
WHERE IS THE “FRUGAL OLYMPICS”? INTERNET VOICES PROTEST EXTRAVAGANCE

An HRIC Issues Brief by Bonny Ling and Trevor Lee

Comments posted on the Internet suggest that public resentment is growing against costly publicity events promoting official prestige rather than the spirit of the Games.

The one-year countdown to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and its media fanfare have come and gone, leaving behind persistent calls for an “economical and practical” Olympics to counteract perceived waste and excess in preparing for the Games. Increasingly, in the past few years, such sentiments have found their way onto the Internet, in blogs, discussion forums and local papers as a full accounting of the spending on various Olympic constructions and events has yet to be fully disclosed to the public.

Similar to the open letter “One World, One Dream and Universal Human Rights” from 40 Chinese academics, writers and human rights activists, these sentiments against an extravagant and wasteful Olympics provide another perspective often hidden from the media glare aimed at festivities and publicity campaigns. This HRIC Issues Brief provides a sample of the range and diversity of these critical views on the Beijing Olympic Games expressed by Chinese Netizens on general blogs and Internet discussion and news forums.

In particular, efforts were made to identify public reactions to Olympics-related news in the online editions of local papers, as well discussion threads in news forums where such articles are posted.¹ Due to the sophisticated Internet censorship system in place in China, the Internet voices represented in this Brief cannot be considered comprehensive, but should be seen as a small sample of the totality of views.

The goal of running a frugal Olympics has been reiterated through the Beijing Olympic Action Plan released in March 2002 and in subsequent official speeches promoting the Beijing Games. Marking the first anniversary of Beijing’s successful Olympic bid, Liu Qi, then mayor of Beijing and also president of the Beijing Organizing Committee of the 2008 Olympic Games (BOCOG), said, “Our Central Government has made clear that in the course of preparing for the Olympics, we should follow the principles of being *frugal, pragmatic instead of seeking luxury*.”² He also stressed that since Beijing is a city in a developing country, “it is more necessary for Beijing to show its singularity and attach importance to frugality and pragmatism in hosting the Games.”³

LACK OF FUNDING TRANSPARENCY

BOCOG has yet to provide the Chinese public with an update on the Olympics budget and costs. An increase to the budget for security and sanitation was acknowledged in 2005 and submitted to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for approval,⁵ but BOCOG has not made the specific figures public to date.

Operational costs for the 2008 Games had originally

“We will avoid extravagance in running the Olympic Games and do our utmost to bring about social and economic developments to the capital city and to the country, creating a unique legacy for China as well as for the whole world.”
—Beijing Olympic Action Plan, Section 1.1,
“Overall Strategic Concept: Guidelines.”⁴

been budgeted at \$1.609 billion,⁶ and BOCOG continues to insist that its budget will not exceed that of the 2004 Athens Games, which stood at \$2.4 billion.⁷ The most updated figure for the Beijing Games came at the 117th session of the IOC in Singapore in 2005, when an IOC news brief mentioned, without offering additional details, that “the new BOCOG budget was going to be just over \$2 billion, which was in line with manageable expectations.”⁸

This lack of transparency also extends to projected Olympic revenues. On March 7, 2007, Yuan Bin, BOCOG’s director of marketing, publicly stated that Olympic merchandise is likely to net China at least \$70 million, but declined to indicate how much money had been made so far by the Olympic licensing program.⁹ This lack of financial transparency makes a comprehensive assessment of Olympic spending impossible, and contributes to a growing public resentment over what some perceive as extravagant publicity events that do little to promote the Olympic spirit in China.

BIG AND EXTRAVAGANT

Public discontent over wasteful spending on the Beijing Olympics centers on extravagant preparations that seem aimed mainly at gaining media attention and providing financial benefit to local officials rather than benefiting the local community or promoting the Olympic spirit.

Despite the lack of official figures, critics contend that construction of the National Stadium, known as the “Bird’s Nest” because of its appearance, and the swimming stadium, known for the same reason as the “Water Cube,” have substantially exceeded their original budgets. The original design of the “Bird’s Nest” was, in fact, modified after 10 senior Beijing academics with links to the construction sector sent a report to Premier Wen Jiabao indicating that it required an excessive amount of steel and was deficient in both practicality and security.¹¹ On July 27, 2004, at the seventh plenary session of the ninth CCP Beijing Municipal Party Committee, Beijing mayor Wang Qishan supported a plan to downsize Olympic construction projects,¹² and soon after

On Jan 10, 2007, organizers first admitted problems with cost controls for Olympic construction. Xu Bo, an official from Beijing’s 2008 Projects and Construction Headquarters, said that some contractors faced problems in controlling costs. “Their actual spending [on certain projects] is higher than their expectations at the time of their bidding.”¹⁰ Despite this, BOCOG authorities have yet to publicly update and detail the cost figures included in Beijing’s bid to host the 2008 Games.

that, construction of the “Bird’s Nest” was suspended for a redesign that eliminated the retractable roof.¹³ The new design used 100,000 fewer tons of steel,¹⁴ and reduced costs by an estimated 1.6 billion *yuan* (about \$210 million).¹⁵

Although the trimming of the “Bird’s Nest” construction represented a concrete effort towards a “frugal Olympics,” there is still no institutional mechanism for the general public to express concern about Olympic extravagance and waste. The public has therefore increasingly resorted to blogs, forums and local papers to criticize impressive architectural projects such as the Bird’s Nest for failing to portray the true spirit of the Games in China. An anonymous engineer was quoted in one online article as saying, “The entire mentality behind [the Olympics] is wrong. We have returned to the Soviet mold—each thing must be done in a big and extravagant way.”¹⁶

Similar charges of extravagance extend to events generating publicity for the Olympics. Coming under particular criticism on the Internet are events incorporating the number 2,008.¹⁷ Some of these events include:

- 2,008 professional drummers were recruited in Beijing in January 2007 for a three-month long celebration marking the 500-day countdown of the Beijing Olympics.¹⁸
- 2,008 senior citizens assembled in Tianjin to perform Tai Chi one morning in May 2007.¹⁹
- 2,008 people gathered to play the Chinese zither together in an attempt to set a Guinness World Record in Yangzhou on August 8, 2007.²⁰

- 2,008 pairs of young children in Jincheng, Shanxi Province, arranged an aerial image of the number “2008” and the Olympic rings, while playing chess at the same time, in an attempt to set another Guinness World Record on August 8, 2007.²¹
- Efforts recently began in Beijing to recruit 2,008 couples for a mass wedding ceremony on the same day as the Olympics opening ceremony next year.²²

Many critics suggest that some participants in these events, especially children and the elderly, might not have voluntarily offered their participation.²³ One news article quoted the observations of a Shanghai neighborhood cadre:

To organize these types of big events, every neighborhood must send a certain quota of people. And it is not just about sending people; all neighborhoods have to show support by providing funding. There are simply too many of these types of activities and meetings for higher-level officials, but neighborhood and residential committees are obliged to attend them. When the camera turns to them, their job is to smile, and if they are interviewed, they should just say some rehearsed lines.²⁴

Increasingly, public comment describes these events as pure hype and a waste of resources. In the words of a neighborhood cadre in Shanghai, “This kind of extravagant practice takes no account of cost, but only strives toward two goals: attracting the attention of the leadership and the media.”²⁹

From this perspective, organizing Olympic celebrations is regarded as a means for local officials to demonstrate their support for the central leadership through contributions to the nationwide Olympic project, and to showcase their own local achievements through ostentatious Olympics-related activities. One local official noted the lack of genuine enthusiasm behind such events: “There have been a number of such [Olympic] activities carried out purely for the attention of the leadership. In some cases, when it turned out that leaders were unable to attend after all, the activities were simply abandoned.”³⁰

ONLINE SENTIMENTS AGAINST THE OLYMPIC “SHOW”

“Some people even shout out the slogan, “Spare no money to host the Olympic Games.” [However,] hosting the Olympic Games is not about showing off because, fundamentally, the Olympic spirit shouldn’t be about vanity.”²⁵

“[These events are] only for image engineering!”²⁶

“These events are grandiose, but do not treat individual people with respect. Some local authorities even use the administrative machinery to spend taxpayers’ money for these irrelevant vanity displays. This is not the original spirit of the Olympics, and has nothing to do with people’s livelihoods.”²⁷

“Between the choice of adding more communal athletic equipment for people to improve their health, or gathering 2,008 residents for an Olympic-welcoming event to make an aerial view of a smile, which choice would genuinely bring a smile to people’s faces? This simple question reflects local government’s true view of their achievements.”²⁸

CORRUPTION

In March 2004, Beijing Olympics organizers voiced their determination to curb corruption in the construction of facilities for the 2008 Games. Wan Jun, vice-minister of the State General Administration of Sports (SGAS), underlined the importance of “clean” Games by stating that “projects for the Beijing Olympics should be projects ‘in the sunshine.’”³¹ Nevertheless, serious allegations of official corruption continue to plague the Beijing Olympics. For example, a 2005 audit report found that the SGAS had made illicit stock investments with 27.8 million *yuan* (about \$3.66 million) diverted from a special fund for “an honorable Olympic Games” and “national fitness.”³² It was later discovered that this 27.8 million *yuan* had originally been moved as early as February 2000 from a lottery

fund allocated to developing sports in China.³³ A year earlier, in 2004, an audit report submitted to the National People's Congress had found that since 1999, the SGAS had misused 131 million *yuan* (about \$17.2 million) of Chinese Olympic Committee funds to build staff housing and provide duty subsidies for its staff.³⁴

Censorship and official preoccupation with image ensure that few cases of corruption associated with the Olympics are reported in depth by domestic media. The seriousness of the situation was highlighted, however, when the Communist Party handed over former Beijing vice-mayor Liu Zhihua to face corruption charges on June 11, 2006.³⁵ Liu, who oversaw Olympic construction projects, has been accused of taking millions of *yuan* in bribes and helping his mistress reap huge profits in construction projects. Beijing Olympic organizers have repeatedly dismissed any link between Liu's wrongdoing and Olympics projects,³⁶ in spite of articles and commentaries suggesting such involvement.³⁷ In December 2006, Liu Zhihua was dismissed from all administrative posts and expelled from the Party.³⁸

Many Chinese have expressed concern over "letting the Beijing Olympic Games become an appetizer in a public-funded feast,"⁴¹ especially during the 2004 Athens Games, when many Chinese officials went to Athens to "monitor" the Games. Reports emerged that some officials brought along family members and spent as much as 170,000 *yuan* (about \$22,500) per person, lavishing public funds on four-star hotels, gourmet meals and private tours around Europe.⁴² One Netizen wrote, "As a Chinese, I'm ashamed of this kind of phenomenon, and I'm not optimistic about [the promise of] holding a 'frugal Olympics' that China has stressed time and again."⁴³

"Where can officials go to pocket profits if not construction projects?"³⁹ a blogger commented on the demolition of a 15-year-old 24-floor high rise in Qingdao to make way for Olympic construction. The Beijing Olympic Action Plan states, "Existing facilities that can be adapted or expanded for Olympic purposes will be used instead of building new ones, and temporary venues will be built in place of permanent ones."⁴⁰

PUBLIC RESENTMENT

Lack of transparency over Olympic expenditures and reports of corruption continue to fuel public concern about waste and misallocation of public funds. Below is a short selection of comments from Chinese blogs and online news and general discussion forums exploring how the funds might be better spent.

General

"Those idiots running our country are spending common people's hard-earned money to dress the capital up like a prostitute, then they'll bring back some gold medals from the Games and split the benefits If you don't have enough money to put food on the table for your kids or see the doctor when you're sick, how can you afford to go see some shitty Olympics?"⁴⁴

—April 30, 2007, a Yahoo! China blog

"There are other ways of spending this money to meet more dire needs, such as helping the poor, helping the low-income strata of our society, investing in education, assisting emergency relief efforts, strengthening national defense and so on. Putting it bluntly, China can't afford this kind of grand gesture right now . . ." ⁴⁵—July 17, 2007, *Xinhua online news discussion forum*

"[China] really shouldn't talk about being extravagant [with events]. We're still a developing country and should focus on development and on steadily and solidly embarking on research for development."⁴⁶—July 20, 2007, a *Xinhua online news discussion thread*

"To organize the Olympic Games really costs a lot of money! Isn't it better to use this money to help the people [?!]"⁴⁷—August 27, 2007, *BBS Forum QQ*

Education

"As for investing in compulsory education, China is indeed showing the spirit of a "frugal education."⁴⁸—Sept. 2, 2004, a *www.eepw.com.cn* blog



Scores of children play traditional Chinese guzheng on the Great Wall to celebrate the one-year countdown to the 2008 Olympics. Photo: Reuters

Poverty Alleviation

“While people are elated about the Olympics, sports are playing an increasingly smaller role in the daily lives of ordinary people. This is particularly true in rural villages—I don’t know if there is a single Ping-Pong table or basketball hoop in poor rural villages.”⁵²—September 2, 2004, a *www.eepw.com.cn* blog

“The media like to emphasize how much effort athletes and coaches put into winning gold medals, but how much taxpayers’ money was spent to win them? Would winning all the Olympic gold medals make China invincible? How about spending all that money on ordinary people? Do they know that there are still lots of people living below the poverty line?”⁵³—October 31, 2004, *BBS Forum Langye Luntan*

“The country is wasting so much, and has anyone ever stopped to wonder what kind of life farmers must be living?”⁵⁴—May 1, 2007, a *Yahoo! China*

“Bidding for the Olympic Games was the desire of all the people in this country, but the truth? Everyone knows the truth deep down. Did anyone ask the poor farmers who make up 80 to 90 percent of China’s 1.3 to 1.4 billion people, and who spend their lives trying to earn just enough to keep warm and healthy? As they have always said, their greatest desire is nothing more than to have enough to eat and warm clothes to wear.”—May 1, 2007, one *Yahoo! China Blog*

“Just the word ‘Olympics’ makes me angry! On what basis should China’s 1.3 billion people hand over their money to build up Beijing? On what grounds can we pay for the Olympics with our tax money and then be ignored? What about the farmers? The People’s Republic was built with the blood and sweat of farmers, and now they want to throw us aside!”—May 26, 2007, a *Yahoo! China blog*

“The Olympic Games waste too much of what should rightfully belong to the poor. A concrete example is real estate, in addition to the attention of

“There will be no talk of extravagance or ostentation in organizing the Olympic Games. We should save every drop of water and every unit of electricity in the construction of the Olympic venues.”⁵⁸
—Premier Wen Jiabao during the inspection of several Olympic venues on July 17, 2007.

the media that shape news and information. When I really think about it, the Olympics were forced upon us.”⁵⁷—August 25, 2007, *BBS Forum QQ*

PROMISES, PROMISES

Along with the promises of a green, high-tech and people’s Olympics, a frugal Olympics is a central obligation in BOCOG’s Beijing Olympic Action Plan, and all levels of the Chinese government are committed to fulfilling this promise. Nearly four years after the publication of the action plan, we are again seeing assurances of frugality and economy from the highest levels of the Chinese government.

It remains to be seen whether these promises will turn into concrete actions during the final countdown, or if the celebratory events will simply become even more extravagant as the opening ceremony approaches. One meaningful way for China to show that it is serious about Olympic frugality is to promptly disclose detailed figures on Olympics-related finances, without which a meaningful assessment of costs, revenues, over-budgeting and corruption is impossible.

In terms of China’s other commitments for the Olympics, it is clear that serious human rights issues, including China’s obligations regarding the fundamental right of freedom of opinion and expression, have come into critical focus over the past six years. The international community should renew its calls for a full and transparent progress report by China in this one-year countdown to the 2008 Games to ensure that all of its Olympic promises are being kept.

Notes

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