

Hosting the Olympic Games and the Issue of Human Rights in China

by Kevin Wamsley

November 18, 2002

First, permit me to thank you for inviting me to testify before this commission. Our point of departure for these proceedings is to discuss the potential influences of the process of hosting the Olympic Games in 2008 on human rights in China. First of all we must acknowledge of course that our ruminations are purely speculative. But, that being said, we may offer some comments on these issues based on our knowledge of China's history, its current political policies and practices, its cultural connections to the Olympic Games in the past and present and, perhaps most importantly, some of the extant perceptions about the role of the modern Olympics in facilitating social and political change.

China's sporting relations with other countries extend back almost a century, including post World War I correspondence with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and participation in the Games of 1932, 1936, and 1948.¹ China's return to competition in 1984, indeed the fervor of its bidding strategies for the Games of 2000 and 2008, signaled that the Olympics had become a significant component of Chinese domestic and foreign policy. If the unofficial financial estimates, cost projections, and the official proclamations of social preparation may be positioned as indicators, then we must conclude that not only are the Games of 2008 a serious commitment for China, they are being positioned as one of the most important events in Chinese history. With this in mind, we may draw some speculative conclusions on what sort of strategies may be adopted and employed by the Chinese government to render a public face of success to the international community and, further, how the Chinese people will participate in projecting favorable images of a modern China to a global audience.

In the post 1984 era of the commercialized Olympic Games, host cities have employed deliberate strategies to represent themselves as world class cities - stable, intriguing, vibrant, and successful.² Beijing will be no different. Indeed, to date, Beijing's public proclamations respecting citizen behavior and hosting protocols, entitled *Urban Civility and Building Citizen Morality*, I would characterize as overt and threatening.³ Arguably, it is fair to say that the Chinese government will ensure that, far beyond the level of the Olympic volunteer, average Beijing citizens will adhere to a code of conduct for the Games, including pre and post periods. This is not unusual for host cities. Rather, it remains a matter of degree. When one considers that the Olympic Games have long been a site for political expression, alongside a more recently fervent civic and national boosterism by host cities, juxtaposed with intense media scrutiny, it follows that citizen behavior and political protests are matters of significant concern for organizing committees and national governments. Assurances from host countries are implied in official doctrine. Indeed, it has been the expressed interest of the IOC through its published *Olympic Charter*, that there be "no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda...permitted in the Olympic areas."⁴ Further, many bidding cities and host cities from around the world have taken steps to remove what are perceived to be unsightly individuals and groups in core areas and to ensure that political groups are not given opportunities to distribute information or capitalize upon media opportunities.⁵ It is fair to assume that Beijing will implement some strategies of urban cleansing, perhaps in the form of relocating unregistered citizens in Beijing, shutting down their businesses, or even detaining them.

One of the most significant factors to be considered in Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics is the potential influence of the idea of nationalism in China, stemming mainly from a common sense of historic and current marginalization among Chinese people, in various forms of international relations and, consequently, the galvanization of public sentiment that hosting the Olympic Games has already inspired and will continue to escalate.⁶ This of course has direct bearing on the behavior of citizens, their support of overall government initiatives, and the reluctance of even some dissidents to jeopardize China's moment of international recognition. This nationalist sentiment should not be underestimated, particularly when one is attempting to gauge how Chinese citizens will react to government crackdowns, urban policy initiatives, dealing with

dissidents, how they may or may not reveal information about their lives to outsiders, and how they will actively participate in the Olympic Games and related festivities. Just as significantly, it is likely that the Chinese government will take advantage of such cultural solidarities as it launches and conducts its programs of cultural representation for Beijing.

In addition to the period of time leading up to the Games, the potential influences of an influx of some 20,000 plus journalists and sport tourists during the Olympic Games must be debated. However, any suggestions that such social contacts between Chinese citizens in Beijing and other parts of China and so-called westerners will have an immediate influence on social activism or a long-term effect on government policies are erroneously simplistic. Certainly the issue of human rights in China has become a focal point for the western media, and journalists will be interested in both controversy and crisis. Any immediate matters of human rights will, without doubt, be dealt with expeditiously. But with respect to term effects of the Games, there are many factors to consider in the hosting process, which tend to polarize media interpretations of local and national events and limit the influence of what might be perceived as contradictory or destabilizing ideologies. First and foremost, the Olympics are a brief and intense media spectacle. Second, the Chinese government may refuse entry to any media personnel who have proven to be 'unfriendly' in the past. Third, the IOC maintains the rights to internal access for members of the media. Fourth, a glimpse at Olympic history demonstrates that serious local or national problems may be focal points of international interest through media scrutiny before and during an Olympics or the bidding process; but such stories tend to fade quickly, when the Olympic caravan has departed. Take, for example, Aboriginal issues in Sydney, Calgary, Salt Lake City, homelessness in Toronto and Atlanta. The Olympic process, bidding, hosting, and the attendant ideological forays into peace, brotherhood, and equity have had little direct impact beyond limited media exposure to such issues and inspiring a greater solidarity towards local resistance to mega events. And, finally, the sheer intensity of the Olympic Games as a media construction tends to shift focus away from national issues that may have received significant attention before the Games, effectively marginalizing the plights of individuals or groups who may have once been central to journalistic interests.

Other international interest groups are integral components of the legitimizing process perpetuated through the Olympic Games. Currently, and increasingly as the Games draw near, corporations, consulting firms, specialists, and academics will trade on the economic opportunities presented by the hosting of the next Games. Groups in Sydney, for example, are lobbying to assist China in developing its infrastructure and Olympic programs, from buildings and facilities to cultural programs, academic exchange, and Olympic education. Corporations that already have a significant multi-million dollar interest in the success of the Games, and those that are currently seeking contracts, are not likely to endorse any systematic critiques that focus negative attention towards the host nation. Indeed, they have diverse financial interests in Chinese markets but also, the larger corporations that trade on Olympic symbolism and ideology have a stake in promoting an image of China as an exotic, historically stable, vital nation through which sensible and interesting cultural links can enhance their products and the flow of global capital. Intellectuals who depend upon access to even limited information, travel, and financial aid for publications and educational liaisons are not likely to seriously raise issues of human rights, for fear of jeopardizing their positions of privilege.

Historically, the Olympic process has tended to provide legitimacy to host governments and their policies, endorsements to their success in hosting the Games, and furthering the 'spirit' of the Olympic Games, as opposed to drawing attention to shortfalls and political controversies. Well-documented examples include the economic crises of Antwerp in 1920 and London in 1948, the Great Depression in 1932 Los Angeles, Hitler's fascism in 1936, Mexico's slaughter of innocent citizens in 1968.⁷ Serious tragedies and atrocities have become subsidiary to the more glamorous immediacies of the Olympic spectacle. On the other hand, members of the international sporting community, Olympic officials specifically, were able to exert remarkable influence through several decades over the issue of apartheid in South Africa. These pressures, however, had more broad-based political support and diplomatic attention.

In summary, the Olympic Games have done far more to sustain and reproduce extant domestic policies, to reproduce mythologies about race and equality, economic and social opportunity, and world peace, than to subvert the inequalities of the world.⁸ In the short term, it is likely that the Olympic process ensconced with its traditional diplomacies, hyperbole, and rhetoric, indeed the political exigencies of host nation, will negatively affect human rights in China. Further, the solidarities created through extensive preparations to host the world should not be underestimated. International lobbying initiatives that question China's social and political prerogatives in the years leading up to the 2008 Olympics might be viewed, even by average citizens, as efforts to undermine what is being celebrated widely as the arrival of a modern China. International advocates for political change in China should proceed with caution.

Notes

¹Dongguang Pei, "A question of names: The Two Chinas Issue and the People's Republic of China in the Modern Olympic Movement," unpublished Master's thesis, The University of Western Ontario, 1995, pp. iii-iv.

²See, for example, Kevin B. Wamsley, "What Price For World Class?" **Canadian Issues**, Autumn 1999, pp. 14-15; "Policy Implications For Hosting the Olympics", **Policy Options**, Vol. 18, No. 3, May, pp. 13-15, 1997; "Tradition, Modernity, and the Construction of Civic Identity: The Calgary Olympics", **Olympika**, V, pp. 81-90 with Michael K. Heine, 1996.

³See the official website: http://www.beijing-2008.org/new_olympic/eolympic/1009_e/5.htm

⁴Olympic Charter, International Olympic Committee, September 2001, p. 85.

⁵See, for example, Helen Lenskyj, **The Best Olympics Ever? The Social Impacts of Sydney 2000**. New York: SUNY, 2002.

⁶While not necessarily representative of popular opinion in China, see Dave Sheng, "Who lost China?" - the resurgence of Chinese nationalism," Chinese Community Forum, 1996, to provide some context for the discussion of these issues. <http://www.rider.edu/phanc/courses/countrys/asia/china/Cnatlsm/Sheng.htm>

⁷See the following sources for both general and specific information on these Games: Alan Tomlinson and Garry Whannel, eds, **Five Ring Circus: Money Power and Politics at the Olympic Games**, London: Pluto 1984; Richard D. Mandell, **The Nazi Olympics**, New York: MacMillan 1971; Arnd Kruger, 'The Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda and the Nazi Olympics of 1936,' in Robert K. Barney, Kevin B. Wamsley, Scott G. Martyn, Gordon H. MacDonald, eds, **Global and Cultural Critique: Problematizing the Olympic Games**, London: International Centre for Olympic Studies 1998, 33-48; Allen Guttmann, **The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement**, New York: Columbia University Press 1984; Kevin B. Wamsley, "The Global Sport Monopoly: a synopsis of 20th century Olympic politics," **International Journal**, Vol. LVII, 3, pp. 395-410.

⁸Kevin B. Wamsley, "Laying Olympism to Rest," in **Post-Olympism? Questioning Sport in the Twenty-First Century**, ed. John Bale, Berg, 2004, forthcoming.