
THE TRAGEDY OF ATHLETIC POLITICS

By Fu Guoyong

The official fixation on garnering medals in international competitions deprives ordinary Chinese of the most basic resources for recreation and physical fitness.

Since that defining moment in 1984 when China won its first Olympic gold medal, our nation has been transfixed by one international athletic competition after another, and the shining gold medals of the Olympic Games seem to have become a kind of addictive stimulant for the people of our country. With its burgeoning population and expansive terrain, China has focused all of its athletic efforts upon a single objective: the gold medal. Our nation's long-standing tendency to view strength and victory as the sole determinants of true "heroism" fits quite naturally with the format of the "athletic duel," and we have become so wrapped up in winning these "duels" that the true meaning of the coveted medal has become inconsequential, as have the sweat and tears hidden behind the pursuit of this prize. We have permanently locked our gaze upon the false sense of pride and the fleeting moment of glory represented by that shining piece of gold. To experience that moment, we are willing to exhaust our nation's vast work force, its material resources, and its financial wealth; no cost is too great. This certainly makes our nation stand out from the crowd. I, for one, honestly cannot think of any other country in the world with a similar approach to athletics.

The true value of these medals—for which thousands of athletes have sacrificed their blood, their sweat and, in many cases, even their entire childhoods—has recently become a point of troubled reflection. It was revealed earlier this year that former marathon champion Ai Dongmei had been driven by hard times to sell 16 medals she had won in international and domestic competitions. She offered her gold medals for just 1,000

yuan (\$120) and her bronze medals for a measly 100 yuan (\$12).¹ Sadly, Ai's ordeal is not an isolated situation; with the exception of a few athletic superstars, most retired Chinese athletes (even those who have won gold medals in international competitions) are unlikely to face better circumstances. The domestic media has reported that nearly 80 percent of our 300,000 retired athletes have faced, to varying degrees, such difficulties as post-training injuries or illness, unemployment and poverty.² I think it goes without saying that these athletes' grim circumstances are not merely their own individual tragedy, but also a tragedy for Chinese athletics as a whole.

Returning to the topic of China's unique relationship with athletics, there have historically been three primary sources of motivation for the athletic endeavor:

- 1) The individual aspect, wherein athletics is seen as a means of exercising one's body and living a healthier life;
- 2) The communal aspect, wherein athletic activities provide an opportunity for a group to come together, to enjoy some recreation or even celebration, and to inculcate within its individual members the value of teamwork and solidarity;
- 3) A competitive motivation, which has gradually taken shape through the intersection of the individual and the group.

The third motivation, manifested in athletic competitions, was originally a byproduct of the other two but, in the modern era, has developed into the Party-state's primary objective. Athletics as the key to teamwork and a healthy lifestyle has been sidelined, and today in

China, the concept of athletics is automatically associated with its competitive aspect. Many of China's best athletes have been trained in settings characterized by highly repetitive regimens and a single-minded focus

on training, which can even be detrimental to physical health. In some cases, an athlete's well-being is considered a small price to pay for the sake of winning an athletic event. Such ruthless "training for the gold" has left

THE MAKING OF A TRUE ATHLETIC SUPERPOWER

By Xu Jilin

I was in Canada during this year's [2004] Olympics, where I followed the Games online. I soon noticed that, in contrast to the average Chinese citizen, most Canadians did not follow the Olympics as intently as I had expected. Also, in contrast to China's crazed "race for the gold," Canada—a major First World power—managed to win just one gold medal. However, Canadians' subdued relationship with the Olympics is certainly not indicative of a dislike for athletics; in fact, it shows their true appreciation for the athletic spirit.

Immediately upon my arrival in Vancouver, I was struck by the vast expanses of lush greenery throughout the city, all of which, I soon learned, are completely open to the public at no charge. From my Vancouver apartment, a 10-minute walk in any direction brings you to acres of verdant parkland. While the city's parks are generally as quiet and still as the water of a secluded lake, they buzz with excitement on evenings and weekends. You can watch, or even join in, a game of soccer, football, Frisbee or baseball, as young boys and girls, dressed in vibrantly colored sporting outfits, hold their own "Olympics." Just as at any other sporting event, the blast of the referee's whistle rings sharply in your ears. Yet, unlike the situations to which we are accustomed in China, you can be sure that every call is the result of impartial judgment, rather than of bribes or pressure. The difference is that here competition is not the primary motivation; everyone just wants to relax and to take a break from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Apart from a few residential green areas designated for private use, most of these well-maintained parks are completely open to the general public. Anyone, whether rich or poor, can enjoy these spaces at no cost. Some of my fellow citizens may be surprised to learn that many of the same people who appear indifferent to the Olympics come out here every day to exercise and stay in shape: rowing boats, skiing, playing ball, swimming and jogging. While their country may be a minor player in the race for gold medals, Canadians' incorporation of physical activity into their daily lives qualifies Canada as a true superpower in the field of athletics.

The situation in China is exactly the opposite. While we put on great airs of self-congratulation at the Olympic Games, athletics has come to play an increasingly minor role in the average citizen's daily life. Let's not even delve into the problems in the countryside. Suffice it to say that one is unlikely to find so much as a Ping-Pong table or a basketball hoop in the impoverished mountain villages stretching across our rural hinterland. Yet, even in wealthier urban regions such as Shanghai, Beijing or Guangzhou, where can the average citizen go to play a game of ball or to run a few laps? Virtually none of China's so-called public athletic facilities are open free-of-charge to the taxpayers who fund them. Once schools go on break, their gates are locked tight. There is little hope that nearby residents will be able to use the facilities, since even students need to navigate a bureaucratic minefield to use the facility during summer vacation. Within residential areas, community centers and clubs offer comprehensive athletic facilities, but all are purely profit-driven, requiring residents to pay for memberships in addition to a monthly facility maintenance fee.

As China's cities grow increasingly congested, parks continue to be eaten up by developers, and the air

countless retired athletes suffering from debilitating injuries and illnesses.

These trends clearly indicate the incorporation of far

grows thick with toxic car exhaust. These trends create an environment that is far from amenable to the individual pursuit of athletics. It is one of the great ironies of our era that in expansive metropolitan areas, stretching as far as the eye can see, it is nearly impossible to find a decent place to jog.

Of course, not every athletic facility in Canada is free. For example, one must pay a fee to use public swimming pools and golf courses. However, even at profit-driven facilities, fees correspond to the average citizens' purchasing power; a game of golf in Canada costs no more than the average citizen's daily food expenditure. Thus, at the golf course near my Vancouver residence, rather than the "big bosses" or "gold-collar" types that make up the majority of golfers in China, you are much more likely to see a couple of elderly men out to have some fun for the day.

Canada is a country known for its high taxes and extensive welfare benefits. The government here does not use its tax revenues to nurture a tiny, elite group of athletic stars dedicated to capturing gold medals at the Olympics. Instead, the government actually uses tax revenues for the taxpayers' benefit, by building a network of public athletic facilities and public spaces throughout the country. This allows every citizen, rich or poor, a chance to take part in all types of athletics and to enjoy leisure activities, fresh air, greenery and sunshine. This is the main distinction between China's and Canada's approaches to athletics. Here in Canada, athletics is not a tool to flaunt the nation's strength and prosperity, but rather an indispensable part of daily life.

Watching the Olympics from Canada, I have been beset by extremely mixed feelings. I do feel a sense of pride for every gold medal that the Chinese team wins, but I also feel a twinge of sorrow whenever I

too many corrupting factors, antithetical to the original athletic ideal and at odds with the best in human nature. I must clarify that I am addressing my criticisms here to our professional athletic programs; there are

think about the price paid by our people for these medals. Athletics in China, from the grassroots to the central government, and from youth athletic schools to the national Olympic teams, is fixated upon one objective and one objective only: medals. Every athlete's ultimate goal is to win a medal at the international Olympic Games, or failing that, at China's own mini-Olympics, the National Games. Thus, the athletic endeavor is left with only one meaning and one goal: beating your opponents and winning a medal. This has created a brutal winner-takes-all mentality in which those who win gold medals become national icons, while everyone else, even runners-up, are just "losers." No one really cares about incorporating athletics into the average citizen's daily life, or even thinks about the true meaning of the athletic endeavor. It is as if the only way that we can experience the joy of athletics is through the supposed "national glory" of Olympic gold medals.

What a sad state of affairs. The Olympics come around only once every four years, yet we Chinese citizens must continue to live our lives, day in and day out. Does it really make sense to sacrifice so much, to banish athletics from our daily lives, just for the sake of a couple tiny gold medals? If we really must choose between winning gold medals at the Olympics or providing our citizens with athletic opportunities and a healthier lifestyle, then I would recommend taking Canada's path. We might become a minor player in the Olympics, but in doing so, we would become a true athletic superpower.

Translated by Kevin Carrico

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A Vancouver jogger enjoys access to recreational facilities that are a luxury in most of China. Photo: Reuters

still countless ordinary people who, far removed from the harsh and merciless world of professional athletics, take the time to play some ball or to go jogging or swimming, purely for their own health or recreation. However, it is also important to remember that such displays of the athletic spirit are solely the result of individual initiative and are completely removed from any government support. Our government reserves its financial support for the brutal form of professional athletics described above, with the result that, over the past half-century, China's investment in and development of public athletic facilities and recreational spaces has lagged pitifully behind that of other countries.

Professor Xu Jilin of East China Normal University, in Canada during the 2004 Athens Olympics, was able to follow the Games online, while also taking advantage of this novel vantage point to observe and consider the average Canadian's attitude toward the Olympics and toward athletics in general. Xu shared his reflections in his insightful article "The Making of a True Athletic Superpower" [see accompanying article], observing that while the average Canadian was not particularly absorbed in the Olympics or in Canada's medal count,

athletics itself remained an indispensable part of everyday life in Canada.

Comparing what he saw in Canada with his experiences at home, Xu observed, with a hint of despair, that athletics in China "is left with one meaning and one meaning only: defeating your opponents. . . . No one really cares about incorporating athletics into the average citizen's daily life, or even thinks about the true meaning of the athletic endeavor." Xu concluded that "while their country may be a minor player in the race for gold medals, Canadians' incorporation of physical exercise into their daily lives qualifies Canada as a true superpower in the field of athletics."

The object of Xu's inquiry, "athletics with Chinese characteristics," is a project that has so completely lost course as to divorce itself from the essence of the athletic enterprise. Our tracks and fields are no longer the sites of unity or of friendly athletic competition, and athletics, as a whole, has been distorted to a point that it would be more appropriately referred to as "athletic politics" or "politicized athletics." Far too many nonathletic components have sullied the entire endeavor. The

primary objective of “athletic politics” is to boost nationalist delusions of grandeur and to communicate—to an audience of its own citizenry as well as to the citizens of the world—the leadership’s carefully crafted image of a powerful and prosperous nation.

We have thus strayed far from the original vision articulated in Athens, the home of humankind’s first Olympic Games. There, athletics was imagined as a means to encourage people to stay in shape, to become involved in public affairs and to develop into model citizens. Thousands of years later in China’s Republican era, Wang Yunwu, former director of the Commercial Press, China’s first modern publishing company, displayed a similar understanding of the athletic spirit. In an incisive analysis, Wang affirmed that a lifetime of athletic engagement could help cultivate a host of essential moral virtues, including a strong sense of teamwork, fairness in competition, loyalty, willpower, bravery, patience, humility, selflessness and respect for rules. Thus, echoing the vision articulated in Athens centuries before, Wang believed that the athletic field is a site not only for the cultivation of outstanding athletes, but also for the cultivation of outstanding citizens.

The primary objective of “athletic politics” is to boost nationalist delusions of grandeur.

People engaged in sports are doing more than exercising; they are being educated in qualities characteristic of an ideal citizen. These ideals were transmitted from one generation to another for thousands of years; yet how odd and unfamiliar they seem to us today, almost as if completely divorced from reality. We have strayed so far from the core of the athletic enterprise that abstract and lofty ideals, such as virtue and education, seem much more foreign and unreal to us than cut-throat gold-medal-centered athletic politics.

The Beijing Olympics are just one year away. Holding the Olympics in this land of athletic politics, where gold medals constitute the Games’ sole meaning, is destined to bring with it an unprecedented surge of narrow-minded nationalist fever. The air will be thick with a false sense of pride, masking the deeper reality of

emptiness, weakness and impending collapse. Despite the fact that all of our medals are nothing more than a disguise for our failings, plenty of my fellow citizens will be wild with joy and glowing with smiles as they bask in the reflected glory of “great power” status provided by the mask of athletic politics. Their eyes will be fixed intently upon the sparkling gold medals, carefully calculating each and every gain and loss; for these medals no longer symbolize victory in a particular athletic event, but rather a vain, essentially false, yet addictive, dream of great power status. In this land of illusion, there is nothing but disdain for countries that lag behind in the race to snatch medals, and there is no chance of warm, sportsmanlike applause for the runners-up in a competition. Our nation’s massive athletic project clearly shows that in this land we call China, politics enshrouds our entire existence, smothering everything in its embrace, so that even if we try to avoid it, politics will forever follow us everywhere we may go, leaving us nowhere to escape its grasp.

What is the true essence of the Olympic spirit? And what is the spirit of athletics? Those trapped in the deceptions of athletic politics will never take the time to ask. However, there is one question that we, as a nation, must face. Considering the tragic fate of Ai Dongmei and her family, as well as struggles faced by the families of many other retired athletes, the true question is: does anyone, deep within their hearts, even care?

Translated by Kevin Carrico

The original Chinese article was posted on the author’s blog on May 31, 2007, <http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/48fe469010009ew>.

Editor’s Notes

1. For more on the hardships of Chinese runner Ai Dongmei, forced to retire in 2002 due to crippling foot injuries, see “Image of Forgotten Star Troubles China,” AFP, posted on *Times of India*, http://timesofindia.india.com/Sports/Other_Sports/Image_of_forgotten_stars_troubles_China/articleshow/1914450.cms.
2. “30 wan tuiyi yundongyuan, bacheng mianlin shenghuo wenti [Of 300,000 Retired Athletes, 80 Percent Face Hardship],” *Yangcheng Evening News*, April 16, 2007, posted at <http://news.sohu.com/20070416/n249474986.shtml>.