

“New China, Great Olympics”: A Historical Study of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as a Spectacle that Promoted Chinese National Strength on an International Stage

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese treated the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as a spectacle that reestablished China's strength on the international stage. In order to relieve the historical shame of the Century of Humiliation from Chinese historical memory, the Chinese felt the need to both win and host international sporting events. To showcase a “New China,” the Chinese modernized Beijing's transportation infrastructure, attempted to reform the manners of its citizens, and sought to dominate the medal count of the sporting events in order to broadcast the image of a newly strengthened, modern nation to the international community. The political motivations of the CCP led the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games to be utilized as a spectacle to promote the image of “New China, Great Olympics,” and showcase Chinese national strength on an international stage.

The Chinese treated the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as much more than a mere international sporting event. The official Chinese Communist Party (CCP) commentary set the stage for the highly anticipated 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, stating: “Beijing will stun the world with the most successful sporting event it has ever seen, striving to compose the most dazzling chapter yet in Olympic history” (as cited in Lovell, 2008, p. 767). This prideful declaration sought to grandly debut China as an Olympic host. The Beijing Games were to be the spectacle that reestablished China's strength on the global stage. For what reasons would the Chinese seek to utilize this international platform for such a nationalistic purpose?

The use of the Beijing Games in this manner was grounded in two underlying causes: the shame embedded in recent Chinese history, and the CCP's political motivations. The modern Chinese people are burdened by the shameful historical memory of the Century of Humiliation in which their nation was militarily defeated by Western imperial powers in the

Opium Wars of the 1840s and by Japan in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. This is what caused China's struggle for self-identification, as the Chinese began to perceive their nation as merely one among many in a “Social Darwinist” struggle for survival. This led the Chinese to establish a strong connection between the strength of their nation's populace and the strength of the nation on the international stage. Thus, the 2008 Beijing Olympics were to be the spectacle that proved to the global community that China was no longer the “Sick Man of East Asia.”

The desire to prove Chinese strength on the international stage also aligned with the political motivations of the CCP. Once Deng Xiaoping rose to preeminent leadership of the CCP in the late 1970s, he drastically shifted the party's focus away from communist doctrines to more pragmatist policies. Thus, the authoritarian party's legitimacy to rule could no longer rely upon Maoist ideology and was instead tied to a variety of factors, most importantly, popular nationalism. One means by which to generate this popular nationalism was through success in international



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sport. Thus, the CCP sought to utilize the Beijing Olympic Games as a spectacle to showcase China's national strength in order to satisfy its political goal of generating popular nationalism for its own legitimacy. The desire to use the Games to promote national strength is best demonstrated by the official slogan of "New China, Great Olympics," which was indicative of China's desire to showcase its recently regained national strength and its ability to successfully host a grand international event. To showcase a "New China," the Chinese modernized Beijing's transportation infrastructure, attempted to reform the manners of its citizens, and sought to dominate the medal count of the sporting events in order to broadcast the image of a newly strengthened, modern nation. Furthermore, to host a "Great Olympics" and showcase China's strength, the Chinese people and CCP placed great emphasis on the spectacular sports venues erected for the event, such as National Stadium, as well as the opening ceremony. Ultimately, I will argue that both the Chinese historical memory of the Century of Humiliation and the political motivations of the CCP led the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games to be utilized as a spectacle to promote the image of "New China, Great Olympics," and showcase Chinese national strength on an international stage.

One day after the extravagant opening ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, a euphoric statement was contained within a front-page article of a popular Chinese newspaper: "Tonight, we finally realized the hundred-year dream of [hosting] the Olympics" (as cited in Hung, 2011, p. 360). Why did the Chinese hold this hundred-year dream to host the Olympics? The answer to this query largely resides within the Chinese historical memory of the Century of Humiliation (Brownell, 2008, p. 15; deLisle, 2008, p. 26; Law, 2010, p. 349; Lau, Lam, & Leung, 2010, p. 164; Xiaobo, 2008, p. 266). The Century of Humiliation began with China's military defeat by Western imperial powers in the First Opium War of the early 1840s, which forced China to sacrifice the sovereignty of its previously guarded national borders (Askew, 2009, p. 104; Huiling, 2011, p. 168; Lau et al., 2010, pp. 162-164; Law, 2010, p. 349; Lovell, 2008, p. 762; Parker, 2008, p. 277; Xu, 2008, p. 17). In addition to this loss, the Chinese then suffered another devastating military defeat at the hands of invading Japanese forces in the

1894-1895 Sino-Japanese War, cementing China's inability to guard its national borders (Law, 2010, p. 349; Lovell, 2008, p. 162; Parker, 2008, p. 277; Xu, 2008, p. 17). This was a crucial moment in Chinese history, for these military defeats shattered the Sino-centric belief that China was the central power of the civilized world (Lovell, 2008, p. 762; Xu, 2008, p. 17). Rather, the Chinese were forced to realize that their nation was only one amongst many fighting for survival in a Western-dominated international community (Brownell, 2008, pp. 33-34; Lovell, 2008, p. 763; Xu, 2008). This belief is largely indicative of the Western concept of "Social Darwinism," developed by Thomas Henry Huxley in the 1860s, in which nations are likened to organisms that compete for resources and survival (Brownell, 2008, pp. 33-35).

The adoption of Social Darwinist thinking in China can be largely traced to the Chinese intellectual Yan Fu, who translated many Western works into Chinese including Huxley's *Education and Ethics* for an Eastern audience (Brownell, 2008, p. 55; Xu, 2008, p. 17). In 1895, Yan published a Chinese article entitled "On the origins of national strength" in which he applied the concept of Social Darwinism he encountered to the current state of the Chinese nation, which was near defeat in the Sino-Japanese war (Xu, 2008, p. 18). In this article, Yan noted that "a nation is like human. If an individual is not active physically, the body will be weak. If a person is active physically, the body will be strong" (as cited in Xu, 2008, p. 18). This statement clearly draws upon Huxley's ideas, namely that nations are like organisms, yet further establishes a direct link between the physical activity level of a nation's populace and a nation's overall strength. However, Yan then posed the following question: "does today's China look like a sick man?" (as cited in Xu, 2008, p. 18). Yan argued that China did appear as a "sick man," for its recent military woes and physical subordination to the West and Japan were signs of weakness within the international community (Xu, 2008, p. 18). Thus, it is clear overall that Yan's article established a direct link between the physical health of a nation's populace and a nation's strength as well as applied this concept to the Chinese national condition to determine that China was a "sick man."

However, this negative portrayal of China's national strength was not limited to domestic thought, as it

was noted in an 1896 British journal article that China was the “Sick Man of East Asia” (Brownell, 2008, pp. 34-35; Xu, 2008, p. 19). The elites of Chinese society, ashamed at this “Sick Man” label, sought to remove this negative designation from the minds and headlines of both the Chinese and Western peoples (Askew, 2009, p. 108; Huiling, 2011, p. 121; Xiaobo, 2008, pp. 266-267). One of the most advocated methods to accomplish this goal was the adoption of Western sport because the elite class—who largely agreed with Yan Fu’s connection between populace physical health and national strength—felt that Western sport could strengthen the national populace’s physical condition and consequently increase China’s national strength (Bridges, 2008, p. 245; Brownell, 2008, p. 49; Xu, 2008, pp. 19, 28, 61). For instance, one scholar noted that “encouraging physical training among the Chinese is essential to saving the nation” (as cited in Xu, 2008, p. 61). Another scholar stated, “the purpose for our advocating physical education and western sport focuses on removing national shame and supporting national survival and renewal” (as cited in Xu, 2008, p. 61). Yet, the best means to demonstrate China’s physical strength and remove the label of the “Sick Man of East Asia” was through winning and hosting international sports competitions, goals that the Chinese thus ached to achieve (Askew, 2009, pp. 107-109; Brownell, 2008, p. 19; Law, 2010, p. 350). The desire of the Chinese to both win and host international sporting events to showcase their national strength is best demonstrated by the three “Olympic Dreams” questions (Brownell, 2008, p. 19). Posed by Chinese patriots in the Chinese YMCA program in 1907, these questions were:

When will China be able to send a winning athlete to the Olympic contests, when will China be able to send a winning team to the Olympic contests, and when will China be able to invite all the world to Beijing for an International Olympic contest? (Brownell, 2008, p. 19)

These questions distinctly demonstrate that winning and hosting the Olympics have long been Chinese nationalistic goals to prove that they were strong (Askew, 2009, p. 104; Brownell, 2009, p. 189; Cha, 2009, pp. 64-65, 147; Hung, 2011, pp. 367, 370; Lau et al., 2010, pp. 168-169; Price, 2009, p. 5; Xu,

2008, pp. 6, 36, 267). Therefore, it is apparent that the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were more than just a sporting event to the Chinese. Rather, they were a nationalistic spectacle to prove China’s strength to the international community and shed the label that was preserved in Chinese historical memory.

This aspiration to achieve nationalistic strength was also contained within the political motivations of the CCP. The origins of these political motivations can largely be traced to the reformative ideas of Deng Xiaoping, the foremost CCP leader of the late twentieth century. Deng assumed preeminent party leadership in 1979 and immediately established a new direction for CCP rule (Brady, 2009, p. 4). Under the previous leadership of Mao Zedong, the CCP garnered its ruling legitimacy from revolutionary communist ideologies that offered an alternative to Western capitalism (Askew, 2009, p. 106). In contrast, Deng sought to recast the CCP as a “party in power” rather than as a “revolutionary party” (Askew, 2009, p. 106). As part of this recasting, Deng orchestrated a shift in the CCP’s economic ideology from communism to “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Askew, 2009, p. 106), which involved a series of market reform and opening-up policies. Due to these market liberalizing policies, the CCP could no longer rely upon revolutionary communist ideology to establish legitimacy and thus sought to fill this ideological vacuum through a variety of alternative principles (Brownell, 2008, pp. 63-64; Haugen, 2008, p. 146; Xu, 2008, pp. 198, 202). Of these alternative principles, one of the most imperative was an increased sense of Chinese popular nationalism (Askew, 2009, p. 106; Brady, 2009, p. 3; Brownell, 2009, pp. 63-64; Haugen, 2008, p. 146).

One of the most visible ways in which the CCP attempted to generate this popular nationalism was through success in international sport, since this would create an image of a strong China and subsequently increase CCP legitimacy (Brady, 2009, p. 3; Law, 2010, p. 353; Jarvie, Hwang, & Brennan, 2008, p. 99; Xiaobo, 2008, p. 267). Efforts to utilize international sport and the Olympic Games in this manner began as early as 1979, when the Chinese National Sports Commission developed an “Olympic Model” for winning certain events at the 1980 Olympic Games (Xu, 2008, p. 197). The CCP’s use of international sport to showcase China’s strength

was once again demonstrated at the 1984 Olympic Games, at which CCP representatives openly linked success in sports competitions with national honor and prestige (Xu, 2008, p. 202). Furthermore, the 15 gold medals won by Chinese athletes at the 1984 Olympics—the first such medals in Chinese history—were portrayed by the CCP as “just the beginning” for the Chinese who sought to prove their nation’s strength (Brady, 2009, p. 3; deLisle, 2008, p. 25; Jarvie et al., 2008, p. 99; Xiaobo, 2008, p. 264; Xu, 2008, p. 203). Finally, scholars have readily noted that no other country or government has been as eager to increase its international prestige through international sporting events as China and the CCP (Askew, 2009, pp. 109, 114; Brady, 2009, pp. 5,7; Dong-Jhy, Barnier, Heitzman, & Wei-Cheng, 2011, p. 119; Hung, 2011; Tong, 2008, pp. 249-250; Xiaobo, 2008, p. 265; Xu, 2008, p. 203). Therefore, it is once again clear that the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were more than merely a sporting event. Rather, the CCP utilized the Games as a spectacle to showcase Chinese national strength in order to generate popular nationalism for its own legitimacy.

The clearest and most succinct manifestation of these nationalistic intentions is contained within the official, international slogan of the Beijing Games: “New China, Great Olympics” (Law, 2010, p. 350; Xu, 2008, p. 243). The “New China” represented in this slogan was a revitalized nation, whose populace sought to portray their selection as host of the 2008 Olympics as a sign that China had recovered from the Century of Humiliation (Law, 2010, p. 350; Xu, 2008, p. 243). Furthermore, the Chinese wanted to utilize their position as host to symbolically reestablish China’s national strength in the international community and prove to Olympic visitors that China could compete with the western powers (Law, 2010, p. 350; Xu, 2008, p. 243). In the attempt to grandly showcase the “New China’s” regained strength to the visiting athletes and spectators of the Beijing Games, the Chinese instituted a series of reforms between the 2001 announcement and the 2008 Games. One such reform was the modernization of Beijing’s uninspiring transportation infrastructure (Cha, 2009, pp. 111-113; Bridges, 2011, p. 246; Hung, 2011, p. 360; Jinxia, 2011, p. 169). It is estimated that the Chinese spent 40 billion U.S. dollars on this reform effort, the most ever spent on infrastructure develop-

ments for an Olympic event (Cha, 2009, pp. 111-113; Bridges, 2011, p. 246; Hung, 2011, p. 360; Jinxia, 2011, p. 169). While this budget was widely distributed on a number of projects, including the creation of new expressways and four new subway lines, one of the most expensive aspects of this effort was the construction of Terminal 3 at Beijing International Airport (Cha, 2009, p. 111). At the time it was built, Terminal 3 was the largest airport terminal in the world and it was meant to demonstrate China’s strength to Olympic visitors immediately upon their entry to the “New China” (Cha, 2009, pp. 111-112). Thus, the modernization of Beijing’s infrastructure was clearly a manifestation of the desire to showcase China’s national strength to Olympic visitors.

Another reform movement undertaken between 2001 and 2008 was a campaign aimed toward improving the manners of Chinese citizens (Brady, 2009, pp.17-18; Cha, 2009, p. 70; deLisle, 2008, pp. 24-25; Law, 2010, pp.351-352; Xu, 2008, pp 251-252). This campaign sought to reform a number of civilian habits that the Chinese feared would be negatively viewed by Olympic tourists, such as cutting in line, spitting in public and littering (Brady, 2009, pp.17-18; Cha, 2009, p. 70; deLisle, 2008, pp. 24-25; Law, 2010, pp. 351-352; Xu, 2008, pp 251-252). The good host campaign was instituted directly by the Communist Party-state apparatus as evidenced by the inclusion of high-ranking members of the Communist Party on the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG). Overall, BOCOG had 650 Communist Party members who led the good host campaign from a top-down perspective. The programs themselves were instituted through targeted school programs and the distribution of Olympic readers that espoused the manners that the Chinese government wanted their citizens to demonstrate (Law, 2010, pp. 343-367). Ultimately, this campaign was clearly an attempt to showcase the strength of the “New China” to Olympic visitors through the projection of a strong, civilized national populace (Cha, 2009, p. 71).

China properly demonstrated this through not only reforming their infrastructure and manners, but also improve their performance in the Olympic sporting events themselves. The desire to utilize the Olympic sporting events as a platform to demonstrate China’s strength was directly related to the shame

of the Century of Humiliation and the ideas of Yan Fu, as the modern Chinese still linked the physical ability of a nation's populace with national strength (Hung, 2011, p. 360; Law, 2010, p. 350; Xu, 2008, p. 267). This link was clearly reestablished in an article of the *The People's Daily* that was published following the 2004 Athens Olympics (Lovell, 2008, pp. 773). This article noted that "when a country is powerful, its sports will flourish... Chinese athletes will make contributions to realize our nation's great revival" (as cited in Lovell, 2008, pp. 773). Thus, in order to strengthen the performance of Chinese athletes and consequently showcase a strong nation, the "Plan to Win Glory in the 2008 Olympics" was implemented in 2002 (Lau et al., 2011, p. 163). This plan identified 119 gold medals that the Chinese sought to win in events such as swimming and gymnastics, increased the budget for these athletics teams and created a new nutrition plan for these athletes that would allot them a higher calorie intake (Brady, 2009, p. 7; Lau et al., 2011, p. 163). Although Chinese athletes did not win all 119 medals identified in this plan, China still topped the medal count with 51 gold medals, 15 more than the second-place finisher (Brady, 2009, p. 7; Huiling, 2011, pp. 102, 275; Xu, 2008, p. 268). These athletic victories were seen as a great source of Chinese national pride, as it showcased to the world that China no longer deserved the "Sick Man of East Asia" label (Askew, 2008, p. 110; Brady, 2009, p. 7; Cha, 2009, pp. 3, 66; Xu, 2008, p. 257). Therefore, the athletic accomplishments of Chinese Olympians can ultimately be seen as another attempt to demonstrate the "New China's" strength to the world, since athletic success was promoted in order to project the image of a strong China to the international community. Overall, it is clear that the modernization of Beijing's infrastructure, the reform of the populace's manners and the success of Chinese athletes were all Chinese attempts to showcase the "New China's" national strength on the international stage of the Olympics.

However, the Chinese did not only wish to showcase their national strength through their modern infrastructure, polite populace and accomplished athletes. Rather, they further desired to showcase their national strength through their ability to host a "Great Olympics" (Law, 2010, p. 350; Xu, 2008, p. 243). The ability to smoothly host countries from all

over the world at the preeminent international sporting event was seen as a great source of nationalistic pride for the Chinese, as it was an enormous event that required meticulous planning and coordination (Cha, 2009, pp. 36, 61; deLisle, 2008, p. 32; Lau et al., 2011, p. 169; Lovell, 2008, p. 767). Yet, the Chinese further sought to utilize their position as host to showcase their national strength by providing the "most dazzling chapter yet in Olympic history" (Lovell, 2008, p. 767). To host this "Great Olympics" and demonstrate China's strength, the Chinese emphasized the creation of spectacular sports venues and a grand performance at the Games opening ceremony (Lovell, 2008, p. 767). The most notable sports venue and iconic symbol of the 2008 Beijing Games was National Stadium, which is more commonly referred to as the Bird's Nest due to its weaved steel frame that encloses the inner-arena (Cha, 2009, p. 112; Hung, 2011, p. 360). This unorthodox design was the creation of Swiss architect Jacques Herzog, who noted that "you couldn't do such an avant-garde structure anywhere else, but the Chinese are so fresh in mind...everyone is encouraged to do their most stupid and extravagant designs there. National Stadium tells me nothing will shake them" (Xu, 2008, p. 254). This statement clearly indicates that the daring to attempt such a complex design project and the ability to successfully complete its construction were meant to be a sign of Chinese strength in the international community. Therefore, the spectacular venues of the 2008 Olympics were clearly a method for China to host a "Great Olympics" and thereby showcase its national strength to the world.

The extravagant opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was another method by which the Chinese sought to demonstrate their strength and ability to host the international community. The opening ceremony is a crucial event for all Olympic hosts, since it allows nations to fashion a narrative of their country that is broadcasted internationally to large audiences (Barmé, 2009, p. 67; Brownell, 2008, p. 165; Kennett & de Moragas, 2008, p. 262). Due to its ability to craft and project a narrative, including one of national strength, the opening ceremony was assigned a high-level of importance by the CCP (Barmé, 2009, p. 64; Brady, 2009, pp. 19-20; Hung, 2011, p. 360). The CCP's emphasis on the opening ceremony is clearly demonstrated by its strict guide-

lines for the event, which stated that the ceremony should be “outstanding, innovative...[reflecting] the strong spirit of the age” (Barmé, 2009, p. 70). Furthermore, the CCP hoped to “take an international perspective,” as well as highlight the “brilliant civilization” of the Qing era and the “glorious era” of the modern day (Barmé, 2009, p. 70). Thus, the principal goal of the organizers and choreographers of the opening ceremony was to grandly and spectacularly showcase China’s historical journey as a strong nation, highlighting China’s traditional and renewed strength, while notably omitting signs of weakness like the Century of Humiliation (Barmé, 2009, p. 68; Hung, 2011, p. 363). Within themselves, these guidelines for the opening ceremony clearly demonstrate that the ceremony was a method for China to host a “Great Olympics” as well as showcase its strength to the international community.

Yet, the Chinese did not only seek to demonstrate national strength and host a “Great Olympics” through the narrative of the opening ceremony, but also through the organized and disciplined nature of the actors as well. This is most clearly demonstrated in the initial act of the event that opened with 2,008 stylized drummers playing traditional *fou* drums in near-perfect unison, demonstrating an outstanding ability to organize a grand event (Barmé, 2009, p. 71; Hung, 2011, p. 366). Furthermore, over 14,000 actors participated in the opening ceremony that was executed flawlessly, once again demonstrating the ability of the Chinese to carefully coordinate this spectacular event (Brady, 2009, p. 19; Hung, 2011, pp. 364, 367). Therefore, it is clear that the CCP sought to utilize the narrative and coordination of the Beijing Games’ opening ceremony as another opportunity to host a “Great Olympics” and thereby demonstrate China’s strength and ability to host the international community. Overall, both the spectacular venues and the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were clearly meant to showcase China’s national strength through its ability to host a “Great Olympics.”

In conclusion, it is clear that the Chinese treated the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as more than a mere international sporting event, as they were utilized as a spectacle to reestablish China’s strength on the international stage. The use of the Beijing Games in this manner was largely grounded in both Chinese his-

torical memory and CCP political motivations. The shattered Sino-centric worldview led the Chinese to realize that their nation was only one amongst many fighting for survival. This Eastern application of Social Darwinism was strongly advocated by the Chinese intellectual Yan Fu created a direct connection for the Chinese between a physically strong populace and a strong nation, leading many Chinese elites to advocate the adoption of Western sport to prove that their country was no longer the “Sick Man of East Asia.” To prove this to themselves and the rest of the world, the Chinese long sought to both win and host international sporting events. Consequently, it is clear that the Chinese truly utilized the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as a spectacle to showcase China’s national strength in order to prove that it is no longer the “Sick Man of East Asia.”

Furthermore, the desire to showcase China’s national strength on the international stage of the 2008 Olympics was also contained within the political motivations of the CCP. Due to Deng Xiaoping’s shift of party ideology, the CCP could no longer rely upon Maoist doctrines for its ruling legitimacy. Instead, the CCP sought to establish its legitimacy through a variety of factors, including an increased sense of popular nationalism. One of the most important means by which this nationalism could be generated was through strong Chinese performances in international sport. These strong performances would portray the image of a strong China to the international community and subsequently increase popular nationalism and CCP legitimacy. Therefore, it is clear that the CCP also sought to utilize the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as a spectacle to promote China’s national strength in order to satisfy its own political goal of generating popular nationalism. These two nationalistic desires to promote China’s regained strength on the international stage were most clearly manifested in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games through the official slogan of “New China, Great Olympics.” To showcase a “New China” to Olympic visitors, the Chinese modernized Beijing’s transportation infrastructure, promoted mass campaigns to reform the manners of its citizens, and sought to dominate on the sports field to top the medal count. Similarly, to host a “Great Olympics” and thus further demonstrate China’s national strength to the international community, the Chinese people and the

CCP placed great emphasis on the spectacular sports venues erected for the event, such as the Bird's Nest Stadium, and the opening ceremony, which was centered on a narrative of national strength. Ultimately, it is clearly proven that both the Chinese historical memory of the Century of Humiliation and the political motivations of the CCP led the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games to be utilized as a spectacle to promote the image of "New China, Great Olympics," and showcase Chinese national strength on an international stage.

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