FAQ#8: Was there a Master Plan to use the Olympic Games to Promote a Positive Image of China to the World?
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(And What was the Strategy for Dealing with the International Criticism on Human Rights)?

(This is a shortened version of a paper presented at the conference on “The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games: Public Diplomacy Triumph or Public Relations Spectacle?” organized by the Center on Public Diplomacy, US-China Institute, and Center for International Studies at the University of Southern California, January 29-30, 2009.)

There was a common perception outside China that the Beijing Olympic Games involved a master plan to promote a positive image of China to the outside world and that this was one of the major goals of hosting the Olympic Games, if not the major goal. I want to argue that while there was widespread agreement in China that the Olympics were an excellent opportunity to promote an image of China to the world, the vast majority of the attention and effort was focused on the domestic audience; that there was never a concrete communication strategy for dealing with the human rights issue; and that in both instances, China’s ability to communicate a positive international image was hindered by the domestic political structure.

The People’s Olympics

Many Western journalists and Amnesty International accused China of failing to keep its promises with respect to its human rights record. But China had not made any such promises, and if journalists had read chapter five of my recent book, Beijing’s Games, they would have known that there was a big internal debate about even the one sentence about human rights that was made in China’s bid presentation in 2001.

However, in its bid China did make one promise that it arguably kept, and that was its promise to host a “people’s Olympics.” There were three main themes for the Olympic Games: the High-tech Olympics, the Green Olympics, and the renwen (人 文 奥 运) Olympics. Renwen is difficult to translate. It was sometimes translated as the “humanistic Olympics,” but after some debate, the preferred official translation was the “People’s Olympics.” This theme was originally intended as a response to the West’s criticism of China’s human rights, but this was never made explicit to the West.

One of the central concepts of the People’s Olympics was 以人为本, “take people as the root,” or “people-orientation.” This phrase had appeared in political rhetoric when Hu Jintao named it in his address to the Third Plenum of the 16th Party Congress in 2003. This preceded the inclusion of a passage on human rights in the revision to the Constitution in 2004. It is interesting that as early as 2001, 以人为本 had already been written into the guiding thought for the Beijing Olympic Games.

In 2000, Beijing Mayor Liu Qi began commissioning a number of groups with the task of developing the basic thought behind the 人 文 奥 运 because he felt that, unlike the other themes, it was unclear. The People’s University formed the Humanistic Olympic Studies Centre to study it. One of the non-Communist Parties, the Democratic League, was commissioned by Liu Qi and began developing working papers in 2001. Forums were held, dissertations and books were written on the topic, working papers were drafted, websites were created, and by the start of the Games it was estimated that at least ten thousand pages had been written on the topic of the “People’s Olympics.”
Faculty members of the Beijing Sport University and the Humanistic Olympic Studies Center of the People’s University were particularly involved with the relevant sport, educational, and cultural organs of the central and Beijing government. Although they had travelled abroad, these intellectuals were all largely focused on the domestic audience and not the international audience. They gave dozens if not hundreds of interviews to Chinese media, appeared frequently on CCTV, and were influential in shaping domestic media opinion. They seldom gave interviews to foreign media and on occasions when they did they were belittled as Party-liners (see these characterizations of Beijing Sport University’s Ren Hai and People’s University’s Jin Yuanpu).

As a result of the orientation of the intellectuals who designed it, the guiding thought of the People’s Olympics was largely diverted away from any focus on China’s international image and into a debate over culture and education. In my interactions with BOCOG and the intellectuals who were working with it, I felt that about 80-90% of the effort that went into this symbol-making was directed toward the domestic audience. The main focus was on the questions of how to manage the “combination of Eastern and Western cultures” (东西结合) that the Games were supposed to facilitate, how to promote Chinese culture within China and to the world, how to use the enthusiasm for the games to raise the general quality (素质) and civility (文明) of the Chinese people, how to prepare the next generation of young Chinese to take their place in the international community.

These discussions and debates formed the intellectual context for Zhang Yimou’s opening and closing ceremonies, the Olympic education programs in the schools that reached as many as 400 million Chinese schoolchildren, the training programs for the 70,000 Olympic volunteers, the cultural performances in the Cultural Olympiad, and the myriad of other cultural and educational activities that surrounded the Games.

Perhaps the major way in which the guiding thought about the promotion of China’s national image was generated was through three keypoint research projects commissioned by the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science, which is administered by the Central Propaganda Department. These grants are the government’s way of channeling academic research in directions that serve its needs. The relative unimportance of the Beijing Olympic Games is indicated by the fact that from 2003 to 2008, only five related projects were funded, of which three were “keypoint” projects with a competitive application process. By way of comparison, in the same time period the number of funded projects that fell under the rubric of “Marxist-Leninist Services” was 190, and under “Party History and Construction” was 178. The first relevant Olympic project was the 2003 project entitled “Improving China’s International Position and Reputation through the 2008 Olympic Games.” The Beijing Sport University won the bid for this project and in April 2007 published the results in Research on Improving China’s International Position and Reputation through the 2008 Olympic Games (《2008年奥运会提升中国国际地位和声望的研究》). Its 65 chapters contain thorough summaries of the issues that provoked negative media reports in past Olympic Games, such as delays in venue completion, transportation problems, media information glitches, terrorist acts, and so on. The lesson
that Beijing clearly learned was that these particular problems should be avoided at all costs, and ultimately they avoided all the problems that got negative media coverage in previous Olympics. The analyses of Western media coverage of the Beijing Games since 2001 indicated that “political” issues – as they are called in China – would dominate coverage. However, the resulting recommendations merely emphasize the importance of treating the media and other leading opinion-makers well.

The most daring chapter, “Beijing Olympics Speed Up the Transformation of the Functioning of the Government,” analyzes the promises made under the rubric of the “People’s Olympics” – and improving human rights is not listed as one of them.

A second keypoint project of the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science was the 2006 project “Construction of the Humanistic Concept, Social Value and National Image of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games” (《2008年北京奥运会的人文理念、社会价值与国家文化形象构建》), which was awarded to the People’s University. Through this project and elsewhere, the People’s University promoted its concept of the “Cultural Olympics.” The final report has not been completed, but in a summary of their conclusions on CCTV in February 2008, they argued that research shows that culture constitutes the core of national image, and “therefore in the construction of a national image, we should hold the line on ‘Cultural China’ (坚持走“文化中国”的路线) in order to make the idea of ‘Cultural China’ into the core theme for dialogue between China and the international community in Olympic discourse.”

So my first point is that if the “People’s Olympics” was the response to the West’s human rights accusations, then that response was delivered in the form of culture and symbols – the “look and image” of the Games, the “branding” of China, the display of “Chinese culture” – and not in the form of verbal debate or dialogue. They were very successful in the former, but the absence of the latter led critics to characterize the Games as one big show orchestrated by the Party-state. This simple-minded view does not do justice to the passion with which the producers of the People’s Olympics threw themselves into fulfilling their mission of promoting Chinese culture and achieving its integration with Western culture. I believe we should accord them more respect.

If the People’s Olympics was to be the response to Western criticism of China’s human rights record, then it probably needed to directly address the issue of human rights, but the topic was never directly taken on in the reports and research devoted to the topic. But now we run into the structure of domestic control over discussions of human rights. The sports scholars, philosophers, and members of non-communist parties who were developing these documents were not likely to address such a sensitive topic as human rights because it was not their job. The job of communicating China’s position on human rights to the outside world one is one of the official responsibilities of the State Council Information Office, which is simultaneously the Office of Foreign Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. This organ’s function is to act as the media conduit between China and the outside world. The Information Office is under the Party Central Committee’s Propaganda Department, which is the nerve center of China’s thought control system. But the factionalism between the various “systems” (系统) of
the Chinese government is well-known, and the propaganda system is a different system from the sport, cultural, and educational systems involved in creating and implementing the People’s Olympics; its power base is in media and communications circles. I did not see evidence that it had an active role in conceptualizing the People’s Olympics.

National Image

While the other systems were doing their work, the Information Office was involved in a separate effort, which involved a different group of intellectuals in the field of communications, whose core was located at the Communications University of China. The question of China’s national image had been the subject of a fair amount of intellectual work, though not nearly as much as the multidisciplinary effort behind the “People’s Olympics.” The third relevant keypoint project designated by the National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Science was the 2005 project, “The Design of China’s National Image in Communications with the Outside World (对外传播中的国家形象设计),” which was awarded to the Foreign Communications Research Center (对外传播研究中心), a unit administered by the Foreign Languages Publishing Bureau, which is in turn under the Party Central Committee. The major results of this project, which involved scholars in communications at China’s top universities, were published in April of 2008 (Communication of a National Image, 《国家形象传播》). Among the 60 chapters, there is not one on the Beijing Olympics. The chapters that touch upon the Olympics agree that Olympic Games are an excellent opportunity to promote a national image; but they use the examples of the Tokyo 1964 and Seoul 1988 Olympic Games as models for a promoting a positive image, and they do not offer the possibility that the Games can promote a negative image. And so three years of work by China’s top communications intellectuals failed to produce a strategy for dealing with attacks and criticism.

Olympic China National Image Ad

If there had been a master plan for using the Olympics to promote China’s image, it would have been developed by the Central Propaganda Department. The single person most responsible for coordinating everything would have been Li Dongsheng, who was simultaneously a member of the Party Central Committee, Vice Minister of the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, and – more to the point here – Deputy Director of the Central Propaganda Department, chief of BOCOG’s Media and Communications Coordination Group, and president of the China Advertising Association. Western media tended to make a big deal out of the American (Hill and Knowlton) and British (Weber Shandwick) PR firms that had worked for BOCOG, but in fact the non-Chinese viewpoint that they provided to BOCOG was only one among many collected, and probably not the most influential – and in any case, BOCOG was not empowered to discuss “political” issues.

So the major reason that there was no master PR plan was due to the strict division of labor with regard to communications with the outside world, with only the organs under the Central Propaganda Department empowered to speak about “political” issues. While
the sport, educational, and cultural systems were crafting their “cultural” messages, the Information Office was engaged in a completely independent effort to produce a television commercial for “China” at the end of 2007. The difficult eight-month birthing process of the “Olympic China National Image Ad” indicates that if Li Dongsheng were trying to develop more proactive communications with the outside world, he may have had his opponents. The ad had been approved at the start of 2007, but it was not finally pushed through until just before the end of the fiscal year. Pressure was exerted via a long article entitled “Raise China’s Face – Where is China’s National Image Ad?” (《扬起中国脸—中国国家形象广告在哪里》) which appeared in November 2007 in Modern Advertising Magazine, a publication of the China Advertising Association of which Li was president. The article was written with the help of scholars at the Communication University of China and demonstrated the widespread support of the heads of China’s major advertising firms. One section, “Using the Opportunity of the Olympics to Build a National Image,” reviews the risk of negative media coverage but, like the other publications discussed, it does not develop a communication strategy for responding to it.

I was invited to be on the panel of academics that evaluated the bid presentations by eight of the top advertising agencies with offices in China. After leaving the hotel where we were sequestered, I never heard anything further about the project until the ad was shown on CNN and BBC on August 8, the day of the opening ceremony. I have still not seen it. Its release had been delayed from the original planned date of April because of the torch relay protests and the Sichuan earthquake disaster. Local reports on the internet make it seem that the project was not finally awarded to one of the advertising firms, but instead to a production team formed by the Information Office. It was also apparently cut to 30 seconds from the originally planned 90.

At the time, we were told that we were making history, because for the first time China was reaching out to the world to try to shape its image, rather than waiting for the world to come and understand it. Those involved in the process seemed to feel that it was an extremely important first step. In December 2007 the Information Office already expressed to me that it knew it was not effective in communicating a positive image of China to the world. It evidently felt it needed a new strategy for dealing with the human rights issue because in December 2008, it announced that together with the Foreign Ministry it was spearheading China’s first-ever “Action Plan on Human Rights,” which would be prepared for release in January by a panel including 50 institutions and NGOs. That this effort was spearheaded by the Information Office and Foreign Ministry, and not by the ministries and offices that actually control human rights, has led Western critics to describe it as a public relations ploy. However, another way of looking at it is that because they are the interface with the outside world, these organs are probably better versed on human rights debates than any others in China. Also, the Information Office’s close connection with the Central Propaganda Department is necessary in dealing with a very important ideological issue. The Chinese announcement states that it will not be just another white paper on human rights, but an actual action plan with benchmarks. A more optimistic interpretation of this measure might be that China’s international image is now being enlisted in a strategy to name
and shame the other state organs into closer adherence to international human rights standards. I believe that the momentum for the action plan was strengthened by the difficult experiences surrounding the Beijing Olympics.

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics