
CRITIQUING THE OLYMPIC GAMES

A Debate Hosted by the Guiyang Democracy Salon

The Olympic Games can be the Chinese Games only if all Chinese people can participate, and only if critical views are permitted. Chen Xi, Chen Defu, Wu Yu, Du Heping, Liang Fuqing, Quan Linzhi, Huang Yanming, Liu Xinliang, and Li Renke discuss their views.

Chen Xi

Any critique of the Olympics is bound to annoy the Chinese government. They say, “While the entire country is joyously celebrating the countdown to Olympic Games, you want to criticize the Olympics? And you still call yourself Chinese?” In the lead-up to the Olympics, the Chinese government is both censoring online media and stepping up pressure on dissidents and rights defenders. The Chinese Communist regime abuses the good name of the Games by continuing to violate human rights. Meanwhile, self-satisfied Chinese intellectuals and cultural professionals—those who have grown accustomed to the regime’s monopoly over culture—are hostile toward “Socratic gadflies” like us who sing a different tune about the Olympics. Otherwise, the Central Committee’s Propaganda Department would have instituted a special column entitled “Comments on the Olympic Games.”

The Olympic Games are staged by the Chinese Communist regime, which has arrogated all power to itself, and therefore cannot fully represent Chinese people so long as dissidents and opposition members are barred from participating in and critiquing them. The International Olympic Committee awarded the 2008 Olympic Games to the Chinese government, but the Chinese Constitution guarantees our right to comment on the Olympics.

My comment begins with a question: How far removed are the Beijing Olympics from the Olympic spirit? To put it bluntly, the Beijing Olympics have strayed from the Olympic ideal and betrayed the Olympic spirit.

The modern Olympic movement, which was founded a little over a century ago, is descended from the ancient Greek Olympic Games, which were first celebrated in 776 B.C. and combined religious and athletic celebrations. The worship of Zeus—the supreme god in the Greek pantheon—was part of this religious expression. The Greeks believed that only athletes who excelled in physical beauty, strength, skill, courage, and determination, and who possessed sincerity and the highest ethical character could honor Zeus. The Olympic Games were therefore considered to be the loftiest of human endeavors.

While the ancient Olympic Games were celebrated, a fire was kept burning at the altar of Zeus, prayers were recited, sacrifices offered, performances demonstrated, and oaths sworn. A crown of olives symbolizing peace was given to winning athletes, who embodied the Olympic spirit from head to toe. Today’s Olympic Charter extols the values of unity, friendship, peace, and progress. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to say that these Olympic values are pleasing to God and fulfill his hopes for humankind. Tradition has it that during the ancient Olympic Games, warring states and fighting tribes suspended hostilities and laid down their arms as a mark of reverence to Zeus. No one was allowed to carry a weapon within the sacred precincts of Olympia. The modern Olympic Charter states, “The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.”¹ These principles also express God’s love and concern for humankind.

If we accept that Olympism is an expression of God’s will, we may then ask whether now that China has become the modern Olympia, the country actually understands the intent of the Olympic spirit.

Although China is about to host the Games, it is clearly

not abiding by the Olympic Spirit. During the countdown to the Olympics, the Chinese government has actually stepped up its harassment and repression of human rights defenders and dissidents. Originally intended to banish injustice and arbitrary power, the Olympic Games have been perverted by the Chinese Communist government to legitimize both.

An atheist nation is incapable of understanding the Olympic spirit.

Chen Defu

In fact, the 2008 Olympic Games are just a big show. But what are they meant to show the world? Is what is being put on display genuine? Is it beautiful? Is it good? Does it really deserve such jubilation from the Chinese people?

Based on my own observations, I would say that the 2008 Beijing Olympics are a show intended to advertise the achievements of the Communist Party. They are a desperate attempt by the regime to win legitimacy. As such, they will be an exercise in grandstanding and false advertising. China's current economic situation is a good illustration. On the surface, China's economic development is both rapid and robust. In fact, however, China's economic development revolves around a "window economy," or, urban economy. Behind that window is China's vast countryside. The western regions of the country remain extremely poor and backward. The regime's monopoly on power and the widening gulf between rich and poor have produced countless child laborers and forced laborers working in brick kilns.

For Liu Xiaobo's article on child and forced labor in China's kilns, see page 80.

The "window" phenomenon is even more evident in China's sports industry. Chinese taxpayers' money is being used to train child athletes—not to improve the physical health of the Chinese people but to win glory for the Party-state. Huge amounts of resources and money are being invested in an extremely small number of professional athletes.

The author of an Internet essay entitled "The Olympic

Gold Medal Trap" estimated the cost to China of each gold medal by using the following formula: If the billions of *yuan* China's sports authorities spent in the four years leading up to the 2004 Athens Olympic Games are divided by the 30 gold medals China won (China actually won 32), each gold medal cost approximately 700 million *yuan*.² Bao Mingxiao, the director of the Sports Social Science Research Center of China's General Administration of Sport, gives the lower figure of 200 million *yuan* per gold medal. Either figure would make China's gold medals the most expensive in the world as well as an extraordinary waste of money and resources. With Olympics such as these, I can understand why China's farmers are crying out, "We want human rights, not the Olympic Games!"³

The Olympic Games represent humanity's aspiration for beauty, harmony, goodness, and respect for the dignity of every single human being. By focusing on these humanistic values, the Games seek to raise society's moral and spiritual condition. It seems to me that the Chinese Communist government's Olympics are focused on attracting foreign business and investment and building up prestige for the Party. From the start, profit has been the primary motivation. Transcending materialism has never been a consideration. If the government were really serious about the Olympic spirit it would have to turn over a new leaf, give up its brutal and despotic rule over the Chinese people, respect the human rights of every Chinese citizen, and fulfill its Olympic pledge.

Wu Yu

The jubilation in the run-up to the Olympics suggests that there is a lot of optimism out there. But I would say to the Chinese Communist government: There is no cause for optimism.

First of all, there is no cause for optimism in Cross-Strait relations. Next March, just a few short months before the Beijing Olympics, Taiwan's two main political parties will be contesting Taiwan's presidential election. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has declared that if it wins the election, it will press ahead with its "Taiwan independence" agenda, which would be hard for the Chinese Communist government to



Laborers work at a tapestry workshop, which produces tapestry souvenirs of Fuwa, the official mascots of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, in Tianjin on July 19, 2007. Photo credits: REUTERS/Vincent Du (CHINA).

swallow. But if the DPP wins, there is nothing they will be able to do about it. If the Kuomintang (KMT) wins the election, the Chinese government may be presented with a situation almost as unpalatable, because under Ma Ying-Jeou, the KMT is likely to copy the DPP's Taiwan independence agenda.⁴

Second, the situation within China itself gives no cause for optimism. The reason people are enthusiastic about the Olympics is that during the past two decades of economic reforms they have been able to fill their stomachs. More than anything else, Chinese people are inter-

ested in tangible benefits, and they think that's what hosting the Olympics will bring them. If they didn't they would be opposed to the Olympics. China's current stock market prices are a barometer of this general feeling. According to government figures, in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics, the number of households playing the stock market has grown from 70 million to more than 100 million. What's on the minds of these people? What's their motivation for playing the stock market? Before the lead-up to the Olympics, people felt that there was something abnormal or not quite kosher about the stock market. But now that the Olympics are less than a year away, all these stock-crazed investors are convinced that they can only win, not lose.

The stock market is booming now, so people are rushing to invest in it. But as soon as the market takes a dive, they'll be singing a different tune because their money is all tied up in stocks. If they keep their money in stocks longer than they should and the market tumbles, we'll see people jumping from skyscrapers. If the stock market continues to pay off next year and people are able to withdraw their investments when they want to, everyone will be happy. If

not, hundreds of millions of shareholders will turn their backs on the Olympics. If it were up to the hundreds of millions who have been playing the stock market, the bubble would keep getting bigger and bigger. But what happens when it bursts?

Du Heping

I would like to discuss three issues: First, will the Beijing Olympics resemble the 1936 Berlin Olympics? Second, are the Beijing Olympics compromised? Third, I will give my own opinions about the Beijing Olympics.

The Berlin Olympics were a disgraceful chapter in the history of the Olympic movement. The Nazi government used them to show off the strength of the German nation and whitewash totalitarianism. Three years after showing the best face of his dictatorship to the world, Hitler plunged the world into another war. Will the Chinese government likewise use the Olympics to legitimize its dictatorial rule? And once the Games are over, will it brazenly continue that rule and possibly launch even more bloody crackdowns to consolidate one-party rule, as it did in Tiananmen Square in 1989? Let's look at the arguments for an international and domestic boycott of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Internationally, the Chinese government supports dictatorships. Within China, it is stepping up pressure on the media, closing down websites, and arresting democracy activists and dissidents. Like Hitler, the Chinese Communist regime may well use the Olympics to affirm and feed its illusions of grandeur.

Now on to my second point. The Beijing Olympics are compromised because the Chinese government's motives for hosting them are anything but pure. Sport is the starting point for the Olympic spirit, but the universal values of human rights and international trade are also essential elements. When Li Qiu, the former mayor of Beijing, traveled to Moscow in 2001 as head of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Bidding Committee delegation, he declared that if the Games were awarded to China, they would "help promote economic and social progress and also benefit the further development of our human rights cause." The Chinese government understands full well the connection between the Olympic Games and development of sports, but its main focus is on business opportunities. As was the case during the ping-pong diplomacy of the Maoist era, human rights don't enter into it.

Third, despite all of this, I support China's hosting the Olympic Games. The only way forward for China is through openness. I for one hope that the Games will enable the Chinese government and people to see how far they are from the civilized world, and not just see their own magnificence; that the Games will enable them to focus on integrity and sportsmanship among people, rather than on profit and selfish gain; that they will generate confidence in civil society, rather than on

the one-party state; and that they will promote the cause of freedom and democracy, rather than boost the prestige of the dictatorship. In short, my hope is that this international sports competition will further China's political progress and social development. This is my wish for the Beijing Olympic Games.

Liang Fuqing

Everybody is much too bright-eyed, hopeful, and optimistic about these Olympics. Wu Yu says "there is no cause for optimism." But I am downright pessimistic.

The damage done by the Communist dictatorship to China's culture, society, and people over the past few decades is obvious to everyone. The Olympic Games are being staged in a country that has been ravaged by the one-party state.

The motto of the Olympics—"Faster, Higher, Stronger"—is a call to surpass one's own limits, to overcome old ways of thinking and acting, and to cut loose from stale traditions. Well, can the Communist Party surpass its own limits, overcome its old ways of thinking and ruling, and break loose from its stale traditions? The whole world has abandoned Marxism, but the Communist Party remains unwilling to renounce it. It has enshrined Marxism in the Chinese Constitution and continues to uphold it as the guiding ideology for the Chinese people. Can we really expect this dogmatic Party to change its mentality?

I, for one, do not.

Quan Linzhi

What I sense in all this gushing about the Olympics is insincerity. I used to be an athlete, so I have a personal connection with the Olympic spirit. I hope that China will host a successful Olympics. But as to whether the Chinese people and government have a real appreciation of the Olympic spirit? I have my doubts. There is too much politics and ideological posturing in the Beijing Games.

The Olympic movement has its own ideals, aims, regulations, trajectory, and principles. The Olympic Games

are a stirring display of human strength. They are an opportunity for individual athletes to become stronger, run faster, and jump higher, and for humanity to stage ever grander games in beautiful, state-of-the-art stadiums and facilities. Everything about the Games manifests human strength and endurance. At the same time, however, the Games show individuals that they are a small part of a big picture and that despite the limits of human strength, team spirit and shared goals enable people to achieve greatness. The Games also encourage people to meet life's challenges with enthusiasm and to learn from past mistakes. The Olympic Charter declares that the Olympic spirit "requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play."⁵ The Olympic spirit encompasses the principles of participation, competition, fairness, friendship, and struggle. Participation is the first, and foundation, of these principles because without it there would be no Olympic ideals and principles. Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games, declared at the 1936 Olympics, "The important thing is not winning, but taking part. The essential thing is not conquering, but fighting well."

What we are witnessing, however, is that the Chinese Communist government is afraid to let certain people from China and abroad play a part in the Olympic Games. In early April 2007, the Ministry of Public Security sent a secret directive to public security bureaus at the provincial, autonomous region, and centrally administered city levels demanding strict background checks of individuals applying to compete in or attend the Olympic Games and Olympic trial events.⁶ The directive bars 11 categories and 43⁷ subcategories of people in China and abroad from entry to Olympic events, including "key individuals in ideological fields," "Falun Gong and other evil cults, organizers of associated organizations and their practitioners," "individuals who show strong discontent with the CPC and the Chinese Government" and "individuals who collude with outside forces to complain to foreigners."⁸ Since it issued this directive, the government has arrested human rights lawyers, stepped up pressure on journalists and the news media, and closed down websites and periodicals.

Huang Yanming

I would like to critique the Olympic Games from a cultural studies perspective.

We could see the Olympics as a purely western thing that is not part of eastern culture. Asian culture does not encourage individual initiative, which is the purpose and spirit of the Olympic Games. In this country, we see obstacles to individual initiative everywhere. Competition is discouraged and instead the established social hierarchy is implemented on all fronts. The principles of fairness and honesty are ignored, while string pulling and bribery are tolerated and expected. The ideals of friendship and equal rights are ignored, while class distinctions, national characteristics, and nationalism are celebrated. And individual struggle is unacceptable because it challenges dictatorial privilege and the Party's position of absolute leadership.

On the face of it, the 2008 Olympics are helping western values advance eastward, but in essence they are promoting a clash of civilizations between East and West. What do I mean by this clash? The Chinese government saw a blank check to legitimize its dictatorial rule and put forward a bid to host the Olympics. Yet because dictatorship is incompatible with the Olympic spirit, the government may get more than it bargained for. Its plan to whitewash its image is running into resistance from the public and from numerous NGOs in the international community as well as in China.

In this respect, I think that China needs the Olympics. Inevitably, the Chinese dictatorship will clash with western democracy, because friction with and resistance from the West may enable Chinese people to see the ugliness in their society and spur the regime to carry out political reform.

That said, we also need to consider the obstinate nature of Chinese autocratic culture.

Liu Xinliang

I would like to discuss two points: First, China needs the Olympic Games. Second, the Olympics and democracy.

First, China needs the Olympic Games. I'd go so far as to say that the Chinese nation needs these Games. As everyone knows, in modern times China fell behind more advanced countries that bullied it as the "sick man of Asia." Chinese people will remember the infamous sign at the entrance of a Shanghai park, which read "Chinese and dogs not allowed."⁹ China was long marginalized and excluded by the civilized world. Today, we need to open up and return to the world. China needs to recover its glorious past and take its rightful place among nations. Now that China's booming economy and growing power are enabling it to engage ever more deeply with the world, China needs the Olympics to show the world its 5,000-year-old civilization. The Olympics will enable the world to understand and get to know China.

Everybody is saying that the Chinese Communist government is using the Olympics to whitewash its dictatorial rule and that the Games have nothing to do with the people. I don't think that's a fair way of putting it. You cannot say that just because the Chinese Communist government is using the Olympics to consolidate its hold on power, the Games are of no concern to the people. Any government would jump at this opportunity. Just because the Chinese government is jumping on the Olympic bandwagon doesn't mean that we do not need the Olympics.

Then there is the question of the Olympics and democracy. Some have argued that China has wasted the people's hard-earned money on building a large number of Olympic stadiums and facilities. To my mind, this is a self-satisfied argument that is typical of Chinese peasant mentality. For 5,000 years, Chinese people stored up their wealth and were afraid to spend it on anything but themselves. As a result, in its 5,000 years of history,



A woman begs in front of an Olympic Games sign in Beijing on October 31, 2007. Photo credits: REUTERS/David Gray (CHINA).

China was never able to create markets and develop a market economy. I think that from the perspective of modern economic development, as long as the government spends money on construction projects within the country, it is money well spent. Because the construction projects for the Olympics are being run by a dictatorial government, there will undoubtedly be some corruption and waste, but thanks to all these new stadiums and facilities countless workers have obtained work, many underutilized construction companies and factories have obtained building contracts, and many state-of-the-art facilities have been developed and are being utilized. The Olympics are a huge shot in the arm for the Chinese economy and have filled a great many

order books. Consumption and “waste” are creating a market as well as new room and opportunities for economic development.

Li Renke

In Beijing, the Chinese Communist government has been trumpeting slogans such as “Green Olympics” and “Good Luck Beijing.”¹⁰ But the fact remains that the regime is using the Olympics as a pretext to continue along the path of power politics. Internally, the central government has strengthened its grip on power; externally, it has intensified its violation of human rights and persecution of rights activists.

Public security and city administration departments have been arrogantly harassing ordinary citizens under colorful banners proclaiming “Green Olympics” and “Good Luck Beijing.” As one 60-year-old Beijing woman put it, smiling bitterly: “The Olympics bring ‘good luck’ to officials, but to ordinary people they are a disastrous turn of bad luck.” According to the Geneva-based Center on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), by mid-2007 more than one million Beijing citizens had already been evicted from their homes due to urban development linked to the Olympic Games, and 1.5 million are expected to be displaced due to Olympics-related development by the time the Games open.¹¹ The case of brothers Ye Guozhu and Ye Guoqiang¹² shows that the government has made a travesty of the Olympic spirit, using heavy-handed tactics against citizens who try to defend their rights when faced with arbitrary evictions. Despite official talk of “Green Olympics” and “Good Luck Beijing,” blood and tears have already been shed to make way for the Olympic Games. In light of these forced evictions, it would be more appropriate to speak of “Red Olympics,” “Bitter Luck,” and “Black Beijing.”

On August 13, 2007, the Public Security Bureau’s National Security Brigade in Jiamusi City, Heilongjiang Province, arrested Yang Chunlin on charges of “incitement to subvert state power.” His only crime had been to help a group of more than 10,000 farmers in Fujin City in Heilongjiang to draw up a petition entitled “We want human rights, not Olympic Games.” The petition was a protest against the authorities’ seizure of their

land. Yang Chunlin’s is a classic case of infringing freedom of speech; the way that the Chinese Communist government handled the case clearly violates the Olympic spirit.

As I see it, the Chinese people need the Olympics Games but they need human rights even more. If human rights and the Olympics are at loggerheads, I will of course choose human rights.

Guiyang City, Guizhou Province, September 16, 2007

Translated by Paul Frank

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Notes

1. International Olympic Committee, *Olympic Charter*, in force as of July 7, 2007, p. 12.
2. These references to the cost of China’s Olympic medals were provided by the author.
3. A number of petitions have been circulated inside China recently, calling for greater attention to human rights, rather than such focus by the government on the Olympic Games. For one example, see “‘One World, One Dream’ and Universal Human Rights: An open letter proposing seven changes for upholding Olympic principles,” *China Rights Forum* 3 (2007): 69–72.
4. Editor’s note: The KMT’s official position supports the one-China policy. This reference is likely a result of Ma’s statement, made in February 2006 while he was in Europe, that while the KMT favors reunification, the party respects the opinions of the people, and that independence is a choice to be made by the Taiwanese.
5. International Olympic Committee, *Olympic Charter*, in force as from July 7, 2007, p. 12.
6. *Guanyu yange kaizhan Aoyunhui ji ceshisai shenqinrenyuan beijing shencha de tongzhi* (Circular on strict background checks of applicants to the Olympic Games and Olympic trial events). See Lu Zhenyan, “Yangzhu zhengzhihua he

aoyun qu zhengzhihua” (The politicization of pig farming and the politicization of the Olympic Games), *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily), August 21, 2007, <http://renminbao.com/rmb/articles/2007/8/21/45303.html>.

7. Although online reports indicate that there are 43 subcategories, the available regulation itself lists 42 subcategories.
8. These regulations are purported to be an official Olympics blacklist and was posted on websites affiliated with the Falun Gong movement. To date there has been no independent confirmation of the veracity of the document. This kind of internal directive is not usually openly available or disseminated to the public. However, the China-based Sina Web portal posted a news item in May stating, “China’s Ministry of Public Security issued an internal secret directive that lists 43 categories of people who will be investigated and barred from the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Some examples of the groups included are overseas hostile forces, counterrevolutionary figures, the Dalai Lama and associates, Falun Gong practitioners, religious groups, and individuals who incite discontent towards the Chinese Communist Party through the Internet.” See “Zhuce renyuan xu yange zige shencha Beijing Aoyun jiang ju qian keyi duiyuan [Registration officials must strictly check qualifications; Beijing Olympics Will Bar Participation by Suspicious Individuals],” <http://sports.sina.com.cn/o/2007-05-16/09492924196.shtm>. This website is no longer available. Other articles mentioning a ban on “suspicious individuals,” without further details, have also been posted on Sina.com and other China-based websites. For an English translation of an excerpt of these regulations, see *China Rights Forum* 3 (2007): 48–51.
9. The derogatory phrase was used during the period of foreign concessions in China. There is some dispute as to the specifics details of the sign’s existence.
10. This phrase is a play on words on the Chinese word for Olympics.
11. Center for Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), *Fair Play for Housing Rights: Mega-Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights*, 2007, available at <http://www.cohre.org/>. See also Li Zimu, “Yige rang shijie hundao de xiaoxi” (Earth-shocking news) *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily), August 19, 2007, <http://www.renminbao.com/rmb/articles/2007/8/19/45289.html>.
12. Between 2001 and 2003, the government demolished the homes and restaurant of Ye Guozhu and Ye Guoqiang. Ye Guozhu, who had applied for legal permission to hold a protest march over forced evictions, was sentenced to four years in prison in December 2004. Ye Guoqiang was sentenced to two years in prison for disturbing the social order after he attempted suicide by jumping into the Jinshui River near Tiananmen Square. See Human Rights Watch, “China: Release Housing Rights Activist,” September 28, 2004, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/09/28/china9400.htm>.