FAQ #6: Are the Beijing Olympic Games being used as a Propaganda Campaign to Prop up the Communist Party?

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/151
FAQ #6: Are the Beijing Olympic Games being used as a Propaganda Campaign to Prop up the Communist Party?

July 19, 2008 in Uncategorized by The China Beat | 3 comments

“Olympic education” is the IOC’s label for the educational efforts that are supposed to be an integral part of the Olympic Movement as required by Fundamental Principle #1 of the Olympic Charter, which states that Olympism is a philosophy of life that blends sport with culture and education. Since 2005 China has been carrying out the largest-scale “Olympic education” campaign in history. There have been academic and professional conferences, textbooks and courses for public schools and universities, educational television and radio shows, magazine and newspaper essays, websites, and more.

In fall of 2007 I was added to the “experts team” of Beijing City’s Olympic Education Standing Office and so I have seen its workings from the inside. I have attended meetings of the Standing Office, taken part in ceremonies at schools, interviewed teachers and principals, and count the people mentioned below as my friends.

From this perspective I offer the following evidence in support of this answer to the above question: “No.”

1) The initial inspiration for Olympic education came from outside China and is the product of an international network.

In the absence of a well-established legal tradition, and in accord with the effort to implement the “rule of law,” China has treated the Olympic Charter and the Host City Contract as if they were enforceable legal documents. Fundamental Principle #4 of the Olympic Charter advocates “sport…without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.” These constitute the core of what the IOC calls “Olympic values.” They have been the starting point for the values taught in China’s Olympic education.

Within the IOC there is a Commission on Culture and Olympic Education. Since 2000 it has been chaired by the IOC member in China, He Zhenliang, whose leadership has given it an influence it did not previously have. His prominence was one of the factors in the attention given to education in China.

Two of the people who have had a big influence on Olympic education in China are Ren Hai of the Beijing Sport University and Donnie Pei (Pei Dongguang) of the Capitol Institute of Physical Education. Ren received a Ph.D. in history from the University of Alberta. Pei received a Master’s Degree from the International Olympic Studies Centre at the University of Western Ontario, Canada and attended the International Olympic Academy (IOA) in Ancient Olympia, Greece. Both of them wrote theses on Olympic history. In 1993 during Beijing’s first bid for the Olympic Games, Ren edited the first college-level textbook for Olympic education, The Olympic Movement 《奥林匹克运动》 (revised and re-published in 2005). Both Pei and Ren are active internationally, taking part in international conferences and in the sessions of the International Olympic Academy. They and other scholars collected information on Olympic education.
programs in previous host nations and invited international scholars to Beijing, utilizing international models in planning Beijing’s programs. I have known Ren Hai since 1994, and am currently affiliated with the Olympic Studies Center of the Beijing Sport University that he directs.

2) The initial impetus for Beijing’s Olympic education programs in the schools came from “the people” (民间), not the government.

At the 2000 Postgraduate Session at the International Olympic Academy, Donnie Pei was inspired by the Dean, Kostas Georgiadis, who led the Olympic education projects for the 2004 Athens Games. After the success of Beijing’s bid in 2001, Pei, who had worked as a p.e. teacher for ten years before going to Canada, began visiting schools in Beijing to try to persuade them to start Olympic activities. He found that most principals and teachers were uninterested because they believed the Olympics were nothing more than sports, but finally on his tenth attempt he ran into p.e. teacher Zhou Chenguang at Yangfangdian Primary School. Zhou was immediately attracted by Pei’s discussion of the Olympics as a way of teaching values because of his own crisis of conscience:

In the 1980s we still understood physical education as the Soviet Union. We required students to line up in straight lines. [For the recess exercises] I was very proud when one thousand children lined up straight. I would put a lot of effort into it. I’d stand on the platform to direct them, jump off and run up to them to straighten them up [motions hands as if adjusting a child’s torso], run back to the platform, and so on. I had put out so much effort. I started to wonder what had I trained them for? They would go out into society and what would they do with what they had learned? Did it have any use? I had produced little soldiers. What had I accomplished? They knew how to be obedient. It was a big machine for producing cabbages. I started to feel as if I had harmed them.

In 2002 Pei and Zhou initiated China’s first Olympic education school activities, a re-enactment of the ancient Greek pentathlon. Pei had gotten this idea from the IOA, where it is an annual tradition created by Ingomar Weiler, a professor in classics at the University of Graz. For Pei, the ancient Greek ideal of all-around education was the remedy for the overemphasis on testing that was plaguing China’s educational system. He says, “Olympic education is a movement, but it’s a moving movement. Humans need to be moved – materialism is not enough. Olympic education emphasizes balance, which is found in the Chinese Way of the Mean as well as in the Greek ideal of harmonious education. China needs this now, as did late 19th/early 20th century Europe in Coubertin’s times after industrialization. The idea has value because of a social need.”

By 2005, Yangfangdian Primary School had already held four installments of its annual “mini Olympic Games,” and each time Zhou Chenguang had faxed multiple invitations to BOCOG with little response from it or other official VIPs. But in that year BOCOG stepped up its operations and started to pay attention to fulfilling the Host City Contract’s stipulations on educational programs, which China took more seriously than host nations usually do. The Beijing Municipal Education Commission, working together with BOCOG, formed the Olympic Education Standing Office. They designated 200 primary and secondary schools in Beijing City and another 356 schools nationwide as “Olympic Education Demonstration
Schools,” and Yangfangdian as their “Pioneer.” Principals and teachers from around Beijing were invited to three forums to learn from the experiences at Yangfangdian. By the end of 2007 hundreds more schools had engaged in “hand-in-hand sharing” with the Demonstration Schools, taking the total number of schools that had carried out Olympic activities to 1,100. It is estimated that these programs touched 400 million students nationwide.

The Heart-to-Heart sister school program was organized among 210 schools in Beijing. This program was based on the “One School, One Country” program first initiated at the Nagano Olympics in 1998. Each school established a sister school relationship with one the 205 National Olympic Committees, as well as with 5 National Paralympic Committees.

In addition, a teacher training program reached about 10,000 primary and secondary school teachers in Beijing.

Thus, what began as a “people’s” initiative was picked up by the government. But the intellectuals generally regarded this as a positive development, because without the support of the government there would have been no way to implement their ideas on such a broad scale. As Pei put it,

> There is no conflict between them and us. They give us a lot of recognition. We do not take the credit. As scholars we must rely on the government. We cannot be too naïve. We are members of social life, we cannot isolate ourselves. We must have an open mind. The government needs our knowledge. We should not be the “lonely flower admiring itself” (孤芳自赏). If the government understands, then we shut up. “The flames reach higher when people from all around add kindling to them” (周人添柴火焰高). It’s teamwork.

What is most important to Pei is that “In the end my ideas go to the children. This is what I want.”

In 2008, Pei was recognized as a “Model Worker” for Beijing City, the highest form of recognition by the Beijing government.

3) Much of the framework and content of Olympic education came from the non-Communist Parties.

Two of the eight legal non-communist parties, the Democratic League and the Jiusan (September Third) Society played a key role in an unprecedented joint effort between the city government, the Party, university professors, and BOCOG, which produced important planning documents on the guiding thought of Olympic education and its concrete implementation. Between 2001 and 2008 the two political parties organized dozens of activities in Beijing, including academic forums, publications, school activities, poster exhibitions, and more, while their branches in other cities also organized activities. Many of the other political parties also organized activities in Beijing and nationwide.

Pei was not a member of the Communist Party in 2001. Several years later, he joined the September Third Society.

4) The specific content of Olympic Education is almost completely non-political.
Schools were given complete freedom to design their own Olympic education activities, and the resulting variety is amazing. Students formed their own organizing committees (following the organizational chart on BOCOG’s website) or conducted bid competitions like the Olympic bid. They organized mini-Olympic games with a parade of athletes in the opening ceremony featuring students dressed as the different nations of the world. They produced a huge amount of artwork in every conceivable medium, even beans or bottle tops glued to posterboard. They developed innumerable performance types, including the “Olympic angel chorus” at Yangfangdian, which performs a moving rendition of Bach’s “Ode to Joy” or the “Olympic Volunteer’s Song” while wearing angel wings. Students at the Information Management vocational school, most of whose parents are migrant laborers, spent two years of their after-school time producing a computer-generated animated film in which the Fuwa mascots introduce Olympic history.

Teachers I talked to felt that Olympic education was nonpolitical, and thus contrasted with the previous character education campaigns in the national curriculum. As one teacher told me, “After the national leaders have stated the policy, if the only way you can think to implement it is to shout slogans, it becomes irritating after a while.” With Olympic education, they could use concrete activities to teach children fair play, teamwork, mutual respect, selfless service, international friendship, the pursuit of world peace, and many other concepts. And unlike the previous character education, their students enjoyed the projects.

The words “communist” and “socialist” are almost completely absent in Olympic education materials and lectures. In mid-May, I sat through 1-1/2 hours of presentations by teachers at local schools considered to have the best examples of Olympic education, and I did not hear the words “communist” or “socialist” once. Last week I attended a meeting of the Olympic Education Standing Office to plan a book that will summarize and analyze the thousands of activities carried out under its umbrella. The success of the Olympic education effort is not being judged by whether it promoted loyalty to the Party or nation, but by whether it motivated the students and produced creative results. I also attended several of the lectures delivered in the teacher training program and to the volunteers. Like the content of the school programs, these lectures largely impart knowledge about the world outside China.

The most political content I have seen was at a meeting run by the Communist Youth League of the Beijing Forestry University, which was a training lecture for college student participants in the Green Long March project to promote environmental awareness across China. A few speakers almost casually mentioned the support of the party and government for the various volunteer projects organized by the CYL, but that was it.

I do not feel that the Party and government are explicitly claiming responsibility for organizing these games – on the contrary, public statements claim that the games belong to all people, that “everyone can participate” (China has placed particular importance on the Olympic creed that “the most important thing is to participate”). The strongest argument that one could accurately make is that the Games implicitly support the Communist Party. But if one wants to venture into the realm of implicit messages, there many others that contradict this one. I believe the major message in Olympic education is that there is an exciting and colorful world out there, and China is about to join it. And this is in accord with the major goal of Olympic education,
which is to produce a next generation of Chinese people who are better prepared to be active citizens in that world than the current adults, who are all too conscious of their limitations.

**Conclusion: Beijing’s Olympic Education De-politicizes the Olympics**

Actually, I think it is more accurate to conclude that the Olympic Games have been *de-politicized* in China’s Olympic education efforts. And this, in my opinion, is part of a backlash against the politicized national curriculum. Ren Hai reached this conclusion in a recent essay:

> Today’s world lacks an education that focuses on a global horizon and is firmly based on the interests of humankind as a whole. It was precisely this lack that sparked the emergence of Olympic education. Olympic education aims to cultivate qualified citizens of the “global village,” to help them break through the various limitations of their respective societies, to impress the seal of a world citizen on top of the existing identity of a national citizen. (In the forthcoming *Olympic Studies Reader*).

Enduring social change only occurs when the ideas in people’s heads change. In my opinion, Olympic education is one of the most important dimensions of the Beijing Olympics, one whose effects will be felt for decades to come. But we will never be able to prove them or measure them, and so what is going on in this realm will be unlikely to make headlines, and its place in history may never be recorded.

I once witnessed Donnie Pei become irritated at a reporter asking him questions about political issues surrounding the games. He stood up and passionately told him in English:

> The Olympic Games are a congregation, a celebration, a holiday – it’s a festival. If some Westerners take this time to raise political issues, tell them they’re stupid. Even if it’s George Bush – tell him to go to the IOA and receive an Olympic education. Olympism is respect for any culture, any people, any nation. That’s why the Olympic Games survived one hundred years until now. We are promoting love between people. I don’t want to promote hatred, such as the Tibet and Taiwan protesters. We are China. We should understand each other better through the Olympic Games.

**Tags:** The 2008 Beijing Olympics