectations" (Manzenreiter, 2010: 35). The so-called "blue sky" days in Beijing did increase in 2008 compared to

previous years and residents of Beijing noticed the improved air quality, even though the continued rapid increase in car ownership subsequently threatens to undermine such clean-up efforts. Critics maintain that the 2008 measures were only a temporary short-term fix and that the deliberate suppression of “bad” news, such as the Sanlu baby milk powder scandal, only showed how little real progress was being made. However, other observers do note that one positive effect of the Olympics was that they “awakened many Chinese to environmental issues that they might not otherwise have confronted ... [government policies are] bound to have an effect on wider practices and ways of thinking” (Cha, 2009: 117). Environmental problems across China, however, do remain extremely serious, so much so that Paul Harris argues that China has become the “global epicentre of environmental disaster” (Harris, 2008: 89), and as such the improved consciousness of environmental priorities will need to be converted into sustained government and private sector action.

Secondly, sociocultural legacies. The Chinese, like the Koreans and other earlier hosts, wished to infuse significant aspects of the host country’s culture into the proceedings, especially during the spectacles of the opening and closing ceremonies. Using the slogan of “One World, One Dream”, the Chinese seemed determined “to turn their hosting of this mega-sporting event into a celebration of a Chinese renaissance and the harmonization of world civilizations” (Vertinsky, 2006). President Jiang Zemin, at the time of the hosting’s selection, described the advantages of the Olympics for promoting “cultural exchanges and convergence between East and West” (Xu, 2006: 96). One theme that the current Chinese government under President Hu Jintao has been stressing is the concept of “harmonious socialist society” and Chinese sports scholars have argued that the 2008 Olympics were an important manifestation of that concept in reality: Chinese sportsmanship combined with the Olympic spirit to create the “humanistic Olympics”. Thus, the third element of the Olympic slogan, the People’s Olympics (*renwen Aoyun* 人文奥运), was, as Susan Brownell and others have argued, not a promise to the international community to improve human rights (though some outside China interpreted it that way) but rather a way to “engage the Chinese people” by preparing them for a globalizing world (Manzenreiter, 2010: 34).

Yet, how far has the “Olympic fever” in China – which was typified by the rush to buy tickets and the enthusiastic crowds watching the flame relays in various Chinese cities – resulted in a longer-lasting impact on society and sporting culture in China? There is little doubt that encouraged by government publicity, a nationwide educational programme in schools on Olympism, and fanned by the informal and formal media there was much support and enthusiasm at the popular level for the Olympics – initially

perhaps concentrated mainly in the hosting cities of Beijing and Qingdao, but increasingly across the country. Here, as Xin Xu has argued, “state interest and public aspiration converge” (Xu, 2006: 94). While Olympism as a concept may not feature so prominently in Chinese education curricula in the future, at the very least pride in China’s Olympic successes and the tangible symbols of that (especially the Olympic venues in Beijing) has remained strong since 2008 and almost certainly will continue to remain strong within the Chinese population in the future.

Certainly, in the run-up to the Olympics there was investment in sporting facilities in cities other than the hosting ones, though of course on a much smaller scale than for the key cities. One intended legacy of the new expensive national-level facilities in Beijing had been that these would be used for “grassroots” sporting activities, although media reports suggest that such usage has been somewhat limited (Dong and Mangan, 2008: 2025). 8th August, the date marking the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, has been designated as China’s National Fitness Day since 2009. On that date, all public sports facilities are open for free and activities and campaigns emphasizing fitness are held across China. But without further investment in sporting facilities and training processes, especially outside the main urban centres, sport will tend to remain an elite and competitive arena rather than one than has much practical reality for ordinary people. The saturation coverage of the Olympics on China’s domestic media in August 2008 undoubtedly contributed to the Chinese government’s ability to assert Chinese nationalism and pride, and may have in the short run inspired some Chinese youngsters to try to emulate the medal winners, but its longer-term impact on wider sporting culture within China is likely to be more limited.

Finally, political-diplomatic legacies. Just as South Korea, under a military dictatorship albeit one showing strains, suffered international criticism about the lack of democracy and poor human rights record during the 1980s in the run-up to the 1988 Olympics (at least until the dramatic democratization of 1987), so China found that even after successfully winning the 2008 Games for Beijing, political controversy would not die away.

Two aspects remained at the forefront: China’s human rights record (both domestically and in terms of its support of notorious governments overseas) and the relationship with Taiwan. While the latter did reach a degree of resolution – and was perhaps more important for what did not happen rather than what did – the former became the subject of increasingly greater critical attention as the opening of the Olympics approached.

US and European politicians, non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International, and much of the Western media had been critical of the Olympics going to Beijing in the first place because of China’s domestic human rights record, but Western governments had been more neutral. Some

Western government officials, indeed, saw this as a significant opportunity to put China under the international spotlight and so obtain some improvement in political conditions within China (Maguire, 2006; Smith and Himmelfarb, 2008). Chinese officials were aware of the potency of this issue and at the time of their bidding campaign claimed that the Olympics would help to promote “the development of society, including democracy and human rights” (Lee, 2007). The human rights aspect continued to be the subject of international media interest, not just in terms of political reform (or the lack of it) but also regarding the rights of Tibetans, other minorities, and the spiritualist Falun Gong believers.

The large-scale demonstrations by young Tibetans in March 2008, the harsh reaction by the Chinese authorities, and the exclusion of the international media from Tibet, however, proved the catalyst for renewed criticisms of China, which were to become focused on the Olympic flame relays being carried out around the world. Far from being a “journey of harmony” and a celebration of sporting endeavour, the torch relays became security and logistical nightmares and a public relations disaster for China (Edney, 2008). At one stage the IOC President Rogge resorted to using the word “crisis”, although there was no serious likelihood that China would have ever agreed to any abandonment of the global relay.³ But most overseas relays had to be shortened and strongly protected, so much so that far fewer members of the public were actually able to see the torch passing by than would have been expected. There were significant disruptions in London, Paris, San Francisco, New Delhi, and Seoul; relays in Islamabad and Jakarta were held behind closed doors; and only in Pyongyang did the flame receive a protest-free and unanimously enthusiastic welcome. Various politicians called for a boycott of the Olympics and, in particular, its opening ceremony. Several political leaders, such as from Germany, Czech Republic, and Brazil made it clear they would not attend the opening ceremony; some such as the British prime minister opted for the closing ceremony, while others such as France and Japan remained ambivalent until closer to the event and linked their attendance implicitly or explicitly to the Chinese leadership opening up meaningful dialogue with the exiled Tibetan leader the Dalai Lama.

The anti-Chinese (or pro-Tibetan) demonstrations and boycott calls overseas were in turn played back into China and into overseas Chinese communities, resulting in efforts to mobilize Chinese residing overseas in relay cities in the later stages of the tour to take to the streets to show solidarity (Canberra and Seoul were good examples⁴) and within China to instigate targeted boycotts, such as the case of the French supermarket chain store Carrefour. The increasingly widespread use of the Internet and mobile phones amongst the younger generations in China enabled these expressions of popular nationalism to quickly find support.

At the same time, China's links with unsavoury governments in other parts of the world, primarily Sudan (which has been responsible for atrocities in the Darfur region) and Burma/Myanmar (which violently suppressed peaceful demonstrations in September 2007), were highlighted to the extent that some activists – inside and outside Hollywood – began to use the label of the “genocide Games” (Cha, 2009: 130-137). As with the Tibet issue, Chinese officials – and IOC officials – were at pains to argue that such political issues should not be linked with the Olympics hosting, but at the very least the heightened degree of international scrutiny made China more sensitive to these international issues and may have contributed to the Chinese government's decision in late 2007 to send a peace-keeping contingent to Sudan (Cha, 2009: 153-154).

But the international protests over Tibet did not result in any corresponding concessions over what it is seen as a crucial internal matter. Despite belated offers to talk with the Dalai Lama's representatives, the Chinese leadership's primary impulse was to tighten down the system and try to ride out the storm in the expectation that once the Games began the worst would be over. The inflamed Chinese nationalism, of course, only further constricted the options open to the Chinese government, even if they had wanted to make ameliorating gestures. Instead, the Chinese government seemed to adopt a “conscious strategy of selecting key, high-profile cases, usually involving foreigners, to demonstrate token liberalization”, while acting swiftly and decisively against internal dissent (Cha, 2009: 139).

On the broader issue of whether the Olympics might contribute to the democratization of China, using the South Korean analogy, caution must be extended, since the political situation, economic size, and external alliance connections differ in the two cases (Wasserstrom, 2002). In the South Korean case, the struggle for democracy reached a peak in the spring of 1987 with large demonstrations and clashes on the streets of Seoul. Faced with the prospect of either using military power (which would almost certainly have resulted in bloodshed and could well have led to the IOC deciding to shift the Games somewhere else) or making concessions to the opposition's demands, the leadership chose the latter, paving the way for a democratic transition before the Seoul Olympics opened (Bridges, 2008: 1947-1948; Cha, 2009: 123-128). While the hosting of the Olympics was not the main cause of this democratization, at least it was a crucial component. Prior to 2008, some Chinese intellectuals did discuss various ways to make China more “democratic” – and the South Korean case was noted – but there was little indication that the Chinese political leadership was willing to go down this road either before or after the Olympics. It certainly felt little internal pressure in the run-up to the Olympics and even subsequently to promote democratization or even improve human rights. Even though it has reacted

with excessive sensitivity to the award of a Nobel Prize in late 2010 and to the “Arab spring” of 2011, the leadership has really not felt the need to do more than issue platitudinous statements along the lines of that given by Premier Wen Jiabao, last October, that the Chinese people’s “wishes for and needs for democracy and freedom are irresistible” (Consonery, 2010). It is certainly ironic that well-known artist-cum-activist, Ai Weiwei, one of the key designers of the iconic Bird’s Nest stadium, was arrested in early 2011 and only released on bail two months later.

As Jeffrey Wasserstrom reminds us, what he calls “transitology” (effectively the transitions away from one-party rule) has shown that such transitions are complex processes. Even though the Olympic hosting played some part in the South Korean move to democratization, it should be noted that Mexico hosted the 1968 Olympics while effectively a one-party state but it took at least another 2 decades before that party lost power (Wasserstrom, 2002: 127).

The Taiwan issue was also an important one for China. Unlike the North Korean efforts after the decision on the 1988 Games was awarded to Seoul, Taiwan did not try either to elbow its way into the 2008 Olympics hosting or to argue for a boycott of those Games. Indeed, the Taiwanese NOC representative voted in favour of Beijing’s bid at the votes for both the 2000 and the 2008 Games.⁵

As with any regional or international organization of which both the PRC and Taiwan are members – there are very few, but the IOC is one – how China deals with Taiwanese participation in meetings held on the mainland has become an enduring subject of controversy. In this particular case, the route of the Olympic flame also became an issue. Despite behind-the-scenes informal negotiations between Chinese and Taiwanese officials, when the planned torch relay route was announced in April 2007 the Taiwanese were unhappy with finding Taipei after Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam and before Hong Kong in the planned route. This was taken as implying that Taiwan was a part of China’s domestic route.⁶ The IOC intervened to urge further discussions between the two sides, but talks broke down again in September 2007 after the mainland asked Taiwan not to show its flag or play its national anthem while the torch was in Taiwan.⁷ So, finally, the Olympic torch did not go to Taiwan.

While the flame plan for Taiwan was deemed unsatisfactory by the Taiwanese leaders, the Chinese government could at least take heart from the fact that Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian’s aspirations for a more “independent” existence for Taiwan, which had naturally upset the mainland leaders and even the United States, did not result in an attempt by him to exploit China’s fear of losing the Olympics by attempting some more provocative action before he left office in May 2008, in the belief that China

would not dare react militarily. The parallel with 1987, when the South Korean leadership balked at risking losing the Olympics, was not put to the test in the China-Taiwan case.

4. Actions, Reactions and Legacies

The Beijing Olympics were a massive event for China and there is much truth in Victor Cha's assertion that they were "arguably the most important event for China since the 1949 revolution in terms of its identity, diplomacy and development" (Cha, 2009: 147). Bearing in mind Zhou Enlai's reputed remark that it was "too early to tell" about the impact of the French Revolution, it may also be too soon to give the final reckoning on the Beijing Olympics, but it is likely that the commercial and infrastructural benefits will be seen as being important and long-standing; Chinese sporting prowess has been confirmed; and China has become better known to the world (though that does include warts and all). However, domestic political change did not occur on any scale and, paradoxically, the limits of its "soft power", at least in the West, may have become more apparent.

Most of this paper has dealt with the impact of the Olympics on China internally, but the external dimension cannot be ignored. Two aspects can be considered here: how far the Games contributed to changing (or confirming) China's image in the world and how far the Beijing Olympics may have impacted on the Olympic movement. Firstly, generally, "a host state would be very sensitive to international perceptions of and reactions to its behaviour in the context of hosting a sports mega-event such as the Olympics" (Xu, 2006: 102). That certainly was the case for South Korea in 1987-88 (Bridges, 2008); but does this observation have the same force for China in and after 2008? As the world's oldest continuous civilization, China does have considerable cultural assets, especially in the view of other Asians; in addition its robust economic growth record (including its so-called model of the "Beijing Consensus") and, more recently, the moral power of its stress on a "harmonious world" contribute to creating a "soft power" which is attractive to some countries and peoples (Huang and Ding, 2006: 26-31). Although some scholars, such as Susan Brownell, have argued that for China the main emphasis of the Olympics was focused on the domestic Chinese audience (Brownell, 2008), the Beijing Olympics could not but have an external impact and be viewed as part of China's putative "soft power", whether intended or otherwise.

However, Wolfram Manzenreiter's detailed analysis of a range of public opinion polls around the world suggests that "the Beijing Olympics failed to win over the hearts of Western publics" and that, if anything, "paradoxically, China's engagement with the Olympic Games has exacerbated

the communication gap between East and West” (Manzenreiter, 2010: 42-43). His analysis demonstrates that whatever positive image impacts derived from this mega-sports-event they were temporary in effect and were frequently overwhelmed by subsequent more contradictory, even negative, messages transmitted through the Western media (Manzenreiter, 2010: 29-33). Yet, most of these polls were conducted amongst European and American populations (plus Japan in many cases), so they may reflect on the “West” but not necessarily on how Asian neighbours, for example, reflected on the Olympic impact. In the specific context of Hong Kong, which might be considered as possessing both Sinicized as well as Westernized societal characteristics, however, one survey suggests that while China has improved its Olympic “image” (or “Olympic spirit”) through its dynamic sporting achievements its human rights image had relatively speaking regressed (Lee, 2010).

Secondly, one of the slogans, at least in its Chinese original, “New Beijing, New Olympics” (*xin Beijing, xin Aoyun* 新北京, 新奥运), implied a transformative function within the Olympic movement. John MacAloon, the doyen of Olympic studies, reminds us that in the IOC’s discourse there are subtly different shades of meaning between the English word “legacy” and the French word “heritage”, in which the former tends to be tilted towards the present’s contribution to the future, while for the latter the “semantic emphasis on the accumulated historical, cultural and moral capital that comes to the present from the past” is more important (MacAloon, 2008: 2067). In that context, what have Beijing and China added to – or subtracted from – the pre-2008 Olympic heritage? In the view of one foreign consultant to BOCOG, writing a year after the Beijing Games, “it was two weeks that forever shaped the future of the Olympic movement” (Hickson, 2009), but without specifying exactly what that meant. Wolfram Manzenreiter comments that the event itself “deserved unanimous accolade and should be rated as an outstanding benchmark for future organizers” (Manzenreiter, 2010: 36). Through hosting the Olympics so spectacularly China has been able to impact on some of the Eurocentric tendencies within the Olympic movement and even justifiably shift the movement more towards that universalism that it claims to represent. Unfortunately, at the same time, China has ensured that never again will such a lengthy international torch relay be carried out (the organizers of the 2012 London Olympics have already ruled it out), while the recent global financial crisis has also made it unlikely that any other country would be willing or able to commit such huge financial resources to such a mega-event in the near future.

Clearly China is in the midst of a “great transformation” with profound economic and sociopolitical implications (Yeoh, 2010). In world power terms China in 2008 felt less vulnerable than, for example, South Korea did twenty years earlier, but, given its deep memory of past Western and Japanese

imperialist actions on its territory, China was – and indeed still is – extremely sensitive to slights, perceived or real, from the outside world. The flame relay protests were an affront to Chinese pride and dignity and even though the Chinese did not feel the threat of a boycott on political/human rights grounds to be a serious one, that did not prevent a domestic upsurge in Chinese nationalist feelings. A successful Games did assuage some of that fervour, but as China continues to grow in economic, political and military power, the potentiality for greater nationalistic feelings amongst its population is very real. The challenge for its neighbours and the rest of the world is to find a way to manage that rise in a peaceful and stable manner.

Notes

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