

## Humanistic Olympics: Where will it lead to?

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### Framework for analysis

The Beijing 2008 Olympics have drawn world wide attention mainly due to the fact that the Games will be staged in a country with a quite different social background in comparison to previous hosts. What impact will the Olympic Games have on China and the world? People's views are diverse - even contradictory - and all of them seem to have certain valid points.

It is true that any forecast for a social event inevitably has considerable uncertainty and vagueness, even more so for the Beijing Olympic Games, a mega event involving so many variables.

But it is still possible to predict the general trend of a social occurrence because all social phenomena are determined by their social context and have historical continuity. My analysis will start by focusing on the current situation of China, then will identify its main social demands and finally will look at the role the Olympics will play or are expected to play in meeting these social demands. I hope this will answer the question, "Humanistic Olympics: Where will it lead to?"

### I. The current social conditions in China

#### 1. Economic reform is playing the leading role in social change.

Unlike the former Soviet Union and Eastern European Countries, China first initiated its reform in the economic realm. During the past 26 years of opening and reform, especially since 1992 when the goal of establishing a market economy was set, economic forces have gradually replaced politics to become the main promoter of social development.

From 1978 to 2004, the Chinese gross domestic product (GDP) increased from 14,730 million to 164,940 million US dollars with an annual increase of 9.4%; The total of import and export from 2,060 million went up to 115,480 million US dollars with an annual increase of over 16%.

The latest research commissioned by the Ministry of Commerce shows that the commercialization rate of the Chinese economy grew from 69% in 2001 to 73.8% in 2003<sup>1</sup>.

The rapid development of the market economy has had the following results:

#### a. Social reform has become an irreversible process

Chinese GDP per capita increased from 250 US dollars in 1980 to 1,090 US dollars in 2003, indicated that the lasting problem of food and clothing was solved and the nation entered to a comparatively well-off stage. Though there are 70 million people still struggling in poverty, the majority of citizens has benefited from the reform. Social reform is already an irreversible trend in China.

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<sup>1</sup>北京师范大学经济与资源管理研究，《2005中国市场经济发展报告》

### **b. China has been integrated into the world economic system**

China joined the WTO (World Trade Organization) on November 11, 2001, indicating that China's economy was finally integrated into the world economic system. In 2004 China exported more than Japan, becoming the world's third largest exporter behind the US and Germany. This integration has forged a solid linkage between China and the world, which means that China's development heavily depends on the external environment.

### **c. Reforms in other social sectors initiated**

The social reform that started from the economy is now spreading to other fields, such as ideology, politics, legal affairs, administration, culture and arts, etc. Some reforms have even gone so far as to exceed many people's expectations. For instance, owners of private enterprises have been allowed to join the Communist Party since 2001, which was unthinkable before that time. The dynamic social changes made the leaders of the nation become aware that "Independent thinking of the general public, their newly-developed penchant for independent choices and thus the widening gap of ideas among different social strata will pose further challenges to China's policy makers."<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Newly emerged social contradictions**

Rapid social changes have resulted in a quite a number of conflicts - even contradictions - in various social spheres.

### **a. Conflicts among social groups**

The income gaps have widened dramatically in China alongside the double-digit economic expansion since 1978, particularly between the prosperous industrializing coastal areas and the impoverished western region. China used to be poor but homogenous but now a polarizing trend suddenly appeared. Some have succeeded in the social and economic transition into prosperity, but others have suffered from stagnation and social turbulence. The Gini's coefficient jumped from 0.28 in 1980s up to 0.447 in 2004, indicating the income inequality reached alarming degree

2004 Gini coefficients in selected countries

|               |              |
|---------------|--------------|
| Hungary:      | 0.244        |
| Denmark:      | 0.247        |
| Japan:        | 0.249        |
| Sweden:       | 0.250        |
| Germany:      | 0.283        |
| India:        | 0.325        |
| France:       | 0.327        |
| Canada:       | 0.331        |
| Australia:    | 0.352        |
| UK:           | 0.360        |
| Italy:        | 0.360        |
| USA:          | 0.408        |
| <b>China:</b> | <b>0.447</b> |
| Russia:       | 0.456        |
| Guatemala:    | 0.483        |
| Hong Kong:    | 0.500        |

<sup>2</sup> Hu Jintao, Building harmonious society crucial for China's progress, Xinhua, June 27, 2005.

|          |       |
|----------|-------|
| Mexico:  | 0.546 |
| Chile:   | 0.571 |
| Namibia: | 0.707 |

(from the United Nations Human Development Report 2004)

### **b. Conflicts between market economy and social environment**

A planned economy had been carried out in China for a long time and the entire social structure was based on it, from government organization, administrative pattern, legal setting to social ideology – all were connected to this old economic pattern. Such a social context is essentially contradictory with the market economy. As the economy is turning from a planned economy to a market economy, the social structure and ideological structure are also suffering a major shake-up.

### **c. Conflicts between development and the natural environment**

The population in China has reached 1.3 billion, about 22% of the world population, while the country's resources are quite limited in comparison to its huge population: the land resource per capita of China is less than 40% of the world average. Water resource is 1/4 of the world average and the forest store is only 1/6 of the world average.

Population growth and economic development are combining to increase demand for many basic resources, leading to a contradiction between development and the environment.

### **3. Harmonious society: a chief goal for China to strive for**

All the above-mentioned factors suggest that China has entered a critical stage with opportunities as well as formidable challenges. The most difficult one is to continue the reforms, at the same time maintaining social stability. So construction of a harmonious society has been proposed as the next goal by the government. And "A harmonious society" is interpreted as "democracy, the rule of law, equity, justice, sincerity, amity and vitality". Social harmony always requires attention to human values, so it is worth noticing that the country's chief leader issued a call to "set all-round human development as its target in economic and social development, and to strive to safeguard the economic, political and cultural rights and interests of the general public to make sure the economic and social progress bring benefit to all of its people"<sup>3</sup>

## **II. China's expectations for the 2008 Olympic Games**

The above social situation and social demands in China provide us with some clues about the unique function that Beijing intends for the 2008 Olympics. That is, to promote a harmonious society internally and to facilitate the formation of a peaceful international environment externally. The reasons for expecting the Olympics to fulfill these functions are based on the fact that certain features of the Olympic Games help to build a harmonious society.

### **1. The goal of Olympic Games is harmonious development**

Olympism tries to establish harmonious interrelations along three dimensions:

- Ø a harmonious development of body and mind at the individual level;
- Ø a harmonious interaction between the individual and society;

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<sup>3</sup> President calls for sustainable development, Xinhua April, 5, 2004.

- Ø a harmonious relationship between human beings and the natural environment.

## **2. The impacts of the Olympic Games are multi-dimensional**

In recent years the Games' impact on the host city have attracted increasing attention and the IOC urged the Games' organizers to pay attention to the legacies left by the Games through initiating the project of the OGGI (Olympic Global General Impact), with 157 variables. Staging the Games, to a certain degree, should help to promote the comprehensive development of the host city and country in terms of their social and economic growth and management abilities.

## **3. The organizing mechanism of the Olympic Games is global cooperation**

Staging the Olympic Games requires a large-scale cooperation of various international organizations, utilizing global resources and serving a global audience. It will help China to meet with and integrate into the world and establish a friendly and harmonious external environment.

### **III. The Concept of Humanistic Olympics and its functions**

According to the BOCOG :

"People's Olympics: The Beijing Olympic Games will be an occasion to spread modern Olympic ideas, while displaying splendid Chinese culture, Beijing's historical and cultural heritage, and its residents' positive attitudes. It will also be an opportunity to advance cultural exchanges, to deepen understanding and friendship between the peoples of the world, and to promote harmonious development between humankind and nature. It will be a time to promote healthy interaction between individuals and society and to foster mental and physical health. In line with the "people-oriented" and "athletes-centered" ideas, Beijing will spare no efforts to provide quality services and to build a natural and social environment that will satisfy all the Games' participants."

Basically the Humanistic Olympics would play the following roles

#### **1. Facilitating social cooperation**

Chinese had a long history of a traditional society consisting of a huge number of small farmers who were self-sufficient. When the People's Republic of China was established in 1949 the state-planned economic structure became dominant and continued for nearly a half century. So how to cooperate with each other based on legitimate principles is still a big lesson for Chinese to learn.

To stage the Olympic Games, which demand comprehensive cooperation among different social sectors, various social interactions will appear between governmental and non-governmental organizations, internal and external relations, individuals and groups, man and nature etc. This would allow everyone involved to recognize the values of the others; appreciate the roles played by the others, and thereby to learn to respect each other.

#### **2. Improving social behaviours**

The market economy did bring vigour to the society and made it prosperous but at the same time it caused various social problems as well. One problem concerning

all members of the society is the decline of social morals, which has already jeopardized the system of social trust.

The Beijing Olympics may provide a chance to change the situation mainly through the Olympic volunteer campaign. A Gallup poll of 1,626 Beijing residents in November, 2000, showed that 94.9 percent of the Beijing residents, including suburb farmers or urban dwellers, supported the Chinese capital's bid with 94 percent ready to serve as Olympic volunteers. The 2008 Olympics are expected to improve social morals through the volunteers' endeavors.

### **3. Stimulating cross-cultural communication**

It is always difficult for ordinary people in different cultural settings to know each other, especially when their cultural backgrounds are very different. Too often our attitudes towards our neighbours are shaped by politicians and elites and their views have strengthened, consciously or unconsciously, our own cultural biases. So it is important for ordinary people to get to know each other directly. The Olympics provide such an opportunity since they are largest international gathering for ordinary people such as athletes, referees, journalists, and spectators. The Beijing Olympics will be a good chance for China to meet the world and world to meet China.

### **4. Disseminating the key values of modern society**

All ages of human society have their key values, in our modern times the rapid development of globalization and modern technology have thrust us into a global village which required China to adapt itself to the changing world and made the following values more crucial: openness, tolerance, friendship and care of the environment. The Humanistic Olympics are certainly expected to contribute to that dimension as well.

## **IV. Challenges faced by the Humanistic Olympics to realize their goals**

Although the organizers of the Beijing Olympics reasonably set up proper goals for the Games it does not mean they can reach these goals without any challenge. The Humanistic Olympics may not achieve the goals of their designers if the following issues are not treated properly.

### **1. The short term goal and long term goal**

The goals of the Humanistic Olympics require quite a long time and great efforts because they deal with the values, attitude and behaviors of human beings. The effects will hardly show in a short time. But the Olympic Games are approaching so quickly that hosting the Games successfully is a more urgent task for BOCOG and the organizers are easily occupied with more concrete cultural events, like opening and closing ceremonies, art festivals and so on, while would have no time to think about the long term goals of the Humanistic Olympics.

### **2. The tangible tasks and intangible tasks**

The huge size of the Olympic Games and multitude of related tasks have put a great pressure on the organizers and it is natural for them to focus on more tangible works like the construction of stadiums, computer systems, and the Olympic village since those projects are so visible and everybody would know if trivial mistakes are made, while the mission of the humanistic Olympics is mostly invisible, at least not as visible as construction and marketing, and may be easily neglected.

### **3. The small elite and the large public**

To realize their effects the Humanistic Olympics have to be carried out by the entire society and people from all walks of life must get involved. As the BOCOG stated, “all members of the society will be able to enjoy the development opportunities brought about by the Beijing Olympic Games, which will attract the attention of and inspire 1.3 billion Chinese to support and care about preparations for the Beijing Olympic Games.” However, due to various reasons, from policy making to media coverage, in many Chinese minds the Olympic Games consist of super stars meeting far away from ordinary people. Perhaps this is the reason that the BOCOG referred to the Humanistic Olympics as the People’s Olympics to correct the wrong ideas. In addition, to get a large number of ordinary people involved in the Games’ preparations would demand a great extra effort, which may be beyond the capacity of the Games organizers.

### **4. The problems of cross-cultural communication**

The Humanistic Olympics are intended to facilitate cross-cultural understanding between China and the world but the question is how to make this happen and lead the understanding to a deeper and more comprehensive level? It cannot be achieved merely by demonstrations at the Olympic ceremonies or arts exhibitions; it demands various sorts of interactive cultural activities participated in by both natives and visitors. Moreover, cross-cultural communication concerns not only China and the developed Western countries, but also diverse cultures from over the world. But what we have seen so far is mainly a concentration on the linkage between China and the developed Western countries.

### **Final remarks**

To interpret China is not an easy task; the reason for saying so is not only because of its unique long history and special cultural heritage, but also because it is in a state of dynamic social transition. A complicated, mixed situation appeared not only in its economy but also in its politics and culture and all social spheres. Many scholars both inside and outside China have failed to predict the country’s fate. China seems too exceptional to their theoretical frameworks. Human society is always diversified. Perhaps we may get close to the truth if we get rid of the rigid frameworks and look at issues in China based on its realities. The Humanistic Olympics is the key concept of the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Its meaning has been explained in different ways and so have its consequences. It is necessary to put the Beijing Olympic Games into the current social context of China in order to explore the concept and predict where it will lead to.