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# FOUR CHINESE BLOGGERS WEIGH IN ON THE OLYMPICS

*The Beijing Olympics prompt deep reflection on the social and philosophical challenges China currently faces.*

## **Wei Zhou**

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<http://weizhoushiwang.blogbus.com/logs/2006/06/2699416.html#cmt>

### **MATERIAL GLUT AND SPIRITUAL EMPTINESS**

China's rapid economic surge often reminds Westerners of Japan—"a Japan that is 10 times bigger and on steroids." Yet almost no one points out that China will also face the material glut and spiritual emptiness that Japan has experienced.

The 1968 Tokyo Olympics and the 1970 Osaka World Expo signaled that Japan had achieved what it had been striving for in the century since the Meiji Restoration: recognition as a great power on an equal footing with the West. In the winter of 1970, the writer Yukio Mishima called on the people of Japan to reassert the essential Japanese spirit, then proceeded to commit ritual suicide by seppuku. Mishima's suicide was a watershed in post-war Japanese history; after more than two decades of rapid economic growth, the Japanese people had reached the peak of material fulfillment and were now plunged into a prolonged and painful period of confusion and apprehension.

Four decades later, China is about to stage two similar events: the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. During these two events, the people of China will be caught up in excitement that has been building for several years. There is no doubt that during this period of affirmation and recognition

of the Chinese people, there will be an outpouring of pride both from the government's propaganda machinery and from most ordinary Chinese people. In this respect, we are no different from our long-despised neighbors.

China is like a young man from the country who goes to the city vowing that he will overcome prejudice and discrimination, realize his own ideals and remain true to his values—only to find that everything he strives for is measured by material standards. His struggle is an epic and marvelous story, but it ends in tragedy. Because he has failed to pursue his own goals, his achievement of material fulfillment leaves him feeling empty inside. To avoid becoming interminably mired in confusion, he would first have to answer the question, "Who am I?"

Economic development has become the ruling party's main source of legitimacy. "Model business leaders" are the heroes of the age, and government officials focus on business to the exclusion of all else because GDP growth is the main criterion for evaluating career success. This country resembles an old jalopy, rattling along at an alarming speed, and dropping parts along the way. As it kicks up dust, the car is in danger of disintegrating at any moment, and roadside spectators are either gasping in admiration at its dizzying speed and future prospects or agonizing over the dangers it is running at every turn. But one thing is certain: anyone standing in its path had better make way.

China has at long last achieved its wish to advance along the road of industrialization. But while Chinese people, who have a strong tendency toward wishful thinking, pat themselves on the back, they would be naive to think that they can avoid the postindustrial

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collapse of idealism that the West has experienced. The astonishing annual economic growth rate China has maintained up to now is not only cause for self-satisfaction, but also raises the question, “If the economic growth bubble bursts, what can replace it?”

### We are about to enter a stage during which the collective anxieties plaguing China will explode.

According to the government’s official philosophy, material scarcity is an evil, and we are building an ideal future society of material abundance based on the principle “to each according to his needs.” Although most people nowadays are much more interested in the present than in this future, “without a [personal] commitment to economic growth, what is the *raison d’être* of capitalism?” (Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 1976).<sup>1</sup>

Most people don’t have the time to stop and consider this question—until circumstances force them to. One trend is already apparent: that “production heroes” are being replaced by consumer/culture heroes, and that the virtues required by industrialization will be replaced by a “fun morality” in which what is wrong is not the satisfaction of forbidden desires but the inability to fulfill one’s desires.

Growing prosperity is accompanied by rapid social disintegration. There are no longer any shared values to bring people together. Intellectuals engaged in the public sphere are all debating the problem of migrant workers and their struggle for basic subsistence. Their prescription for reducing the destructive force of antagonism between social strata created by society’s growing prosperity is to increase material standards of living. This is certainly one aspect of the problem, but there is perhaps a more important issue: growing prosperity is also creating internal destructive forces that are caused not by material scarcity but by material excess. For the time being, these forces are manifested only in certain obscure works of art, but the point is that there is no easy prescription to diminish their destructive power.

The opening of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway may turn out to have been a pivotal event in contemporary Chinese history. More and more people will travel to distant places to escape from themselves or to find themselves. There may be a genuine opportunity for a revival of Confucianism, as long as a period of spiritual emptiness is followed by an attempt by the nation to return to its roots. We are about to enter a stage during which the collective anxieties plaguing China will explode and mental illness will become a widespread social phenomenon. After a prolonged period of rapid economic growth, in the 1990s Taiwan experienced a religious revival that may well turn out to have been a dress rehearsal for what will happen on a much larger scale in China.

“The dragon will have cause to repent. A state of fullness should not be indulged in long.”<sup>2</sup> A reaction may take some time to emerge, but the more importance we place on material fulfillment to the exclusion of all else, the greater the destructive potential of this reaction is likely to be. Unfortunately, by the time we see it, it may be too late.

### Ran Yunfei

Posted: July 15, 2006

[http://blog.tianya.cn/blogger/post\\_show.asp?BlogID=185021&PostID=6049959&idWriter=0&Key=0](http://blog.tianya.cn/blogger/post_show.asp?BlogID=185021&PostID=6049959&idWriter=0&Key=0)

### THE OLYMPICS ARE ONE BIG CONGEE-EATING CONTEST

The 2008 Beijing Olympics are fast approaching, but the authorities have been very sketchy about what benefits the Games will bring to ordinary people. The Olympics are being paid for with taxpayers’ money, but why don’t they make public where the money is being spent, where it is being misspent and which corrupt officials are in charge of which construction projects? Nor have they studied or informed us ordinary people about the harm the Olympics may cause Beijing and even China. Dictatorial governments often act arbitrarily and claim that their actions are the will of the people. I will therefore take a leaf from the writings of Lu Xun to scrutinize the government’s actions.

Americans are usually keen to host the Olympics because the Games can give a boost to the economy and are a real money-making opportunity. When America hosts the Olympics, ordinary Americans are informed of how the money is being made and also told what tangible benefits they get from the games. In China the authorities may say that the Beijing Olympics are a money-making opportunity, but where is that money going? They don't tell ordinary people what tangible benefits, if any, they will get from the Olympics. Why is this? Because the regime uses the Olympics to improve its international relations and dupe ordinary people into thinking that it is doing a great job in governing the country. It spouts worthless clichés such as “hosting the Olympics is the road to a great national revival.” Although the Olympics are far removed from the concerns of the ordinary citizens whose tax contributions are paying for them, the regime will use any gold medals won by Chinese athletes as a diversion from the increasingly sharp contradictions that are plaguing Chinese society.

I've always felt that to a small potato like myself, the Olympics are about as important as a neighborhood congee-eating contest.<sup>3</sup> During the 2004 Olympics I wrote a newspaper piece entitled “The Olympics Are One Big Congee-Eating Contest,” which I'm posting below to show how I feel about the Olympics and gold medals. Although it is an old article, what I wrote is probably new to a lot of people. Like many things, sports are just a matter of common sense, but people with ulterior motives conceal the truth about them or use them for their own ends. What I have to say about the Olympics may seem almost as critical as what has been said about behavior during the Cultural Revolution, but it is all factual and in no way slanderous:

*I remember how drunk with elation I felt in college 20 years ago when the Chinese team returned from the Olympics. Xu Haifeng had won China's first Olympics gold medal and earned worldwide fame.<sup>4</sup> Yao Ming, who would later compete in the Olympics, was still a snotty-nosed kid then. . . .<sup>5</sup>*

*What are the Olympics about? The Olympics Committee will tell you quite frankly that the main purpose of the Games is to take part. You could compare the Games to a*

*congee-eating contest. If you go into the contest with the attitude that you'll eat as many bowls of congee as you can, and you end up eating a few more than that, you may well become a congee-eating champion. But there's a limit to what you would do to become a champion congee-eater. You wouldn't put all your savings into the contest; nor would you bet your life on it. I think that the way China will stage the Olympics will be to spend money that rightfully belongs to a very large number of taxpayers on a very small number of people who can eat a lot of congee, which is not what the Olympic spirit of taking part in the games is about. It's only natural and fitting that on the day of a congee-eating contest every eye should be fixed on the contestants, and that the fellow who can eat the most bowls of congee should bask in the applause of the crowd. A congee-eating contest can certainly be an occasion for fun and merriment, but if your neighbor happens to become a congee-eating champion, your life will not be noticeably different on that account. For life cannot be a daily series of congee-eating contests. Life follows its own course and daily rhythms, and if you want to enjoy it in peace and security, you had better not forget who you are.*

**If your neighbor happens to become a congee-eating champion, your life will not be noticeably different on that account.**

*Naturally, in terms of scale, influence and number of spectators, no congee-eating contest can compare with the Olympic Games. But for someone like myself, who doesn't like to use high-flown words and who prefers to look at big events from the perspective of everyday life, there are countless parallels between the Olympics and a congee-eating contest. Having watched the Olympics for 20 years, we ought to know that leading a decent and dignified life is more important than winning any number of gold medals. From this perspective, what Chinese people need is a collective gold medal and a spirit of sportsmanship and to rid themselves of their false pride and constant fixation on gold medals. What they need more than gold medals is a good attitude and genuine self-confidence. In this spirit, let us drink to the Athens Olympics.*

Published in *Western China Metro News* (Huaxi Du Shibao) on August 3, 2004.

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## “Feather Halberd” (Wo shi yu ge)

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<http://shenyuanzhuren.bokee.com/5657913.html>

### WHOSE OLYMPICS ARE THESE ANYWAY?

The night China won its bid to host the Olympics, the whole nation joined in jubilation. I've forgotten what I was doing that evening, but there was no way I was going to join the celebrations organized by our school, because I've always felt very far removed from that sort of collective revelry. I recently saw a movie that brought back memories of that night. “Unknown Pleasures” tells the story of two socially disaffected 19-year-old friends named Xiao Ji and Bin Bin. One evening, Xiao Ji's girlfriend steals money from him, so he goes to a nightclub and threatens people with a kitchen knife. Bin Bin holds him back, and as the two friends are about to exchange blows, we hear loud cheering. The camera turns to a crowd of people watching the television announcement that China has won its bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games. Instead of fighting it out, Xiao Ji and Bin Bin are drawn into the sea of jubilation. The built-up suspense of their fight comes to nothing. I was left confused and annoyed that China was awarded the Olympics.

I was reminded of this by a news report I saw on several major Web sites this evening. According to the report, the “Olympics Legislative Coordination Task Force thinks that most of Beijing's floating population consists of rural migrant workers employed in urban infrastructure construction projects. It is estimated that during the Olympic Games alone, Beijing will have one million migrant workers employed by the building industry. The government is therefore planning to send these people back to their home districts.” (*Xinjing Bao* [Beijing News], September 15.) My first reaction on reading this was the same as when I saw “Unknown Pleasures”: the 2008 Olympics are a damn nuisance. First they deprive me of a good fight scene in a movie and now they've spoiled my plans. Given my bad luck these last two years, I was planning to go to Beijing next year to get some work in the building industry. But if the government goes through with this plan, I'll have to go someplace else.

But emotion aside, a rational assessment of the situa-

tion and some conclusions are in order. If we assume that the authorities are just doing this to improve their image, we are underestimating their intelligence. *Beijing Times* reports that the authorities are also considering measures and regulations to force members of the floating population who work in beauty salons and barber-shops<sup>6</sup> to leave Beijing. The State Council has been asked to approve regulations to restrict the number of people entering Beijing by requiring an authorization from a county-level government office or above.

(*Jinghua Shibao* [Beijing Times], September 15, 2006.) Readers will recall that at last year's meeting of the Beijing Political Consultative Conference, PCC member Zhang Weiyang proposed establishing a “population access system” to control the number of migrants coming into Beijing. Ms. Zhang's ludicrous proposal quickly became the target of public criticism. In my opinion Zhang did not come up with her “population access system” on her own. Clearly, the government wanted to avoid drawing fire against itself, so it floated a trial balloon through a private individual. The reason the authorities are prepared to take heavy-handed measures to solve the problem is that since the late 1990s there have been signs that the rising tide of rural migrant workers has the potential to cause all sorts of crises, and these floating populations have already seriously strained municipal organizational structures, the household registration system, the social security system and other basic government services, and have also shaken the government's authority and reputation.

“Persuading” a million rural migrant workers to clear out of Beijing and return to their home districts, ostensibly as part of the effort to clean up the capital for the Olympics, is the continuation of the population access system mentioned above. The only difference is that this time the government has a more high-sounding goal. The authorities may even be able to dupe enough people to turn a serious crisis into something more manageable. To boost its international image, the government is promoting the “One World, One Dream” slogan for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The government will no doubt attempt to whitewash its image as a brutal dictatorship by driving a million workers from the capital, paving the streets with fresh flowers and tying silk ribbons on trees, but the truth cannot be covered up, and a flimsy fig leaf may actually focus public attention on the situation.



Photo: Reuters

Even if two years from now the noise of the Beijing Olympics carnival reaches 200 decibels, it will not drown out the cries of Tiananmen Square and the bottled-up bitterness of the petitioners at Dongzhuang.<sup>7</sup>

One has to wonder if these policy makers, who are, after all, far removed from the common people and their reality, aren't thinking that many rural migrants will be perfectly happy to go home and live in poverty there. But what about those who don't go home—where will they go? The answer is not hard to figure out: most of them will drift to other cities to eke out whatever living they can find there as migrant workers. This will not only aggravate the unemployment problem and the urban-rural conflict in these cities, but will also increase their crime rate. Migrants who return home will face even worse prospects. It follows that the government's decision to drive migrant workers from the capital may have the unexpected and disastrous consequence of intensifying political and economic contradictions across China. Consequently, burdens Beijing now shoulders as the nation's capital will be shifted to other cities, and discrimination based on both class and regional origin will become an increasingly serious problem. Those who favor this ludicrous "population access" policy should learn the lessons of traditional water control programs, which proved successful because they emphasized draining rather than blocking up. If tensions that have been building up for a long

time are blocked and repressed by the authorities, sooner or later they will explode into a full-blown social crisis.

The authorities are no doubt aware of the problem, but they've found no better cure, or perhaps they have found it but are not willing to pay the price to apply it thoroughly. The required medicine, which is bitter and painful but will scrape the toxins off the bones, is to give every member of society—regardless of sex, social class, household registration or political status—an equal place in society; to make an all-out effort to narrow the growing gap

between cities and rural areas and between the rich and powerful and disadvantaged groups; and to implement the rights guaranteed by the constitution and the laws promulgated under it. Let the Olympic motto "Better, Faster, Stronger" become the motto for China's political reform. The use of the "population access" policy to attempt to cure old ills may end up causing new ills that will be like gallstones and kidney stones in the social body. By the time we find out which ills are worse, the old or the new, there will be no time left to treat either.

**This is the sad lot of little people overtaken by historical events much bigger than themselves.**

Let me finish with that scene from "Unknown Pleasures." Xiao Ji is holding a kitchen knife and Bin Bin has just been hit in the face. When they hear the crowd cheer because China has just been awarded the Olympics, the two friends are reluctantly drawn into a vast narrative not of their own making. That is also my experience. This is the sad lot of little people overtaken by historical events much bigger than themselves. I am not being argumentative for the sake of argument. But it behooves us to ask: Whose Olympics are these anyway? "Persuading" a million migrant workers to return to their rural homes will make the song and dance of the Olympic Games a nightmare for them. The

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Olympic Games will not be theirs, although they will have played a bitter role in their success.

As an individual, the best attitude one can have is to practice nonviolent resistance and refuse to watch the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Just like government censors who cut certain scenes from movies and chapters from books, during the Olympics I am going to tear pages from my diary to mark this disgrace. The simple reason is that I, too, am a rural migrant worker.

## **Zhaoyang Lushang** **(“Dawn on the Road”)**

Posted: June 18, 2007

<http://pinerpiner.spaces.live.com/Blog/cns!BCF9D7544B7A7579!1573.entry>

### **OLYMPIC CRIMES**

I remember the weekend they announced the winner of the Olympic bid. I was visiting Tanzhesi Temple in Beijing, and a group of people had stayed at the temple that evening to watch the Olympic announcement on TV. When they heard the word “Beijing,” everyone cheered, and then they opened a bottle of red wine to celebrate. I felt like crying but I didn’t want to be a spoilsport.

It’s amazing how far apart people can be. I don’t believe that the Olympics will bring any benefits to China, Beijing or ordinary Chinese people.

**The games the Communist Party is staging are a shady business that can only invite trouble for us.**

I remember the tragic events that accompanied the celebration in 1999 of the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the PRC. Without warning residents beforehand, the authorities closed off large sections of the city to prepare for the celebrations, and many people were unable to go home and were forced to stay in hotels. I heard about it at the time, but what I didn’t realize then was that some people died because they couldn’t obtain emergency medical attention. Since

then, I have hated national celebrations of this sort. I take it as a given that the games the Communist Party are staging are a shady business that can only invite trouble for us.

On Christmas Eve of 2006, I was taking a stroll in Hong Kong’s Victoria Park when I noticed an industrial exhibition that looked lively and interesting, so I bought a ticket. As I was going in, a young woman holding a box stopped me and motioned that I was supposed to put my ticket in the box. I didn’t understand right away, so she said in stiff-sounding Mandarin, “Support the Olympic Games.”

Surprised to see this sort of thing in Hong Kong, I said loudly, “I detest the Olympics!” The girl was stunned, but I was glad to have enjoyed the freedom that exists in Hong Kong.

In the exhibition hall there was a big contraption on which visitors were encouraged to leave notes wishing the Chinese Ping-Pong team the best of success. At least 5,000 people had done so. When I returned to Beijing I told a Hong Kong friend about this. Curling her lips, she told me, “Don’t assume that Hong Kong people aren’t dupes.”

She’d hit me where it hurt, because I had always had a special place in my heart for Hong Kong. But that’s another story. The Olympics are fast approaching, and there are more and more news reports about them. Some strike a discordant note. Here are just a few of them:

At the end of March, a tunnel under construction for the No. 10 subway line collapsed, burying six workers. Work on the tunnel had been accelerated because Line 10 will go to the Olympic Village and has to be completed before the Games open. Other accidents have claimed more lives, but they have invariably been reported as exceptional and unrelated incidents, and no one has looked into the common thread connecting them all. A slogan on the streets of Beijing reads, “I participate, I contribute and I enjoy.” Can these words be said in good conscience to the dead and wounded?

On June 5, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson rebutted a

report by an international human rights organization by claiming that all citizens evicted from their homes to make way for the Olympics had received adequate compensation and that “not one family has been forced to leave Beijing.”<sup>8</sup> This categorical statement cannot be verified, but there are photographs of farmers in northern Beijing who have been demonstrating for years against the demolition of their homes and forced evictions to make way for the Olympics.

On June 10, 15-year-old gymnast Wang Yan broke her neck at the national championships and will likely be paralyzed for life. This tragedy was not completely accidental: to qualify for the Olympics, athletes are being forced to go beyond their limits. Wang Yan is just another teenage victim of the Olympics.

On June 11, on the eve of the World Day Against Child Labor, an international NGO reported that a factory in Dongguan, Guangdong Province, was using low-paid child labor to make Olympic-licensed products. The factory owner’s explanation was very revealing: “We do put children to work, but not to make Olympic-licensed products.”<sup>9</sup>

I would put these scattered news stories under one banner headline: “Olympic Crimes.”

Pressure from certain Western mischief-makers who are calling for a boycott of the Olympics appears to be causing China to change its attitude toward the Darfur problem in Sudan. But I think this is an exception. The CPC is so unyielding that the Olympics cannot really be used as leverage.

The other day, a mischief-maker encouraged me to stage a personal boycott of the Olympics. That hurt, because I’m an inveterate sports fan and can’t resist watching sports. So I told myself that I was going to watch the world’s Olympic Games, not the CPC’s Olympic Games. But I couldn’t help feeling ashamed. A poem I read recently put it well: “Living is shameful.” Only because this happens to be my motherland?

Translated by Paul Frank

### Translator’s and editor’s notes

1. Daniel Bell wrote, “but without a commitment to economic growth, what is the *raison d’être* of capitalism?”; the Chinese quote adds the word “personal” or “own” to the idea of commitment to economic growth. See Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 1976 (Harper Collins 1996 edition), p. 80.
2. This quotation from the *Yijing* (Book of Changes) could be loosely translated as “pride comes before a fall.” See, Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *I Ching: Or, Book of Changes*, Princeton University Press, 1967, 1st ed. 1950, p. 9; F. Max Muller, ed., James Legge, trans., *The Sacred Books of China Part II: The Sacred Books of the East Part Sixteen* (1879), Kessinger Publishing Co. 2004 reprint, pp. 59, 60; Appendix II, p. 267.
3. Congee is rice porridge.
4. Xu Haifeng won a gold medal in shooting at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. He is currently chief coach of the Chinese national shooting team.
5. Yao Ming, widely thought to be the best center in the National Basketball Association, competed for China in the 2004 Olympics and is expected to play for China in the Beijing Olympics.
6. That is, people who are engaged in prostitution.
7. The Dongzhuang section of Yongdingmen district in Beijing is the site of what has come to be known as the “Petitioners’ Village,” a shantytown where poor petitioners who have traveled to the capital find lodging for a few *yuan* per night. See “The View Beneath the Bridge,” *China Rights Forum*, No. 1, 2004, [http://www.hrchina.org/public/PDFs/CRF.1.2004/b4\\_TheView1.2004.pdf](http://www.hrchina.org/public/PDFs/CRF.1.2004/b4_TheView1.2004.pdf).
8. The Foreign Ministry was responding to the report “Fair Play for Housing Rights: Mega-Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights,” released on June 5, 2007, by the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, [www.cohre.org](http://www.cohre.org).
9. The report in question, “No Medal for the Olympics on Labour Rights,” was issued by the group PlayFair2008 and can be accessed at [http://www.playfair2008.org/docs/playfair\\_2008-report.pdf](http://www.playfair2008.org/docs/playfair_2008-report.pdf).