

# Why Did China Bid Twice for the Olympic Games? Sport, Nationalism and International Politics\*

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## Introduction

Hosting the Olympic Games is seen by China and most Asian nations as a means for national restoration, the construction of national identity, economic prosperity and international recognition. In this sense the Olympic Games have significant symbolic power. China ended its isolation in 1978, re-joined the International Olympic Committee in 1979; In 1984, they took part in the Summer Olympic Games for the first time since the early fifties; and in 1985 established their "Olympic Strategy". Hosting the Olympic Games was an important part of the strategy to make China a sporting superpower, as well as a political and economic power, that could compete on equal terms with the US in the West and Japan and South Korea in the East; Thus Beijing was a candidate city for the Games in 2000 and 2008. This paper will examine the reasons for China's two bids; the factors which resulted in the failure of the first bid and the success of the second; and the impact of the bids on the development of Chinese society and of international politics.

## 1980s: The Initiative - from the Asian Games to the Olympic Games

To understand China's first bid for the Olympic Games it is necessary to understand their successful bid to host the Asian Games in 1990 in Beijing, as this bid stimulated China's ambitions to host the Olympics. The 1980s were a watershed in the history of the People's Republic of China. They had finally ended the Cultural Revolution and began an 'open door' policy. Its economic reformation 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 Asian Games were started in 1951 in New Delhi under the Asian Games Federation and the slogan 'Ever Onward'. For complex historical reasons Taiwan were recognised by the International Olympic Committee from 1954 to 1973. It was not until 1974 that the People's Republic of China (PRC) took part in the Asian Games. Their participation in the Asian Games changed the landscape of Asian sport, for within five years China challenged the dominance of Japan and Korea and became the dominant sporting nation in the Asian Games.

The outstanding performance of the Chinese athletes at the Asian Games stimulated the desire of the Chinese Sports Ministry to host this largest sport event in Asia on Chinese soil and 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!'<sup>1</sup> The Games were a political games to fuel China's ambition to establish a national identity and play a major role in international politics and economy in a new era. Documents from the Chinese central government underline these ambitions: 'To hold successful Asian Games in Beijing is important for the Chinese Communist Party and socialist country. It is an important event to strengthen our nation's self-esteem and identity in the world.'<sup>2</sup>

Also the general Chinese public interpreted the Games' significance in terms of identity and restoration of Chinese pride: 'Why do we want to host the Asian Games? In the past the Chinese people were called by the Westerners as 'the sick men of Asia'. Today we will use our achievements at the Asian Games to clean out the humiliation. The Asian Games is linked to the honour of the country. 1.1 billion Chinese care about it. ...The Asian Games will prove that China is more confident than before. ... China will have a bright future!'<sup>3</sup> The patriotic feeling, the self-esteem, the desire to be "strong men" in Asia constituted the 'Spirit of the Asian Games.'<sup>4</sup>

Thus official politics as well as public opinion underwrote the paradigm of a sport mega-event's symbolism which fosters nationalism and modernity in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If Beijing were to succeed in winning the bid, it would be the first major international sport event ever to take place in China. In order to achieve this goal, the government launched a campaign in 1983 to win support from other Asian countries. Various activities and diplomatic efforts resulted in good news for Beijing when the OCA decided on 28th September 1984 that China would be the host for the 11th Asian Games in July 1990.<sup>5</sup> After Beijing won the bid, Chinese people were united under the banner of patriotism: 'To host a good Asian Games for the country's glory and for the nation's pride' became the slogan.<sup>6</sup> Sport provided the perfect platform to display the strength and the unity of the Chinese nation.

However, "becoming real" to Asia was not the ultimate goal of China. In July 1990, during the preparation for the Asian Games, Deng Xiaoping, General Secretary of the Communist Party accompanied by the Minister of Sport Wu Shaozu, visited the National Olympic Sport Centre, which was being built for the Asian Games. He instructed Wu Shaozu: 'After the Beijing Asian Games, we must host an Olympics Games, for hosting the Olympic Games will inspire the national spirit and help the development of the economy. As a Sport Minister do you have this determination to host the Olympic Games?'<sup>7</sup> Wu Shaozu therefore organised a steering working group to draft a propo-

sal of hosting the Olympic Games after Deng's visit. Eight months later, in February 1991 Premier Li Peng approved the Proposal for the Bid for the 2000 Olympics which was jointly submitted by the Ministry of Sport, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Beijing Municipal Government.

The 1990 Beijing Asian Games was a success story, despite a boycott attempt as a result of the government's treatment of protests in Tiananmen Square the preceding year. 36 countries with 6,122 athletes participated in the Games. China also firmly established its position as Asia's foremost sporting nation at the Games by winning 60% of the gold medals (183) (see table 1). In addition China developed firsthand experience of bidding and hosting a major sports event. In Beijing, more than 400,000 citizens were mobilised to serve the Games as volunteers before and during the Games. Finally China was exposed to the grand scale commercialization of sport for the first time, including advertising and sponsorship. The Games was praised as a window that showed China's reform achievements and its progress in opening up to the world.<sup>8</sup>

#### Medal Table - 1990 Asian Games

Rank	Country	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1	China	183	107	51	341
2	Korea	54	54	73	181
3	Japan	38	60	76	174

The success of the Beijing Asian Games strengthened China's determination to host an Olympic Games. Immediately after the Games, the bid for the 2000 Olympics began: the Beijing 2000 Olympic Bid Committee (BOBICO) was established on 18 March 1991 and the official application for hosting the 2000 Olympics was submitted to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) on 3 December 1991.

1993: The First Time - Bid for the 2000 Olympic Games

However, when the BOBICO submitted its application to the IOC, IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch told Zhang Baifa, Vice Chairman of the BOBICO: 'You have started a difficult campaign. You are facing a lot of competitors. I wish you good luck.'<sup>9</sup> The IOC President's prediction was right. The bid was mixed with international politics and became a difficult task for Beijing. In the early 1990s, world politics were changing in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The United States began to re-evaluate its strategy toward China.<sup>10</sup> After Clinton came to power in January 1993, the Clinton administration began to use human rights issues to put pressure on the Chinese government, hoping to end the Communist regime and transform China into a democratic country.<sup>11</sup> The objective was to spread the ideologies of democracy and free market economies and to gain more political and economical interests in Asia.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, as soon as Beijing publicly announced its intention to host the 2000 Olympic Games, the United States politically lobbied against China's bid for the Games. A

resolution, which was introduced by California Congressman Tom Lantos (D-Burlingame) in opposition to the Beijing bid because of human rights violations, was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in July 1993.<sup>13</sup> The resolution stated:

*To express the sense of the House of Representatives that the Olympics in the year 2000 should not be held in Beijing or elsewhere in the People's Republic of China... Whereas holding the Olympic games in countries, such as the People's Republic of China, which engage in massive violations of human rights serves to shift the focus from the high ideals behind the Olympic tradition and is counterproductive for the Olympic movement: Now, therefore, be it Resolved, That (sic!) the Senate-*

*(1) strongly opposes the holding of the Olympic Summer Games in the year 2000 in the city of Beijing or elsewhere in the People's Republic of China and urges the International Olympic Committee to find another, more suitable venue for the Games;*

*(2) urges the United States representative to the International Olympic Committee to vote against holding the Olympic Summer Games in the year 2000 in the city of Beijing or elsewhere in the People's Republic of China; and*

*(3) directs the Clerk of the Senate to transmit a copy of this resolution to the Chairman of the International Olympic Committee and to the United States representative to the International Olympic Committee with the request that it be circulated to all members of the Committee.<sup>14</sup>*

Sixty U.S. senators signed a letter that was sent to each IOC member. The letter called on all IOC members to reject Beijing as a site for the Olympic Games. In order to oppose the holding of the Olympics in Beijing, Lee Hamilton, Chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, wrote a letter to the President of the IOC. He criticised China's human rights record and stated: 'The Administration has made protection of human rights a fundamental tenet of its foreign policy. In particular, the Administration has expressed deep concern about the human rights situation in China... Given the prestige that hosting the Olympic games confers on the host country as well as the goal of the Olympics to foster comity among nations, the administration strongly believes that a country's human rights performance should be an important factor in the selection of a site for the 2000 Olympics.'<sup>15</sup>

China responded in August 1993. During an interview in Beijing, Zhang Baifa, Deputy Mayor of Beijing and Vice Chairman of the BIBOCO, told Australian television that Beijing was unhappy about America's non-binding congressional resolution: 'If Congress can pass a resolution objecting to our bid for the 2000 Olympics, we could, frankly, boycott their Atlanta Games in 1996. If our bid fails, we could write to Congress to protest about their interference and justifying our revenge.'<sup>16</sup> He added that considering the future development of the Olympic movement, China would not do so.<sup>17</sup> Zhang's statement was reported by the Western media as a hint from Beijing that China might boycott the 1996 Olympics as revenge for the United States' opposition - if it failed to win the bid.<sup>18</sup> These reports

put Beijing into an unfavourable position. Fearing that IOC members might turn their backs on Beijing due to the boycott threat, Chinese Olympic officials denied the media's interpretation and announced the official stance. He Zhenliang, President of the Chinese Olympic Committee and the IOC member in China, stated at an IOC news conference in Monte Carlo on 17 September 1993: 'The media misunderstood Zhang Baifa's statement'19... 'Regardless of the vote of Sept. 23, China will continue to do everything to contribute to the Olympic movement. There was never a boycott threat. The question of a boycott of the Atlanta Games does not exist.'20

The bid also reflected the subtle relationship between the Taiwan (Chinese Taipei) and the People's Republic of China. After Beijing announced its bid for the 2000 Olympics, He Zhenliang and two other officials from the Chinese Olympic Committee visited Taiwan to seek support from Wu Jingguo, the IOC in Taiwan (Chinese Taipei). In an interview by the local media about the PRC's visit, Wu Jingguo claimed: 'I will vote for the interest of the Chinese nation and the interest of the Olympic Movement,' and further 'before I departed to Monte Carlo for the IOC session, my parents told me: "When you vote, you must remember that you are Chinese!" Although they did not ask me to vote Beijing, I understood what they mean.'21 Despite having been instructed by the Taiwan government not to support the PRC, Wu Jingguo voted for Beijing on 23 September 1993. He also helped to convince other IOC Committee members to support Beijing.22

As a result of long-lasting Sino-African relations established in the early 1950s23 and China's contributions to the development of sport in Africa by designing and constructing sports facilities,24 Beijing also received strong support from the African IOC members in the voting for the 2000 Summer Games in 1993.25

In addition, as with the bid for the 1990 Asian Games, Beijing's bid for the Olympics was supported by many overseas Chinese people. The Hong Kong businessman Huo Yingdong donated one million U.S. Dollars to the IOC for the construction of the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.26 He also promised to donate a huge amount of sporting grants to Africa and planned to donate a stadium, which would seat 100,000 people, to the Games if Beijing won the bid.27

Despite strong opposition from the United States and Zha's speech in relation to the boycott issue, Beijing did well and took the lead in the first three rounds of voting (see table 2). However, Beijing lost out in the final round to Sydney on 23 September 1993 by 45-43.28 The unexpected defeat was partly attributed to a "secret plot" in which it was alleged the Australian Olympic Committee secured two crucial votes by offering inducements to African delegates.29

City	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4
Sydney	30	30	37	45
Beijing	32	37	40	43
Manchester	11	13	11	
Berlin	9	9		
Istanbul	7			

Many people in Beijing had believed that their front-running bid would win and they were disappointed when news of the defeat reached China. It was reported that 'disappointment and a sense of rejection was palpable in the city (Beijing) and in the faces of Olympic supporters who had gathered at hotels and meeting halls.'30 Zhao Linmin observed that the failure of the Beijing bid in 1993 brought back the memory of the 'hundred years of humiliation' and thus stimulated the first explosion of Chinese nationalism in the reform era.31 Guided by contemporary Chinese nationalism which was based on the theory of 'Western containing'32 and Huntington's idea of the 'clash of civilisations',33 many Chinese, especially the nationalists, 'believed that the United States was against the rise of China and saw Beijing's lost bid for the Olympics as part of a Western plot to contain China. Chinese urban youth and intellectuals especially felt that the West treated China as a third-rate country and was conspiring to keep it from taking its rightful place on the world stage.'34

Facing growing resentment which endangered the stability of the country and the relationship with the West, the Chinese government tried to calm down the public by urging them to accept the defeat with an open mind. An editorial entitled 'Marching toward Internationalisation' published on the People's Daily argued:

*We respect the IOC's choice and congratulate Sydney on its success... There are many complicated reasons for the defeat. We should not blame anyone. Instead, we should carry on. We will follow the principles of Olympism and continue to support the Olympic movement. China will continue to embrace the world and march toward internationalisation. An open China wishes, and will be able to, host the Olympics. It is every Chinese people's dream to host the Olympics...*

*The most important thing is to participate. We participated in the Olympic movement by bidding for the 2000 Games. The bid itself has promoted our national spirit and consolidated national unity. It also contributed to the development of the Chinese economy. Although we failed to win the bid, we have benefited from it and have learned a lot. We understand that we must develop the economy and build China into a strong country. Only by doing so, China could win trust and be known and understood by the world. Everything will be easy by then.*

*We can neither turn arrogant in victory nor lose heart in defeat. We believe that China, with one fifth of the world population, a territory of 9.6 million square kilometres and a history of 5000 years, will host the Olympic Games in the near future! We will work hard and wait for that day!35*

**2000 Summer Olympics Bidding Results**



## 2001: The Second Time - Bid for the 2008 Olympics

Although the defeat in Monte Carlo in 1993 disappointed many Chinese it further strengthened China's determination to host the Olympic Games. As soon as the news of China's unsuccessful bid reached Beijing, many Chinese wrote to the Sports Ministry and urged it to initiate another bid for the 2004 Olympics. Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou announced that they would like to be the host cities.<sup>36</sup> IOC President Samaranch also showed his continued support for China and hoped that Beijing would bid for the 2004 Games: '...always, we hope the People's Republic of China will bid again. We know they are disappointed, but maybe they will try again.'<sup>37</sup> In response to the public, the local governments and the IOC, the Sports Ministry and the Chinese Olympic Committee jointly held a meeting in early 1994 to discuss the feasibility of the bid for the 2004 Olympics. A decision was made at the meeting that Beijing would go ahead with a bid for the 2004 Olympics. Consequently a proposal was sent to the state council for approval. However, after careful consideration, the central government rejected the proposal.<sup>38</sup>

They were reluctant to run the risk of losing again especially as the USA still opposed them.<sup>39</sup> It decided that China would need more time to prepare economically and politically for another bid. In addition, Chinese officials were also concerned about relations with African countries in the context of international politics. As Samaranch stated in late 1993: 'China has a special relationship with Africa. If there is an African bid, China will not bid.'<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, in order to secure more votes during its first bid, China had promised African countries that no matter if Beijing won or lose the right of hosting the 2000 Olympics, it would support African countries to host the 2004 Olympics.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, when South Africa announced its African bid for the 2004 Olympic<sup>42</sup> the Chinese government decided to put Beijing's plans on hold in order to support South Africa. Apart from the concern of Sino-African relations, the Chinese government was reluctant to run the risk of losing again as the United States continued to lobby against China in international politics and opposed Beijing's bid for the 2004 Olympics.<sup>43</sup>

China decided to launch its second bid for the right to host the Games in November 1998. Liu Qi, Mayor of Beijing between 1999 and 2003, explained the rationale for doing so at the launch of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Bid Committee (BOBICO): 'The central government and the State Council support the bid for the 2008 Olympics...Hosting the Olympics will inspire the spirit of the nation, consolidate national unity, show the world the achievements of China's modernization campaign. It will strengthen China's international influence, boost mutual understanding and friendship between Chinese and the peoples of the world, facilitate the 'open-up', and achieve a peaceful international environment for the socialist modernization.'<sup>44</sup>

The move was supported by Chinese people in general. According to a survey conducted by GALLUP, 94.9% of the citizens in Beijing (13 million people) supported the hosting of the Olympics.<sup>45</sup> 94% percent of the citizens in Beijing wanted to serve the Olympics as volunteers.<sup>46</sup>

The BOBICO received numerous support letters and donations from both home and abroad.<sup>47</sup> In order to make the bid successful, the BOBICO adopted new strategies for its second bid:

1. Learning from the experts. Talents from all fields were summoned by the BOBICO to help the Beijing bid. Professors from universities in Beijing, experts from the Sports Ministry, journalists, artists, economists and overseas Chinese were invited to work as consultants to produce the Beijing Bidding Report. Experts who understood and had experience in the Olympic bid process from Australia, Paris, the United States, Britain, Japan, Switzerland and Sweden were invited by the BOBICO to help the Beijing bid. The BOBICO also sent a delegation to Sydney in 2000 to learn from its rival in 1993.<sup>48</sup>

2. Publicizing the bid nationally and internationally. Celebrities were appointed, such as film stars like Jackie Chan and Gong Li became 2008 Olympic Games Ambassadors. The Three Tenors<sup>49</sup> were invited to perform in the Forbidden City on 23 June 2001. The concert attracted more than 30,000 people. After the concert, Luciano Pavarotti publicly expressed his support for Beijing's Olympic bid.<sup>50</sup>

3. Winning support from IOC members. Chinese IOC and IF members began to campaign worldwide for global support of Beijing's bid.<sup>51</sup>

4. Facing criticism of China's human rights' records. As for the previous bid, human rights issue became a significant barrier for Beijing. The strategy for Beijing this time was not to avoid the criticism of human rights issue in China but to respond to it according to the guidelines of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights<sup>52</sup> and the Olympic spirit and principles.<sup>53</sup> The BOBICO publicly announced its stance with regard to the human rights issue. Liu Jinmin, Deputy Mayor of Beijing and Vice President of the BOBICO argued in February 2001: 'By applying for the Olympics, we want to promote not just the city's development, but the development of society, including democracy and human rights...If people have a target like the Olympics to strive for, it will help us establish a more just and harmonious society, a more democratic society, and help to integrate China into the world.'<sup>54</sup>

5. Addressing the issue of environment. Beijing's poor environmental condition was another barrier. During the bid, many foreign journalists criticised Beijing for its dirty, smoggy, drought-ridden and congested environment. Evidently, the city had more environmental hurdles to clear than its Western rivals including Paris and Toronto. The government responded quickly. A large part of the eight million U.S. Dollars budget for the bid of the 2008 Olympics was used to improve traffic infrastructure and the environment of Beijing, and to build more parks and green areas. The BOBICO also announced in early 2001 that twenty non-government environmental groups had collectively signed an 'Action Plan for a Green Olympics' to improve the environment to support the bid.<sup>55</sup> In July 2010, Liu Jinmin told the media that the government had

launched a 10-year environmental protection plan and 'the efforts to improve Beijing's environment will press ahead, regardless of whether the Olympics come to China or not.'<sup>56</sup>

In February 2001 the members of the visiting IOC Evaluation Commission inspected Beijing. They gave positive feedback to Beijing on 15th May 2001: 'It is the Commission's belief that a Beijing Games would leave a unique legacy for China and to sport and the Commission is confident that Beijing could organize excellent Games.'<sup>57</sup>

Finally, China sent a strong and carefully selected team to present Beijing's plan for hosting the 2008 Games at the 112<sup>th</sup> session of the IOC which was held in Moscow in July 2001.<sup>58</sup> They delivered their presentation in front of more than 119 IOC members who were to elect the host city from for the five candidate cities including Beijing, Toronto, Paris, Istanbul and Osaka. He Zhenliang, who witnessed China's long journey toward the dream of hosting the Olympic Games, made an emotional speech at the end of the presentation: 'By voting for Beijing, you will bring the Games for the first time in the history of Olympism to a country with one fifth of the world's population and give to this billion people the opportunity to serve the Olympic Movement with creativity and devotion'<sup>59</sup> He also promised to the IOC: 'in seven years from now, Beijing will make you proud of the decision you make here today.'<sup>60</sup> The vote was conducted in the afternoon of 13<sup>th</sup> July 2001. In the second round, Beijing won 56 votes giving them an overall majority and rendering further voting unnecessary.<sup>61</sup>

**2008 Summer Olympics Bidding Results**

City	Round 1	Round 2
Beijing	44	56
Toronto	20	22
Paris	15	18
Istanbul	17	9
Osaka	6	—

Eight years after the narrow defeat to Sydney in 1993, Beijing had been awarded the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. When the news reached Beijing, more than one million people in Beijing took to the streets to celebrate. 400,000 people gathered at Tiananmen Square to cheer (figure 1). 'Achieve the century-old dream of the Chinese nation', 'The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' became popular slogans around China.<sup>62</sup> The following day, the People's Daily commented on the success and explained the significance of the Games. It highlighted the relationship between the Games, patriotism, national unity and modernisation: 'The Chinese people's 'Olympic Dream has come true...we have been waiting for this moment for so long! The Chinese people are so happy. We scream and shout for this success...To host the 2008 Olympics is a great opportunity for China in the new century. It will promote patriotism among Chinese people of

all ethnic groups, facilitate the Reform and Opening up of China and contribute to the construction of a modernized socialist country.'<sup>63</sup>



People Celebrate in the Success of the Bid for the 2008 Olympics at the Tiananmen Square in Beijing on July 13, 2001

Source: The Beijing Organising Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad, The Collection of the Documents for the Bid of the 2008 Olympics

Beijing's success in its bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games was regarded as a milestone on the road of national revival. Many Chinese were celebrating the rise of China rather than the Olympic Games. As Liang Lijuan, a retired journalist in Beijing, claimed: 'People will remember Beijing. They will remember the night of July 13, 2001 when all the Chinese people and foreign Chinese cheered for the success of the bid. They cheered and sang, they felt proud to be Chinese. What a great poem the scene was! Can we find another moment in China's history that people cheered for the country together? The Chinese nation has suffered so much during the past centuries. After hard work, we are welcoming the great revival of China. That is why the news of the success for the bid of the Olympics excited so many. The passion of the Chinese nation, the excitement and the feeling of pride and elation erupted like a volcano.'<sup>64</sup>

**Conclusion**

The reform and opening-up of China since the 1980s showed the 'outside world' to the Chinese people and made them realise that China's standard of living, science, technology, military, education and economy lagged behind its 'old Western enemy'. At the same time, Chinese people shared hope with the government that China would recover its strength, achieve modernisation and become a powerful country again in the near future. In this climate, the desire to host the Olympic Games ran high. It was driven by the powerful demand for national revival. Beijing's two bids for the Olympic Games reflected the close relationship between sport, international poli-



tics and China's nation building.

China's confidence in launching the bids twice in eight years would not have happened without its strong economic development and its increasingly important role on the international political stage. The failure of the first bid stimulated China's determination to win the second time. Through the two bids China learned about international political games and connected itself to the world, in particular the Western world. The success of the bid in 2001 was seen by most of the Chinese people as a landmark in the history of the Chinese nation. They celebrated not only Beijing's Olympic victory, but more importantly, the rise of China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Notes

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