
A WORM'S-EYE VIEW OF THE BEIJING OLYMPICS

By Wei Liu

Amidst all the hype and publicity, how do ordinary Chinese feel about the 2008 Olympics? It's not all that easy to find out.

China, a country with 1.3 billion people still under Communist rule, will host the Olympic Games for the first time in 2008. Some people in democratic countries have called for a boycott. For example, the Paris-based organization Reporters Without Borders referred to China as “the world’s biggest prison for journalists and cyber-dissidents” and, to illustrate the statement, transformed the five circles on the Olympic flag into five handcuffs on the Chinese flag. On July 19, 2007, US Congressman Dana Rohrabacher told thousands of Falun Gong practitioners at a rally in Washington DC that the US should not send its sports teams to a China ruled by a Communist regime that persecutes its people.¹

Clearly, there are voices outside China that oppose Beijing’s hosting of the 2008 Games.

It might be taken for granted that people inside China are more enthusiastic about the Beijing Olympics; certainly there was much celebration there when Beijing won its bid for the Games. But the reality is not so straightforward.

Let’s look at the basic conditions in China. With the Communist Party still in control of the economy, the average income of China’s one billion adults was about \$107.50 per month in 2005, according to the World Bank, while some 150 million people were living on less than \$1 a day.² In today’s China, many people still lack access to basic standards of housing, education and medical care. In the meantime, Communist officials and their families have become millionaires through their privileged access to privatized state enterprises and assets.

Next, let’s examine the conditions for athletes in China. In the 2004 Athens Olympics, China won 32 gold medals, taking second place among the world teams, while the United States took first place with 35 gold medals. How could the Chinese team perform so well when most people in China struggle for a basic living and do not enjoy a good standard of health?

The fundamental principles of the Olympics state that “Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.”³

But look at the situation in China. In China, a sports coach enters a primary school or middle school to pick out students who show an aptitude for sports. These students are then sent to a special school, where the sole focus is sports. It is not uncommon for coaches at these schools to yell at or strike students at their whim. Without the distraction of intellectual endeavor, students at the special sports schools focus their efforts on acquiring the skills and the fitness needed to beat their opponents and rise to the next level of competition—from city teams to provincial teams and, ultimately, to the national team. China’s athletes are housed and provided with living expenses by the government; they don’t have to concern themselves with anything but preparing themselves to win competitions. At the same time, they live under tremendous pressure; for them, the ideals of friendship, solidarity and fair play are replaced by a more oppressive reality.⁴

For the average student in China, on the other hand, sports facilities are poor. It’s typical to see a physical education class in which 20 students share only one basketball or four pairs of badminton racquets. Where

no medals are at stake, a teacher often is not concerned with performance or how long a student might have to wait to use the equipment, only whether the balls and racquets are accounted for at the end of the session.

Once out of high school, China's rural residents usually have access to ample physical exercise through arduous labor on farms or urban construction sites. The challenge for urban residents is different, given the generally sedentary nature of their work and the scarcity of public sports facilities. When I lived in Chongqing, a city of seven million people, I can recall seeing only one public tennis court, with enough space for no more than four players at one time—and it seemed to be closed most of the time. Most tennis players have to make do with finding a wall they can hit a ball against.

Since the 1980s, the most common physical exercise for Chinese people has been *qigong*, or breathing exercise. This kind of exercise does not require any special equipment or facilities, and large numbers of people can be seen practicing in parks or other open areas. However, some types of *qigong*, such as Falun Gong, have attracted so large a following that it has been banned by the government on grounds that it constitutes an “evil cult.”

Under these circumstances, how meaningful for the average Chinese are the Olympics medals hyped by Chinese officials and the government-controlled media? What would it really say about China if the Chinese team won the largest number of gold medals in 2008? In the 2004 Olympic Games, China won 32 gold medals compared with Russia's 27. Does that mean the Chinese can claim to be more physically fit than Russians? Few people would agree.

Indeed, there is a real question of how ordinary people in China feel about Beijing hosting the Olympic Games. Most know little about the spirit or the principles behind the games and are only familiar with the Chinese government's promotion of the physical goal of “faster, higher and stronger” and how the hosting of the games represents China's increasing political and economic stature in the world. The official media have also shied away from revealing the real cost of the games, focusing on the 15 billion *yuan* in organizational costs, while the actual total cost is closer to 280 billion *yuan*, or about \$35 billion.

China's professional athletes face tremendous pressure to excel in careers that often end abruptly. Photo: Reuters



Three people in China, with whom I talked over the telephone, were all in favor of Beijing hosting the Games, and one planned to go to Beijing to watch them. In hopes of obtaining a broader sampling of opinion, I posted an essay about the Beijing Olympics on some China-based Internet forums and invited people to express their views on the Games. I found that my essay was deleted from some of the forums, but was left up on a few others and got a total of 400 hits. Seven people responded to the essay, among whom, two approved of Beijing hosting the Olympics, two disapproved, and three took a neutral position. Among the disapproving comments, a poster calling himself Brave Man wrote, "Our country has spent the people's resources on official vanity projects for decades." The next morning, I found that his reply had been deleted from the forum, and I wondered if others had been deleted before I had a chance to read them.

I then went to a well-known overseas Chinese Web site, www.boxun.com, which overseas Chinese can visit freely and which some people inside China can also access through firewall-breaking software. That essay attracted 230 hits and 50 replies.⁵ Below are some of the comments that were posted:

- I need health, not a gold medal.
- In the ProAmerica World Sports, Cuba got more gold medals than America. Does that mean Cuba is stronger than America? And East Germany always got more gold medals than West Germany. Did that mean anything?
- Can we say we are No. 1 in the world to those peasants confined to their villages by the household registration system? Can we say it to workers who spend more than ten hours a day in factories and worksites and sometimes don't get paid?
- I'm not happy. Our school is closed for the summer, and the only public soccer field nearby has been converted into a parking lot. Now I can't find a place to play soccer.
- The concentrated athletic training system of China has many problems. I saw the badly injured

feet of Ai Dongmei.⁶ Where is the so-called glory? Sports are used to harm the body instead of benefiting it. . . .

- I live like a beast of burden. The gold medal has nothing to do with me. Our athletes struggle for gold medals; the athletes of foreign countries participate for the Olympic Spirit.
- Chinese people surely need Olympic gold medals, not only for the glory, but also as the incarnation of national spirit. It can encourage people in all trades to work with passion and make our nation strong. The Olympic slogan of "faster, higher, and stronger" encourages all people to exercise hard, improve their physical fitness and contribute to the revival of our Chinese nation.
- Athletic achievement is a symbol of our nation's strength, which we can show the outside world. It is not the gold medal that matters, but patriotic morality.
- The Olympic Games can help the slave workers in Shanxi Province forget their misery and enjoy some immediate happiness in front of the TV.
- It has nothing to do with me.
- The government is cautious about how much of its budget is for sports. It has never allowed spending on sports to affect the people's basic necessities. And it's normal for athletes to get injuries. Are you going to tell me athletes in foreign countries just sleep and don't have to train ?
- Is it worth all the trouble for the people in China? Isn't it just a game?
- Ordinary people care about their daily life, not gold medals. Even if China gets ten thousand gold medals, does it mean anything? Also, it should be expected for China, with the largest population in the world, to get the largest number of gold medals. I think it's better for China not to get the largest number; then those guys can't use the medals to claim that conditions in China are very good.

- To Chinese citizens who don't have enough money for tuition and school fees, gold medals don't mean anything.
- In autocratic countries, it seems that official vanity always outweighs putting bread on people's tables.
- The Olympic Games have nothing to do with me.
- What kind of life do those slave workers in Shanxi Province lead? It's inhuman. The foreigners say we don't have human rights, and it's true.
- I like to play basketball and I need someplace to do it.
- In foreign countries, athletes use their own money to train, while in China, athletes use other people's money to train.

There were more replies along the same lines. Altogether, among the 50 people who posted comments, five individuals (10 percent) expressed approval of Beijing's hosting of the Olympic Games, the same number expressed neutral views, and 40 people (80 percent) expressed disapproval.

Even this, of course, is still not a reliable depiction of the views of China's 1.3 billion citizens. In the countryside, where 80 percent of China's population lives, people have limited access to the Internet or even to telephones. The average peasant focuses on little beyond survival, and it is hard to believe that many of them are paying any significant attention to the Olympics.

Still, some peasants have taken the trouble to protest the Olympics. By July 2007, a petition entitled "We Want Human Rights, Not the Olympics" had gained signatures from some 10,000 people throughout many provinces and from a wide variety of trades. One activist interviewed on an overseas radio broadcast said, "We are struggling to stay alive. We cannot go to the stadium to watch the Games with no food in our stomachs and no clothes to cover our bodies."⁷

In the final analysis, it is very hard to gauge public support for the Beijing Olympics in a system where the media are under tight government control and free expression is suppressed. There can be no doubt that many Chinese regard Beijing's hosting of the Olympics as a point of national pride, but if the Chinese government is confident that hosting the Olympics is in the best interests of China and its people, dissenting opinions and the reasons for their objections should also be allowed a hearing.

Notes

- 1 For a full transcript of Rohrabacher's speech, see <http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2007/8/3/88270.html>.
- 2 The World Bank, "China Quick Facts," <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/CHINAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20680895~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:318950,00.html>.
- 3 The Fundamental Principles of Olympism are included in the Olympic Charter, and can be accessed in full at http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_122.pdf.
- 4 For more on the training of China's athletes, see Calum MacLeod, "China Ties Olympic Gold to Quest for Worldwide Esteem," *USA Today*, June 13, 2007, http://www.usatoday.com/sports/olympics/2007-06-13-china-sports-schools-1a-cover_N.htm.
- 5 "Auyun jinpai dui Zhongguo laobaixing zhende zhongyao ma? [Are Olympics Gold Medals Genuinely Important to the Ordinary People of China?]" The essay and comments, originally posted on the China-based NetEase Internet portal, <http://bbs.163.com/shishi/3943275,246.html>, were reposted on the US-based Boxun Web site: <http://www.peacehall.com/forum/boxun2007a/357300.shtml>.
- 6 Chinese runner Ai Dongmei, 26, was forced to retire in 2002 due to crippling foot injuries. In April 2007 she went public with plans to sell off her medals as she sued her former coach on allegations that he had used abusive training methods and had taken most of her winnings. "Image of Forgotten Star Troubles China," AFP, posted on *Times of India*, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Sports/Other_Sports/Image_of_forgotten_stars_troubles_China/articleshow/1914450.cms.
- 7 "Shidi nongmin: Zhongguo hai bu jubei juban aoyunde zige [Displaced Peasants: China Does Not Have the Qualifications to Host the Olympics]," <http://soundofhope.org/programs/162/66956-1.asp>.