
LOOKING BEYOND THE 2008 OLYMPICS

By Fan Baihua

The international community needs to look beyond sports, beyond Beijing and beyond 2008 in order for the 2008 Olympics to have any lasting relevance for Chinese society.

Some people say that sports are sports, and no other connotations should attach to them. The ancient Greeks would beg to differ, as would the founders of the modern Olympic Games and, at the other extreme, the Communist Party of China. From ping-pong diplomacy to the Olympic Games strategy, sports in China have long been unduly “politicized.” The cost of a single medal won on the playing fields to uphold national prestige will cost 700 million *yuan*, even without taking account of the cost exacted from China’s severely exploited athletes.¹ The absurd preparation and selection processes politicize the Olympics to an extent that makes a mockery of the spirit of the event.

Some people link the 2008 China Olympics (I feel it is inaccurate to refer to them as the “Beijing Olympics”) to the Games held in Germany (1936) and in the Soviet Union (1980). This analysis, while justified, overlooks too many differences. Just as with sessions of the National People’s Congress, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and the Party Congress, as well as various international summit meetings, the majority of China’s citizens take little notice of the Olympics. The situation has become one in which a small number of people manipulate their monopoly on power to chat and argue and congratulate themselves, while the majority of people have no idea what they’re saying or doing, or why.

On the surface, such indifference could also be attributed to many people in Europe and the United States. The difference is that in China there are a great many things about which people should concern themselves,

yet are unable to do so; for example, whether China is in fact capable of hosting the Games; whether Olympic venues should be so luxurious; whether, because of the Olympics, the children of Beijing’s migrant workers should be forcibly returned to their home villages, and 50 schools for migrant children should be closed . . . People in China do not have the right to know, the right to criticize, the right to participate or question; they are passive and scattered.

What Europeans or Americans care about is purely a matter of personal choice; what Chinese care about is what the Chinese government decides they should. The government is always instructing the people to care about various issues, but people learned long ago that all they should really be concerned about is how to obey the Party’s will and restrain their own.

In such a situation, what can anyone do regarding the Chinese Olympics? This appears to be a meaningless question, because if you are a Chinese citizen, all the government wants from you is your support and endorsement, or that you allow yourself to be posed in front of a camera lens and repeat a few inane comments.

However, if you are an official of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), or the United Nations Secretary-General or High Commissioner for Human Rights, or the leader of an important human rights organization, or a politician from a major nation, or a member of the press with the opportunity to come to China and make use of the new policy temporarily relaxing rules for foreign media, you should make a point of listening to the groans of Chinese laborers and the clang of shackles being broken by rights defenders; you should listen to the wails resounding throughout the vast land of China.

You need to do more than take in the spectacle of the Games or calculate how to make money out of the Chinese Olympics. You need to be able and willing to expose and halt the abuses that have been perpetrated through the Games right from the outset.

Some political leaders in Canada and the United States are already speaking of boycotting the “Chinese Olympics.” European Union political leaders have also issued a solemn warning, and human rights organizations have published reports on how the Chinese authorities have not fulfilled their promise to promote human rights through the Games.² It is very likely that progressive groups and individuals from overseas will perform some highly imaginative “sensitive acts” that Chinese rights defenders and ordinary Chinese people should be able to carry out but in fact find very difficult to do. This brings to mind certain people: Qin Yongmin—still in prison today—who 10 years ago mounted his own individual challenge to the Chinese Olympic bid³; rights defense activists who appeal for the release of political prisoners; banned civil society groups; hundreds of thousands of petitioners; forcibly relocated individuals shunted hither and yon, migrant workers. How will they be brought into the Olympics? Their situation leads me to suspect that human rights in China will be even more restricted as a result of the Olympics.

Will everyone in China and overseas who is concerned about human rights in China be like the French-based NGO Reporters Without Borders, which, following contact with some unnamed officials, suddenly abandoned their boycott of the Olympics?⁴

China’s economy is increasingly associated with an “Olympics bubble,” and many people expect to cash in even before the Olympics begin. Please, world, do not let the dazzling 10-day spectacle of the Olympics cause you to overlook the long-term sufferings of the Chinese people, which will not be cured by an increase in China’s GDP! Anyone with a sense of conscience must know that you can and should do something for the Chinese people before the Olympics conclude in August 2008. The Olympics should not be separated from the struggle for Chinese people’s freedom and democracy. Rescuing the spirit of the Olympic Games is an expression of love for humanity itself.

BENEATH THE SURFACE OF THE “GREEN OLYMPICS”

Here I would like to focus more specifically on the environment, which is the focus of Beijing’s goal for a “green Olympics.” Ms. Gunilla Lindberg, vice-president of the IOC, stated that air pollution, traffic congestion and poor English skills are three major problems for the Beijing Olympics.⁵ Pan Yue, the open-minded deputy director of China’s State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), has taken advantage of the Olympics to press for action on China’s environmental crisis, a highly commendable course.

The fact remains, however, that the selfish, narrow, petty, greedy and vicious nature of Communist bureaucrats is the main cause of the absolute mess that is China’s environment. The system foils the best efforts of a truly good and clean official such as Pan Yue, just as Shi Meilun could not reform China’s stock market and Li Jinhua has not been able to bring order to the financial chaos of central government organs.⁶ Pan Yue’s reform of environmental monitoring has failed to halt deterioration of China’s environment, or bring about the slightest change to his SEPA colleagues, and I believe that his enlightened but largely ineffectual efforts are tolerated only for the sake of the 2008 Olympics.

What is the relevance of a “green Olympics” when individual environmental activists are made to pay such a bitter price for their efforts?

Chinese officials reported that, 10 years ago, Beijing had only 100 “blue sky days” per year. Last year, this figure reached 241 days, although Ms. Lindberg says it is very difficult to notice the change. The moment China won the right to host the 2008 Olympics, the government announced that in accordance with international requirements, China would make daily announcements of the pollution index for major cities nationwide. I pointed out at the time that the announcements would inevitably show constant improvement to the pollution index and the overall achievement of “blue sky” goals. And indeed, this has been the experience in Nanjing in the ensuing years,



Xu Jiehua (C), wife of environmental activist Wu Lihong, and his sister Wu Liying (L) leave the court where Wu was sentenced to three years in prison. Photo: AFP/Getty Images

with a huge gap between official pronouncements and what people actually experience.

The phenomenon may be similar to that reported in 2001 by Hong Kong political commentator He Lian-giang, who wrote, “A Beijing environmental activist revealed that along some of Beijing’s main thoroughfares, such as Chang’an Avenue, some of the grass is dry and yellow. So in order to impress the Olympics assessment team with Beijing’s suitability to host the games, the authorities actually painted the grass green.”⁷

Beijing is investing over 100 billion *yuan* in fixing the environment for the Olympics, apart from the huge outlay of capital needed to move the Shougang Steel plant several hundred miles outside of the city.⁸ If China really can take this opportunity to bring environmental degradation under control, it will be a very good thing. But now that the one-year countdown has started, what worries me is that a great amount of time has already been squandered, and that the government will just leave ordinary people to bear the burden of the usual approaches, such as restricting private car use and clos-

ing down factories in Beijing, Shanxi and Hebei for a certain number of days, as it did during the World University Games.

In any case, what is the relevance of a “green Olympics” when individual environmental activists are made to pay such a bitter price for their efforts? A case in point is Wu Lihong, renowned as the “Guardian of Taihu Lake.”

FIGHTING FOR GREEN BEYOND BEIJING

Official responsibility for Taihu Lake constantly shifts between the provinces that share it, Zhejiang and Jiangsu. I have previously proposed the establishment of a Taihu Province or a Taihu City to more closely bind the fate of the lake to those who live in its vicinity. But in fact, a single administration might protect the lake no better than the current joint arrangement, as demonstrated by the various waterways that fall under the sole jurisdiction of Nanjing. If not for the beautification efforts lavished on Nanjing for the 2005 National Games, the outer Qinhuai River would no doubt still be

as pungent and bereft of life as many of its tributaries remained even during the National Games.

The latest outbreak of pollution in Taihu Lake had tremendous impact. It is hard to know what is more terrifying: the fact that half of Wuxi City was without water for 100 hours, or the fact that the officials and department responsible for monitoring pollution escaped unscathed. It is likewise horrifying that the local government did not release news of the incident for three days afterward, and that the relatively well-educated people of southern Jiangsu Province did not follow the example of the people of Xiamen⁹ and take to the streets in protest. The failure to hold accountable those responsible for the incident simply encourages officials and business owners to remain derelict in their duty to the public.

Mr. Pan Yue always warns against radicalism in civil environmental protection organizations, but what constitutes radical? I don't think there are any radicals among China's civil environmental organizations. Speaking frankly, even top environmentalists Liao Xiaoyi and Liang Congjie¹⁰ are, if anything, too meek and mild. Back in the 1990s, in Yixing, more than 10,000 people who had reached the limits of their tolerance protested against the pollution in Taihu Lake. Were they too radical, or was it the officials who suppressed them who were barbaric? Could it not be said that it is because the people of Yixing were suppressed by militia back then that Taihu Lake ended up a reeking mess this year?

People all over the world admire America's scenic wonders, and while this is related in part to American government and business resources and strategy, who can deny the achievements of American environmental "radicalism" over the last century? The fact is that throughout history, China's least privileged have been called angry or enraged, but not radical.

This is the context of the arrest of Wu Lihong. For over a decade, Wu has devoted himself to protecting Taihu Lake from its primary polluters in Yixing City, Jiangsu Province, and exposing collusion between government and polluting industries. In 2005 he was named one of China's top 10 environmentalists.¹¹

On April 13 this year, Wu was arrested by local police, reportedly just before going to petition the government in Beijing on Earth Day. Wu is now accused of extorting 18,000 *yuan* from a factory proprietor. His friend Zhang Jianping insists that Wu has been framed. "Governments and enterprises have tried many times to buy him off," Zhang says, "He refused them all."¹²

Wu's supporters observe that since 1993, Wu has fought thousands of chemical plants in the area, and has petitioned the higher authorities countless times about polluting enterprises and the corrupt officials who shield them. Local officials once offered Wu, then vice sales manager of the Nanfang Soundproofing Factory, a six million *yuan* machinery contract. The director of a large chemical plant also stated his intention to send Wu two million *yuan* worth of foreign trade business, while other enterprises promised him gifts, even a house. He refused it all. Wu once said, "I don't want questionable money. I might make only 20 *yuan* for a day's work, but my conscience is clear."

I wonder if Mr. Pan Yue would consider sending someone to investigate the truth behind the case of the Guardian of Taihu Lake. I read an excellent interview with Pan Yue by a reporter from *Southern Exposure* (*Nanfeng Chuang*), in which Mr. Pan expressed a great deal of frustration.¹³ In fact, Pan and Wu have expressed a lot of the same concerns, using similar language. The forces that constrain Pan Yue are the same as those that have trapped Wu Lihong, and it is precisely these forces that are killing the people of Wuxi and of China.

The scope of the green Olympics includes more than Beijing, and more than 2008. The Chinese public has proven helpless in the Taihu Lake crisis. But is there really nothing the international community can do?

Translated by J. Latourelle

This article was compiled from two Chinese articles, originally published on the Web site of HRIC's online journal *Ren Yu Renquan*, http://www.renyurenquan.org/ryrq_article.adp?article_id=640 and http://www.renyurenquan.org/ryrq_article.adp?article_id=678.

Editor's notes

1. Regarding the alleged cost of an Olympic gold medal and an official think-tank's lower estimate, see "Yimei Aoyun jinpai 7 yi yuan? Tiyu juguo tizhide leng sikao [One Gold Medal Costs 700 Million Yuan? State Sport System's Cool-headed Analysis]," Xinhuanet.com, September 6, 2004, http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2004-09/06/content_1949453.htm.
2. For information on some boycott actions, see "Should the EU Boycott the Beijing Olympics?" <http://www.boycottbeijing.eu/4.html>.
3. Qin Yongmin was arrested in late 1998 after he applied to register the Hubei Provincial Preparation Committee of the Chinese Democracy Party, and was sentenced to 12 years in prison on charges of "subversion of state power." Qin had previously been arrested in 1993 and sent to a labor camp for two years after expressing opposition to China's bid to host the 2000 Summer Games because of the enormous cost. See "Chinese Government Must Free Pro-Democracy Advocates," Human Rights Watch, 1998, <http://hrw.org/campaigns/china-98/china-detainees.htm>, and Richard Dicker, "Human Rights Would Lose in a Beijing Olympiad," *International Herald Tribune*, June 23, 1993, <http://www.iht.com/articles/1993/06/23/eddick.php>.
4. Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF) originally called for a boycott of the Beijing Olympics ("Call for the Boycott," August 21, 2001, <http://www.rsf.org/rsf/uk/html/asia/cplp01/cp01/200801.html>). In January 2007, however, representatives of the group were allowed their first official visit to China, after which they issued a press release noting the beginning of a "constructive" dialogue and "signs of change on the eve of next year's Olympic Games in Beijing," and stated the wish that "these games will be a success, an occasion for all participating countries to share in the humanistic values of the Olympic idea" ("First official visit by Reporters Without Borders to China," January 23, 2007, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=20564). Shortly thereafter, the Chinese government announced a new penalty points system for the press, and also obstructed a number of foreign journalists attempting to take advantage of looser restrictions on reporting prior to the Olympics. On August 8, 2007, Reporters Without Borders held press conferences in Beijing, Paris, New York and Montreal harshly criticizing China's human rights record in the run-up to the Olympics, resulting in the brief detention of several foreign reporters in Beijing. See "Protests in Paris, New York, Beijing and Montreal One Year Before Start of 2008 Olympics," Reporters Without Borders, August 7, 2007, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=23180.
5. See Gao Peng, "Beijing Full of Confidence 500 Days Before Olympics," China View (Xinhua News Agency), March 27, 2007, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-03/27/content_5901980.htm.
6. Hong Kong native Shi Meilun, aka Laura Cha, vice-chair of the China Securities Regulatory Commission, resigned on September 13, 2004, after battling criticisms that reforms she proposed were "too foreign." See <http://www.walterhutchens.net/blog/archives/2004/09/13/laura-chashi-meilun-leaves-csrc/>. Li Jinhua, auditor general of China since 1998, has promoted a "sunshine policy" of publicity and transparency in his exposure of financial scandals, including misuse of funds earmarked for the 2008 Olympics.
7. The article quoted could not be found online. He Lian-guang works for Phoenix Television, which has official mainland connections but retains a level of editorial independence.
8. See "Shougang Confirms Plant Closure in Time for Olympics," Xinhuanet, posted on May 20, 2007, on the official Beijing 2008 Web site, <http://en.beijing2008.cn/76/95/article214079576.shtml>.
9. See Huo Tao's "Reflections on the Struggle for Environmental Rights" elsewhere in this issue of *CRF*.
10. Liao Xiaoyi is president of Global Village of Beijing and has served as an environment consultant to the Beijing Olympics. See <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/cgw2006/198224.htm>. Liang Congjie is president of Friends of Nature. See <http://www.cctv.com/program/UpClose/20040628/100556.shtml>.
11. Simon Montlake, "Whistle-blower in China Faces Prison," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 14, 2007, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0814/p01s03-woap.html>.
12. On August 10, 2007, Wu Lihong was sentenced to three years in prison on a charge of extortion. See Simon Montlake, *ibid*.
13. This particular article could not be located online. For further information on Pan Yue's forthright assessment of China's environment, see He Qinglian, "Who Is Responsible for China's Environment," *China Rights Forum*, No. 1, 2006, http://hrichina.org/public/PDFs/CRF.1.2006/CRF-2006-1_Responsible.pdf.