

How China became an Olympic boogeyman for the West

written by Charles Xu
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Gu Ailing won the gold medal in Women's Freeski Big Air during the Olympic Games 2022.

In the early 1990s, barely a decade after [rejoining](#) the Olympic movement, Beijing launched a bid to host the 2000 Games. Unfortunately by then, U.S. policy had begun to shift perceptibly from the honeymoon years of rapprochement. Gone was the incentive for even arch-reactionaries like U.S. Presidents Nixon and Reagan to embrace the People's Republic of China (PRC) effusively in the name of hard-nosed anti-Soviet realpolitik. With the end of the first Cold War, anticommunism also receded as a guiding framework for U.S. imperial rhetoric, in favor of a universalized (if richly hypocritical) weaponization of neoliberal "human rights." This was a discursive terrain tilted heavily toward bourgeois democracies in the imperial core, on which China was hardly more equipped to compete than it had been in the Mao era.

Sure enough, the U.S. mainstream press [united](#) in opposition to Beijing's bid, with the New York Times anticipating the facile and now-omnipresent analogies with Nazi Germany, as University of Hong Kong historian Xu Guoqi quotes in his 2008 book [Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008](#): "The city in question is Beijing in the year 2000, but the answer is Berlin 1936." Bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress vehemently urged the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to reject the bid on human rights grounds. In the event, Beijing led in every round of voting until the last, when it narrowly lost to Sydney 45-43. It later [emerged](#) that the Sydney organizing committee had not only secured the two-vote margin via outright bribery (par for the course for the IOC), but had secretly commissioned an anti-China smear campaign laundered through a London-based human rights group. The bonds between white Anglo settler colonies prevailed, and the Sydney Olympics became the stage for a truly noxious whitewashing of Australia's genocide against Aboriginal peoples.

Still smarting from its defeat and the naked hypocrisy of Western powers around the “politicization” of the Games, Beijing nonetheless forged ahead with a bid for the 2008 Olympics. This time it won with ease, aided by widespread sympathy for the circumstances of the 2000 loss, as well as a slick PR campaign designed to neutralize the attack lines that had sunk its previous attempt. Bid committee official Wang Wei [assured](#) the IOC that “with the Games coming to China, not only are they going to promote the economy, but also enhance all the social sectors, including education, medical care and human rights.” Despite strenuous efforts to weaponize large-scale unrest in Tibet in the months leading up to the Games, even limited boycott appeals from Western campaign groups went nowhere. The 2008 Beijing Olympics went down in history as China’s “[coming-out party](#)” and a seminal moment in its growing self-confidence as a rising world power.

It is telling that Jules Boykoff, the outspoken critic of the Olympics whose book [Power Games](#) I have relied on heavily in my research for this and [other articles](#) on this topic, makes no mention at all of this widespread popular perception of the 2008 Games or their significance in the broader arc of Chinese history. Instead he treats them as an exclusively elite project and focuses entirely on critical narratives, a tendency he has doubled down on in his most recent [commentary](#) on the 2022 Beijing Games. Possibly the most revealing line is his response to Beijing’s assurances from the 2008 bid: “This human-rights dreamscape never arrived. It’s telling that today, neither China nor the IOC are vowing that the Olympics will spur democracy.” It does not seem to occur to Boykoff to see this as a positive development: that China’s growing confidence in its own model frees it from the need to address Western imperialists in their favored (and deeply hypocritical) discursive terms. As the New York Times [put it](#) succinctly, “Where the government once sought to mollify its critics to make the Games a success, today it defies them... China then sought to meet the world’s terms. Now the world must accept China’s.”

This reflects a broader analytical lacuna in campaigns that take the Olympics themselves as an undifferentiated political target: they fail to account for the positions of different host countries vis-à-vis the imperialist world system. To flatten “the Olympics” or “human rights” as universal categories is effectively to privilege normative Western understandings of both. In practice this leads to the grossly uneven and asymmetrical treatment of Olympics hosted by self-styled democracies in the imperial core—historically the overwhelming majority—versus the few that are not. To be sure, local anti-Olympics campaign groups are undoubtedly justified in fighting the social dislocations they bring to host cities everywhere. (Full disclosure: I have previously worked with one such group, [NOlympics LA](#), which does valuable work connecting the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics to gentrification and racialized policing.)

But where was the outrage over the illegal U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, when Salt Lake City hosted in 2002? Over Britain’s war crimes there and in Iraq, when London hosted in 2012? Over Japan’s continued refusal to acknowledge its colonial crimes against humanity, when Tokyo hosted in 2021? The indictment of entire host countries as “[human-rights nightmares](#)” (Boykoff’s [crude label](#) for China and Kazakhstan, when Beijing and Almaty wound up as the only finalists for 2022) seems to be reserved for nations outside the imperial core. The nascent transnational anti-Olympics [movement](#) needs to overcome these ideological blinders if it is ever to match the coherence of the great anti-racist mobilizations that shook the IOC in the 1960s and ’70s. Presently there seems little cause for hope, with leading figures like Boykoff and his fellow “left” sportswriter Dave Zirin uncritically propagating U.S. State Department lines on both [Xinjiang](#) and [Peng Shuai](#) in their coverage leading up to the 2022 Games.

New Emerging Forces

What, you might ask, was the People’s Republic of China up to in the world of

international sport during its more than two decades in the Olympic wilderness (from [1952 to 1980](#))? The story of “ping-pong diplomacy” with the United States and other Western powers is already well-documented, reflecting an obvious Northern historiographical bias. But in an age of growing calls for “decoupling” between China and the West, and for South-South cooperation via the Belt and Road Initiative among other projects, the buried history worth uncovering is that of the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO).

GANEFO emerged from a bold act of anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist solidarity by the Indonesian government of Sukarno, the visionary anticolonial leader and co-founder of the Non-Aligned Movement. In 1962, Indonesia as host pointedly refused to invite Israel and Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang (KMT) regime to the fourth Asian Games and was summarily suspended from the IOC. In response, Sukarno [proclaimed](#) that:

“The International Olympic Games have proved to be openly an imperialistic tool... Now let’s frankly say, sports have something to do with politics. Indonesia proposes now to mix sports with politics, and let us now establish the Games of the New Emerging Forces, the GANEFO... against the Old Established Order.”

His bracing rhetoric is reminiscent of the Chinese IOC delegate Dong Shouyi’s 1958 [broadside](#) against then IOC President Avery Brundage, but shorn of any residual attachment to a mystical [“Olympic spirit.”](#) China enthusiastically jumped in to help organize and promote GANEFO in 1963, covering travel costs to Jakarta for 2,200 athletes from 48 countries, overwhelmingly based in the Global South. It left with a bumper crop of athletic victories—topping the overall medal table, followed by the Soviet second-string squad and the Indonesian hosts—and effusive goodwill from athletes across the emerging Third World.

There would never be another GANEFO, owing to the horrific U.S.-backed coup that

ousted Sukarno and installed Suharto's military dictatorship in 1965. But this piece of history remains more vital than ever to recover. Because the lesson of Beijing 2022 and the moves toward a [diplomatic boycott](#), however farcical, is that the United States and its allies in the Global North will never fully accept China as a legitimate member of their elite club. In their current position as hosts, PRC officials may feel understandably constrained in denouncing the "politicization" of the Games. But it would be wise for them, for the Chinese people, and for the rest of the world to keep in mind the fact that politicizing the Olympics is a long, hallowed tradition for the workers and oppressed nations of the world. The People's Republic of China has a storied place in that tradition, of which it can be justly proud.

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Charles Xu is a member of the [Qiao Collective](#) and of the [No Cold War](#) collective.

