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FAQ#3: Could China stop Taiwan from coming to the Olympic Games?

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Finally I have time to get back to the Olympic FAQ I posed several months ago:

Could China stop Taiwan from coming to the Olympic Games?

Actually, this was a trick question. Chinese leaders strongly desire for Taiwan to attend the Olympic Games and other major sports events because they are the most important venue in which Taiwan is displayed to the world as a dependent part of Chinese national territory.

Global politics usually don’t change as quickly as we would like, but they do change. One year ago I was one of many people who thought that the biggest political threat to the Beijing Olympic Games was the movement toward independence in Taiwan. Now it appears that the Taiwan situation is comparatively stable. But the symbols associated with Taiwan – including words – remain one of the most politically sensitive areas of the Olympic Games.

The story of China’s withdrawal from the IOC between 1958 and 1979 due to the IOC’s recognition of the national Olympic committee on Taiwan has recently been told in English based on newly available sources. For that background, I refer the reader to Xu Guoqi’s newly-published Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008; my chapter on “‘Sport and Politics Don’t Mix’: China’s relationship with the IOC during the Cold War,” in East Plays West: Essays on Sport and the Cold War; chapter 5 in my recent book, Beijing’s Games: What the Olympics Mean to China; and chapter 8 in the book that I translated, He Zhenliang and China’s Olympic Dream (by Liang Lijuan).

The PRC’s readmission into the IOC was achieved in 1979 when the general membership approved the Nagoya Resolution, known as the “Olympic formula.” The resolution read as follows:

“The Resolution of the Executive Board is:

The People’s Republic of China:

Name: Chinese Olympic Committee

NOC anthem, flag and emblem: Flag and anthem of the People’s Republic of China. The emblem submitted to and approved by the Executive Board.

Constitution: In order.

Committee based in Taipei:

Name: Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee

NOC anthem, flag and emblem: Other than those used at present and which must be approved by the Executive Board of the I.O.C..
Constitution: To be amended in conformity with I.O.C. Rules by 1-January 1980”

(Minutes of the Executive Board meeting, Nagoya, Japan, 23-25 October 1979, p. 103).

Note that admission to the IOC hinged upon approval of only five items – name, flag, anthem, emblem, and constitution. Officially, the identity of a national Olympic committee (NOC) is reduced to these and only these five elements. As a result of the Olympic formula neither the phrase "Republic of China,” nor its associated flag, anthem and emblem may be used in venues conducting IOC-approved activities. Mainland Chinese have been known to object to the presence of Taiwanese symbols or pro-independence ideas at venues like the International Olympic Academy in Greece or the 2004 Pre-Olympic Congress in Greece, knowing that the Nagoya Resolution supports them. From the PRC’s perspective, the intent of the resolution is to symbolize Taiwan as a dependent territory of the PRC, and the Olympic committee on Taiwan as a territorial branch of the Chinese Olympic Committee. Thus, Chinese sportspeople do not like the English phrase "national Olympic committee," because they believe that Taiwan is not a nation. In the PRC, the phrase used is “national and territorial Olympic committees” (国家和地区奥委会). The current Olympic Charter, on the other hand, specifically states that "NOCs have the right to designate, identify or refer to themselves as ‘National Olympic Committees’ (‘NOCs’).”

The Nagoya Resolution was accomplished under a version of the Olympic Charter that stated that the words "country" or "nation" in the charter could also apply to a "geographical area, district or territory.” However, in response to the multitude of states created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union the charter was reworded in 1997 and today article 31.1 states, “In the Olympic Charter, the expression 'country' means an independent State recognized by the international community.” This description contradicts the PRC’s position that Taiwan and Hong Kong are not independent states. However, the existing status of Taiwan and Hong Kong was preserved by an entry in the 1996 IOC Session minutes stating that the change would not be retroactive.

Obviously, Taiwan’s status within the IOC is complicated. From the point of view of the IOC, it is an NOC equivalent to the other NOCs, and Taiwan has often pressed for its due rights on that count. However, from the PRC’s perspective, the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee has an equivalent status to the Chinese Hong Kong Olympic Committee, and neither is allowed to act contrary to the interests of the mainland. So, for example, China has argued that the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee does not have the right to bid for the Asian Games and Olympic Games – a right possessed by all the other NOCs. Taiwan’s response was to bid for the World Games, the world’s biggest contest of non-Olympic sports, which will be held in Kaohsiung in 2009.

To make things more complicated, by the PRC’s logic Macau should also have its own NOC. However, the IOC works by its own logic, not by the PRC’s logic. Taiwan and China were shoe-horned into the IOC after 21 years of difficult negotiations. Hong Kong was grandfathered in after 1997 since it had had an independent NOC since 1950. Macau had never had a recognized NOC, and by the time of its return to China in 1999 the revised Olympic Charter was in place. Today there is an organization called the Macau Olympic Committee that is not recognized by the IOC (and the IOC could probably legally prevent its use of that name if it were so inclined), so any Macau athletes must represent the PRC in the Olympics.

The Nagoya Resolution had a problem: it was written in English and French, and not Chinese. When the first cross-strait sports exchange was to take place at the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing, the Chinese translation of “Chinese Taipei” became a key issue. My English translation of the biography of He Zhenliang, IOC member in the PRC, describes the word games that ensued:

On our side, we were accustomed to translating “Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee” as Zhongguo Taihsi Aoewihui（中国台北奥委会）, which was logical, but Taiwan translated it as Zhonghua Taihsi Aoewihui（中华台北奥委会）. For a long time each had verbally expressed this Chinese title as it wished. When they took part in competitions in a third location, there was no problem of how to translate the name into
Chinese because only the English names were used, and the countries that used Chinese characters to express place names, such as Japan and Korea, would just use their phonetic alphabets to spell out the pronunciation of “Chinese Taipei,” thus avoiding the problem of translating the name into Chinese characters. However, with the Asian Games being held in Beijing, there was no way to avoid the problem of the Chinese name…

[…]

Apparently they saw the one-character difference between Zhongguo Taipei Aoweihui and Zhonghua Taipei Aoweihui as an important question of principle. Actually, their unspoken reason was that “if you are the Zhongguo Olympic Committee then we simply will not be called the Zhongguo Taipei Olympic Committee so that we won’t be roped in and turned into a local organ of the Zhongguo Olympic Committee, and so we insist on being called the Zhonghua Taipei Olympic Committee.”

We discussed the matter among ourselves and concluded that this one character did not involve the question of the principle of the “two Chinas” or “one China, one Taiwan.” (Liang, He Zhenliang and China’s Olympic Dream, 2007, pp. 338-39)

The sensitivity of the words used to describe China’s relationship with Taiwan was brought home to me when I was translating He Zhenliang and China’s Olympic Dream. The original translation of the chapter on National Reunification by a naive American who thought that words are just words underwent such substantial revisions by Mr. He and the book’s author, his wife Liang Lijuan, that it required eight more hours for me to input their revisions. It was only later that I learned about the tifa (提法), or officially-approved wording, that is established by the Central Propaganda Department. I first tried to get the book published in the US or Hong Kong, but was told that there was no market for it; thus it was ultimately published by the Foreign Languages Press, the foreign propaganda press of the Chinese government.

Mr. He had been greatly frustrated by the language barrier in trying to make then-President Juan Antonio Samaranch and other IOC members understand the argument about the one-character difference between Zhongguo and Zhonghua. He asked me many times whether I thought that section of my translation would make the problem comprehensible to non-Chinese speakers. The reader may judge for her/himself from the excerpts above. Since a fair number of IOC members have now read the translation, perhaps they finally understand the extreme importance of names in Chinese culture, which traces roots back to Confucius’s “rectification of names.” In Taiwan, the struggle for recognition in the IOC is called the struggle for the “correct name” (正名).

During the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, in accordance with the Nagoya Resolution, China’s national laws, and China’s diplomatic agreements with 168 countries, China will symbolize Taiwan as a province of China, and if history repeats itself, sometimes Taiwanese people will attempt to subvert this. When the route of the Torch Relay was introduced in April 2007, Taiwan insisted that it could only receive the torch if it entered and exited via a third, independent country, and did not come or go directly from the Mainland, or from Hong Kong or Macau, which would have symbolized that Taiwan is a part of China.

BOCOG is anticipating attempts to display ROC symbols in Olympic venues. In Atlanta in 1996, at the finals in women’s table tennis between China’s Deng Yaping and Chinese Taipei’s Chen Jing (who had won the gold medal in 1988 representing China), a Taiwanese student spectator unfurled the flag of the Republic of China and was ejected by Atlanta police, while another Taiwanese student (who was also an Olympic volunteer) was arrested for assaulting the officer when he tried to protect the first student, and spent several hours in jail. This was possible under American law because the back of the admission ticket contained fine print prohibiting, among other things “flags other than those of participating countries,” and giving the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games the authority to
"eject any Spectator who fails to comply with these rules." The back of the Beijing tickets contain fine print stating that "Chinese laws and regulations prohibit you from carrying certain articles to the Venue. You should not carry...flags of countries or regions not participating in the Games."

This background returns me to the question of whether China could stop Taiwan from coming to the Olympic Games.

Actually, the legal right to determine the invited countries does not rest with the host city. According to the current Olympic Charter, the IOC approves the list of NOCs that will be invited to the Olympic Games. The host city contract requires compliance with the charter. Ergo, the host city cannot alter the IOC’s invitation list. (By the way, the charter now gives the IOC the right to punish NOCs that accept the invitation and then withdraw – i.e., boycott.)

Those familiar with Olympic history will recall that for the 1976 Montreal Olympics, Canada, which had established diplomatic relations with the PRC, prohibited Taiwan from competing under the name and symbols of the ROC. At the time there was debate about whether this constituted a breach of the host city contract. As recorded in Xu Guoqi’s book, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau responded to the House of Commons by arguing:

“[…] We do not discriminate on the basis of sex, race or, indeed, national origin. All we are saying, and it seems to me this is a policy that would have the support of any member of this House regardless of his party, provided he believes in a one China policy, is that we will not let athletes come into Canada… to pretend that they represent a country, China, that they do not represent. That is all we are saying.” (“Olympics and Taiwan,” July 12, 1976, Canada Archives: RG 25, vol. 3062, file 103)

In today’s litigious environment, a breach of the host city contract might result in a lawsuit. But these days the IOC has the Nagoya Resolution in place. In sum, the lay of the land is quite different now and it’s doubtful that China could get away with excluding Taiwan, even if it wanted to.

But it doesn’t want to. Since at least the 1970s, it has been the PRC’s policy to invite Taiwan to major sports events, including the quadrennial Chinese National Games. “Taiwan” has often been represented by a team, but where the athletes actually come from is often unclear. This facet of China-Taiwan relations is not given much attention in either the mainland or Taiwan and so most people don’t know much about it.

Apparently the first such invitation was issued to Taiwan for the 1972 Asian Table Tennis Championships in Beijing, which were part of “ping-pong diplomacy,” with no response. A team composed of Taiwanese living in Japan and the US competed in the 1973 Asia-Africa-Latin America Table Tennis Championship. The website of one of the eight legally-recognized non-Communist Parties, the Taiwan Democratic Self-Governance League (Taimeng), states that in 1975 Taimeng co-organized the first team to represent Taiwan in the Chinese National Games, a delegation of 297 people, including 190 athletes. They were described as “Taiwan nationals” (apparently born in Taiwan or with relatives there) living in the mainland, Hong Kong, Macau, and abroad. The team leader was said to be from New York. Other reports state that a “Taiwan” delegation also took part in the 1979 National Games. But Taiwan is not listed in the medal count for either the 1975 or 1979 Games.
By the 1983 and 1987 National Games the policy of organizing pseudo-Taiwanese teams seems to have changed because media reported that an official invitation had been issued to Taiwan by the State Sports Commission, but apparently no “Taiwan” team took part in either Games. Sports led the way in the establishment of cross-strait exchanges, and He Zhenliang represented the Chinese side in the top-secret negotiations initiated in 1988 that allowed Taiwan to send a large official delegation to the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing (Liang 2007, pp. 333-55). In 1991, for the first time a song and dance troupe and a dragon boat team from Taiwan attended the Minority Nationality Sports Games, and delegations have participated in all subsequent Minority Games; a delegation of 60 attended the 2007 Games in Guangzhou. From 2000 onward Taiwanese teams have taken part in the National Farmer’s Games, and from 2003 in the National City Games. With the exception of the 1990 Asian Games delegation, these groups are sponsored by civil cultural exchange organizations and not by the government. But most Chinese people are not aware of the difference.

In sum, after 35 years of a Taiwan presence in Chinese opening ceremonies, for most mainland Chinese people it would be unthinkable that Taiwan, in their minds an inalienable part of China, would not march into the stadium during the parade of athletes in the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics.

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics