

# Olympic Diplomacy: A New Way to Reshape Beijing's International Image

Wenlong Song<sup>1,\*</sup>, Xinyu Xing<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of International Relations, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, 100024, China

## Abstract

The Olympic Games can attract the attention of billions of people all over the world in a short period of time. For its host city, it means an excellent advertising show, a chance to update its city image to the whole world. At the same time, with the temporary multilateral platform of sports diplomacy provided by the Olympics, leaders of all countries gathered to showcase friendly relations and their national status, reach reconciliation or promote cooperation. Beijing is a beneficiary of sports diplomacy. After successfully hosting the 29th Summer Olympics in 2008, Beijing will host the 2022 Winter Olympic Games, thus becoming the first city in the world to both host the Summer and Winter Olympics. Drawing on its decades of experience in sports diplomacy, China has formed an increasingly mature model to enhance sports competitiveness and national soft power through bilateral sports interactions, participation in international competitions, holding major events, and involvement in international sports organizations. Despite of the challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, the escalated competition between China and the United States, and the complexity of the economic situation at home and abroad, Beijing still has the confidence to present its new city image on the global stage by embracing another Olympics success in 2022.

## Keywords

Olympic Games; Sports Diplomacy; Beijing, City Image.

## 1. Introduction

As China's capital city, Beijing's name is frequently used to refer to the central government of People's Republic of China on all kinds of reporting occasions. It is also widely known as the Chinese city that hosts the most international sporting events. Thanks to the huge success of the 2008 Olympic Games, Beijing's city image was spread to every corner of the world by newspaper, TV medias, and the Internet. China's national status in the world has been significantly improved. The stereotype that existed among some people outside China for long has been broken and the world's perception of China has been refreshed. From the isolation in the international society in the middle of the 20th century to the diversified diplomatic layout of current time, China has made great efforts during the past decades to this end. In such process, sports diplomacy has played an indispensable role in the reshaping of China's international image. Beijing is good at using the "non-political" nature of sports to achieve specific political goals. For example, the "Ping Pong Diplomacy" in the 1970s helped China flexibly reverse its situation of strategic isolation in International society and the Beijing Asian Games in the early 1990s helped eliminate the negative public opinion and political bias after a political disturbance happened in China. It is always possible for sports diplomacy to help China find the light when the country walks into the darkness of political predicament, illuminating its political prospects. It is not an easy thing to replicate the success of Beijing. Currently, in the context of the quick spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and the downturn of global economy, China is going to face a great deal of challenges from all aspects in terms of holding major

sporting events. Beijing is trying to show the overwhelming victory it has achieved in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and its growing national strength by hosting the 2022 Winter Olympics. Beijing's achievement is in stark contrast to the bleak and chaotic situation of western countries. It is foreseeable that the success of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics will once again demonstrate China's institutional advantages, economic strength, cultural attraction and international leadership, and reshape Beijing's city image at the same time.

## 2. Sports Politics and Urban Public Diplomacy

In terms of its origin, sports is a non-political social activity that enables people to communicate and interact across language barriers, cultural differences and geographical restrictions. However, with the deepening of globalization and the increasingly closer international exchanges, sports has been expected to have more political functions, so it is also called "war in the age of peace." Sports diplomacy has become an important part of a country's foreign policy. It is a bilateral or multilateral diplomatic activity that achieves certain political and diplomatic goals through sports exchanges conducted by countries, international organizations, and relevant parties. It has dual attributes. On the one hand, sports diplomacy shows the attribute as a tool and regards sports as a model diplomatic tool; on the other hand, sports becomes the object and content of a country's diplomacy. Countries interact with each other based on sports-related affairs, and sports becomes a significant tool for countries to realize national interests and to display their soft power. As the most influential sporting event in the world, the Olympic Games itself is diplomacy. From the application to host the event to the voting of the International Olympic Committee, from the setting of Olympic events to the order of the national teams for entering the stadium at the opening ceremony, all these are diplomatic issues and require the active involvement of all countries' governments and their diplomats.

The Olympics has a self-contradictory dual attribute. It advocates staying away from politics while at the same time relying on political propaganda. The Olympic Charter stipulates that the Olympics remains neutral politically. However, it is inevitable for nationalism and political factors to intervene in. Athletes have nationalities and are naturally labeled with certain ideologies and political attitudes. What is also quite contradictory is that, nationalism and politics simultaneously weaken and support the Olympics. During an Olympics event, the great enthusiasm arisen by national chauvinism for winning glory for both the country and the nation will last for a long time, from the preparation period to the closing of the Game. The International Olympic Committee is also committed to protecting Olympic values, preventing excessive political intervention and avoiding possible political protests during the Olympics event.

Public sports activities are endowed with special symbolic meanings politically. Sporting events are "low-risk, low-cost and high-profile", and are one of the major tools to express national pride and stimulate national cohesion. During the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, Mao Zedong delivered speeches twice at the opening ceremonies of the liberated areas' sports meetings to carry out war mobilization and to win the moral support of the International Anti-Fascist Alliance. In the history of Olympic Games, delegations from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea have entered the stadiums with the "Korean Peninsula flag" together four times at the opening ceremonies, reflecting the wish of the two countries for peace and for the easing of the situation in the district of Northeast Asia. Leaders from India and Pakistan once attended the cricket match between the two countries, they met, shook hands, and watched the game together. "Cricket diplomacy" helped ease the tension between the two countries. World leaders' attendance in major events can symbolize a friendly relationship with the host country. On the contrary, when a country leader refuses to attend the sporting events held by the host country, it indicates a kind of negative

attitude towards the two countries' bilateral relations. In some cases, leaders can use their attendance at the opening ceremony of an Olympics as a bargaining chip for the host country's diplomatic compromise or other political interests. In July 2008, at the critical moment of China-Russia land border talks, Russian Prime Minister Putin expressed an attitude of vagueness and hesitation to attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games, which led to Russian foreign minister Lavrov's visit to Beijing and the rapid conclusion of the agreement between China and Russia.

Sporting events provide a platform for countries to resolve their conflicts. The principle of fair competition in sports and the principle of non-conflict in diplomacy have created an environment for countries' peaceful coexistence. When countries put their contradictions and disputes aside and compete with each other in a fair way, obeying the rules just like how athletes do on sports fields, the friendship among them and the mutual understanding among their peoples will be enhanced. Sports meetings can always gather a group of extremely powerful people, providing an informal platform obviously different from the negotiating table on diplomatic occasions for summit diplomacy. Such informal meetings and talks can often lead to the conclusion of a formal agreement. The creative "ping-pong diplomacy" in the 1970s was a typical example. Sports exchanges were the very first steps "ping-pong diplomacy" tried to take. It paved the way for the improvement of the US and China's bilateral relations and changed the strategic balance between the two super powers, the Soviet Union and the United States. The baseball diplomacy between the US and Cuba in the 1970s also showed the two countries' will to ease the tension between them. With its unique flexibility and operability, sports diplomacy can easily succeed at occasions where traditional diplomacy may fail. With the lively atmosphere in the stadium, the estranged relations between some countries can have some changes quietly and gradually. However, the politicization of sports cannot be completely avoided. Case studies of the 1936 Berlin Nazi Olympics, the 1972 Munich Olympics, and the 2002 World Cup final show that sporting events can provide a basis for ideology, creating and encouraging a new sense of national identity. During the Cold War, the two camps' mutual boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics and the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics made the already intense opposition of the two sides severer.

### 3. Eliminating Prejudice: Efforts of China's Sports Diplomacy

From its government to its people, China has always had great enthusiasm for the Olympics. From participating in it to hosting an Olympic Game, China's "Olympic dream" comes from the growing national pride and also the desire for international recognition. By winning a championship on the sports field, China hopes to get rid of the humiliating collective memory of being continuously oppressed and invaded over 100 years' time in its modern history, and to eliminate the stereotypes and political bias concerning China in the narratives of the Cold War, and also to reshape a new national identity and a vibrant international image.

China always strives for a lawful and independent seat in all international sports organizations. China followed a tortuous course to establish its contact with the International Olympic Committee from the very beginning. Shortly after its founding, the People's Republic of China attended the 1952 Olympic Games. However, due to the presence of the delegation from Taiwan, China had to cut off its contact with the IOC later to express its strong discontent of and firm opposition to the situation of "two Chinas" in Olympics. It was not until 1971 when China resumed its lawful seat in the United Nations and its legitimate rights in other international organizations that Chinese athletes returned to the Olympics. For the People's Republic of China, the legitimacy of its seat in a sports organization concerns its core national interests, that is, the unification of the nation. On all official occasions of various sporting events, the Taiwan region cannot appear as a sovereign country.

On global sporting stage, Chinese athletes made tremendous efforts to break the stereotyped prejudice of "sick man of East Asia" foreigners had against China for long, using their gold medals and champion cups. In the early decades since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the main goal of China's sports diplomacy was to break diplomatic isolation and to show the world the positive look of a new China. In this period, China's sports diplomacy was under the influence of its eager mindset to "prove myself" and "narrow the gap with advanced countries" to a large extent. In the 1960s, China had thousands of sports diplomacy activities with more than 50 countries, among which the most impressive one was the 1st Games of the New Emerging Forces held in Jakarta in 1963. This game was mainly attended by countries from the third world. At that games, China totally won 66 championships and broke many world records, proving its powerful strength in sports competition, winning the respect and recognition from broad Asian, African and Latin American countries. In 1984, China achieved its breakthrough of getting no Olympic gold medals. From the year of 1981 to 1986, the Chinese women's volleyball team won five consecutive championships in international matches, which was a sports miracle that greatly boosted China's national morale.

By hosting major international sports games, China has shown the world its new national image and cityscapes. It was in Beijing, 1990 that China for the first time hosted a large-scale multi-sports event. The success of the 1990 Beijing Asian Games marked a major step forward for China to have completed its conversion from a games participant to a games host, from "going outside" to "inviting inside". People all over the world started to truly understand both the modern and fashionable sides of Beijing, an ancient city with a history of thousands of years long. Beijing's city image thus became more vivid and more lively in the world. The real change took place in 2008 when Beijing hosted the 29th Summer Olympics and Paralympics, which was hailed as the most successful Olympic Games in history. China gave the world a lively, brilliant master class in terms of "national brand" and public diplomacy by sports, presenting to the world a civilized, harmonious and confident "new" China, which to a certain extent eliminate public opinion's misunderstandings of China like "authoritarianism", "closed and backward" and "gold medal-oriented". With the huge success of Beijing Olympic Games, China has stepped up its public sports diplomacy and has achieved fruitful results in its foreign aid to the sports cause of third world countries.

China influences the formulation of sports rules by joining international sports organizations. After China has proved its strength many times on the sports field, the gold medal fever inside China gradually subside. And China's sports diplomacy tend to be more rational. The Chinese government is paying more attention to improving the physical fitness of Chinese people. A balance is reached between China's competitive sports and mass sports. The Chinese government advocates sports for all and invests heavily in the development of sports industries in order to enhance the comprehensive strength of China's sports cause. In 1998, the National Sports Committee of China was reformed into General Administration of Sports of China. Its subordinate agency, the Department of International Liaison, was responsible for affairs concerning foreign countries or related to Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan inside the sports system, and was also responsible for the exchange and cooperation with international sports organizations. Some departments that had close ties with sports diplomacy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Ministry of Sports for example, also set up their relevant agencies to promote sports diplomacy. In terms of its participation in international organizations, China has become the member of 100 international sports organizations. And Chinese serve as executive committee members in more than half of the federations of Olympic sports. Totally, there are now nearly 300 Chinese holding a post in international sports organizations, among whom more than 230 people hold a post higher than secretary general.

China tries its best to have a good image in the International Internet community and to eliminate the misunderstandings and prejudices about China's sports cause. The Internet has

already become an important way for the international communication of China's sports cause. However, in an Internet environment dominated by the English language, China's sports information is in a position of discourse weakness or even ignored directly. For long, people all across the world are surrounded by the massive reports of the right-wing liberal medias in the western world. And it is difficult for them to hear the rational voice from China. Western medias have a long-term and stubborn prejudice against China. They continuously doubt the "whole nation system" of China and the country's fairness of sports. They tend to relate China's sports cause with the negative memories about the Soviet Union, labeling Chinese athletes as "gold medal manufacturing machines" trained in a whole nation system. In the narratives of western medias, Chinese athletes are portrayed as individuals in lack of vitality and personality in an authoritarian system. On the Internet, China is trying to bring changes to the stiff style of its official discourse, encouraging non-governmental and social forces to speak out in international public opinion filed. Through NBA star Yao Ming, tennis star Li Na and many other "sports diplomats", China has successfully showed the world a new image of its own sports cause all these years. During Yao Ming's time at the Houston Rockets(2002-2011), because of their common idol, basketball fans from the two sides got to know each other better.

#### 4. To Replicate the Success of the Beijing Olympics

Beijing has already reaped a great deal from the success of the Olympics. Juan Antonio Samaranch, the late former President of the IOC, believed that to choose Beijing as the host city of the 29th Summer Olympic Games marked the beginning of a "Chinese Century"; Henry Kissinger, the former US Secretary of State, believed that the Beijing Olympics was "a momentous step in the development of China's relationship with the world, a step that will have a positive, significant impact on China and will in a sense bring Chinese people great inspirations from the games." Liu Qi, president of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games, said that the 2008 Olympic Games "left huge and abundant heritage both in culture and sports". As China marched toward a global power in the early 21st century, sports, as a sort of collective experience, witnessed China approach the center of the world stage as a member of the international community. Under such circumstances, Beijing successfully won the bid to host the 2022 Winter Olympic Games, with the great aspiration to replicate and surpass its own success 14 years ago and to write new brilliance.

However, when Beijing was granted the chance to host the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in July 2015, no one could predict that there would be so many world order-subverting events happening in the following seven years: President Trump undermined the mutual understanding and trust the US had long maintained with its allies across the Atlantic, and launched a trade war between the US and China; the Covid-19 pandemic is now raging all across the globe, causing great damage to the global industrial chain and the world's trade and economy, leaving countries waiting anxiously in pandemic blockade and the "war" for vaccine distribution. Because of the sharper contradiction between the rising labour and organizing cost and the declining political and economic benefits of the Olympics, the appeal of hosting the Olympics for a city seems to be waning. After a year's postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, there has been a wave of "canceling the Olympics" in Japan. The overwhelming negative attitude of the polls has cast a shadow on the Tokyo Olympic Games, making the quality of this game very worrisome. In the complex international situation currently, it is foreseeable that Beijing will be under tremendous pressure to host the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. It is indeed a tough task to gather athletes from all countries together under the premise of ensuring the prevention and control of the Covid-19 pandemic. We should have sufficient confidence in China. Beijing also needs to dispel the hostility of those who choose to boycott the 2022 Winter Olympics through diplomacy, and to soothe those who show their worries and anxiety of it. And



Beijing also needs to encourage its third world "Olympic partners" to actively participate in the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

In 2020, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee clearly stated that China will be built into a "leading sports nation" by 2035. This goal cannot be achieved overnight. It will take decades' time to make it come true. China is paying more and more attention to its balanced and sustainable economic growth, its social well-being, public health and sports cause. Since the beginning of the 20th century, China has been trying to integrate into the western-dominated sports system. In this process, China learned from and showed the respect the sports rules first stipulated by the western world, and introduced non-local sports to its own land and promoted them. However, China has ignored the development of local sports to a certain degree. Since the 2008 Olympic Games, China started to learn from the experience of Japan and South Korea consciously and introduced Chinese martial arts into the Olympic Games. Nowadays, Chinese Kungfu courses are also taught at Confucius Institutes around the world. At the same time, China has increased its investment in sports industry overseas. In order to stimulate the growth of its domestic football industry, China has bought four youth football clubs from the Premier League, La Liga and A-League of Australia.

Major sporting events are a key component of China's "soft power" strategy. China has put a lot of resources into the promotion of its national image, but its rate of return on investment is quite low. This is called the "soft power deficit". The soft power evaluation index does not speak highly of China's international reputation. In more than 30 countries, China is ranked in the 25th place. Although China has deeply impressed the world with its economic strength, it is difficult to completely reverse the external world's stereotype of China as an antiquated, outdated and closed communist country. But China's efforts are not in vain. Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has hosted many major sporting events, which demonstrates China's economic achievements and miracles of its city construction in a good way and facilitates the rapid development of its sports investment, sports industry and event tourism.

The way that Beijing provides public sports products to the world enhances its leadership. With China's accumulation of sports resources and the improvement of its competitiveness in sports, China has gradually given full play to its strengths and enhanced its ability to provide public products to the world in global sports, including foreign aid in sports, sponsorship and investment in major international sporting events, and participation in the system construction and rule making of international sports organizations. All these years, China's "stadium diplomacy" has attracted much attention. Through the implementation of its overseas sports infrastructure assistance programme that follows the principle of equality and mutual benefit and attaches no political conditions, China has built dozens of stadiums all over the world, most of which are located in Africa, such as the Tanzania National Stadium, and the National Stadium of Gabon, the host country of the 2012 Africa Cup of Nations final. Besides, Laos, Mongolia, Costa Rica and Papua New Guinea all have cooperation with China in their stadium construction projects. Through these assistance projects in its sports diplomacy, China actively practices the vision of a community of shared future for mankind of "extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits", which can serve as good replacement of the idea of Eurocentrism.

## 5. Conclusion

The complex relationship between sports and international politics is fully reflected in the Olympic Games. In the current international order, there are three obvious trends. One is the trend of international multi-polarization, which indicates the more and more frequent involvement in the Olympic Games of new emerging countries like China, India and Brazil. China of 2008, Russia of 2014 and Brazil of 2016 all belong to emerging BRICS countries. Another is

the trend of nationalism's regaining the upper hand over internationalism. Ethnic and religious factors are increasingly affecting sports. The politicization of sports has not abated, but shows a growing trend on the contrary. The voices and actions of boycotting the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games appeared very often in the public opinion field of international society. And the trend for new Internet technologies to gradually shape and change the public's attitudes towards sports. The fight for digital power among nations has also affected sports. There is not only a direct connection between sports diplomacy and city image through major sporting events, but also a connection between virtual network and the building of city image.

By reviewing China's interactions with the world in its sports diplomacy, we can find that from the pursuit of international recognition after the founding of the People's Republic of China to the active participation in international sporting events and diplomacy since the Reform and Opening-up in the 1980s, China is becoming more and more confident. This confidence comes from China's accumulation of sports resources and the improvement of its competitiveness in sports, and also from the enhancing of the country's soft power and national cohesion. Beijing benefited a lot from the 2008 Olympics in terms of infrastructure, sports economy, city image, culture, emotions and the sense of national pride. Such heritage has become the solid foundation for Beijing to hold the 2022 Winter Olympic Games 14 years later. Despite faced with challenges of uncertainty from all sides in international politics, the economic situation at home and abroad, the Covid-19 pandemic, and non-traditional security, Beijing is ready to give the world a wonder again.

## Acknowledgments

This work was funded by the school-level scientific research project (No. WHCB18C001, WHCB18C002) of Beijing International Studies University.

## References

- [1] Wasserstrom, Jeffrey N. 2000. 'Beyond Ping-Pong diplomacy: China and human rights'. *World Policy Journal*, 17(4): 61-66.
- [2] Keech, Marc, and Houlihan, Barrie. 1999. 'Sport and the end of apartheid'. *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 88(349): 109-121.
- [3] Van Hilvoorde, Ivo, Elling, Agnes, and Stokvis, Ruud. 2010. 'How to influence national pride? The Olympic medal index as a unifying narrative'. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 45(1): 87-102.
- [4] Shahid, Shakeel Ahmad. 2015. 'India: Pakistan. Sports as a tool for peace: cricket diplomacy'. *International Journal of Coaching Science*, 9(1): 51-63.
- [5] Carter, Thomas. F., and Sugden, John. 2012. 'The USA and sporting diplomacy: comparing and contrasting the cases of table tennis with China and baseball with Cuba in the 1970s'. *International Relations*, 26(1): 101-121.
- [6] Alan Tomlinson, Christopher Young, *National Identity and Global Sports Events: Culture, Politics, and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup*, State University of New York Press, 2006.
- [7] Guoqi Xu. *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2008. Pp. xi, 377.
- [8] Berkowitz, Pere, Gjermano, George, Gomez, Lee, and Schafer, Gary. 2007. 'Brand China: using the 2008 Olympic Games to enhance China's image'. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 3(2): 164-178.

- [9] Robin Jones, James (Jim) Riordan, *Sport and Physical Education in China*, Taylor & Francis, 1999
- [10] Jonathan Grix, Paul Michael Brannagan, Donna Lee, *Entering the Global Arena: Emerging States, Soft Power Strategies and Sports Mega-Events*, Springer Singapore; Palgrave Pivot, 1st Edition, 2019
- [11] Spry, Damian. 2016. 'What is soft power? Hint: it's not footing Sam Dastyari's bills'. *The Conversation*, 7 September 2016. Accessed 23 July 2020. <http://theconversation.com/what-is-soft-power-hint-its-not-footing-sam-dastyaris-bills-65026>.
- [12] Shambaugh, David. 2015. 'China's soft-power push: the search for respect'. *Foreign Affairs*, 26 August 2015. Accessed 8 March 2017. [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/china-s-soft-power-push](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/china-s-soft-power-push).
- [13] Motoh, Helena, *Olympism with Chinese Characteristics: an Intercultural Problem*, FILOZOFSKA ISTRAŽIVANJA, 115 God. 29 (2009) Sv. 3 (477–484).
- [14] Luša, Đ. (2017). Olympic Diplomacy and the Emerging States: Striving for Influence in the Multipolar World. *Croatian International Relations Review*, 23, 102-73.