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Olympic Fever! From Beijing to Vancouver and Back

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The Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics are now over, and most of the athletes, media, and tourists have left my home city. If the media (particularly British media) began by focusing primarily on negative issues, the drama of national teams, and individual athletes and overall medal counts seemed to drown out the naysayers, much as in Beijing two years ago. Both host countries came off as excellent hosts, and both host countries carried home unprecedented numbers of medals. If for China their Olympics had been a coming out party, an end to a century of general humiliation, for Canada these games were seen as an end to the humiliation of mediocrity: for having failed to win a single gold medal on home turf after twice hosting, in 1976 the Summer Games (Montreal) and in 1988 the Winter Games (Calgary). Canada, known as a country of nice people (A Fair Country, as John Raulston Saul recently called it in the title of his new book), has spent much of its history deferring to others, so when the Canadian Olympic Committee announced the “Own the Podium” program, investing $22.3 million dollars last year in winter sports training, Canadians and non-Canadians were surprised. Although Canada did not win the greatest number of medals, it finished third overall and set an Olympic record for the greatest number of gold medals ever won by a country in a winter Olympics. In 2008, China also dominated in gold medals without completely dominating in total medals. In both cases the extra investment and attention given the Olympics was judged to be important by some, and criticized by others.

Praise and criticism for the Olympics in general, and for the past two Olympics specifically, along with heart-warming stories of personal and national drama, can easily be found in mainstream media outlets. What I would like to offer in this post are some reflections on the connections between China and Vancouver as I experienced it in February 2010.

Olympic Fever!

In May 2008 I was finishing up a research year in Shanghai and flew to Beijing to meet my parents at the world’s largest building—the new airport. Not only was I shocked by the sheer size of this (and so many other Olympic building projects), I was even more impressed that each of the dozens of (new) bridges connecting downtown Beijing to the airport had a smartly-uniformed military officer standing at attention underneath. Olympic security was a major effort. Ordinary (i.e., working class) Beijingers in Baoluocong Hutong, where we stayed, did not seem impressed by the hordes of foreign tourists (us) descending on the city. I did not sense a general mood of happiness to welcome the Olympics. On the new high speed train back to Shanghai I spoke in hushed tones with some Chinese who had heard rumors of homegrown (from the Northwest) terrorists caught with explosives in Tianjin. I left China according to plan two months before the Olympics, happy to be far away from a Beijing summer and Olympic crowds.

Once upon a time, only a few weeks ago, like many other Vancouverites, I wished I had the means to again escape the Olympics to somewhere sunny and warm while hordes of fans from all over the world descended upon my fair city to cheer, shop, and get drunk in the streets outside my apartment window. Even more than the summer Olympics, the winter Olympics are primarily for the wealthy. City and provincial government budgets were slashed to make up Olympic funding shortfalls in the wake of “market” failures, lies and bankruptcy. What was cut? The very social programs that make Vancouver the envy of the world in its safety and beauty. Despite knowing all of these things, sometime early in the first week of the games, I caught Olympic fever.

It is a strange thing, this Olympic fever. During the opening ceremonies I was in the New York area and happened to see an advertisement with all-of-your-greatest-American-celebrities-born-in-British-Columbia: Samantha from Sex in the City; Sarah McLachlan; Steve Nash; the other guy from Will and Grace; and Michael J. Fox, all telling me “You gotta BE here!” All it took was a slick advertising campaign and I was homesick and wanted to be in the middle of the action.
On Tuesday my wife and I were invited to the medal ceremonies held at B.C. Place. To be honest, I did not particularly want to be there. This was my first live Olympic event. Crowd control measures were in full effect and we had to walk many blocks out of our way to get to meeting points in front of full security. Ben Mulroney (yes, the son of neo-con former Prime Minister Brian) and a blonde local TV celebrity tried to warm up the crowd, getting cheers for each B.C./Vancouver comment, with Mulroney attempting to keep the crowd focused on a more inclusive Canadian nationalism, and translating half his comments into mandatory French.

It was Nova Scotia night, and representing was a stage show called DRUM! Soon the stage was full of Aboriginal Canadians, Acadians (French-speaking) and Celtic dancers, pipers and drummers, finally joined by Afro-Canadian settlers singing gospel and blues (but see weekend burning cross incident in Nova Scotia). The audience was whipped into a true Canadian orgy of multiculturalism and global camaraderie with fiddles, accordions, spoons, celtic dancing and heaving bosoms as the medley shifted for 30 minutes from pounding drums of a Native-Celtic mix to soft toe and tap-dancing, all with a spinning globe and vague flag-shapes on the projection screens that were reminiscent of Disney’s “It’s a Small World.”

But soon the real show started and the medals began to be distributed. I had not seen any of the events on television, but when Mike Robertson of Canada won silver for Men’s Snowboard Cross, I stood up and whooped and cheered and clapped, and found myself, cynical of both the Olympics and nationalism, without even a hint of shame for cheering for my country. Olympic fever had caught me up and melted my cold, skeptical heart. Even the Disney-fied performance of the Bare Naked Ladies could not dampen my spirits.

As Canada earned its first gold medal on home territory and local papers published extra editions celebrating each Canadian win, and we climbed in the medal rankings to third (it then dropped to fourth and fifth, but then finished at third), my enthusiasm and sense of enjoyment grew, despite myself. Each medal, each hockey game won, the fever in the city grew, and it somehow grew inside me too. Sunday afternoon after the gold medal hockey win for Canada, the city erupted in uncharacteristic exuberance, and I gave more than my share of high fives out the window as my friend drove me home through the throngs of revelers.

**Olympic Fever as nationalism and internationalism**

What I have described above as Olympic fever seems to be an unstable mix of nationalism and internationalism—what in Canada we call "multiculturalism," a legal reality. Its counterpart in the PRC might be conceptualized as the multi-ethnic state that is open to the world. There is no doubt that the Olympics is particularly successful at (temporarily) combining these two ideas. One way of examining the connection between nationalism, internationalism in the context of China and Canada is to look at the case of the Chinese curling team.

Curling is a quintessential Canadian sport; one of the most successful “made-in-Canada, for Canadians” feature films of the past decade was called Men With Brooms. Both Canadian medal-winning teams are based in Alberta — the men’s team in Edmonton, and the women’s team in Calgary. Although curling is popular all over Canada, the prairie provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba) are particular strongholds of the sport. Many small farming towns have a hockey rink and a curling rink as their community centre (Canadian spelling). So when the Chinese Olympic committee members decided they wanted to focus on winning curling medals at this Olympics, it should be no surprise that they chose to hire Canadian coach Dan Rafael and base their men’s and women’s teams in the small town of Leduc, Alberta, just south of Edmonton. From this base, the teams have participated in various competitions, sometimes called “bonspiels,” Championships, and the Canadian championship, the Tim Horton’s Brier (Tim Horton’s being a national institution bringing rural and suburban Canadians together around coffee and donuts, although I recently spotted one at Penn Station in NYC).

For most Canadians, curling bonspiel office parties involve drinking beer and throwing “rocks” down the ice (even certain university departments partake, for example) — a good time for all. Even serious curlers, like the "skip” of the gold-medal winning Canadian men’s team, Kevin Martin, support their
competitive curling with outside work. Unlike these Canadian amateur heroes, the Chinese teams are professional. They are paid to work full-time improving their game. This has become controversial for some, most importantly for Chinese coach Dan Rafael after the more experienced women’s team lost to the Russians in the second week of the Olympics. As part-timers, Canadians who practice competitive curling are considered to have passion for the sport that offsets the significant income lost by pursuing this career. So when Rafael threatened to quit coaching the Chinese teams after the Olympics he spoke what was on the minds of some Canadians by accusing the professional Chinese team of a lack of passion: "My personal view, my opinion, is I don't think they have the passion most curlers have . . . I'm furious. The problem with this team is that they have no passion. It's their job,” said Rafael. "This national team has been together for six or seven years and most of these players have been on the team far too long and take it for granted.” Rafael later curtailed his comments, after his team of women finished well with a bronze medal (the Chinese men were never considered medal contenders and finished well at 8th overall).

The Chinese women’s curling team can be seen as a microcosm of the ambiguities of nationalism and internationalism characteristic of the Olympics. According to media, many Canadians who live in Leduc have become quite attached to the Chinese players. In a country with large numbers of recent immigrants from China, I wonder where the boundaries are between a Chinese and Canadian identity? Somehow Chinese-Canadians, whether citizens or recent immigrants, negotiate between these identities.

Who benefits from this unstable mixture of internationalism and nationalism? Obviously Olympic sponsors, like Visa, the only credit card acceptable at the games, not to mention the massive transnational corporation that is the IOC. Politicians like Vancouver’s mayor Gregor Robertson went to Ottawa to try to cash in on Olympic “capital” to see a rise in federal support for social housing that has been steadily cut since the Olympic bid. No doubt Prime Minister Stephen Harper will try to cash in on Olympic good feelings in his negotiations with other nations and with Canadians if a widely-expected election happens anytime soon. But PM Harper is fighting an uphill battle for influence with China: after he snubbed the opening ceremony in Beijing, the Chinese leadership responded in like fashion, and as far as I can tell skipped the games in Vancouver entirely.

The more important question, is, who loses? In the logic of neoliberal trickle-down economics which somehow still governs the decisions of national leaders around the world after the global financial crisis of 2008, the Olympic Games bring cash to a city and to a country, and this cash will create jobs. There is very little evidence that this trickle-down works. There is a large amount of evidence that the ballooning costs of hosting an Olympics (whether Beijing 2008, Vancouver 2010, or London 2012) diverts money from social programs like schools, libraries, and affordable housing (Vancouver rents are taking up a disproportionate amount of working people’s salaries, and most young middle-class families cannot qualify for a mortgage to purchase a small two-bedroom condo at an average price of $500,000). One could even extend the metaphor of Olympic fever to being a symptom of a deeper disease. For more critical and constructive views of the Vancouver Olympics, check out The Hook and The Tyee, local independent news sources.

Controversy and active art: Chinese sculpture in Vancouver during the Olympics

Coincidental to Vancouver’s hosting of the Olympics, the Vancouver Biennale has brought a significant number of prominent Chinese artists’ sculptures to public spaces in Vancouver. So, even while the Chinese government was largely absent from the Vancouver Games, the strong Chinese presence in the city (close to 20 percent of Vancouver’s population is ethnically Chinese) means that contemporary China remains an important component of Vancouver’s melting pot cultural scene. While Olympic spectators were watching Chinese athletes compete in snowboarding, ice skating, and curling (and Olympic media commentators were flogging the canard of Chinese government involvement in training those athletes), spectators were also walking past art installments that raised more complicated questions about the relationship of China’s citizens to its government and the perception of this relationship abroad. Below are some pictures my wife and I took of these sculptures during the Olympics.
The Beijing-based Gao Brothers have brought controversy to Richmond with this sculpture of a feminized and tiny Mao balancing on the disjointed head of Lenin. The sculpture is positioned between the new Canada Line train service and the new Olympic speed-skating oval. For rubber-necking Richmond* drivers distracted enough by this imposing sculpture to rear-end the car in front, there is a drive-through British Columbia car insurance office next door. Interestingly, many of the negative comments about this sculpture feel that Canada should not be celebrating communist dictators (!) * Richmond is a suburb of Vancouver with a very high percentage of recent immigrants from Greater China. There are no less than three Chinese shopping malls and dozens of the best Chinese restaurants in North America.
“MISS MAO TRYING TO POISE HERSELF AT THE TOP OF LENIN’S HEAD”

GAO BROTHERS  BEIJING, CHINA  POLISHED STAINLESS STEEL

ABOUT THE SCULPTURE: This sculpture features two controversial figures from history. Mao Zedong, former chairman of the Communist Party of China, appears as a female character in this political satire, delicately balancing on the head of Vladimir Lenin, the Russian revolutionary.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS: The Gao Brothers often critically portray Mao in their art. Their more critical sculptures remain banned in China. The Gao Brothers’ work is held in private collections and exhibited at some of the most prestigious museums around the world.

ABOUT THE VANCOUVER BIENNALE: The Vancouver Biennale is a non-profit organization that mounts public art exhibitions outdoors, creating an open air museum. The sculptures, new media and performance works by international artists are located in parks, beaches, urban plazas and transit stations throughout Vancouver and surrounding areas. The emphasis is on engagement, accessibility, diversity and education.
Less controversial than the Gao brothers, and far more abstract than Yue Minjun’s visceral self-portraits (see below), is Jun Ren’s “Water # 10” located next to a branch of the Fraser River in view of the Olympic speed-skating Oval.
Yue Minjun’s sculptures demand to be noticed and invite passerby to participate. I have seen grown men crawl into the arms of one of these figures for a picture, and dogs barking uncontrollably at the disarming life spilling out of the laughter.
VANCOUVER BIENNALE

“A-MAZE-ING LAUGHTER”
YUE MINJUN, CHINA
PATINATED BRONZE

Yue Minjun uses his own iconic face in a state of hysterical laughter as a signature trademark. Recognized universally as a sign of happiness, the ‘smile’ raises questions of intent and interpretation. One of the most influential contemporary artists in China, Yue Minjun represents the new wave of Chinese artistic freedom. "SHI XIANG SHENG" marks Yue Minjun’s Canadian debut.

www.vancouverbiennale.com

Temporary exhibition of the Vancouver Biennale 2009–2011
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