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Beijing Olympic FAQ#3: Which Olympic Games is most useful for understanding the Beijing Olympic Games?

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Due to other commitments I have had no time to blog since February, but I hope to be able to post with more regularity now.

FAQ#3: Which previous Olympic Games provides the most useful historical precedent for understanding the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games?

For multiple reasons, I do not subscribe to the current fad for drawing parallels between the 1936 “Hitler” Games and the 2008 Beijing Games. If one is looking for actual historical connections, then I would argue that the 104-year connection between the U.S. and China through Olympic sports, which dates back to the 1904 St. Louis Olympic Games, is today exerting a much greater influence on the shape of the Beijing Olympics than is the legacy of a now-defunct German regime.

The third modern Olympic Games were held in St. Louis in 1904 alongside the Louisiana Purchase Exposition (world’s fair), and while China did not take part in the sports (it would send its first Olympic athlete to the 1932 Los Angeles Games), the Qing dynasty sent the first official delegation that it had ever sent to an international exposition. It was motivated to do so by concerns about the negative national image of China promoted by the unofficial exhibits at previous fairs, such as the opium den exhibit at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The 1904 Olympics were apparently the first Olympics to be reported in the press back in China.

The world’s fair was America’s coming-out party as a world power. It had just acquired the former Spanish colonies of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam as a result of the Spanish-American war in 1898. At the fair, it presented itself as an expanding power, with an extremely large display devoted to the Philippines. Another large section of the exposition grounds was devoted to displays intended to demonstrate that the government was succeeding in civilizing American Indians.

That the Old World was not completely happy about the emerging New World is evident in the European criticism of the Olympic Games. IOC president Pierre de Coubertin said that awarding the Games to St. Louis had been a “misfortune” and recalled, “So the St. Louis Games were completely lacking in attraction. Personally, I had no wish to attend them. [...] I had a sort of presentiment that the Olympiad would match the mediocrity of the town.” He complained about “utilitarian America.” He also labeled as “embarrassing” the [Anthropology Days](#), in which natives who had been brought to the fair for the ethnic displays competed in some track and field events and pole-climbing, and their performances were unfavorably compared with those of the “civilized” men who took part in the Olympic Games.

While the Americans were generally satisfied with the Olympic Games, even to this day European historians consider the St. Louis Games and the associated Anthropology Days to be one of the low points of Olympic history. It is often said that the 1906 Intermediate Olympic Games in Athens “saved” the Olympics. Historian [Mark Dyreson](#) has observed that after St.

Louis it became clear that American notions of what purposes Olympic sport should serve differed quite dramatically from the notions of the European nations that made up the core of the IOC's leadership. The conflict would remain for the rest of the twentieth century.

The first published calls for China to host the Olympic Games appeared in two YMCA publications: a 1908 essay in *Tientsin Young Men*, and an item in the report to the YMCA's International Committee by C.H. Robertson, the director of the Tianjin [Tientsin] YMCA. Robertson stated that since 1907 a campaign had been carried on to inspire patriotism in China by asking three questions:

1. When will China be able to send a winning athlete to the Olympic contests?
2. When will China be able to send a winning team to the Olympic contests?
3. When will China be able to invite all the world to come to Peking [Beijing] for an International Olympic contest, alternating with those at Athens?

These three questions are now famous in China because it has taken almost exactly one hundred years for China to realize this [Olympic dream](#). Robertson went on to note enthusiastically, "This campaign grips in a remarkable way the heart and imagination of the Chinese officials, educators, and students, and I believe it is a thing in which American boys will want to have a definite and practical part."

Olympic sports were introduced into China in the late nineteenth century by the YMCA and missionary-run schools and colleges. The YMCA continued to play a major role in China's sport system and its influence was still being felt until recently since many sports leaders were YMCA-trained. The last of these leaders have passed away in recent years. The IOC co-opted* the first Chinese member in 1922; he was C.T. Wang, who was active in the YMCA and a Yale University graduate. The third IOC member in China, Dong Shouyi (Tung Shou-yi) (coopted in 1947) attended Springfield College, the YMCA's college in Massachusetts.

China imitated the St. Louis model. In 1910 the Nanyang Industrial Exposition in Nanjing was China's first attempt at an international exposition on Chinese soil. Held in conjunction was a sporting event organized by the YMCA that later came to be known as the first national athletic games of the Republic of China (founded in 1912). The American YMCA used the Philippines as a [launching point](#) to spread sports throughout East Asia, and in 1913 the first Far Eastern Olympiad was held in Manila. They were so successful that the IOC was worried that they might be a rival to the Olympic Games – so it requested that the term "Olympiad" should be removed, and they were thereafter called the Far Eastern Championships. They were the first regional games in the world and at various times included athletes from the Philippines, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, and Hong Kong.

One hundred four years after the U.S. hosted a world's fair and an Olympic Games as its coming-out party, China will host the [Beijing Olympic Games](#) as its coming-out party. (Shanghai will host the World Expo in 2010). What we will see in Beijing in 2008 is what the model for promoting a national image to the world has evolved into after a century in China. The Olympic slogan "One World, One Dream" expresses this ideal: we are all part of one world, and we share the dream of prosperity and strength. As the U.S. did over a century ago, China will

try to display the success of its civilizing mission among its frontier minorities. It will try to display its wealth through monumental architecture and exhibitions of economic wares. In 1904, train stations were one of the major ways of displaying wealth – the St. Louis Union Station completed in 1902 was one of the largest and most opulent train stations in the world. In 2008, sports stadiums have replaced train stations, and China will have its Bird's Nest Stadium. The St. Louis world's fair was the biggest of all time, just as the Beijing Games may well be the biggest Olympics of all time. When a superpower holds a coming-out party, it is a hard act to follow.

The most relevant historical lesson from 1904 is that existing powers do not necessarily welcome newcomers with open arms. As happened to the U.S. there are suggestions that Chinese views about the purposes of Olympic sport conflict with the “correct” (i.e., dominant) views. It may happen that future Olympic histories written by Westerners will record that the Beijing Games were a low point in Olympic history, and London 2012 “saved” the Games.

These days, if it sometimes seems that Chinese ideas about national image contain some throwbacks to the turn of the last century, there is probably good reason. In the meantime, the West has changed the rules of the game by adding new factors such as human rights, while China is still trying to win by playing more or less according to the rules it learned in the early twentieth century. Of course, as long as the West controls the rules of the game, it can keep changing them to ensure that newcomers never win.

* “Co-optation” is the IOC’s word for its process of selecting its members.

Next I hope to return to the Olympic FAQ that I promised in my last blog: **Could China stop Taiwan from coming to the Olympic Games?**

Tags: [The 2008 Beijing Olympics](#)