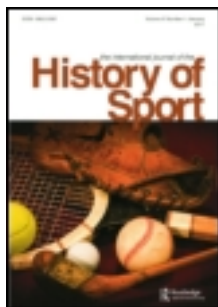


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Olympian Politics in Beijing: Games but not Just Games

Kevin Caffrey

This article discusses how the Olympics serve as a meaningfully political act at least as much as a sporting event, with China's ambitions to dominate the 2008 games something of a political analogy for the logic of its greater ambitions in Asia and the world. Seeing the spectacle as politics by other means, this analysis takes up the example of how the 2008 Beijing games are the latest leg of an old project that has seen muscular Christian motivations in China morph into notions of 'face' that articulate with China's elevated geopolitical position in the world today. Its 'higher weight-class' position is here analysed as a two-front communicative ritual operation aimed both inwardly at the Chinese populace, and outwardly at an international audience of global neighbour-states.

Introduction

The old adage is that 'politics is who gets what', and it is a sentiment that rings true to our modern logics of limited-resource competitive capitalist societies. However, such questions are never quite so simple as Adam Smith would have us believe. Politics is also who 'who' is, who is positioned where and how smoothly all this is accomplished. It is something multi-faceted, and the Olympic Games have come to be one of these facets for a growing world society. The 2008 games in Beijing seem set to be exemplary in this respect, with most commentators observing that the games are political except the official acolytes of the party state itself. [1] Suggesting that the games are a form of politics by other means has become something of a commonplace, so without becoming too inequitably critical we will take up the example of how the 2008 Beijing games are the latest result of an old project that has seen muscular Christian motivations in China morph into notions of 'face' that articulate with China's 'higher weight-class' geopolitical position in the world today. The Beijing games are analysed here as a two-front communicative ritual operation

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aimed both inwardly at the Chinese populace, and outwardly at an international audience of global neighbour-states – though both fronts are properly geopolitical. What follows are observations about the many aspects of this greater geopolitical reckoning of the 29th Olympiad.

Sport as Politics

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) enjoys holding forth on its apolitical character, but few interested observers actually believe them. [2] Its charter defines the ‘Olympic spirit’ from the eyes of an individual, steering clear of reference to statehood and intending to promote peace and human dignity while prohibiting discrimination based on ‘race, religion, politics, gender’ or anything otherwise incompatible with belonging to the ‘Olympic Movement’. [3] Despite this hopefulness, the charter nonetheless frames the mechanism of running the games through existing geopolitical nation states. In order to compete, one has to be selected by one of the 202 national Olympic committees (NOC) and be a national of that NOC country. While NOCs are supposed to preserve their autonomy from government, [4] public office-holders often govern the NOCs. They are also not provided independent sources of funding, depending financially on the national governments from which they ‘maintain separation’. When the practical issues of the games are so financially and otherwise dependent on national governments, the Olympics cannot live up to its ideal as a politics-free venue for sport competition. Rather, political tension and propaganda have at times substantially darkened the modern history of the games. Hitler tried to showcase the athletic superiority of the Aryan race during the 1936 games in order to justify his Nazi plan to the world. Terrorists killed 11 athletes in the 1972 Munich games as part of Israeli-Palestinian terror politics. The US and USSR also boycotted the 1980 Moscow and 1984 Los Angeles games as part of Cold War geopolitics. In short, there is a wealth of evidence to suggest that they are a venue for international geopolitics. On the academic front there is even work to suggest that the games are expressly political, and MacAloon has formulated the games as a Turnerian ritual process, suggesting that the very structure of the Olympic rituals resonate with the logic of inter-group interaction rituals. [5] As the political logic of the modern nation state developed, an ancient Greek idea about sport as ritualized war without weapons and bloodshed was to undergo a renaissance, as seen reflected in the opinion of a German sporting newspaper from 1913: ‘The Olympic idea in the modern age symbolizes a world war that is not expressed through open military action, but that gives anyone who knows how to read sports results a fair idea of the hierarchy of nations.’ [6]

The charitable interpretation of these trends suggests that sport can also be a lesson in peace. [7] According to the sociological work of Elias and Dunning, international-level sporting events such as the Olympics or the World Cup are regular occasions for states to congregate publicly. [8] Games allow each state’s proxies to compete without killing each other. The IOC seems to use such ideas to exaggerate the

Olympic movement's high moral purpose, but in the end it *is* undeniable that the games allow a trans-national view of the world and its peoples which can militate against prevailing national insularities. In a working paper during the Barcelona Olympics, MacAloon suggested that the venue is unique and almost ideal for both explicit and back channel politics. [9]

The analogy of war by other means is a felicitous one, and the pragmatic hopefulness in the idea is reasonable. Yet the machinations of the official, the wealthy and the well-placed are not the only considerations here, and these international sporting events have little to structurally direct them away from the at least as likely result of their feeding chauvinism and xenophobia in national populations. The sentiments of the not wealthy and the poorly-placed masses are unpredictable, and if Chinese history is any indication, they are potentially transformational. In the light of this, it becomes difficult to maintain a simple position that the games resolve international disputes and rivalries between countries when we must also recognize this potentially xenophobic result.

The Olympics as war by other means is analogically the same as to invoke Clausewitz's famous argument that war is politics, and this 'games=politics' logic plays to the hierarchical element of the Olympics. While every country is an equal competitor in the games, there are clear leaders and followers – no more than one team or person stands at the top of the pyramid winner's platform. There is something about China that has an affinity with the idea of politics relating to the management of hierarchy, since relative hierarchy has been something worth going to war for in China – as we know from its cosmological politics and the first line of Sun-Tzu's *Art of War*, that 'war is a vital matter of state' (*bing zhe guo zhi da shi ye*). Though not a 1:1 relationship, it is fair to say that China's approach to the games has a clear geopolitical hue to it. Dong suggests that '[Sport] does not occur in a vacuum ... it reflects, and is reflected by, the dominant social structures and values of the society in which it exists'. [10] This is a pregnant notion worth unpacking on many levels, but suffice it to say that in the consideration of the games for China, it reflects a new awareness on the part of the state that it is operating with an audience of equally sovereign neighbour states in a tightly interconnected world. Witness the recent attempt by the Chinese state to change its mascot. Knowing that other states see the dragon as an aggressive icon, Chinese image engineers suggested the panda be used instead. This set off a firestorm of commentary, claiming everything from exaggerated political correctness and poor understanding to weakness and outright stupidity. It is now unclear what will be done, but the attempt to ditch the dragon was a sign of awareness that what others think is a key aspect of this Olympics as a venue for political manoeuvring.

Sport, put in anthropological terms as an abstract practice, seems to be something like competition within particular ritualized parameters. The act of competition itself can be seen as merely the potential to succeed, since one does not *compete* when there is no chance of winning or losing – a situation that would be all ritual rather than competitive sport. It is a small leap from this to Beijing's 2008 spandex geopolitics,

and the approach is readily documented by attention to the small events leading to Beijing. Competition and triumph were, for example, the tropes that energized China's being awarded the 2008 games. Almost every Chinese newspaper covering the awarding of the games to Beijing splashed something like the phrase 'We won!' (*women yinle!*) over their front pages. [11] The structure of the modern sports in the Olympics is fixed by international rules, but in its Chinese avatar these political games have a significant charge of Chinese historical characteristics. Susan Brownell contends that

[S]ports were emptied of their muscular Christian moral content and replaced with contents that suited the needs of the politics and tenor of the times in China. The muscular Christian morality [*sic*] of fair play, citizenship, and democracy was replaced over time with Chinese discourses about national prestige and international competition. [12]

Athletic bodies can here be seen as a relatively new idea for the intended expansion of new Chinese state influence, which is still imperial in a non-territorial manner – interestingly, this ancient mode is very much in keeping with more recent modes of empire like that of the US. Hardt and Negri's argument about the nature of the new world order [13] is perhaps useful here in that it shows how a dominance over the ways in which political, social, and economic interactions are made meaningful at a global level is a new kind of more subtle 'empire'. If the Olympic Games have taken on newer importance in the Beijing event, it is likely because of the challenges of this new 'empire' aspect of global interaction – a spectacle of emerging world culture with its explicit or implicit impositions of a meaningful governing mechanics of national interaction that might not be as new as we thought. The games might now also be a site where the playing out of a new global political order can be seen, half engaged with the older system of nation states and half engaged beyond it with a new global order of interaction.

In order to properly situate how the Beijing Olympics are meaningful as particularly Chinese politics, we turn to some historical background of contextualizing importance. An image increasingly associated with Beijing 2008 is that of Zheng He, the great Ming Dynasty admiral who sailed seven voyages to and through the India Ocean, reaching as far as the Middle East and the east African coast. Little is actually known about him, but imagined likenesses are appearing regularly in Olympics propaganda as the man who went out into the rest of the world to spread the light of Chinese civilization. [14] As the once and now again poster-boy for China's (re)engagement with the world, he presents something of a revelatory coincidence for our understanding of Chinese Olympic geopolitics, [15] and there may be more similarity to his activities as a tool for Chinese engagement in the world than is immediately apparent. His mission seems interesting in that there is increasing argument over whether it was exploratory or a maritime colonial operation. [16] Since it wasn't 'our' kind of colonialism, which is to say directly economic and extractive, and was instead tasked more overtly with collecting

relationships of tributary quality all the way to Africa, we might split the difference and call it some kind of imperialism with Chinese characteristics. Surely the Chinese, who were imperial far earlier than the modern Western countries, can have some claim to their own brand of imperialism. Note too the recent commentary storm about China's forays into African and South American 'resource diplomacy'. Western, especially American, pundits have over-exerted themselves in their efforts to argue this new behaviour into convenient imperial categories, when the very Chinese desire for and careful engineering of productive relationships describes it better. Re-engagement in the world and the opportunity to show off Chinese skills, logistical abilities and modern advancement have a happy affinity, then, as the stated goals of hosting the games and the unstated political goals of the Beijing government coincide. They are nonetheless political.

Not a coincidence in this politics is the use of the image of Zheng He's great treasure boats to signal China's re-engagement with the world. A replica of what one of the boats is thought to have looked like is being constructed in Nanjing, and in 2008 it will sail on a new voyage of image-building, the politics of which resonate with what we now like to call 'public relations'. [17] It will cost about US\$10 million to build, and will be the largest wooden ship in the world. It is slated to travel to countries along the ancient maritime 'Silk Road' to promote 'bilateral relationships', and if we care to look closely we can see that this 'modern legendary ship' is a kind of physical metaphor for the way Chinese want to see their intended rise to world position unfold. The ship looks the part of a traditional vessel, with an oak plank shell and a configuration thought to be that of the Zheng He vessels. Yet outward appearances hide key differences, since it is also to have three modern engines, computers and air-conditioning, with a speed capability almost twice that of other large 'sailing' vessels. This is the way China's new geopolitical image will engage the world: a physical statement that the dragon fleet is ready to set sail as the biggest, fastest operator, with both its traditional forms and its modern sciences intact and deployed to good effect. [18] Consider the comparison to the world's next biggest wooden vessel, Sweden's *Gothenborg*. It was constructed as an austere, relatively compact vessel closely approximating a recognized past and with its own technological limitations. China's new Zheng He vessel, immediately described as a 'treasure ship', emphasizes exquisite structure and decoration in a spectacle of Chinese skill – very much in keeping with traditional Chinese cosmological practice, as it turns out. 'Practical' vs. 'spectacle', only this time the spectacle has some serious practical in it. It is of course also revelatory how the sense of 'tradition' is working in this example, and since nobody really knows what the great treasure ships of Zheng He's fleet looked like, [19] this 'traditional' form is something of a best-guess rendition that lives up to newfound 'nostalgia'.

Just as this fifteenth-century Chinese Muslim admiral was sent on seven expanding voyages to engage with the wider world than that well known by the Chinese court at the time, his twenty-first-century image signals a re-engagement with the larger world. Six hundred years ago the great treasure fleet carried with it spectacular gifts

made to represent the civilizing light of the Chinese son of heaven, and today Zheng He is a masthead for the programming that will present a spectacular China re-engaging with a receptive world through the spectacle of the Olympic Games. The games will showcase Chinese development – the sine qua non for inexpensive goods that fuel the Western world's consumerist cultures – and its recent infrastructural wonders. Counting on its newfound economic wealth to gain it mainstream legitimacy in the community of nations, Beijing is hoping that the games as a political instrument of broadcasting will accentuate the positives of its meteoric rise while suppressing the negatives. Whether the world will parse the data in the way China hopes remains to be seen, but the voyage will not be exactly smooth sailing.

Credit Where Credit Is Due

China can legitimately use the opportunity of the Beijing games to exhibit the successes of the state, its logistical abilities and its potential for the future. Most of the country has improved access to almost everything; it is an economic development superstar; its success at infrastructural development is a logistical masterstroke that India publicly envies; and a greater general national wealth is evident. Beginning with infrastructure-building projects, China has achieved the spectacular. The new Beijing-Lhasa rail line, said to have been declared unfeasibly difficult by the Swiss who were consulted beforehand, was completed last year. Total railway mileage has increased dramatically, with a China-Europe line said to be on schedule for completion in 2008–9. Total Chinese highway infrastructure is to exceed that of the US interstate highway system soon, and an 'Asia Highway' linking China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma to Europe is due in 2010. Airports have been built, with the new Beijing airport to be the biggest in the world when it is completed in 2008, and air travel is booming. Symbolically and actually, China is no longer the 'sick man of Asia'.

'Yellow Peril' Chinaphobes in the West often like to pontificate about how China's fast economic growth will be offset and even reversed by a lack of political reform, causing collapse because the state is unable to deal with the forces it is unleashing. In this particular brand of wish-dream, China must follow 'our' development parameters, whether it wants to or not. Modernization liberals, on the other hand, are content with remaining hopeful about China's rise. The cargo-cult like payoff of being able to sell every Chinese person a pair of socks that is always just beyond the horizon involves a myth of the China market 'Great Pumpkin' that continues to motivate the neoliberal classes, whose exercise in fancy reinforces their own bias that evolution towards an Anglo-American style capitalist democracy is an unavoidable course that all states must follow. The notion that China is a lumbering giant, poorly equipped to respond effectively to its problems or strike its own path towards development, has been shown to be more than a little clumsy by a fairly responsive 'brush-fire' method of addressing social problems that seems to have worked so far.

Ten years ago government revenues were 10 per cent of GDP, and prospects for addressing serious internal issues seemed bleak. And yet today's 20 per cent of GDP and tightly run fiscal policies make it more likely that it will be able to address its social problems. Some commentators suggest that Chinese corruption is of the 'lubricating' kind resembling America's nineteenth-century gilded age – monumentally corrupt, rapid economic growth – but not the 'kleptocratic' zero-sum type that has destroyed Africa. [20] Tight control of its development process has paid off, with the decision to maintain state corporations having had benefits in being able to avoid some of the excesses seen in the former Soviet developmental sequence. The monumentally corrupt Shanghai land bubble, for example, ended in the Shanghai party boss being jailed last year for his offences. To combat income inequality the government has chosen to stress equality of opportunity as a state responsibility, thereby investing huge amounts in education, quadrupling the number of university graduates in the past five years and making public education in the poorer inland provinces free up to grade nine. After SARS, China has taken its head out of the sand in terms of the danger it faces from possible epidemics, recently demonstrating that it can address these types of issues. Its AIDS control attempts are far superior to India's, with progress on tuberculosis detection and treatment having also soared. Even the environment has finally appeared on the Chinese radar as a potential threat, with much rhetoric and even some attention to the matter being attempted. These indicators of progress will be the raw material of China's Olympic presentation to the world, with medals won a nice icing on the cake.

A more subtle and quiet advance is also happening behind the scenes. Governance has seen a transformation from engineering approaches to legal, economic, management and historical methods – evidenced by the kinds of degrees held by most of the next generation of officials. Nearly 200,000 officials have been shifted around lately, and preference has been given to younger officials who have experience dealing with poverty and rural development issues. This is a beneficial change since the last generation of officials was almost all technocrat engineers, and the 2008 Beijing games will present this transformation as a milestone in the progress of Chinese development. [21] The power of this positive narrative for the Olympics 2008 coverage will be significant, but every milestone has its millstone.

Felt But Unseen Difficulties

It is important to recognize the new and improved conditions in China today, but it is equally significant to recognize that the ways in which China has secured them are nonetheless 'brush-fire' methods of addressing social problems unleashed by its development. This is not necessarily bad, but the doubtfulness of whether addressing the symptoms are enough to change their causes takes some of the hopefulness out of the observations. The brush-fire method of social problem-solving, successful though it has been so far, does seem to suggest that the government has lost some or all of the initiative in the development process, and is now in many ways only reacting to it

rather than driving it. Operating on the observation that the Olympic Games are also high politics, like other political operations it necessitates an accounting of the negatives that accompany its positives. Though spectacles like the Olympic ritual have a place in the system of modern nation states, such grand performances can also obfuscate the unequal mechanics that are often its conditions of possibility. It does not well serve a thinking audience to politely endure this obscurity, nor does it do justice to the human price being paid to underwrite the spectacle or its associated development track. Just as any empire's expansion needs an accounting of what it is costing to expand, there must be a reckoning for the cost of an empire-turned-nation-state's full reengagement with the international system of states. To this end, let us look again at the positive elements of China's performance.

Improved access to almost everything, economic development, infrastructural advances and national wealth are evident, and China has managed to ride the whirlwind of development effectively. Both Chinaphobes and modernization liberals are having to recognize that China has demonstrated flexible and attentive governance, and is capable of choosing its own path rather than having it dictated by the forces of an unleashed capitalism. Today's 20 per cent of GDP government revenues and tightly run fiscal policies allow better ability to address its social problems, but are they successfully managing to do so? First, accurate data on Chinese finance or any other kind of economic indicator are difficult to come by and should be considered approximate. Second, corruption is still a monumental problem, and while the suggestion that it is of the 'lubricating' rather than kleptocratic variety seems hopeful on its face, the analogy with America's gilded age is misleading. The idea that Chinese corruption is 'lubricating' has a pedigree in the notion that there is a particularly Chinese form of capitalism, and that idea has merit. However, the suggestion that Chinese corruption is not kleptocratic 'of the type that has destroyed Africa' [22] seems more problematic. I find it difficult, for example, to allow for the idea that the jailed Shanghai party boss, whose accepted bribes were in the millions and who acted more as a gate-keeper than a facilitator, would have been practising lubricating rather than kleptocratic corruption.

In early March 2007 the topic of the Beijing Olympics even came up in the National People's Congress meeting, and the news was not all good. Corruption and cost overruns were the topic of discussion, with the arrest of Deputy Mayor Liu Zhihua (the official in charge of Olympic projects) for corruption and other embarrassing habits being an issue of note. [23] This is in fact a brute example of how corruption is out of control, and it provides for exactly the kind of parasitic businessmen-elite (of the type found in Latin and South America) that some commentators suggest is not a fixture of Chinese development. [24] In 2006 the official number of deaths reported in China's mining industry was 5,000, with candid assessments putting that number far higher. [25] In Shanxi the party and government heads often drive Hummers, but the mines are considered some of the most deadly. In a country like China, famously assumed to be authoritarian, we might think repeated reform directives from Beijing on the authority of top national leaders

would produce results. Not so. In fact, central government efforts to rein in local authorities have been not only ignored but actually blocked. In October 2006 Beijing announced that it was delaying until 2010 a plan that would have forced the closure of the thousands of illegal mines that account for the majority of deadly accidents. According to the official Xinhua News Agency, the plan foundered because of opposition from local governments, which see mines as their 'major capital sources'. That, said Xinhua, led 'many local authorities to protect unsafe mines for financial gain'. [26] It is difficult to see how these actions are 'lubricating' when they seem at least as kleptocratic. [27] While money is made and lives develop, not all lives. The image of poor people being sacrificed for the privileged, when it appears in Olympic coverage broadcast to the world, can have a strong blowback potential.

Stressing equality of opportunity to combat income inequality has a nice American 'rugged individualist' tone to it that plays well in today's neoliberal justification for the way the world 'is', but it is characteristically dissembling about the way the world should or could be. Money invested in education can only be a good thing, but quadrupling the number of university graduates and free public education in the poorer inland provinces is not without its own resulting problems when tens of thousands of these graduates fail to find jobs every year. [28] Wealth inequality and unequal access to opportunity will almost surely be a high-profile topic of discussion when thousands of foreign journalists are given free access to China, as was required by the IOC in order to award the games to Beijing. The post-SARS wake-up *has* demonstrated that China can address healthcare concerns, and its AIDS control attempts may be superior to India's even despite the embarrassing habit of arresting the best of the AIDS doctors and activists. Still, in much of the country there is little or no access to healthcare *at all*, marking a division between first- and second-class citizens demarcated by whether or not one can endure a major illness without dying due to, or sending one's family into, dire poverty. An unhappy example then is the nexus between a particularly kleptocratic corruption and the healthcare system, seen recently in a hospital scandal in response to much reader-generated complaining about predatory health profession practices. It was reported by the courageous *Southern Weekly* that out of ten samples of 'urine' sent in to coastal hospitals for diagnostic analysis, six of them returned a diagnosis that the patient had a urinary tract infection requiring over \$US100 worth of medicine (a vast sum for most Chinese) – all despite the fact that the 'urine' sent in was actually just tea. Aside from not being at all a 'lubricating' form of corruption, what this indicates is that healthcare access at the actual human level is still very much a serious and pervasive problem. Any suggestion that vast strides have been made since the time of China's 'barefoot doctors', who at one time had provided a minimal level of free healthcare even to the far edges of the Communist empire, needs to be moderated by practical reflection. Health and reasonable healthcare are particularly sentimental issues that promise to take a significant place in the human interest segments of Olympic coverage, and these predatory conditions will likely be covered even by the charitable foreign media. And when it comes to China, few foreign media tend to be charitable.

When it comes to governance, the transformation from engineering approaches to legal, economic, management and historical perspectives can again be a positive. If engineers are the ones who know *how to do things right*, and governors, economists, managers, historians and other social scientists are the ones who know *what the right things to do are*, then a balancing progress *is* being made. But realizing that not everything that counts can be counted and not everything broken can be fixed mechanically is only a beginning step. Beijing 2008 marks this transition from engineering to managing an actual human population, and the subsequent age/term limits for official positions help to insure receptive and flexible governance into the future. However, it remains to be seen if the state will effectively develop past its current brush-fire method of addressing the social problems generated by the challenges of development. Addressing the symptoms may not be enough to transform their causes, thereby taking some of the hopefulness out of observations about China's future. If this loss of initiative in development is the case, then the future may hold only a waiting game of brush-fire events until the fires get too big to stamp out.

Spectators have been led to believe that all Chinese citizens stood up and cheered when the 2008 games were awarded to Beijing. Dong wrote that 'Virtually all of China, from the government to its citizens, pledged all-out support for Beijing's bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games', even citing a poll showing 98.7 per cent support. [29] The strong internal support for the Beijing games seems to come largely from the coastal regions that have the largest middle-class urban populations, but some of the rest of the country seems to have been underrepresented in this support. I have no doubt that Beijing exploded in rapture at the news, but that this 'all-out support' was not forthcoming from many people elsewhere seems to have been lost in the festivities of self-congratulation. There is much resistance, aggravation and ambivalence hidden behind this narrative; it is not 'all-out support' and it is worth outlining to serve our cause of accounting for a downside to China's new globalization and re-engagement games. In the rural areas labouring under increasing relative poverty, routinized labour migration and other forms of deprivation characterizing the underclass of neoliberal Chinese development, priorities often lie elsewhere. One illegal shaft coal miner I met in Sichuan in 2002, between jokes about how well he would do the day hauling coal out of a tiny, black tunnel became an Olympic sport, voiced this sentiment in his comments on Beijing being awarded the games. '*That* China has reason to be happy, *this* China has more practical things to worry about than games,' he said with a matter-of-fact grin.

I was living on China's south-western Yunnan frontier at the time the news that Beijing had been awarded the games was published in the newspapers, and the number of people who were visibly excited about it was a bit surprising – surprising because there were so few. Most who were very animated about it were tourists from eastern China, a few students and anyone connected to the operations of the party-state. The rest seemed to shrug it off as yet another of Beijing's plans that will likely not benefit Yunnan or its people. One way to parse this was that people who were far

removed from the needs of the common citizen were more likely to engage in self-congratulatory rapture than were the actual common people. Perhaps it is the faraway quality of the frontier – the popular sentiment there being ‘the mountains are high and the emperor is far away’ – that makes this blasé approach to this latest imagination of national pride possible, but it pays to remember that a great deal of China is frontier. And even more of it is marginal, where even in more urban places the disenfranchised can reflect this view on the orgy of Olympic support in China. One Mr Song, a Beijing restaurant owner whose restaurant was flattened to make way for new construction that was supposed to make Beijing look better for the Olympics, pointed out how he was neither compensated for the loss of livelihood nor reimbursed for the rent he had already paid in advance. He said: ‘Holding the Olympics will directly benefit real estate contractors with special connections. How can I support Beijing’s Olympic bid when I’m not sure how I’m going to feed my children now?’ [30]

The artificial patriotic high of Olympics mania will end after two weeks of ritual games in 2008, and the country will then be left with the often very stark conditions of developing China. When the country can win gold medals in badminton and Shanghai can produce Ferrari-driving *Forbes* 500 list members, but the inner regions of China continue to be dominated by poverty, poor health care access, a manufactured lack of voice, massive inequality and a hyper-visible wealth disparity, Yunnanese can feel (not without good reason) like there are problems with Beijing’s priority list. It isn’t that the people of the frontiers think the Olympics are at fault, but rather that there are other pressing issues yet to be taken care of before China spends money on international spectacles. As a result, they find it difficult to get carried away in the Olympic spirit. This lack of enthusiasm in the face of priority disagreements highlights the domestic price that China is paying for its emphasis on the Olympics. The increase in patriotism for the relative ‘haves’ may be an effective strategy for Beijing’s development course, but as an internal control tactic its success is predicated on the condition that people do not consider themselves as relative have-nots who have lost out on the benefits of the games and see patriotism as a poor substitute for food with which to feed their children.

There are other examples of potential disagreement along these lines, with other relative ‘have nots’. Against all manner of advice, China intends to run the Olympic torch to the top of Mount Everest. Aside from climbing professionals who consider it lunacy of the first order, the fact that Everest is in Tibet has made the issue a lightning-rod for political comment. On one hand this plan is understandable as the nation state ‘encompassing’ its geobody by the semiotic light of that particular nation-reinforcing torch. On the other hand, Tibet as a colonial territory of the world’s oldest empire casts this spectacle of torchlight in roughly the same terms as the new Beijing-Lhasa railway – i.e. as a neo-imperial vehicle of expansion. Consider this new ‘world’s highest’ railway. The shiny new Canadian-made Bombardier train-cars and the sheer engineering marvel of the line would seem to be a laudable success for China, and that is just the way Chinese media will present it for Olympic

coverage. And yet only about ten per cent of the jobs constructing the railway were held by Tibetans; between 3,000 and 5,000 *additional* soldiers will be stationed along the route for 'security'; and the new access to Tibet further facilitates an inflow of Chinese migrants to Tibet that is already the most hated aspect there of China's control. The Dalai Lama has already observed that the new railway is politically motivated to bring about cultural change, even invoking a notion of 'cultural genocide'. These 'domestic' concerns, by warrant of the relative greater legitimacy the Dalai Lama enjoys internationally regarding Tibet, become international issues of geopolitical significance for Beijing that will factor prominently in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2008 games. And once the media have enjoyed the unprecedented freedom mandated to them for the Olympics coverage, it will be difficult to put the genie back in the bottle, and the price for attempting to do so will be high.

China is perhaps the world's most impressive neoliberal development success, and a final indicator for this success is the recent legislation ensuring private property. [31] This success has been effective at controlling China's internal concerns, but unrest shows that it may be encountering diminishing returns on its brush-fire methods. In trying to meaningfully account for the increasing rate of unrest in China, we catch a glimpse of this discord's pace. A 2004 protest in Sichuan against corruption surrounding a dam project was 100,000 strong, and it was only one of 74,000 'mass incidents' that year. That number increased to 83,000 the next year, and these are just the statistics to which the state has admitted. One of the ways China has tended to deal with internal discord is to displace it by manipulating internal sentiment to an external location – America not being the only government adept at manipulating its population's xenophobic sentiments in order to fertilize the fields of its geopolitical interests. With a sense of the obstacles to China's presentation as an international success story, it is these geopolitical interests to which we now turn.

Geopolitical Significance

As we can see, several of the relatively hidden aspects of China's development performance have important international geopolitical implications. The Beijing Olympics are the culmination of an effort going back to 1949, an internal political act directed at its populace, and a geopolitical assertion of international scope about the intended direction China plans to take for its ascendance to the status of fully peer state. Since 1949 the government had an oscillating engagement with the Olympics movement, before settling into an 'elite sports system' as a winning strategy. The games and their political complex are therefore the outcome of dramatic diplomatic, political, social and economic change born of ideological commitment. This commitment has an analogue in Beijing's plans for international stature, including the politics of relationship in Asia and the rest of the world. In addition to this nearby concern, China is expanding its influence into regions such as Africa, the Middle East and South America in its quest for resources to power its economic

development – often coming into new tensions with already existing political relationships in these regions.

As we saw hinted in its willingness to change mascot from the ‘threatening’ dragon to the cuddly panda, China is wisely concerned with its international image because it remains quite negative despite recent improvement (a trend helped, no doubt, by recent political idiocies by the United States, which seem designed to universally antagonize). While some reports have suggested that recent polls show how Asians have begun to see China less as a threat to them, ethnographic data gathered in South-East Asia, Taiwan, Japan and India seems to suggest rather that people in these areas maintain a less rosy view of China’s rise. [32] Compared to the recent behaviour of the United States, China looks downright benign; but not everyone is interested in comparing these two imperial giants. Many countries are more interested in the ramifications of China’s rise. The games being in Beijing is an opportunity for China to get its message out in order to rebuild its image, a venue where the host benefits from the charge of positive sentiment usually extended to it because of its need to adhere to internationalist standards of cordial interaction agreed upon by the world sporting community. The Olympic ritual event is a sign of the nation for the Chinese that the international stature of modern China is something worthy of pride, but it is also a sign to the international audience of an agreed-upon interaction ritual. Of course, as with games in general, something is at stake; and these stakes are what China’s neighbours are watching more intently.

The government’s position is that all nation states can coexist in harmony, but in the realpolitik-dominated age of nation states this can only really be taken as a placeholder for when the state is politically capable of disregarding this harmony in its interests, and everyone knows it. [33] It is one thing to say that China wants only peaceful, harmonious growth or that its re-engagement with the world should be accepted this way. It is quite another thing to actually have reason to believe that is all there is to it. Just as Zheng He’s voyages were both relationship-building engagement *and* maritime imperialism, so China’s expansion now is resource relationship-making *and* good old fashioned influence expansion. Hosting the games is something to be proud of, but China’s new diplomatic weight-class means that the competition is also aware of a new presence in the ring – and new contenders can get knocked out. China well understands the symbolic importance of face, and abstracting the concept to the level of the nation diminishes this understanding only a little, since its own international relations theory is often spoken of in this way. Indeed, this grandiose calculation of public image in a kind of Goffmanian mechanics writ large has a long history. [34] The order of traditional Chinese polity was organized as a symbolic hierarchy-making process that enticed or required other polities to accede to Chinese orderings of the world assembled concentrically and hierarchically by relations of tribute. China has for 2,000 years had its own logic of empire, and it seems reasonable to suspect that all these mysteries of recent manifestation and conception that are seen to coalesce around the 2008 Olympics also reflect this historical imperial logic. The major transformation in China’s geopolitical approach now as apart from its

historical one is that the traditionally default centre-of-the-world self-positioning has been replaced with one of nominally equal competitors with the opportunity to succeed.

There are several ongoing concerns involving China's policies in Asia that will surely be part of the message it wants to broadcast to its neighbour states, and therefore will certainly colour the image-engineering attempt presented in the games. Even a short list of these Asia policies, when viewed for their interconnected relationships, constitutes something of an 'alliance haze'. Of more immediate scope is China's recent interaction with India, which, though usually civil, has still been quite competitive. The new Beijing-Lhasa rail line is too stark a colonial instrument to put Tibetan minds at ease, and the further shrinking of China's buffer with India has given *that* country cause to heighten its attention to China's moves in the region. The opening of the Nathu La Pass, a Himalayan pass on the old Silk Road, occurred last year, and bilateral trade between the two Asian population giants reached US\$21 billion in 2005, up 38 per cent from 2004 and expected to reach US\$50 billion by 2010. There are those in India, such as Gujarat's infamous Chief Minister Modi, who look to the Chinese development model as the only suitable model for Indian development. However, a larger and less morally bankrupt consortium of Indian military experts has warned that the new openings will allow 'Chinese spies and agents on subversive missions' to enter India. [35] Of course, most of this is predicated on the situation of India vis-à-vis Pakistan, and of greater concern to India is the close relationship China has with Pakistan and Burma. Pakistan's relationship is signalled by the Chinese-assisted Gwadar Deep Water Port project, which gives economic benefits to China, because it is only a few hundred miles from the energy-rich Persian Gulf, and strategic benefits to Pakistan and its naval forces. Burma's (Myanmar's) relationship to China is shown by cross-border trade and the fact that China is one of the very few countries that routinely defend its pariah-state behaviour – the product of successful resource and access diplomacy – in the UN, and by the fact that it serves to contain India's own potential to expand its influence. The close relationships these countries have with China have in turn played a large part in India's new closeness with the US, unfolding as a traditional balancing act for the region. And where there is traditional balancing along the realist model of international relations, there is the matter of military strength.

According to Jiang Enzhu, a spokesman for the National People's Congress, Beijing has also accelerated its military spending. China's military budget is to be increased 17.8 per cent this year to about 350 billion yuan (almost \$45 billion). [36] Taiwan already has something of an arms race going with China, regularly purchasing US weapons and technology, and ensuring US involvement in that relationship. Presenting this military build-up as benign during the Olympics will likely follow the tried and true path of suggesting that it is for internal protection rather than external projection, and there is more than a little truth to this. But this is something of a two-edged sword that demands attention to why it needs the *internal* protection of a national army rather than a police force.

Japan presents China with a complex range of issues designed to complicate Beijing's plans for Asia, allied as it is with both Taiwan and the US along both political and economic lines. US bases in Japan mark it as a cooperator with the containment policies of the Cold War; a 'missile shield' being considered to protect Japan and Taiwan in case of a Chinese attack is also in the works; the remilitarization of the country has been given the green light; and the aggravating refusal of Japan to apologize for its atrocities in China during the Second World War energize certain conditions of possibility for further contention between the two Asian powerhouses. Colonial memories of Japanese invasion die hard in China, and it is to this day extremely difficult to find a person in or from Nanjing that has anything good to say about Japan. Japan does indeed have much to answer for, and Beijing's hospitality during the Olympics will likely highlight this by its exacting charm and diplomacy in the face of morally questionable Japanese decisions of late. With all attention focused on the camaraderie of the games in Asia, the powers of the Pacific Rim will be on high image alert while furiously positioning themselves under Olympic cover. As MacAloon suggests, there will likely be much back-channel politicking obscured by the reasonable comment that 'we are just here for the games'. [37]

There are loose ends in this diplomatic haze and development narrative, of course. China's total highway infrastructure is to exceed that of the US, but occupying any significant portion of it with automobile density to the degree that the US has carelessly allowed would be economically infeasible and an environmental suicide involving its neighbours. With global warming rightly becoming the unavoidable cause celeb for the twenty-first century, and China having a nearly hopeless record in this regard, environmental concern will be a theme for which it will have to answer many tough questions. Internally, flooding due to over-cutting of timber in the headwaters of the Yangtze is still a cause of great concern. Geopolitically, environmental dangers are an already sensitive point with Russia because a recent chemical spill poisoned a river running into Russian communities north of China. The 'Asia Highway' also develops ties to and through Central Asia that require Russia to interface with Chinese plans as well, so these relationships are not inconsequential. These development projects are natural moves for a growing, globalizing state, but the potential for projection of Chinese influence, particularly in Central Asia and the Middle East, concerns its global neighbour-states for a variety of economic, environmental and political reasons. Virtually nothing can be done beyond its own borders without activating an entire system of interpenetrating alliances already formed in the international community, and the Beijing games will be the window into China's thinking and behaviour on these issues.

China should not be unrealistic about the games' impact on its image. The event will not change the political economics of unrest in the country, and it may even contribute to it. If Beijing is unwilling or unable to parlay the higher profile it achieves through the Olympics into a new image in the international community that emerges from its troubled past – all despite the fact that conditions seem set for at

least half of the world media coverage having a decidedly critical tone to it – then the new mandarins will have only a stark and troubled social landscape to return to, not much will have changed and they will be paying off a large debt that many disgruntled Chinese saw coming. The games will also not change the suspicion that China represents in Japan and India. We have discussed how the Olympics serve as a meaningfully political act at least as much as they are a sporting event, and media attention so far seems to agree – at least until the games actually start. China's ambitions to dominate the 2008 Olympic Games have been shown here to be something of a political analogy for the logic of its greater ambitions in Asia and the world, and the fact that its major geopolitical competitors are the US, Japan, India and Russia indicates something of the scope of its ambitions.

Late in the writing of this article it became necessary to include reference to two revelatory examples of Chinese geopolitical wrangling that draw this discussion into clearer relief. Exacerbation of the Sudan situation by Chinese road-blocking in the UN has left Beijing's protestations of harmony-building somewhat embarrassingly bloodied, with everyone from Hollywood directors and multinational corporations (!) decrying the injustice and making the obvious link between China's hopes for a great Olympics and its providing cover for crimes against humanity. Beijing's very late attempts to influence their African partner's behaviour is too clearly the result of massive international outrage at China rather than a visibly laudable willingness to help for greater international harmony. Its late decision to send a company of peacekeeping military engineers to Sudan will not untarnish their reputation in time for a shiny Olympics – no matter how good they are at kung fu. [38] Similarly, the very recent forestalling of UN Security Council motions to condemn Burma's lethal crackdown on peaceful protest seems to have struck the Western media audiences as something like moral cowardice of sacrificing lives on the altar of politics. One does not have to think hard to reach that conclusion, since that is largely what it is; but the outcome of the situation promises to be a repeat of the backward-thinking reaction, 'too little too late' response and unsubtle result of the Sudan situation so far. Perhaps these actions have been overdetermined by the importance of resource access for a precariously balanced Chinese development machine, but too obviously these manoeuvrings are the actions of crass realpolitik for anyone to mistake them for anything like the harmonious rhetoric spun from Beijing. Having to take it on the chin from other global heavyweights the year before the 2008 games will doubtless have an effect on China's presentation, and running interference (in any recognized form) for two of the most bloodstained regimes in the world promises to be a hot topic of discussion in 2008.

Several of the articles in this volume document various vantages on China's ambitions in the world, and in the process they take on a realpolitik visage. Many of the articles flesh out specific instances and aims of China's political games by exploring the background to this Olympic commitment as seen from the vantage of China's global neighbours, and in one case from inside China where the vantage is from the position of women athletes. The multiple perspectives on the means by

which China was able to impress the world and win the games provide an informed comment on the background to the spectacle, meaningfulness and politics of the 2008 games. Like the long list of similar states who have in the past more visibly conducted politics under guise of games, China is in the business of calculating its interests. This recent instrumentalization of the Olympics (perhaps Olympization of instrumentality is more accurate?) has taken on Chinese form in its stated stress on harmonious relationship-building. [39] China has much to be proud of in the reform contemporary period because it has come a long way, and its accomplishments have been, well, Olympian. But it would be unwise of world punditry – indeed, it has been unwise of them – to look too rosily on China's many positive accomplishments without giving a matter-of-fact accounting of their negative conditions and consequences. China's Olympians will be standing on the shoulders of their less fortunate countrymen, and their plight should not be ignored during the grandiosity of the games – even if the Beijing government does not have a strong record of recent concern for them. We have discussed how some of China's more recent accomplishments are inextricably tied to enduring social problems and risks worth *not* ignoring, and how these concerns become geopolitical concerns.

Notes

- [1] A good example of this would be Beijing former vice mayor Liu Jingmin, who, not being quite clear on the concept, maintained that 'We want to separate politics from the Olympics'.
- [2] Boniface, 'Weaponless War', 3.
- [3] IOC Charter Fundamental Principles, Clauses 2 and 5, available online at http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_122.pdf.
- [4] IOC Charter, Rule 28.6.
- [5] MacAloon, *This Great Symbol*.
- [6] Boniface, 'Weaponless War', 3.
- [7] Federic Paxson at the turn of last century imagined that athletic fields could serve as a proxy for expansionist foreign policy in a world of shrinking available frontiers – imperialism by other means. Dyerson, 'Prologue: The Paradoxes', 940.
- [8] Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*.
- [9] MacAloon, 'Politics and the Olympics', 14.
- [10] Dong Jinxia, 'Women, Nationalism', 538.
- [11] A few of the Beijing tourists I interviewed on the south-west frontier could not understand how blasé the locals were about it, saying to me that the locals just 'did not have a sufficient understanding of how hard China had struggled to get the games'. The local Yunnanese had little use for this idea, and one retired official who overheard this statement later explained to me that local people understood very well what the Olympics was, but unlike the 'inner Chinese' (meaning Beijingers in this case) they knew how much the games would cost – how much normal Chinese people would have to struggle *because* the games were awarded to Beijing. See below.
- [12] Brownell, *Training the Body for China*.
- [13] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.
- [14] 'China To Revive Zheng He's Legend', *China Daily*, 4 Sept. 2006.
- [15] Unlike in the Ming, when being a Muslim was just another way of being 'Chinese' – a category that had everything to do with sociopolitical practice and almost nothing to do with anything

we would now call 'ethnic' – now Islam is racialized by a relatively recent ethnic paradigm. Now the fact that he was Muslim and descended from the Prophet will not likely be one of the qualities most commonly cited in support of his symbolic power.

- [16] Wade, 'The Voyages of Zheng He: A Reassessment'.
- [17] When complete, this replica will be about 71 metres long, 14 metres wide and five metres tall.
- [18] The best of the traditional and modern is not a new goal for China. Once before the ideal of using 'Western science' synthesized with 'Chinese culture' had been the marching orders of some Republican revolutionaries before the 1911 Revolution.
- [19] Jealousy at court and an extreme policy shift at Zheng He's death (1433) saw the great ships left to rot, their plans destroyed and all records of the voyages burnt. These extreme shifts in the ancient world are interestingly resonant with Chinese politics of the last half-century even after 600 years.
- [20] A. Kroeber, 'The Underestimated Party-state', *Financial Times*, 26 Feb. 2007.
- [21] Also, newer age and term limits for official positions ensure that those older than 65 (locally) or 70 (nationally) do not continue to hold power. As a check and balance, it seems fairly anaemic. But for a country that has tended towards gerontocracy, this is a veritable leap in protecting against an irrational durability of bad policy ideas.
- [22] Kroeber, 'The Underestimated Party-state'.
- [23] Mr. Liu was removed from his position because he had taken so many bribes he was found to have his own resort pleasure palaces stocked with young women. Also discussed in regard to the games was the arrest of the party secretary of Qingdao, though less is known about that case. Such sexy topics are far too attention-grabbing to pass up for any mainstream media operation.
- [24] Kroeber, 'The Underestimated Party-state'.
- [25] One Hong Kong NGO estimated that as many as 20,000 die each year.
- [26] S. Elegant, 'Where the Coal Is Stained with Blood', *Time*, 2 March 2007, available online at www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1595235,00.html, accessed 20 April 2008.
- [27] Given the structure of Chinese governance and the intimate relationship the party and the government have with development capital, the future seems rather more likely to be something like Japan's corporate government...with Chinese characteristics, of course, though an uncharitable observer may start thinking 'kleptocracy' along these lines.
- [28] Approximately 30,000 each year. One would also expect that, as in America where the mantra of opportunity is also a dominant and poorly veiled manipulation of public sentiment, eventually what the range of opportunity is may be shrinking and tightly controlled by circumstance.
- [29] Dong Jinxia, 'Women, Nationalism', 538.
- [30] R. MacKinnon, 'Beijing-Going for Gold', CNN Online, 19 Feb. 2001, available online at <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/east/02/19/china.olympics/index.html>, accessed 20 April 2008.
- [31] 'China Passes New Law on Property', BBC News, 16 March 2007, available online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/asia-pacific/6456959.stm>, accessed 20 April 2008.
- [32] This even as they (correctly, I think) see America's recent behaviour as *even more* of a threat.
- [33] This is especially true of the US, which has deployed the subtleties of just this technique even if the recent administration has embodied the dangerously thick and uninterested lack of subtlety that animates its commander in chief.
- [34] E. Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*.
- [35] Stakelbeck, 'For Commerce or Conquest'.
- [36] J. Yardley and D. Lague, 'Beijing Accelerates Its Military Spending', *New York Times*, 5 March 2007.
- [37] MacAloon, 'Politics and the Olympics', 4.

- [38] Richard Spencer, 'China's Kung Fu Peace-keepers Head for Darfur', *DailyTelegraph*, 17 Sept. 2007, available online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/09/17/wdarfur117.xml>, accessed 20 April 2008.
- [39] 'Philosophy of Harmony', *China Daily*, 27 Sept. 2006.

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