

China, Finally Claiming Its Olympic Glory

Tommy Treacy, Economics and International Affairs, '24
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Mark Berlin, Associate Professor of Political Science



Research Question

What were the similarities and differences between the 2008 and 2022 Olympics? How do they reflect the changes in Chinese political culture over the last 14 years?

Background

Beijing, China was the host of the 2008 and 2022 Olympics. International sporting events bring in billions of dollars to countries. The 14 years that separated these international events saw many changes in China. These changes were caused by the replacement of former President Hu Jintao with current President Xi Jinping.

What is Chinese Nationalism?

The 2008 and 2022 Olympics were held in Beijing, China. The 14 years that separated these international events saw many changes in China and its relationship with the international community.

After China's defeat in the First Opium War, Chinese nationalism began brewing in the form anti-foreigner sentiments. Historical events like the Taiping Rebellion, Arrow War, Tongzhi Restoration can all be viewed as an expression of these newfound nationalist ideas (Duara).

Nationalism became important again in the second half of the 20th century. This time, rather than being a form of anti-foreigner attitudes, it was caused by China opening to the world (Ferdinand). This era was representative of China throwing off the shame of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and integrating itself more deeply into the international culture.

2008 vs. 2022



2008 Olympics Opening Ceremonies



2022 Olympics Opening Ceremonies

What was nationalism's affect on the Olympics?

The 2008 Olympics was a symbol for China. It was their re-emergence on the international stage after their modernization drive. After imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries, China had finally achieved parity with western power. These attitudes were evident as 90% of China thought the Olympics were of critical importance (Pew).

The 2022 games were dramatically different. Since 2008, the Olympics has seen many scandals. This makes it less prestigious to be a host city for the Olympics. Additionally, global events like the Covid-19 Pandemic surrounded these games made them far more controversial. This, and the fact it was almost seen as "old news" made it less influential on the Chinese public.

How did China project itself?

In 2008, China wanted to showcase themselves as a country on the rise. They coined the term "peaceful rise" to show that they were ready to be a global player – but one fighting for common good. Additionally, they wanted to showcase their culture. Thus, they had many culturally-influenced events for the opening ceremonies. These events were spotted by the various ethnic groups in China. It created the appearance of a cosmopolitan and tolerant nation. By marketing in these ways, the games became a celebration of the Chinese spirit.

In 2022, China was focused on showing off the "China model". The China model sees social and economic sectors with state control; however, there are some market-based practice that still push through. They showed their model and technocratic practices through beautiful and highly-technological performances.

China turned away from their people and their historical journey and towards their newfound technological prowess. This is indicative of a games less focused on a celebration and more of one dedicated to influence.

These Olympic Games were defined by China using soft power on foreign audiences. By showing China's incredible technology and beautiful culture, it could show its own strength. In 2008, the Games was an ad for foreign audiences to shape how they viewed China. In 2022, the Games was a propaganda piece to show the development that the "China model" could produce.

Conclusion

President Xi moved China's international image away from President Hu's prior goals. Hu sought to have China be a friend to all while Xi wants China to be admired by all. The Chinese people mostly seem to neglect the difference between these two views. Instead, they continue to see the economic benefits from China's growing economy. This is what keeps them invested in Xi's vision for China.