
HUMAN RIGHTS: THE TRUE GOLD STANDARD

By He Qinglian

The Chinese government needs to demonstrate progress on its commitments to improving human rights. Otherwise the 2008 Beijing Olympics will face growing opposition, not only in the international community, but also within China.

A MOVEMENT BORN OF BROKEN PROMISES

In stark contrast to the revelry at Beijing's victorious Olympic bid six years ago, the Chinese government now faces an embarrassingly defiant, and possibly inescapable, challenge: a rapidly expanding international boycott of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Even organizations in Norway, a country known for its neutrality in the unpredictable world of international politics, are getting involved. Despite concerns about international opposition, however, the most disconcerting development for the Chinese authorities is undoubtedly the increasing participation of China's own citizens in this boycott movement: in one case, 3,000 peasants from Qinghua Village in Fujin, Heilongjiang Province, signed a petition declaring, "We want human rights, not the Olympics."¹

Given that the myth of China's economic miracle has sustained its charm and shown no sign of fading over the past six years, what could account for the massive shift in international perceptions of China that is driving this boycott movement? To answer this question, we need look no further than the slogans promoted by the various participating groups. A quick review reveals that the Olympic boycott movement is the direct outcome of the Chinese government's deception of the international community and abandonment of its obligations. In order to relieve some of the pressures coming to bear during its bid for the Games in 2001, the Chinese gov-

ernment promised to improve human rights conditions in China. Since then, however, China's human rights situation has not only failed to improve even marginally, but has actually undergone a rapid deterioration due to mounting political suppression and a growing dependence on an ever-expanding army of secret agents.

The Chinese authorities prosecute even the most routine criticism in commentary or academic research by means of politicized criminal charges such as "endangering state security," "incitement to subvert state power" and "leaking state secrets," which routinely draw prison sentences of 10 years or more. Considering the government's excessive politicization of all matters, it is hard to know whether to laugh or cry at the irony of these same authorities appealing to the international community for a "depoliticized" approach to the Olympics. So-called "professors" have been dragged before the state media machine to assert that those who link politics with the Olympics "completely fail to understand the Olympic spirit," while at the same time referring to the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics by the United States and 61 other nations as a "farce." The Chinese government, which has essentially politicized all public discourse, is the least qualified entity on earth to make such an appeal, which is clearly aimed at allowing the Party to maintain its exclusive hegemony over political power and discourse.

THE CHINESE PEOPLE OPEN THEIR EYES: HUMAN RIGHTS COME FIRST

In the aftermath of the 2004 Athens Olympics, certain segments of Chinese public opinion had already begun questioning the government's game of "gold-medal politics."

The assumption that Olympic gold medals represent a nation's strength is a political illusion that has been hammered into the Chinese public consciousness through years of government propaganda and ideological education. The Chinese government has long described its primary political goal as the creation of a "wealthy and militarily strong country." Yet even with the transition from Maoist orthodoxy to "economic development," the Party's sights have remained much more closely focused on developing a strong nation than a wealthy citizenry, completely excluding human rights-related concerns from their policy considerations. This myopic vision has bred the specious concept that participation in the Games reflects a nation's strength, status, and political and spiritual well-being. Winning gold medals or hosting the Olympics becomes a tool for the government to boost the nation's international prestige, build "domestic harmony" and "unite friends from all around the world who love peace, for the enhancement of mutual understanding and the advancement of mutual progress." The Party has even gone so far as to claim that the Olympics pulled Japan and South Korea across the threshold of modernization to join the ranks of the advanced nations of the world, and to assure us that holding the Olympics in Beijing likewise destines China to a glorious future.

It is precisely this national ideology that has led to the unprecedented Chinese obsession with "gold medal politics." It began on July 29, 1984, after 28 years of isolation from the Olympics, when Xu Haifeng captured China's first gold medal during the Summer Games in Los Angeles. *China Youth Daily* reporter Sun Jie captured the surge of public excitement at this moment in Chinese Olympic history in his renowned dispatch, "Triumph: Rounds of Glory at Prado!" Xu's article was eventually incorporated into primary school language and literature textbooks, instilling a passion for gold medals in the hearts of our younger generation under the mask of "education."²

In this manner, gold medals soon became a central component of the Chinese people's dream of a great and powerful nation, and the ensuing "Olympics complex" became the Chinese government's not-so-secret weapon for unifying and manipulating popular sentiment. Many Chinese (even some living overseas) consider support

for the Beijing Olympics a test of patriotism, and when Beijing won its bid for the Olympics in 2001, many actually believed that this "success" was a sign of China's growing international prestige.

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Since then, a league of elite athletes, nurtured at exorbitant costs to Chinese taxpayers, has achieved the dream of "capturing the gold," and masses of officials have reaped profits by attaching themselves like parasites to the Olympic dream. Upon closer inspection and reflection, however, it has become increasingly clear that there is no correlation between winning gold medals and improving ordinary people's livelihood. After China won the second largest number of gold medals in the 2004 Olympics, and the government busied itself with joyous celebrations, Chinese public opinion, which still had slight room to breathe at the time, began a process of reflecting upon the nation's "Olympic complex." Numerous indirect criticisms of athletic policy have been directed at two primary questions: the relationship between gold medals and the welfare of the people of China; and the actual cost exacted in obtaining these gold medals.

GOLD MEDALS AND LIVING STANDARDS

At the 2004 Athens Olympics, China won a total of 32 gold medals, second in number only to the United States, which won thirty-five. The Chinese people should have been thrilled with these results, but some people had already begun to awaken from their "Olympic complex" trance and consider that these medals may not be a cause for celebration. Beset by an onslaught of social problems, the Chinese government has essentially absolved itself of responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, and instead has focused its efforts and financial resources on a series of face-saving projects of "national glory." The Olympics is one of the largest of these projects, yet despite the government's concerted focus and massive expenditures, the



Xu Haifeng, who won China's first Olympic gold medal in the 1984 Los Angeles Games, ignited the Chinese public's enthusiasm for the Games. Photo: AFP/Getty Images

policy of sacrifice for Olympic glory does not seem to have given China any competitive advantage over its former socialist brothers. Russia, together with nine other former Soviet republics, including the Ukraine, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Lithuania, earned a total of 162 medals at the 2004 Olympics, 45 of which were gold, thereby far surpassing both China and the United States.

The Chinese people initially had no objections to setting aside massive state funds for the purpose of winning Olympic medals: after all, didn't the former USSR earn its reputation as an athletic superpower through similar means? But it has been nearly 20 years since Russia and other former Soviet states embarked on their process of democratization, a process that ended dependence upon totalitarian state machines to consolidate labor and financial resources for the sole purpose of winning gold medals. The exceptional performance of these nations at the 2004 Olympics thus constituted a victory of the determined efforts of individual athletes over the Chinese state's gold-medal machine. Along the same lines, the Chinese people have also long been aware that, with the exception of a few profit-dri-

ven spectator sports, the majority of US athletes competing in the Olympics are not full-time professionals, while Chinese athletes are all professional athletes supported by taxpayers' hard-earned money.

One cannot help but recognize that China's Olympic performance is far less impressive on a per-capita basis than the gross figures might suggest. Of the 10 countries that have won the greatest number of gold medals, most have won one gold medal for every million citizens, with the United States lagging slightly behind at one medal for every 2.85 million Americans. China, however, captured just one medal for every 20.59 million Chinese.

The shortcomings of China's athletics policy are even more evident at a

more personal level. Chinese studying abroad have noticed the inferiority of their physical condition compared with that of their classmates. Such discrepancies are not genetic, but rather the direct result of a national athletic policy that emphasizes the Olympics while providing virtually no public sports facilities for ordinary citizens.

The complications of China's misplaced athletic policy actually extend much further, to a mounting array of social crises in the fields of education, social security and health care. Chinese education is grossly underdeveloped, with more than 50 million children across the country deprived of an education. The government owes retired workers more than 1 trillion *yuan* in pensions, amounting to nearly half of the country's annual GDP. Meanwhile, those at the bottom of China's social ladder simply cannot afford to get sick under "medical insurance reform" that has proven to be nothing but a fancy name for cutting benefits to the absolute minimum. With ordinary Chinese people facing such hardship in their basic living conditions, the time has come to question the Chinese government's policy of spending astronomical amounts of taxpayers' money to sup-

port a group of elite athletes' efforts to win face for the Party: is such a policy really in the people's interest, and is it really what the people want?

THE TRUE COST OF A GOLD MEDAL

Another flurry of discussion over the government's Olympic policies was driven by an Internet essay in 2004 entitled "Beware of the Gold Medal Ruse,"³ which unveiled a shocking figure for the "cost" of a single gold medal: 700 million *yuan* (\$87 million). According to this article, the annual budget of China's General Administration of Sports (GAS) rose from 3 billion *yuan* to 5 billion *yuan* following the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Based on this figure, China would have spent a total of 20 billion *yuan* in four years "preparing for battle" at the 2004 Athens Olympics. Rounding off the number of gold medals won by the Chinese team to 30, the cost of each gold medal would come to roughly 700 million *yuan*, very likely an Olympic record for "the world's most expensive gold medals."

Bao Mingxiao, the director of the Institute of Physical Science under the General Administration of Sports, challenged the article's shocking conclusions,⁴ in particular, faulting the author's decision to base the calculations on the GAS' total operating costs during the four years between the Sydney Olympics and the Athens Olympics. Claiming that the government's annual expenditures on a single Olympics contender came to roughly 4 or 5 million *yuan*, and considering that the Chinese Olympic Team consisted of about 400 athletes, Bao posited that total expenses were "only" 1.6 to 2 billion *yuan*. Dividing this total by the number of gold medals, Bao concluded that the cost of each medal was "only" about 50 or 60 million *yuan*.

In his efforts to defend China's athletic policy by refuting the figure of 700 million *yuan* for each gold medal, Bao Mingxiao failed to consider that in today's China, 50 or 60 million *yuan* is a far from insignificant sum. Ultimately, if even a professional researcher at a government-sponsored research center calculates such a high figure, we are forced to conclude that each gold medal costs China a massive sum of money that could be better spent elsewhere.

Despite the fact that China is winning more Olympic medals than ever, it is precisely these exorbitant costs that have muted the Chinese people's cheers of 20 years ago. Indeed, the response to the Athens Olympics was noticeably low-key, even in comparison with China's victorious return from the "battle for the gold" at Sydney just four years earlier.

Exorbitant costs have muted the Chinese people's cheers of 20 years before.

Another factor that brought China's Olympic expenditures into focus was the timing of the 2004 Olympics at the outset of a new school year in which many impoverished Chinese families were struggling to pay for their children's education. The media carried stories on a daily basis of families pressed into utter despair, even suicide, by their failure to scrape together a few hundred or thousand *yuan* for school expenses. The extreme and obvious inequalities in Chinese society dimmed the luster of China's glimmering Olympic gold medals, and the looming shadow of individual pain and desperation led citizens to begin questioning the massive sums set aside for training elite athletes and sending officials abroad on "fact-finding trips" for the Olympics. Adding fuel to the rising fire of doubt and criticism, the "auditing storm" of 2004 revealed that officials in the Administration of Sports had improperly used funds earmarked for Olympics programs to build their own homes,⁵ leading one Internet commentator to exclaim with a sigh, "Olympics, Olympics, how many corrupt acts have been committed in your name!"

Which is more important: gold medals or the people's well-being? This fundamental question, repeatedly ignored, has finally come to the forefront, awakening and uniting a segment of the population that is now crying out in a solemn and pained chorus: "We want human rights, not the Olympics!"

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IS THE ONLY TRUE MEASURE OF INTERNATIONAL STATURE

With less than a year until the 2008 Beijing Olympics,

the Chinese government's escalating expenditure on the Games is bound to arouse a growing popular discontent. The Chinese government might take a cue from Nazi Germany and the former Soviet Union: less than a decade after using the Olympics as an emblem of national prestige and the ruling party's "glorious, great and correct"⁶ character, both of these totalitarian regimes disappeared from the face of the earth. The Chinese government risks the same fate if it persists in its disregard for human rights.

On April 30, 2007, Amnesty International released a 22-page report⁷ that serves as a somber reminder that the international community's initial support for China's 2008 Olympic bid was based on the Chinese government's solemn promise to improve the human rights situation in China. Amnesty International found that since winning its Olympic bid, the Chinese government has subjected even more Beijing residents to detention and reeducation through labor to ensure that the Olympics will proceed "smoothly." Thus, the Olympics have been a catalyst for deterioration rather than for improvement of human rights.

Amnesty's critique covers only the cases of a few persecuted prisoners of conscience, but a deeper examination of the quality of life of the average Chinese citizen would provide an even clearer demonstration of the extent of China's human rights crisis. The recent discovery of modern-day slaves in the brick kilns of Shanxi Province is but one example of the tragedies occurring throughout China's shattered rural economy. In the current environment, the Shanxi brick kilns are certainly no anomaly.

As a Chinese scholar concerned for my country's future, I urge the Chinese government to expand its dreams of "great power" status to include human rights as a priority equal to that of wealth and military strength. Flaunting wealth and power before the world will be to no

avail so long as China's own citizens must resort to kneeling and begging for their lives. Regardless of how many face-saving projects of "national glory" such a country may embark upon, it will never be able to win the world's respect, or realize its dream of becoming a "world leader."

Translated by Kevin Carrico

This translation is of an edited version of an article originally posted on the Web site of HRIC's Chinese monthly online journal, *Ren Yu Renquan*, http://www.renyurenquan.org/ryrq_article.adp?article_id=695.

Notes

1. The brief petition, "Bu yao Aoyun yao renquan," is posted on Qian-ming.net, http://www.qian-ming.net/gb/viewarticle_gb.aspx?vID=2747. Other petitions with a similar message have since been posted on the Web site.
2. No online version of this article was found, but it is referred to in articles such as "Yimei Aoyun jinpai 7 yi yuan? Tiyu juguo tizhide leng sikao [One Gold Medal Costs 700 Million Yuan? State Sport System's Cool-headed Analysis]," Xinhuanet.com, September 6, 2004, http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2004-09/06/content_1949453.htm.
3. The unattributed article, "Aoyun jinpaide xianjing," has been posted on a number of Internet bulletin boards since 2004, including <http://bbs.lasg.ac.cn/cgi-bin/forum/view.cgi?forum=10&topic=438>.
4. "Yimei Aoyun jinpai 7 yi yuan? Tiyu juguo tizhide leng sikao," op. cit.
5. See "China Uncovers Olympic Corruption," BBC News, June 24, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3835019.stm>.
6. The motto "Guangrong, weida, zhengque" is used by the Communist Party of China to refer to its rule.
7. The report, entitled "The Olympics Countdown: Repression of Activists Overshadows Death Penalty and Media Reforms," can be accessed in full at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170152007>.