

China, the Asian Games and Asian politics (1974–2006)

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China, the Asian Games and Asian politics (1974–2006)

The Asian Games reflected Asian politics and the relationships between Asian countries. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the Chinese sport in the Asian context. The Asian Games is the largest sports event in Asia. It is held every four years for the purpose of developing intercultural knowledge and friendship within Asia. The Asian Games, from its birth in 1948 was closely linked with policies in post-colonial and anti-imperial Asia. This was demonstrated in the 4th Asian Games in Jakarta in 1962 which this work has discussed previously in the contribution headed 'Sport, Militarism and Diplomacy: Training Bodies for China (1960–1966)'. We now will discuss China's participation in the Games and its relationship with Asian countries and the political implications.

After the Second World War, Asia experienced an awakening. The collapse of colonialism generated an upsurge of freedom, friendship and fraternity among Asian people. Many prominent Asian leaders who had, for decades, waged a determined struggle against colonial powers began to establish a 'New Order' of Asia. G.D. Sondhi, an Indian, saw it as an opportunity to propose his idea of an 'All Asian Games' to unite the newly independent Asian countries through sports meetings. In March 1947 when Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, held the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi, Sondhi's idea impressed the representatives of various countries at the conference. Sondhi then discussed the idea with some Asian delegations at the London Olympics in 1948 and he received a positive response from various countries, including the Republic of China. The Asian Games Federation (AGF) was established in February 1949 by 11 Asian countries. It decided to follow the Olympic pattern and hold the games every four years in Asia. The motto 'Ever Onward' symbolised progress in Asia and the emblem, a full rising sun with 11 rings, symbolised the 11 founding countries. It was believed that the Asian Games were an opportunity for 'renewing contact' among oriental countries.

The 'Two Chinas' issue at the Asian Games

The political change in China in 1949 resulted in two nation states: the Republic of China in Taiwan led by the Nationalist Party and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in mainland China led by the Communist Party. The Republic of China was a founding member of the Asian Games and according to the rules of the AGF would be expected to represent China in the first Games which was planned to take place in New Delhi in 1951. However, Taiwan did not receive the invitation from the organising committee of India. In contrast, the PRC did. Wu Xueqian, who was then the director of international relations of the All-China Sports Federation and later

Vice-Premier and the Foreign Minister of the PRC in the 1980s, recalled what happened:

I remembered it was 26 January 1951 when the Indian Embassy in Beijing held its national day celebration reception. Chairman Mao was present and gave a speech at the reception. Chairman Mao claimed: 'India is a great nation and Indian people are the great people. China and India have a good friendship which has lasted for thousands of years. Today when we celebrate India's National Day we hope that China and India will unite to keep the peace between our two nations'.¹

The Indian ambassador and Indian senior officials at the reception were very pleased with the Chairman's remarks. A few days later, China received an invitation to attend the Asian Games despite the fact that the PRC was not a member of the AGF. Taiwan did not receive any invitation although it was a member of the AGF.

The PRC did not have time to organise a sports team to compete at the Games. Instead it sent a delegation of nine observers led by Wu Xieqian to the Games. The delegation was warmly received by the Organizing Committee and the Indian Premier Nehru. Thus, China's appearance at the Asian Games in New Delhi served the political purpose of building a bridge between India and China.

When the second Asian Games took place in Manila in 1954, the Philippine Olympic Committee followed the rules of the AGF and invited Taiwan to participate in the Games. The PRC did not receive any invitation. From 1954 to 1970 Taiwan represented China at the Asian Games. During this period, the 'Two Chinas' issue became a political issue at the Asian Games as it was at the Olympic Games. The turning point came in 1974 when Iran hosted the Games in Tehran.

The PRC's return to the Asian Games

From the early 1970s China and Iran developed a close relationship. In September 1972 the Iranian royal family and government were invited to visit Beijing and they received there a warm welcome from Chairman Mao Zedong. Subsequently at the Asian Games Federation (AGF) board meeting in September 1973 in Bangkok, Iran proposed accepting the PRC as a member, and revoking Taiwan's membership. The proposal was supported by Japan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, but opposed by Thailand and Malaysia. After some intense debate, the AGF officially admitted the PRC as a member of the AGF on 16 November 1973 and Taiwan was excluded.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) was particularly cautious about this change. At its 74th session in September 1971, the IOC stated that politics should not mix with sport. It claimed that if the AGF did not invite all the countries that were IOC members to attend the Asian Games, then the IOC would not acknowledge the 7th Asian Games which would be held in Tehran in 1974. Other international federations warned that their member countries would be forbidden to compete with non-member countries at the Tehran Asian Games.

With the support of Iran and the AGF, Beijing announced on 17 November 1973 that it would send a team to represent China at the 7th Asian Games in Tehran. It was the first major international event to be attended by China since 1966 when the Cultural Revolution had begun and during which China had been isolated. The government saw the Games as a golden opportunity to restore the PRC's status in the Asian world. The Sports Ministry issued the 'Work Plan for Competitive Sport' on 3 December 1973. The goal it set was for the Chinese national team to achieve

positions in the first three places in most of the events at the Asian Games. As the Games approached in 1974 it became the major task of the Sports Ministry² and two-month selective trials were held to train and select the best athletes for the Games.³

Deng Xiaoping, who was recently free from his political opponents, the ‘Gang of Four’, became a vice-prime minister and began to push the country towards economic recovery and developing international relations. He saw the Games as an excellent opportunity to restore and develop China’s relationship with other Asian countries. Zhao Zhenghong, vice-minister of the Sports Ministry, asked him for advice, ‘What shall we do if athletes from China and Iran encounter each other at some events?’⁴ With his usual pragmatic manner, Deng replied: ‘If you have two gold medals in your pocket, you should use one to pay what you owe to Iran’.⁵ China did. When it met Iran in the final of the water polo China lost the game by one point: 8:9.⁶

In September 1974, the PRC attended the Asian Games in Tehran – the PRC’s first since 1951. Altogether, 269 of its athletes competed in 14 events, it won 33 gold medals and came third in the medal table. China’s return to the Asian Games and its impressive performance were regarded as a major breakthrough in Asian sport and Asian politics especially given that China was still in the middle of the Cultural Revolution.

The IOC was not at all happy about the decision made by the AGF. In a press release on 10 February 1974 it claimed that the AGF’s decision to exclude one of its member countries from the Asian Games was a very disappointing event. At its 5th session in Vienna in 1974, Lord Killanin, the president of the IOC, showed his disappointment over the increasing involvement of politics in sport. He considered that the recent Asian Games had set a bad example in the sports world.

The Iranian Olympic Committee responded to the criticism on 21 May 1975. It gave eight reasons for the exclusion of Taiwan from the AGF and the Asian Games. It insisted that Communist China was the sole representative of China. Immediately, Taiwan issued a statement which argued:

The Iranian Olympic Committee, in its circular letter of 1 November 1975, harped on the Asian Games to justify its argument in favour of recognizing Peking as the sole representative of China in the Olympic Movement. The reasons it gave in the letter not only represent distortions of the true facts, but also constitute an unwarranted attack on the IOC. Moreover, it neglects to mention the fact that the Republic of China (Taiwan) was excluded from the Tehran Games in direct violation of the IOC rules, thanks to the grand design of the Iranian Olympic Committee.⁷

The 8th Asian Games took place in December 1978 in Bangkok. Altogether, 288 Chinese athletes participated in the Games. They competed in 15 events, won 56 gold, 60 silver and 51 bronze medals and rose to second place on the medal table.

China’s return to the AGF and its participation in the Asian Games had provided a potential model for the IOC to address the ‘Two Chinas’ issue at the Olympics. Like the AGF, the IOC voted overwhelmingly in November 1979 to admit the PRC as the Chinese Olympic representative. Unlike the AGF, the IOC also offered Taiwan a solution to remain in the Olympic Games: that Taiwan must change its name from the National Olympic Committee to the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee and to change its flag and anthem accordingly. Taiwan first protested about this solution and agreed at last. The change in international politics

and the increasing influence of the PRC on the sporting world had left Taiwan no other choice. The AGF and the Asian Games would adopt the IOC's model in 1986.

The change from AGF to OCA

Between 1951 and 1981 the Asian Games was organised and governed by the AGF. It was a sports organisation without fixed headquarters or steady income. The president and general secretary of the AGF were provided by the host countries of the Games. The headquarters changed according to the change of host city. Nevertheless the AGF was a semi-independent and democratic sports body and actively promoted unity and cooperation in the region and tried to stick to its principles and rules, even under pressure from superpowers such as the USA, the Soviet Union and China, and from the IOC and International Federations.

In the late 1970s, many Asian countries established national Olympic Committees and began to participate in the Olympic Games. There grew a desire for a strong body to supervise and develop Asian sport and which would have access to the world stage including the International Olympic Movement. Simultaneously, Gulf Arab states emerged with rich financial resources and were ready to play an important role in Asian sport.

Their representative was Sheik Fahd Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Kuwait sports leader. His strong political ambition and anti-Semitic stance would influence the policy and practice of the Asian Games for the next two decades.

In 1978, prior to the 8th Asian Games in Bangkok, members of the AGF met and decided to establish a new Asian sports body to replace the AGF. Ultimately, in November 1981, under the strong influence of the Gulf Arab states, 34 Asian countries approved the proposal for a replacement organisation, to be called the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA). The 34 Asian National Olympic Committees (NOCs) would become the founding members of the OCA, and other NOCs could be admitted with votes from two-thirds of the OCA members. In this way it would be unlikely that Israel would be admitted to the new OCA.⁸

The OCA was formally established in November 1982, during the 9th Asian Games in New Delhi. The election of the president and headquarters became the focus. Sheik Fahd Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the president of the Kuwait National Olympic Committee, as mentioned before, with his strong political ambition and rich billionaire family background showed strong interest in the position. Japan was not interested in the Asian Games in the early 1980s; China did not feel confident enough to serve as the seat of the presidency and India was cooperative after Fahd's donation of US\$15 million to build a sports stadium for the New Delhi Games. Fahd also had all the votes of the Gulf Arab states and other votes from some south Asian countries. In addition, he promised US\$1 million every year to fund the new organisation along with office space, facilities and working vehicles. Consequently, Fahd became the first president of the OCA and the headquarters became fixed in Kuwait.⁹

Taiwan applied for membership of the OCA in order to be able to attend the Asian Games in 1984. However, the OCA committee did not discuss its application until the 10th Asian Games in Seoul in 1986 when the board met and agreed to adopt the IOC model for Taiwan and accept Taiwan as a new member. It provided that the membership will take effect when the constitution of the applicants is duly revised

and approved. Any infringement of the IOC resolution by the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee will result in suspension of its membership.¹⁰

The PRC's return changed the power structure of the Asian Games. It challenged the dominance in Asian sport of Japan and South Korea and it established its position as the sports superpower in Asia. This was clearly evident at the 9th and 10th Asian Games (see Table 1).

The 9th Asian Games was held in Delhi, India in November and December 1982. Altogether, 3,411 athletes from 33 countries competed. The Games saw the beginning of the PRC's dominance of Asian sport. Chinese athletes won 61 gold medals and a total of 153 medals, overtaking Japan to be the top medal winner. After the Games, Western media reported the progress made by the Chinese athletes and gave China the label sport superpower.¹¹ Agence France-Presse commented:

China began to take part in the Asian Games in 1974 and achieved 3rd place. Yesterday, China has overtaken Japan which dominated the Asian Games for 31 years. ...The so called 'Sick Man of East Asia' has become a sports superpower.¹²

When the Games finished on 3 December 1982 the Chinese media congratulated the Chinese team. Editorials were published in the *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, *China Youth Daily*, *Beijing Daily*, *Worker's Daily* and *China Sport Daily* to praise their success. Newspapers in Hong Kong put a high value on the PRC's performance at the Games. The *Wenhui Daily* published an editorial entitled 'From "The Sick Man of East Asia" to the New Sport Super Power'. It commented:

Our athletes brought great news for millions of Chinese at home and abroad. The Chinese people finally wiped out the tag of 'The Sick Man of East Asia' and became a new sports super power in Asia . . . our success was in Asia and we must carry on to achieve greater success in the world scene. Every Chinese wishes the country to break Asian records and set sights on world level. We sincerely hope that Chinese athletes will train hard in the next two years and perform well at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games.¹³

Another editorial entitled 'The Spirit of A New Sports Super Power in Asia' published in *Dagong Daily* argued that China's success at the Games represented the country's competitive spirit and symbolised the rise of China:

A team, a nation and a country must maintain competitive spirit. ...The country is marching toward modernization and our athletes are trying their best to win

Table 1. Gold medals tally of the Asian Games in the period 1951–1990).

<i>Year</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>1st</i>	<i>2nd</i>	<i>3rd</i>
1951	New Delhi	Japan	India	Iran
1954	Manila	Japan	Philippines	South Korea
1958	Tokyo	Japan	Philippines	Taiwan
1962	Jakarta	Japan	Indonesia	Philippines
1966	Bangkok	Japan	South Korea	Thailand
1970	Bangkok	Japan	South Korea	Thailand
1974	Tehran	Japan	Iran	<i>China</i>
1978	Bangkok	Japan	<i>China</i>	South Korea
1982	New Delhi	<i>China</i>	Japan	South Korea
1986	Seoul	<i>China</i>	South Korea	Japan
1990	Beijing	<i>China</i>	South Korea	Japan

Source: The Guangzhou Asian Games Organising Committee, ed., 2009.

honour for the country. The raising of the five-star red flag at the medal award ceremony represented China's image. Sports success symbolized the rise of China.¹⁴

Four years later, China, again, claimed its leading position at the 10th Asian Games in Seoul in 1986. Altogether, 384 Chinese athletes competed in 27 sports and won 222 medals (94 gold, 82 silver and 46 bronze). It was a narrow success against Japan which won 93 gold, 55 silver and 76 bronze (see Figure 1).

The 1990 Beijing Asian Games

The 1980s is a watershed in the history of the People's Republic of China. China had finally ended the Cultural Revolution and begun its 'open door' policy. Its economic reforms brought China out of its isolation. Sport in this context was used as a vehicle to serve China's political purposes. During this period China began bidding for the Asian Games.

The outstanding performance of Chinese athletes at the Asian Games stimulated the Chinese Sports Ministry's desire to host this largest Asian sport event on Chinese soil. In the capital Beijing, Zhang Caizheng, Deputy Minister of Sport, stated:

The Games would be a platform for Asian and Chinese athletes to show to the world that Asian sport had reached international standards; a window to show the world that China, after its open-door policy and economic reform, had become a superpower in Asia again; and a classroom in which patriotism and nationalism would be taught through the Games.¹⁵

The Games would be political Games to fuel China's ambition to establish a national identity and they would play a major role in international politics and economy in a new era. Documents from the Chinese central government underlined these ambitions: 'To hold a successful Asian Games in Beijing is important for the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist country. It is an important event to strengthen the nation's self-esteem and status in the world'.¹⁶

In order to achieve this goal, the government launched a campaign in 1983 to win support from the IOC's Asian member countries. Lu Jingdong, Vice-President of the Chinese Olympic Committee (COC), wrote to all the national Olympic

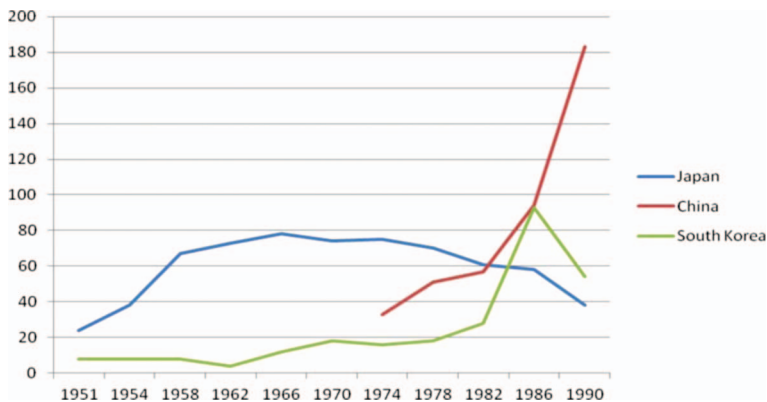


Figure 1. The number of gold medals won by Japan, China and South Korea at the Asian Games (1951–1990).

committees in Asia seeking their support. A Beijing delegation was sent to the headquarters of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) in Kuwait in November 1983 to discuss the possibilities of a Beijing Games. In February 1984, Wu Xueqian, the Chinese Foreign Minister, who had led the Chinese delegation to attend the First Asian Games in New Delhi in 1951, wrote to the chairman of the OCA to assure him that the Chinese government supported the Games and would allow all member countries of the OCA to Beijing to participate in the Games. In early September 1984 two Chinese delegations were sent to visit Western Asian countries including Kuwait, Syria, Yemen, Oman, Iraq and Bahrain and Southern Asian countries including the Philippines, Thailand, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. These communications, visits and diplomatic efforts resulted in good news for Beijing when the OCA voted on 28 September 1984 that China would be the host for the 11th Asian Games in July 1990. After Beijing won the bid, the Chinese people were united under the banner of patriotism. The slogan became 'To host a good Asian Games for the country's glory and for the nation's pride'.¹⁷ Sport provided the perfect platform to display the strength and the unity of the Chinese nation.

The political implications of the Games increased after the 'Tiananmen Square Incident' on 4 June 1989 when the central government and army cracked down on the students' demonstration in the Square. After the bloody crackdown, China became diplomatically isolated from Western nations that had been supporters of the open-door and reform policies. Economically, China faced an abrupt cut in foreign investment and in its tourist trade, with the threat of even more trade sanctions as China's human rights record came under scrutiny.¹⁸ The party hoped to reinvent the image of China. The Asian Games in September 1990 could be used as a window to show China's stability and to win back foreign investors; and to unite the disillusioned Chinese people under the banner of patriotism.

The Games now received the highest attention. Jiang Zemin, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, visited athletes at their training base in Beijing at the Chinese New Year on 28 January 1990 and he encouraged them to train hard for, and to play well at, the coming Asian Games. He told the athletes that their achievements at the Asian Games would show the world China's new image after the economic reforms. In March, Li Peng, the Prime Minister, made a speech at the National Parliament to call for support for the Games:

The 11th Asian Games will take place in our country this year. The whole country must care for and support the Games and make it the best ever. Athletes and coaches must train harder to achieve the best results at the Games.¹⁹

The patriotic feeling, the self-esteem, and the desire to be "strong men" in Asia constituted the so-called 'Spirit of the Asian Games'.²⁰ A commentator argued:

Why do we want to host the Asian Games? In the past Westerners called the Chinese people 'the sick men of Asia.' Today we will use our achievements at the Asian Games to clean out humiliation. The Asian Games is linked to the honour of the country. 1.1 billion Chinese care about it. ...After the 'Tiananmen Incident' happened on 4 June 1989 some people believed that the moon in the West is brighter than in the East and that China's future depends on Westernization. The Asian Games will prove that China is more confident than before. Chinese people believe in the superiority of the socialist system and its creativity. China will have a bright future.²¹

In order to stage a political and sports show, an Asian Games complex, including three major stadia, the athletes' village and the Chinese Sports Museum, were completed in September 1990. Another 55 stadia and training facilities were all completed on time. The Games cost 25 billion RMB in total, of which central government provided 10.5 billion; the Beijing government 6.5 billion; the lottery 4 billion; and the rest came from sponsorship and donations from people around the country.²² China was exposed to grand scale commercialisation of sport for the first time, including advertising and sponsorship. Huo Yingdong (1923–2006), a Hong Kong businessman, donated 100 million RMB to build an indoor swimming pool for the Games;²³ and invested 100 million Hong Kong dollars to build the Grand Hotel Beijing which served the OCA officials, IOC committee members and very important persons (VIPs) from all over the world during the Games.²⁴

The government also used the 'Asian Games Spirit' to mobilise citizens in Beijing. More than 400,000 citizens became volunteers before and during the Games. They undertook jobs including policing assistance, construction work and shopping assistance. Some 400,000 students and workers were trained to be fans. They were divided into 106 teams and assigned by the organising committee to sit in stadia to cheer every competition. Shi Qing, a fan leader and a leader of the Youth League of Beijing's Xuan Wu district, recalled one day that she took her team of fans to the stadium according to the organising committee's instructions. They arrived at eight o'clock in the morning and waited in the stadium for four hours under a blazing sun to cheer a event which lasted for only 60 minutes.²⁵

The 1990 Beijing Asian Games was successful, despite a boycott attempt and criticism of the '1989 Tiananmen Incident'. Thirty-six countries with 6,122 athletes participated in the Games. China sent its best athletes to the Games: 1,500 elite athletes from all over the country were selected to be trained intensively for eight months. After training hard, 670 of them were selected to participate in the Games. They competed in 27 sports and consolidated China's position as Asia's foremost sporting nation by winning 341 medals (183 gold, 107 silver and 51 bronze); and breaking 1 world record, 30 Asian records and 96 Asian Games records. The Games was praised by the Chinese media as a window that showed China's reform achievements and its progress in opening up to the world.²⁶

Although there were some commercialisation implications, the 1990 Beijing Asian Games was a political Games, especially after the 'Tiananmen Incident'. The Chinese government played a major role in organising the Games, including planning, financing, training and management. As indicated by the official slogan: 'Unity, Friendship, Progress', the Games was used as a platform to win trust, confidence and recognition from both the Eastern and Western worlds, and to show the stability and progress of China. It received global attention and generated global publicity. As Richard Espy has argued: 'The modern Games have been utilized not so much for international fair play, peace and understanding as for national self-interest, survival and pride'.²⁷

The Beijing Asian Games also saw the return of Taiwan after 20 years of absence, and greatly contributed to the improvement of the relationship between mainland China and Taiwan. Following the decision made by the OCA in 1986, Zhang Fengxu, President of Chinese Taipei Committee, announced on 12 July 1988 that Taiwan had decided to send its team to Beijing in 1990. In response, on 14 July 1988 Li Menghua, President of China's Olympic Committee publicly welcomed Taiwan to join the 1990 Asian Games: 'the Organizing Committee of the 1990 Asian Games

will do its best to provide all the facilities it can for Taipei Athletes'.²⁸ He highlighted the significance of the Games in serving the relations between mainland China and Taiwan:

It will be the first time that a mega international sporting event will be held in China. The participation of Mainland athletes and Taiwan athletes will facilitate the communication between both sides across the Straits and will contribute to the development of sport of the Chinese nation.²⁹

One year later, an agreement was signed by the Chinese Olympic Committee's representative He Zhenliang and the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee's representative Li Qinghua in Hong Kong on 6 April 1989. It was agreed that Taiwan would use 'Chinese Taipei' at international sporting events including the Asian Games and the Olympics.³⁰ A long-lasting political battle of the 'Two Chinas' at the Asian Games since 1951 finally came to an end. In September 1990, Taiwan athletes made their trip to Beijing and competed using the name 'Chinese Taipei' and under the flag of the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee (see Figure 2). They won 10 silver medals and 21 bronze medals and ranked 16th on the medal tally. They successfully accomplished their ice-breaking mission.³¹

Power and politics at the Asian Games in the post-1990 era

The 1994 Asian Games

The 12th Asian Games was held in October in Hiroshima, Japan. The host city was well known as the first city in history to be destroyed by a US atomic bomb during the Second World War. The Organizing Committee and the OCA selected this symbolic site to promote peace and harmony among Asian countries. Therefore 'Asian Harmony' became the official slogan of the Games and the mascot were a pair of white peace doves called Poppo and Cuccu.

The changes in the countries participating at the Hiroshima Games reflected the changes of Asian politics. The end of the long-lasting civil war in Cambodia and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy had not only brought peace to the country and to the people but had also enabled Cambodian athletes to return to the Asian Games after a 20 years' absence.³² Five former Soviet republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, had gained independence



Figure 2. Flag of the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee.

after the fall of the Soviet Union and for the first time took part in the Games as independent countries. Iraq had been suspended from the Games due to its invasion of Kuwait.

About 7,000 athletes, coaches and officials from 42 countries took part in the 1994 Asian Games. China sent 568 athletes. They competed in 31 sports and won 266 medals (125 gold, 83 silver and 58 bronze).³³ Chinese athlete Mo Huilan was a star of the Games. She nearly swept the gymnastic competitions with gold medals in the team, balance beam, uneven bars, and vault and a bronze in the all-around. The Chinese swimming team won 15 gold medals.

Japan and South Korea ranked 2nd and 3rd on the gold medal tally. The participation of Central Asian countries changed the power structure of Asian sport. Uzbekistan Decathlon athlete Ramil Ganiev broke the Asian record with his score of 8,005. The Uzbekistan defeated China in men's soccer and won the gold medal. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were crowned 4th and 5th respectively on the gold medal tally by defeating strong competitors from West Asia and South Asia.³⁴

Although China came top of both the gold and overall medal tables, a drug scandal at the Games shamed the Chinese team. Eleven Chinese athletes, including seven swimmers (four male and three female), two canoeists, a hurdler and a cyclist tested positive for anabolic steroids and were banned from competing.³⁵ This also resulted in protests by the US and Australian swimming federations, claiming that China should be banned from international swimming competitions.³⁶

The 1998 Asian Games

The late 1990s was a difficult era for Asia. The 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis happened. Lee Teng-hui, President of the Republic of China (Taiwan) challenged the One-China policy and enraged Beijing, resulting in mainland China conducting a series of missile tests. The US government responded by deploying two carrier battle groups, including the USS *Nimitz*, into the Taiwan Strait in March 1996.³⁷

The 1997 Asian financial crisis started in Thailand and swept to Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Laos, the Philippines and other Asian countries. The Asian economy suffered serious hits. Accompanying the economic crises there was political and social unrest in Asia. In Northeast Asia, political and military conflicts between North Korea and South Korea continued. In South Asia, the long-lasting tensions and conflicts between India and Pakistan due to territorial disputes on Kashmir escalated to a new level. Both countries conducted nuclear tests in 1998.³⁸ In Central Asia, Afghanistan was suffering from the civil war between the Taliban and the United Islamic Front.³⁹ In West Asia, Iraq was in the middle of the disarmament crisis and tension grew between Iraq and the West.

Against this background, the 13th Asian Games took place in Bangkok in December 1998. Its slogan was 'Friendship beyond Frontiers'. The aim was to promote harmony, cooperation and friendship among Asian countries. Although Thailand had been the starting place of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and was heavily affected, the Thai government tried its best to support the Games. It was hoped that the Asian Games would help Thailand's economic recovery and give confidence to domestic and foreign investors.

New sports venues including Rajamangala National Stadium, the biggest sports stadium in the country with a capacity of 50,000 people; the Bangkok Asian Games Aquatic Centre; seven indoor sports stadia and one Athletes Village, which could

accommodate 10,000 people, were built to serve the Games. The government also invested a large amount of money to improve the infrastructure of Bangkok.

It also endeavoured to bring all the Asian countries to the Games. With financial support from the Thai Government, cash-strapped countries such as Laos, North Korea and Cambodia sent their athletes to the Games.⁴⁰ However, three countries were absent: Afghanistan withdrew because of economic difficulties and the unrest within the country; Saudi Arabia withdrew for political and diplomatic reasons;⁴¹ Iraq was still banned from the Games for its invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The Games also reflected the continuing political disputes between China and Taiwan in the context of the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. China protested when the Taiwan delegation raised its national flag instead of its Olympic flag in five places in Bangkok. The Organizing Committee hoisted down Taiwan's national flags and replaced it with the Olympic flags.⁴²

Finally, 9,699 athletes, coaches and officials, from 41 countries and regions, took part in the Bangkok Asian Games between 6 and 20 December 1998. The Chinese athletes competed in 24 sports and won 274 medals (129 gold, 77 silver and 68 bronze).⁴³ Korea overtook Japan by winning 65 gold medals. Thailand won 24 gold medals and climbed up to 4th place.

The Bangkok Games was also the first Asian Games after China had regained sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997.⁴⁴ Athletes from Hong Kong, for the first time, competed under the flag of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (see Figure 3). The Blue Ensign colonial flag (see Figure 3) used by Hong Kong between 1959 and 1997 became history. Hong Kong athletes performed well at the Games. They won five gold medals and ranked 13th in the gold medal tally.⁴⁵

The 2002 Asian Games

The 14th Asian Games was held in Busan, South Korea from 29 September to 14 October 2002. It was the first Asian Games of the twenty-first century. A total of 9,912 athletes, coaches and officials from 44 countries and regions competed in 419 events and 38 sports, making it the biggest Asian Games in history. It was also the first time in the 52-year history of the Asian Games that all 43 member countries of the Olympic Council of Asia – from war-ravaged Afghanistan to the newly independent East Timor – participated.⁴⁶

The slogan of the Games was 'New Vision, New Asia'. The emblem of the Games was an image symbolising the development and unity of the Asian people. Both the slogan and emblem symbolised peace, co-operation, friendship and common

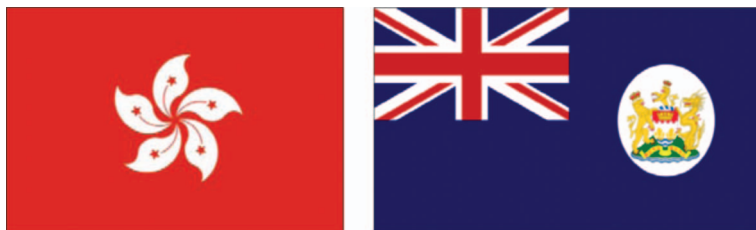


Figure 3. Flag of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the PRC (left) and the colonial flag of Hong Kong (right).

prosperity in the Asian world. The Games greatly contributed to the improvement of North and South Korean relations. It was the first time that North Korea had taken part in an international sports event held on the soil of South Korea. During the opening ceremony,

Athletes from North and South Korea jointly strode into the stadium hand-in-hand and side-by-side, wearing the same uniforms. They marched behind a special 'reunification flag' depicting a powder blue outline of the Korean peninsula on a white background, which symbolized hope that the two rivals would eventually reunite.⁴⁷

South Korean President Kim Dae-jung commented, 'North Korea's participation shows the yearning of the two Koreas for peace and reconciliation'.⁴⁸

China sent 686 Chinese athletes to compete in 357 events and 36 sports. Eighty-five per cent of the team members were young and inexperienced. The purpose was to use the Asian Games as a training ground to prepare them for the 2004 and 2008 Olympic Games. Nevertheless, they performed well and won 150 gold, 84 silver and 74 bronze medals, keeping China at the top of the gold medal tally.

The Games also saw the transformation of Macau – the first and last Western colony in China – from a Portuguese colony to a Chinese territory.⁴⁹ Athletes competed under the Regional flag of the Macao Special Administrative Region of the PRC (see Figure 4) and won 4 medals (2 silver and 2 bronze). The team ranked 29th in the gold medal tally.⁵⁰

The 2006 Asian Games

The 15th Asian Games was held in Doha, Qatar on 15 December 2006. Altogether, 6,520 athletes competed in 46 disciplines from 39 sports. As in the 2002 Asian Games, China intended to again use the Asian Games as a training ground to train the young athletes; to give them more big-event experience; and to prepare them for the forthcoming Beijing Olympic Games. Famous Olympic athletes had disappeared from the Games and two-thirds of the team members were new and inexperienced. Cui Dalin, secretary-general of the Chinese sports delegation, said frankly: 'We want to train our youngsters for the Olympics'.⁵²

Nevertheless, there were still enough world-class athletes in the team to secure the Asian title for China. Led by Liu Xiang, the 110-metre hurdles world record holder; Cheng Fei and Yang Wei, triple world gymnastic champions; Guo Jingjing, female diving champion; Lin Dan, badminton star; and Zou Shiming, world boxing champion, the Chinese athletes won 361 medals (165 gold, 88 silver and 63

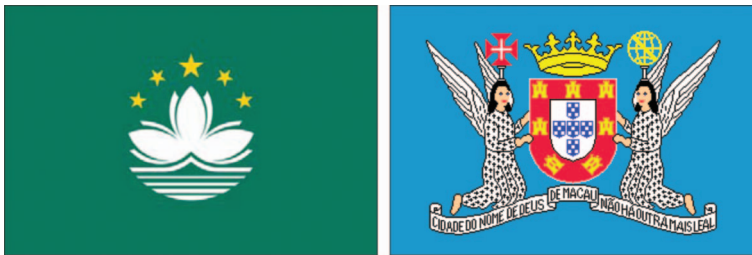


Figure 4. Flag of the Macao Special Administrative Region of the PRC (left) and the colonial flag of Macao used at the Previous Asian Games (right).⁵¹

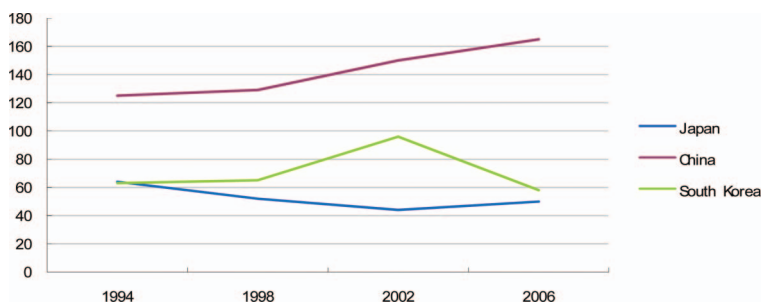


Figure 5. The number of gold medals won by Japan, China and South Korea at the Asian Games (1994–2006).

bronze) and ensured the continuing dominance of China at the Asian Games⁵³ (see Figure 5).

Conclusion

The history of China's participation in the Asian Games between 1974 and 1990 shows the close relationship between sport and politics and reflects the changes in world politics and the economy. Sport has a great importance, not only for the establishment of the PRC's identity, but for the prospects of eventual reunification with Taiwan. It has played, and still plays, an important part in the PRC's strategy of bringing Taiwan back to where Beijing conceives Taiwan's proper place to be – that is, part of a unitary Chinese nation. The 1990 Beijing Asian Games represented how an international sporting event was linked to international relations and the power and image of a country. It also showed the active role of sport in domestic politics and reflected how sport served the consolidation of China's national unity, national stability and the Socialist ideology held by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership.

The 1994, 1998 and 2002 Asian Games reflected the economic, political and social changes in Asia including the Asian financial crisis, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, conflicts between the two Koreas, tension between China and Taiwan, the end of British colonisation in Hong Kong and Portuguese colonisation in Macau. The Games also reflected the Asian people's call for peace, cooperation, friendship and common prosperity, and contributed to the construction of a united and harmonious Asia. The history of China's participation in the Asian Games has demonstrated that, as long as conflicts and confrontation exist in society, sport and politics will be inseparable. As Juan Samaranch claimed, 'It is silly to pretend that sport is not involved in politics'.⁵⁴

Notes

1. X. Wu, 'My Memory of the Asian Games, 4.
2. Fu, *The History of Sport in China*, 379.
3. Ibid.
4. Dong Huang, 'China Entered the Asian Games in 1974. Deng Xiaoping Made the Plan', *Global Times*, 16 December 2006.
5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.
7. Tang, *China at the Olympic Games 2*: 321.
8. Interview of an OCA official by the author, 10 April 2006.
9. Ibid.
10. Hao, *The History of Sport in China*.
11. Song and Qiao, *People's Memory*, 374.
12. Ibid., 374.
13. 'From "The Sick Man of East Asia" to the New Sports Super Power', *Wenhui Daily*, 3 December 1982.
14. 'The Spirit of A New Sports Super Power in Asia', *Dagong Daily*, 3 December 1982.
15. Fu, *The History of Sport in China*, 84.
16. Zhang, 'The Changes Brought by the Asian Games', 280.
17. Ibid., 84–85.
18. Ibid., 271.
19. Cheng, Yingsheng and Qilu Liu, ed. *The 1990 Asian Games*. Wuhan: Wuhan Press, 1990.
20. Zhang, 'The Changes Brought by the Asian Games'.
21. Li, *The 1990 Asian Games*, 23.
22. Ibid.
23. It was renamed Yingdong Swimming Pool after the 1990 Asian Games.
24. Mou and Wang, *The Legend of Chinese Businessmen*.
25. Wang, 'Cheering Team at the Asian Games', 48.
26. 'From the Beijing Asian Games to the Guangzhou Asian Games', *China Youth Daily*, 12 November 2010.
27. Espy, *The Politics of the Olympic Games*, 27.
28. 'China Welcomes Taiwan's AG Trip', *Manila Standard*, 16 July 1988.
29. Reporter, 'Welcome Taiwan's Participation in the 1990 Beijing Asian Games', *PLA Daily*, 15 July 1988.
30. Yaming Wu, 'Statement made by the Office of Taiwan Affairs', *People's Daily*, 23 July 1989.
31. Shihong Ye, 'The Chinese Team Captures Most of the Gold Medals', *The Liberty Times*, 11 November 2010.
32. Previous to the 1994 Asian Games, Cambodia participated in the 1954, 1958, 1962 1970 and 1974 Asian Games.
33. Editorial Team of the Yearbook of Chinese Sport, *Yearbook of Chinese Sport (1994–1995)*.
34. Olympic Council of Asia, 'Overall Medal Standings – Hiroshima 1994', Olympic Council of Asia, <http://www.ocasia.org/Game/MWinner.aspx?AMWCode=16&GCode=1> (accessed 5 February 2011).
35. Kidd, Edelman, and Brownell, 'Comparative Analysis of Doping Scandals'.
36. 'China's fall from grace', BBC Sport: http://cdnedge.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/other_sports/839040.stm
37. Ross, 'The 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and Use of Force'.
38. Dixit, *India-Pakistan in War & Peace*.
39. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.
40. Sadec Asia Pacific, '13th Asian Games News Coverage, News Wire Archives of the 13th Asian Games', Sadec Asia Pacific, <http://www.sadec.com/Asiad98/news1206.html> (accessed 2 May 2011).
41. *Sport Weekly*, 2 December 1998.
42. Sadec Asia Pacific, '13th Asian Games News Coverage, News Wire Archives of the 13th Asian Games'.
43. HERESports Ministry, *Sport in China in the Past 30 Years*, 117.
44. Hong Kong became a colony of the British Empire after the First Opium War (1839–1842). The 156 years of British colonial rule in Hong Kong ended on 1 July 1997 when the sovereignty was officially transferred from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China.
45. Olympic Council of Asia, 'Overall Medal Standings - Bangkok 1998', Olympic Council of Asia, <http://www.ocasia.org/Game/MWinner.aspx?AMWCode=17&GCode=1> (accessed 6 February 2011).

46. East Timor used to be the colony of Portugal between 1702 and 1975. It was then occupied by Indonesia between 1975 and 2002. The country gained independence in May 2002 and became a member of the United Nations in September 2002.
47. Jong-Heon Lee, 'Asian Games Open in South Korea', United Press International, 29 September 2002. http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2002/09/29/Asian-Games-open-in-South-Korea/UPI-40631033315236/
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50. Olympic Council of Asia, 'Overall Medal Standings - Busan 2002'.
51. Macau participated in the 1990, 1994 and 1998 Asian Games as a Portuguese colony. Athletes competed under the flag of the Municipality of Macau (in Portuguese, Concelho de Macau).
52. Nick Mulvenney, 'Mainland Expects a Doha Gold Rush', Reuters, 29 November 2006. http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?we_cat=8&art_id=32906&sid=11091079&con_type=1&d_str=20061129&fc=4
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