THE BEIJING EFFECT

WILL THE OLYMPIC GAMES CHANGE CHINA, OR WILL CHINA CHANGE THE OLYMPIC GAMES, ASKS DR. SUSAN BROWNELL, IN THE FIRST ARTICLE OF OLYMPIC REVIEW'S NEW SERIES OF OLYMPIC RESEARCH.
China’s desire to host the Olympic Games is nearly as old as the modern Games themselves. Around 1907, the Chinese YMCA began a campaign to stir up patriotism by asking, “When will China be able to invite all the world to Peking for an International Olympic contest...?”

One hundred years later, at the eighth evening hour of the eighth day of the eighth month of the year 2008, the Opening Ceremony for the Beijing Olympic Games will begin (eight is a lucky number in Chinese culture, symbolising prosperity and development). The Olympic Games will be hosted by the least Westernised nation in the world to yet host them, the heart of Far Eastern civilisation, the most populous nation in the world. It will be only the third time the Olympic Summer Games have been held outside the Western hemisphere — after Tokyo 1964 and Seoul 1988 — and it will be the greatest-ever meeting of East and West in peacetime. It will mark a pivotal moment when the Olympic Movement begins to attain an unprecedented universalism, which is expressed in the slogan “One World, One Dream”.

Surely this should be a moment to celebrate the global culture of the 21st century. But Beijing’s bid was met with hostility in some quarters among Western politicians, media, human rights groups, and even some everyday people. When Beijing won the bid and it was shown live on Chinese television, tens of thousands of people took to the streets to celebrate, and the optimism about the Olympic Games and the future of China becomes more fervent as the Games draw near.

So why wasn’t there widespread celebration in the West? People in the developed Western countries seem fixated on the question of whether the Olympic Games will change China. Will they improve China’s human rights record? Will they open China up more to the outside world? Will they bring democracy to China?

**CAN THE OLYMPIC GAMES REALLY BRING ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE?**

We still lack a good scientific understanding of the Olympic Movement as a social movement capable of effecting social change. Pierre de Coubertin had a vision that still shapes the Olympic Movement today, but in this age of science people expect concrete proof that a vision is being carried out. Beijing will be the first host city to produce a full Olympic Games Global Impact (OGGI) report. This is an important step, but OGGI will not assess the cultural fields that might be most interesting for the Chinese Olympic Games. For example, it will not measure the effects on cultural heritage — such as the preservation of culture to enrich the Olympic cultural programme versus the destruction of historical sites for new construction, the growth of traditional sports versus their replacement by Olympic sports, or the effect of the Olympic Games on traditional cultural beliefs.
The greatest legacy of the Beijing Games will be a largely intangible one – its human and cultural legacy. This goal is expressed in one of the three themes for the Olympic Games, renwen aoyun 人文奥运, which has been translated into English as the “humanistic” or “people’s” Games. Hosting the Olympic Games will require China to “link up with international standards,” accelerating the process that already began over 100 years ago. The changes that occur will not be those forced upon China by others, but will be those that China voluntarily seeks out so that it may play a key role in the global society of the 21st century.

WILL THE OLYMPIC GAMES CHANGE CHINA?

Confucian tradition holds a strong faith in education as a means for creating a harmonious society. One of the main ways in which the “people’s” Games will be realised is through Olympic Education on a scale never seen before. There are academic and professional conferences, textbooks and courses for public schools and universities, educational television and radio shows, magazine and newspaper essays, internet training, and more. BOCOG and Olympic scholars see the enthusiasm of volunteers as an opportunity to improve the public educational level and morality with education in Olympic history and values, traditional Chinese culture, Beijing history, public etiquette, international customs, foreign languages, and lifesaving first-aid skills. Currently 100,000 volunteers are slated to receive training, and BOCOG is considering multiplying that number several times. Because of the importance of foreign language skills and the goal of shaping the next generation, most of the volunteers will be college students. This is indeed a way in which “Olympism with Chinese characteristics” will be promulgated throughout China.

WILL CHINA CHANGE THE OLYMPIC GAMES?

People are talking about the Olympic Games as an opportunity for China to learn knowledge from the West that will benefit China’s development. They are not paying...
as much attention to the question of whether China can teach anything to the West. Likewise, OGGI will assess the impact of the Olympic Games on China and not China’s impact on the Olympic Games. Although Chinese people believe that the result of the Games will be a “combination of East and West,” if the Olympic Games are only a one-way process in which China learns from the West, then the cultural exchange will not be truly mutual.

The second goal of the “humanistic Olympic Games” is to display Chinese culture to the world and propel the Olympic Movement to become a truly multicultural, global cultural system. But it is not easy for a non-Western nation, even one with such a strong cultural heritage as China, to propel the Olympic Movement to become multicultural. Actually, there is a great deal that Chinese culture could contribute to Olympism, such as the search for world peace or da tong, “the Great Harmony,” respect for human and national dignity; he er bu tong, “harmony despite differences;” and tian ren he yi, “humans and nature as one.” These philosophies will be expressed in the Chinese hospitality toward guest nations, the traditional sport of wushu, the layout of the Olympic Green along the north-south axis of Beijing according to the principles of fengshui (geomancy), and in other ways.

ARE WE READY?
The Chinese slogan for Beijing’s bid, xin Beijing, xin Aoyun, “New Beijing, New Olympic Games,” was translated into English as “New Beijing, Great Olympic Games.” It was felt that the rest of the world might not understand how China could create a “new” Olympic Games. China hopes that it will change the Olympic Games, but is the West really open to that possibility? Are we truly ready for “One World, One Dream”?

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