1-25-2008

Beijing Olympic FAQ #1: Politics and the Olympics

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/172

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Beijing Olympic FAQ #1: Politics and the Olympics

January 25, 2008 in Uncategorized by The China Beat | 3 comments

(Posted by The China Beat on behalf of Susan Brownell)

Last year the International Olympic Committee (IOC) invited me to write an essay on the Beijing Olympics, and “The Beijing Effect” was published in the July-September 2006 issue of The Olympic Review. At the end of that essay I wrote, “China hopes that it will change the Olympic Games, but is the West really open to that possibility? Are we truly ready for ‘One World, One Dream’?” Since that article appeared in the official magazine of the IOC, it is not implausible that Beijing decided to answer my question. On August 8, 2007, Beijing marked the one-year countdown to the Games with the premier of what became a hit song and a slogan that one can see everywhere on TV advertisements and billboards: “We Are Ready,” 我们准备好了. Indeed, Beijing’s preparations exceed all previous Olympic Games in their scale and financial investment. Beijing is ready for us. But are we ready for Beijing?

I don’t think the outside world is ready to understand what it will see in August 2008. So I am doing my small part to get it there. My participation on The China Beat is one part of my effort. If you want to know more about me and my experience of China, take a look at the interview with me that was just posted by my fellow Fulbrighter in Beijing, Dan Beekman, who is “Blogging Beijing” on the homepage of the Seattle Times.

As one of the world’s few academic experts on Chinese sports, I am getting a lot of requests from journalists these days. And then there are my opinionated and sometimes politically-misguided family members in the U.S. (you know who you are), and my academic colleagues (thanks, Allen Guttmann). Since there are a few basic questions that get repeated over and over, I have started compiling my e-mail responses into Beijing Olympic FAQs. Below I give my answers to FAQ#1: *Is it possible to keep politics out of the Beijing 2008 Olympics?*

**FAQ#1: Is it possible to keep politics out of the Beijing 2008 Olympics?**

I get a little impatient with this naive question, “is it possible to keep politics out of the Olympics?” The Olympics have been intimately tied to national politics at least since the 1906 Intermediate Olympic Games in Athens. These were the first Olympic Games at which athletes marched into the stadium behind national flags and the three flags of the medalists were raised in the awards ceremony. To protest that Irish athletes had not been allowed to compete as a separate nation, the silver medalist in the triple jump, Peter O’Connor, climbed up the flagpole to wave the Irish flag in place of the British Union Jack that had been raised. [The first Olympics in Athens in 1896 were so well-supported by the Greeks that the IOC approved a Greek request to hold intermediate Olympic Games in the middle of the Olympiad. The 1906 Intermediate Games were the first and last because of political and economic instability in Greece.]

The reviver of the modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin, was a rather sophisticated thinker about the relationship between sports and politics, and always understood that politics were an integral part of the Olympic Movement. IOC presidents during the Cold War (Sigfrid Edström, Avery Brundage, and Lord David Killanin) often tried to forbid people from “mixing sport and politics,” but that was largely part of their effort to keep the political conflicts over which they had no control from disrupting the Olympic Games. It was never official IOC policy. And it is not today. The IOC’s only official stance on politics is contained in Fundamental Principle #5 of the Olympic Charter, which states, “Any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement.”
The Olympic Games have often functioned as an alternative to mainstream diplomatic channels. The IOC is a non-governmental organization, which therefore is able to function in the cracks between governments. And it is important for it to maintain that independent intermediate position, so its presidents and other leading thinkers have correctly understood that they must maintain political independence from national governments to the degree possible. This complex political reality was captured in sayings like “keep the politics out of sport,” but in order to understand what this really means, you have to delve a little bit deeper and understand the global structure that underlies Olympic sport. I will get into that in my answer to FAQ#2.

So the answer is, no, it is not possible to keep politics out of the Olympics, and in fact their political role is what makes them important in today’s world and in the quest for world peace. This is as true in 2008 as it was over 100 years ago.

Stay tuned for FAQ#2: **Will calls for a boycott of the 2008 Olympic Games be successful?**

**Tags:** The 2008 Beijing Olympics