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The debates over the Olympic Summer Games in Beijing this summer rages, in the streets as well as in popular and academic media, and is discernible also in many of the new books on China, the Olympic Movement and the Beijing Games that's flooding the bookstores this spring. The critical voices are in majority, but there are attempts at creating a more balanced, unprejudiced understanding of Chinese politics and the IOC decision to give the Games to Beijing. Marina Svensson, Associate Professor at Lund University, specializing in contemporary China, has read two books that in different ways portray the diverse and complicated reality behind the slogans. In the anthology *Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China* (University of Michigan Press), edited by Monroe E. Price and Daniel Dayan, a number of contributions contextualize the Beijing Games in relation to the Olympic Movement, sport and society in today's China, and the media landscape which is the playing field of the conflicting narratives on China. Susan Brownell, anthropologist at University of Missouri and leading expert on Chinese sports, has a pronounced pro-Chinese view, arguing that China deserves the Games, if only to counter the Western domination of what is supposed to be an international movement. Svensson's perceptive reading and informed analysis of the two books give qualified guidance for the choice of pre-Olympic reading in the summer of 2008.

## The Beijing Games: Contesting narratives

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*Monroe E. Price & Daniel Dayan (red)*

**Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China**

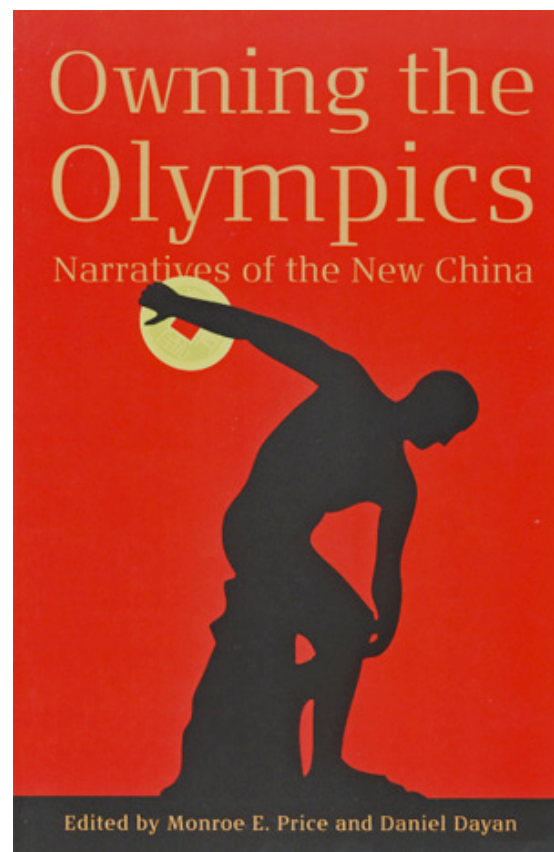
4016 sidor, hft.

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2008 (The New Media World)

ISBN 978-0-472-05032-1

In August 2008 China will host the Olympic Games, an event that has given rise to heated debates on a variety of issues unrelated to sports, including human rights, international politics, as well as journalist practices and media reports. Although Western and Chinese observers disagree on many things, most would nonetheless agree that the Beijing Games is more than a huge sports event.

For Western governments and observers the Games are associated with both expectations and fears. One big question is whether the Olympics will push China towards a more open and liberal political system, or whether it rather symbolises the rise of an assertive and strong one-Party state that will dominate world economics and politics. The Chinese government for its part clearly sees the Games as something of a coming-out party. It is an



opportunity to project to the world an image of a prosperous and strong China, as well as assert its rightful role as an important player in world affairs.

The Games are not only an invitation for the world to come to China and appreciate its culture, economic development, and new international status, but also a way for the Communist Party to display its economic and political success to its own citizens, and thus an opportunity to strengthen its political legitimacy. Many ordinary Chinese citizens also take a strong patriotic pride in and have high expectations on the Beijing Games. This patriotic pride is fuelled and shaped by slogans, propaganda, and commercial advertisements related to the Olympics that different actors, including the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Beijing Olympics Committee, various Chinese governmental bodies, and domestic and foreign enterprises, display in Chinese media and on billboards all over the country. It should be remembered that many foreign enterprises and individuals also have a stake in China's rise and economic development, and therefore also support and benefit from the Games and take part in various publicity events.

The existence of these complex and somewhat contradictory expectations and views on the Beijing Games among foreigners, especially Westerners, and Chinese (groups which by no means are homogenous) explain the heated and divergent views and protests that became visible during the international leg of the Olympic torch relay in April. Although the focus and size of the protests and the vehement nationalistic counter reaction among many Chinese citizens abroad and in China were unforeseen as they were propelled by the Tibetan protests that preceded the torch relay, the protests and divergent views and expectations should not have come as a surprise since they had been building up over many years.

For those who want to get a fuller picture of the Beijing Games as a media and sports event, and the different and competing narratives that surround it, two new books provide much needed and fascinating insights. *Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China*, edited by Monroe E. Price and Daniel Dayan, focuses on the Games as a media event and discusses how different actors provide different and contesting narratives. The authors of the volume come from different disciplines and fields, including media studies, Chinese studies, human rights and legal studies, etc. *Beijing's Games: What the Olympics Mean to China* is written by anthropologist Susan Brownell and focuses more on sports, including Chinese sports history, and sport and nationalism.

The Price and Dayan volume provides a background to and contextualises the Beijing Games within the Olympics movement and in relation to representations and media events more generally. The book consists of three thematic sections. The first section unpacks and problematizes the slogans and narratives surrounding the Games. Several of the chapters discuss how official narratives are constructed and how different actors then challenge these narratives by putting forward counter-narratives. The slogan "One World, One Dream" chosen by Beijing expresses the ideal that we are all part of one world and share the same dream of prosperity and sports achievements, but the slogan actually obfuscates conflicts in Chinese society and in the world and the existence of many different and conflicting dreams.

Jacques deLisle's chapter discusses the Chinese regime's different and somewhat contradictory views and aspirations in relation to the Games. The main official narrative the regime wants the world to embrace is that of a prosperous, orderly, normal, and globalized China. It wants the world to have faith in China's peaceful rise, and pledges to play by the rules (whether these be WTO regulations or human rights obligations).

An additional dimension is the efforts to showcase the Beijing Games as high-tech and environmental friendly. These visions and attempts feed into an aspiration to be perceived as a modern and technologically advanced global power. The aspiration to be seen as politically stable and orderly is more problematic as it necessitates the suppression of social and political unrest and has led to the build-up of a strong security apparatus, which actually belies the image of China as an open and normal country. deLisle discusses at length how Western NGOs and domestic activists use different counterstrategies and narratives that challenge the official narratives. Many NGOs and exile organisations have thus realised that the Olympics is a good and visible occasion to raise issues related to human rights in order to create pressure on the regime.

Monroe Price further develops this issue in a chapter that provides some case studies of how different NGOs and organisations provide narratives that challenge China over issues such as labour standards and support to Sudan. Slogans are subverted, hijacked and taken over, and different organisations have launched slogans such as "One World, One Dream, Free Tibet," "One World, One Dream, and Universal Human Rights," and "Genocide Olympics," as also seen during the April protests.

The second section of the book focuses on how the Beijing Games relates to and differ from previous Games as well as feed into previous narratives of China. This section includes, for instance, a chapter on China's soft power strategy, where cultural and sports events play an important part (Nicholas J. Cull), and another on the construction of Beijing as an Olympic city (Heidi Østbø Haugen). Jeffrey N. Wassertrom discusses how Western media have and continue to oscillate between romanticising and demonising China. Another chapter (Briar Smith) deals with the

regulations under which Chinese and foreign media operate in China. In order to provide a more open environment and live up to its human rights promises, Beijing has given foreign journalists and media more freedom and less restrictions before and during the Olympics.

But these promises, as discussed in several other chapters in the book (for example Sonja K. Foss and Barbara J. Walker in the next section), on the other hand lead to expectations of human rights improvements and to reports in foreign media that highlight unwanted aspects of Chinese society, which undermine and challenge the official narratives of the Olympics. The fact that Western media pay a lot of attention to human rights, or give voice to biases and distortions, as have been alleged by nationalistic Chinese citizens recently with respect to Tibet, has been in the centre of Chinese critique that the West politicises the Olympics.

The final section of the book includes chapters that discuss what impact different forms of representations, communication technologies, and alternative media have on the Olympic narrative and on the image of China. One chapter (Christopher Kennett and Miquel de Moragas) provides an analysis of how different Western broadcasters described the closing ceremony in Athens and the presentation of the Beijing Olympics. Their analysis shows that although the host nation may have spent considerable time planning the narratives, journalists and broadcasters have considerable leeway to interpret and broadcast according to their own will.

Another chapter (Andy Miah, Beatriz García, and Tian Zhihui) points out that in the age of blogging, formal media outlets are no longer the only actor, and that this makes it even more difficult for host nations and official broadcasters to dominate and control the Olympic narrative. The number of nonaccredited media and citizen journalists has increased with each Olympics, and the question is whether Beijing will be able to contain this development. The only chapter in the Price and Dayan book that more explicitly deals with sport is Hai Ren's chapter that addresses the issue of the domination of Western sports and the failed attempts to make Chinese martial arts (*wushu*) an Olympic sport.

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*Susan Brownell*

**Beijing's Games: What the Olympics Mean to China**

230 sidor, hft.

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield

2008

ISBN 978-0-7425-5641-6

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Susan Brownell's book discusses in more detail the Western domination of what is supposed to be an international Olympics movement. One purpose of her book is to show that China has a rich and indigenous sports history that has been sadly neglected not only by Western sport historians but by Chinese historians as well. In this context she explains how different intellectual and political ideas and trends, such as classicism and orientalism, have given rise to biases and misrepresentations of the role of sports in traditional Chinese society and in the neglect of non-Western sports.

Brownell also provides a useful history of how sports and national identity has been closely linked in Chinese history since the late Qing dynasty when China began to modernize after having suffered many defeats by Western armies. Chinese reformers advocated physical training as part of their attempts to create a strong Chinese state that could stand up to the Western powers. Sports have thus, since the early twentieth century, been utilized to create national identity and strengthen state power in China. This development was reinforced with the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 and under the influence of communism. Hence, the Beijing Olympics is but the culmination of the efforts to use sports for patriotic purposes. Brownell's book also includes interesting chapters on women's sports in China and on the architectural features of Chinese sports stadiums from the republican period to the Beijing Olympics. As an anthropologist Brownell explores interesting links between bodies, physical structures, and national politics.



The book provides a detailed account of China's Olympic aspirations and interactions with IOC, and the way politics since 1949 have influenced these aspirations until China in 1979 was re-admitted to the IOC. Starting with the Lake Placid Winter Games in 1980 and the Los Angeles Summer Olympics in 1984 Chinese athletes have been able to take part in the Olympics. Since then the success of Chinese athletes has become a topic of both admiration and suspicion among Western athletes and journalists. Brownell argues, quite convincingly, that many Western journalists have political biases that lead them to unthinkingly accuse China of centrally organized doping, and to describe Chinese athletes as products of "a communist sports machine" without having evidence or sufficient knowledge of the Chinese sports community. Furthermore, their ignorance about Chinese history and society also often lead them to disparaging and absurd comments on Chinese culture and history. Brownell makes no secret of thinking that China deserves the Olympics and that the West is too pre-occupied with China bashing and human rights critique. She also finds the idea that the Olympics can change China Eurocentric and instead argues that the West should be prepared to learn something from China.

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Brownell's book doesn't dispute the major findings in the Price and Dayan volume but adds some useful Chinese perspectives and voices to the debate on the Beijing Games as a media and sports event. It is obvious that although we all share some common dreams and aspirations, Chinese and Western governments, media, ordinary citizens and athletes view the Beijing Olympics in somewhat different ways. These different views and narratives can be difficult to reconcile and unpack unless we know more about the history and the underlying conflicts and debates surrounding the Beijing Olympics.

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