

CHINA

could redefine the olympics

China might change because of the Olympics, but what about the other way round?

by Marcus Hoy

Humanistic Olympics is about getting people involved in the Games. Here Chinese men attempt to fly a giant kite in the shape of Beijing 2008 Olympic Games mascots as part of local countdown activities to the Olympics.



To say that the Chinese are enthusiastic about the forthcoming Olympics is rather like saying that Brazilians are partial to an occasional game of football. When China was awarded the 2008 games, the street parties across the nation were arguably more intense than any other celebration in the history of the movement, and many are already predicting that Beijing's hosting of the event will be a defining moment in Olympic history.

Many interesting questions are being asked of what effect the Olympics will have on China, stated Susan Brownell, author and Associate Professor at the University of Missouri in the USA. But many equally important questions need to be posed about how China will affect the Olympic movement.

In a provocative address to the 2005 Play the Game conference, Brownell criticized what she saw as the Western obsession with questions of human rights, democracy and openness in relation to the 2008 games. While some concerns may be valid,

she argued, the debate needs to broaden its scope to include the Chinese concept of the 'Humanistic Olympics' and how the games might change outdated mindsets in the Olympic movement.

"In discussing the Beijing Olympics, Western observers readily express a desire to change China. But why are we so concerned about changing China and not concerned about China changing us?" she asked.

Post-Olympism

She stated that China's staging of the 2008 games could herald the demise of outdated Western perceptions of the Olympics, and the beginning of what she referred to as a period of 'post-Olympism'.

She pointed to the hostile media reaction to China's bidding success as indicative of a 'colonial mindset' that still persists in the West. Cynics, she suggested, might be tempted to compare Western criticism of China with the IOC's internal record on democracy. Indeed, she stated, the IOC could

have more to learn from China than China has to learn from the IOC.

One of the 2008 Olympics' most important goals, she continued, is to display China's 'humanistic' characteristics to the world – characteristics which, instead of holding personal freedoms in the highest regard, emphasize that individuals are part of a group with a duty to clan and country.

Despite the criticism to which it has been subjected, she added, China maintains a remarkable level of social order for such a populous nation, and tremendous improvements have occurred in most people's lives over the past 30 years.

The year 2008, she concluded, will mark an unprecedented moment in Olympic history, which is embodied in the Olympic slogan "One World, One Dream." Surely this huge event bringing together so many diverse cultures should ultimately be a time for celebration.

Olympic games will teach China to cooperate

by Kirsten Sparre

“Humanistic Olympics” is also about changing China

The Chinese will use the Beijing 2008 Olympics as an opportunity to learn how to cooperate and restore social responsibility. The Olympics should also help ordinary Chinese to meet the world and learn values such as openness, tolerance, friendship and care of the environment.

So said Hai Ren, director of the Olympic Studies Centre at Beijing University, who had accepted the challenge of explaining to Play the Game delegates what lies behind the Chinese concept of “Humanistic Olympics”.

“Humanistic Olympics is the key concept of the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Its meaning has been explained in different ways but in order to explore the concept, it is necessary to put it into the current social context of China,” said Hai Ren.

Respect and cooperation

First of all, the Olympics will be an exercise for the Chinese in learning how to respect and cooperate with each other.

“The Chinese have had a long history of being a traditional society with many self-sufficient small farmers. When the People’s Republic of China was established, the state-planned economic structure became dominant and continued for nearly half a century. So how to cooperate with each other based on legitimate principles is still a big lesson for Chinese to learn,” Hai Ren explained.

Secondly, as market economy has made China more prosperous, it has also led to a decline of social morals.

“The Beijing Olympics may provide a chance to change the situation mainly through the Olympic volunteer campaign,” said Hai Ren and referred to a survey from Beijing which showed that 94 per cent of all respondents wanted to be volunteers at the Olympic Games.

Thirdly, the Olympics will stimulate cross-cultural communication and allow ordinary Chinese to meet ordinary people from other parts of the world.

Finally, China must adapt to modern times and the global village, and organisers hope the Olympics will help make values such as openness, tolerance, friendship and care of the environment more central to the Chinese.

A mission at risk

So that is what “Humanistic Olympics” means to the Chinese. However, Hai Ren was concerned that the ideals and goals could drown in the practicalities of organising the Games.

“The mission of the humanistic Olympics is mostly invisible and may easily be neglected,” said Hai Ren.

He also pointed out that for many people in China, the Olympics is an elite project where superstars meet far away from ordinary people.

“Getting a large number of ordinary people involved in the preparation of the Games may be beyond the capacity of the organisers of the Games,” he said.

Training China’s sports journalists

by Kirsten Sparre



Mary-Nicole Nazzaro trains China’s sports journalists for the future

With the Olympic Games coming closer, a number of sports journalism degree programmes have emerged in China. One of them is based at the Cheung Kong School of Journalism and Communication at Shantou University and is headed up by Mary-Nicole Nazzaro, an American sports journalist.

At Play the Game Nazzaro spoke of the problems inherent in teaching Western-style sports journalism in a country like China.

“Hands-on journalism training programs are not the norm in China. In fact, sending students out into the field to report, even on something as harmless-seeming as a sports event, is sometimes construed by potential interview subjects as threatening,” she explained.

Journalists in China operate under far stricter government controls than any Olympic host country since perhaps the Soviet Union in 1980. The Chinese government has a history of discouraging its journalists from reporting news that is deemed

to be unflattering to the country and investigative journalism in China is in its infancy, held back by strict government controls and the threat of job loss or even more serious consequences.

“That makes inquiries into doping stories and other scandals extremely difficult. The situation has changed somewhat in the wake of the Ma Junren profile drug cases in sports such as women’s swimming. But this is a new development,” said Nazzaro.

Critical questioning is also hampered by cultural traditions. Nazzaro explained that her students all agreed that they could not ask a Chinese athlete what should happen to a coach who had encouraged doping.

“It would be seen as disrespectful to speak out against such a ‘father figure’ and violate the culture of respect and obedience that currently exists in Chinese sports and society,” she explained.

Read the full presentation at www.playthegame.org