
TWO HISTORICAL TURNING POINTS: THE SEOUL AND BEIJING OLYMPICS

By Chen Kuide

The Olympic Games spurred a change of values in South Korea in 1988. Will they serve a similar purpose in China in 2008?

The spring of 2007 was very eventful in China. First, there was an uproar after eight books were banned in January.¹ Foreign banks began to operate in China, and the Shanghai and Shenzhen stock exchanges took a tumble, sending shock waves through the global financial markets and creating anxiety among shareholders. Then, to everyone's surprise, the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress passed the Property Law amid much fanfare and lofty oratory by Wen Jiabao, although during the debates leading up to the ratification he had taken a low-key approach. In Shanghai, princeling Xi Jinping² was appointed head of the municipal Party committee. Then, a nation-wide debate was sparked by the case of the Chongqing "nail house" couple who tried to resist the demolition of their home to make way for a shopping center. In Beijing, a group of old "Rightists" met, their heads held high, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Anti-Rightists Campaign. The Zhang Ming incident at Renmin University added fuel to the flames,³ followed by the reopening of the Reform and Reconstruction (*Gaizao yu Jianshe*) Web site, which had fallen to the censor's ax, and the news that dissidents Chen Ziming and Ren Wanding had obtained permission to go to Hong Kong.⁴

Although it is hard to avoid seeing a connection between all this and the expected realignment of power at the 17th Communist Party Congress later this year, from a broader and deeper perspective it is patently obvious that the 2008 Beijing Olympics are the unspoken background for these events. Faced with the Olympics craze here in Beijing, my mind drifts back

twenty years to the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

In the early hours of May 18, 1980, South Korean president Chun Doo-hwan declared martial law and dispatched thousands of paratroopers to the city of Kwangju to quell mass demonstrations. The paratroopers brutally suppressed thousands of students and ordinary citizens who had taken to the streets calling for democracy. The "Kwangju Incident," as this massacre came to be known, shocked the world and turned out to be the defining event of the 1980s in South Korea. It resulted in 191 dead, 122 seriously wounded and 730 lightly wounded civilians.⁵

After the Kwangju massacre, which was officially referred to as the "Kwangju Rebellion" and later the "Kwangju Incident," the South Korean media bowed to pressure to hush up the story.

In 1981, South Korea won its bid to host the 1988 Olympics. Thanks to its booming economy, South Korea had earned a place as one of the Four Little Dragons (Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea), but it lagged behind politically and culturally. The South Korean government therefore hoped to use the Olympics to create a positive international image.

The South Korean government's suppression of the democratic movement triggered fierce and open resistance from the opposition parties. The international community, particularly the sports world, was very concerned about the situation, and many high-profile sports personalities proposed rescinding South Korea's award to stage the Olympics and finding another venue instead.

A rising democratic tide swept over South Korea.

Democracy activists demanded that the constitution be amended to provide for the direct election of the president, but the government refused to budge. On April 13, 1987, Chun Doo-hwan suddenly announced his decision to suspend constitutional debate until after the Olympics, and declared that the next president would be elected by the (extremely unrepresentative) electoral college, as provided for by the existing constitution. He threatened students and the opposition that any “violent or socially disruptive acts will be severely punished.”

The day Chun Doo-hwan announced his “grave decision,” more than 4,000 students from 11 universities took to the streets demanding his resignation. On April 17, more than 160,000 students from more than 40 universities marched in the streets and clashed with the police. On the anniversary of the April 19 uprising of 1960,⁶ more than 4,000 students and Seoul residents staged demonstrations and rallies during which more than 300 were arrested. Even Cardinal Kim Sou-hwan called on South Korea’s 1.6 million Catholics to pray that democracy would soon be realized in South Korea.

In June 1987, mass demonstrations erupted throughout the country. One million people took to the streets of Seoul demanding an amendment to the constitution. In the half month between June 10 and 26, more than 8.3 million citizens staged more than 2,145 separate demonstrations. Chun Doo-hwan had never faced such fierce and prolonged popular resistance, which came to be known in history as the “June Resistance.”

Chun Doo-hwan was determined to follow the same old disastrous road and reenact the Kwangju Incident by carrying out a bloody suppression of the “April Resistance.” But events turned out differently.

The United States made it known that it opposed a government crackdown. On June 27, 1987, the United States Senate passed a resolution by a vote of 74–0 declaring US support of South Koreans’ efforts to establish fair and free elections and to evolve peacefully into a full democratic government. On July 1, 1987, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution by a vote of 421–0 calling for the democratization of South Korea. If it stuck to its guns, the South Korean government faced the prospect of losing its bid to host the

Olympics, which in turn could very easily bring down the government.

Chun Doo-hwan’s government concluded that since international pressure made further repression unfeasible, compromise was the only option. On June 29, Chun Doo-hwan’s heir apparent, Democratic Justice Party presidential candidate Roh Tae-woo, announced that the government would accept the opposition parties’ demands and implement an eight-point reform program consisting of: (1) a direct presidential system; (2) a fair presidential election law; (3) the release and amnesty of political prisoners; (4) a guarantee of fundamental human rights and the rule of law; (5) a guarantee of freedom of the press; (6) local autonomy and self-governance; (7) a guarantee of the basic rights of political parties; (8) guarantees of social stability and social reforms aimed at promoting public welfare and well-being.

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On July 1, Chun Doo-hwan announced that he accepted Roh Tae-woo’s reform program, and he resigned from the presidency of the ruling Democratic Justice Party on July 10. That same day, opposition leader Kim Dae-Jung was granted amnesty and the freedom to openly engage in political activities. Kim began campaigning for president and expressed his support for the Seoul Olympics.

On October 12, 1987, the Korean National Assembly adopted sweeping revisions to the constitution, which were ratified on October 27 by 93 percent of voters in a national referendum. This “Constitution of the Sixth Republic,” as it was called, was the first South Korean constitution based on a compromise between the ruling party and the opposition. It provided for the direct election of the president for a nonrenewable five-year term, rescinded the president’s power to declare a state of emergency and dissolve the National Assembly, guaranteed the fundamental and inviolable human rights of individuals and guaranteed the principle of a multi-party system.

In December 1987, personal rivalry between oppositionists Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam resulted in Democratic Justice Party candidate Roh Tae-woo winning the election with 36.6 percent of the votes. This was South Korea's first peaceful and orderly transition of presidential power.

The twenty-fourth Olympic Summer Games, held in Seoul between September 17 and October 2, 1988, involved a record 9,421 athletes from 160 countries, and raised South Korea's political and economic profile in the international arena. Seoul's international image was further enhanced by its unprecedented synthesis of sports and culture. The Seoul Olympics thus became a turning point in the history of modern South Korea.

Very soon after the Olympics, the National Assembly reexamined the Kwangju Incident. In February 1990, two opposition parties led by Kim Young-sam and Kim Jong-pil and the ruling Democratic Justice Party led by Roh Tae-woo merged to form the Democratic Liberal Party. In December 1992, ruling party candidate Kim Young-sam won the election to become the

fourteenth president of the Republic of Korea. Upon taking office in 1993 as South Korea's first civilian president, Kim promised to build a national cemetery for the victims of the Kwangju Incident of 1980, and in 1997 awarded compensation to victims of the massacre. Within this same four-year period, Roh Tae-woo was arrested after confessing to amassing around \$650 million in slush funds while in office, and Roh and Chun Doo-hwan were sentenced to lengthy prison terms for their parts in the Kwangju massacre.⁷ They were subsequently pardoned by former opposition leader Kim Dae-jung, who had by then been elected president of South Korea.

A NEW VALUE SYSTEM

I have previously compared the Beijing Olympics with the 1936 Berlin Olympics as well. The Chinese leadership strenuously objects, for obvious reasons, to any comparisons with the Nazis, but they are equally reluctant for any parallels to be drawn with the historic turning point that allowed democratization to triumph over

Olympic winner: The election of Kim Young-sam (c) as President of South Korea in 1992 had much to do with a change in political climate brought about by the Seoul Olympics. Photo: AFP/Getty Images



Seoul's authoritarian regime. The wishes of Chinese leaders notwithstanding, the logic of history is a powerful force that, according to Communism's own theory of historical materialism, cannot be determined by human will. The contradictory and confused signals coming from Beijing since the beginning of 2007 indicate that China's leadership recognizes the potential threat to its power that the Olympics presents, but is not united on the best course to adopt.

Today's China differs from the South Korea of 20 years ago in terms of size, international influence, modern historical trajectory, ideology, institutional structure, geopolitical environment and popular mentality, but the two countries still offer some striking and fundamental parallels:

1. Both the Tiananmen massacre in China and the Kwangju massacre in South Korea were tragic and traumatic events of historical significance.
2. South Korea's economy took off more than two decades ago under an authoritarian political system; likewise, China's economy has experienced rapid growth for more than two decades, despite the central government's increasing political control.
3. The concepts of liberal democracy, human rights and the rule of law enjoy wide currency among students and intellectuals in both countries.
4. International cultural trends are exerting a strong and pervasive influence on both societies.
5. Christianity, broadly defined, is spreading rapidly among ordinary people in both countries.

These similarities are more significant than are particularistic differences between the two countries. In fact, the events in China at the beginning of this year all suggest a common thread. I would like to focus here on: changes in civil society, public opinion and the system of values.

Although the authorities in Beijing are still making every effort to block the free flow of information, in this age of the Internet, their ability is not equal to their

ambition. Indeed, the Internet, and in particular the huge and rapidly proliferating blogosphere, have not only created a forum for the expression of public opinion but have gradually become the leading engine of public opinion.

Most crucially, China's emergent civil society (*minjian*)⁸ has already formed its own value system, which in its discourse opposes and transcends the official value system, and is becoming more vocal by the day. The official value system, on the other hand, is steadily losing ground in public discourse; the government increasingly declines to articulate its value system at all, and what public utterances it does attempt are halting, defensive and lacking in conviction.

A careful comparison of how Chinese print media and electronic media have reported the stories cited at the beginning of this article shows that Web sites lean more toward civil society and its value system.

For example, public opinion was very much in support of the "nail house" couple. China's left and right political camps are often at loggerheads and unwilling to make concessions to each other, but in the case of the Chongqing "nail house" incident, both expressed unrestrained support for the couple's resistance.

By and large, the broad spectrum of public opinion was also in agreement during the banned books incident, the Zhang Ming incident at Renmin University and the "Rightists" meeting.

Similarly, when *Freezing Point* (*Bingdian*) was shut down last year,⁹ the director of the Central Propaganda Department brazenly claimed, "The Central Propaganda Department did not order *Freezing Point* to stop publication. The Youth League Central Committee took the decision and the Central Propaganda Department is now playing a passive role in this." Zhao Yong, the secretary of the Youth League Central Committee, also pleaded innocent: "The fact that *Freezing Point* has stopped publication has nothing to do with me." When officials make such feeble attempts to defend themselves, they show that they are very conscious of the value standards by which most people judge such incidents these days. They are aware of the judgment of history.

In one of his pompous moods, Mao Zedong once quoted a verse from a poem by the Tang poet Han Yu: “An ant, trying to shake a mighty tree, is ludicrously ignorant of its own weakness.” Mao was euphorically convinced that the mighty tree he had won by the barrel of a gun would endure through the ages as firm as a rock. Who would have thought that as government officials are increasingly disdained by ordinary people, those countless little ants might gradually succeed in shaking the foundations of that mighty tree?

We dare not underestimate the significance of changes in values and the formation of a new value system that could serve as the foundation for the establishment of a future constitution.

Translated by Paul Frank

The original Chinese article was first posted on the ObserveChina.net Web site, <http://www.observechina.net/info/artshow.asp?ID=43205>.

Translator’s Notes

1. In January 2007, China’s General Administration of Press and Publications banned eight books by intellectuals and writers reflecting on sensitive events in 20th century history. They included *Past Stories of Peking Opera Stars*, by Zhang Yihe; the memoirs of *People’s Daily* journalist Yuan Ying; *The Press*, by Zhu Huaxiang (about the Chinese news media); *This Is How It Goes at SARS.com*, by Hu Fayun; a book about the Great Leap Forward; and a book about an independent candidate for local elections. According to an official at the CCP Propaganda Department, these books were deemed to have “overstepped the line” in 2006. See <http://chinaview.wordpress.com/2007/01/25/china-urged-to-get-recent-ban-lifted-on-eight-books/>.
2. *Taizidang*, or “princelings,” are the children of high-ranking officials. Xi Jinping is the son of Xi Zhongxun (1913–2002), a founder of the Communist guerrilla movement.
3. Zhang Ming, dean of the political science department at Renmin University, was fired in March 2007 after he had posted articles on his popular blog detailing a row with his superior and attacking the “bureaucratization of Chinese universities” and the general lack of academic freedom. See *China Digital Times*, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2007/03/china_university_sacks_dean_after_blog_rant_reuters.php.

4. Chen Ziming, former director of the Beijing Research Institute of Social and Economic Sciences, was sentenced to 13 years’ imprisonment in 1991 for “counter-revolutionary” activities and for serving as a “black hand” behind the pro-democracy demonstrations of 1989. He was released on “medical parole” in 1994 after pressure from the Clinton administration, but was rearrested in 1995 after staging a protest on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Ren Wanding, the founder of China’s League of Human Rights, was first arrested in 1979 after the Democracy Wall Incident and spent four years in prison. He was arrested again in 1989 after the Tiananmen Square massacre. On Chen Ziming, see Radio Free Asia at http://www.rfa.org/cantonese/zhuanti/redian/2005/07/22/china_Ren_yuan_din/?simple=1; on Ren Wanding, see the BBC Chinese Service at http://news.bbc.co.uk/chinese/trad/hi/newsid_6540000/newsid_6540500/6540535.stm.
5. According to the BBC, “Official figures put the death toll at 200, with another 1,000 protesters injured. But according to other estimates between one and two thousand actually died.” See “Flashback: The Kwangju Massacre,” BBC News, May 17, 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/752055.stm>.
6. On April 18, 1960, 3,000 students from Korea University held a peaceful demonstration in Seoul to protest police violence and the cancellation of presidential elections. Government-hired thugs attacked many students that day. The next day, the police opened fire on a mass demonstration, killing hundreds of students. President Syngman Rhee imposed martial law and closed schools and universities, but opposition to martial law, including in the National Assembly, grew so vocal that he was forced to resign on April 27, 1960. See Jürgen Kleiner, *Korea, a Century of Change*, World Scientific, 2001, pp. 126–27.
7. Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo were tried for their roles in the 1980 Kwangju massacre and the 1979 coup d’état. Chun received a death sentence, which was later commuted to life in prison; Roh was sentenced to more than 22 years in prison.
8. The term *minjian* does not have a direct translation in English. As an adjective, *minjian* usually means non-governmental, though it often implies only relative independence from the government and its officials. A *minjian* organization, for example, can serve as a bridge between private business and government officials. Nevertheless, a growing number of Chinese commentators are using the term *minjian* to imply true independence of thought and action from the government.
9. In January 2007, the authorities temporarily suspended *Freezing Point*, a weekly supplement of the official *China Youth Daily* newspaper that often challenged the Party line.