

Exploring the Role of the Olympic Games in Political Narrative——A Case Study of 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics

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Abstract. It is increasingly commonplace for sporting events, and even the Olympics, to be politicised and used as a means of political narrative, and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics are no exception. Considering that the Beijing Winter Olympics is recently hosted, and there is a lack of adequate analysis and discussion of it, this paper focuses on exploring the role of the Olympic Games in political narratives, and through the dissection of several controversial issues, it specifically illustrates Beijing's tactful utilisation of the Games. It is expected that the results of this case study will enrich the empirical basis of Olympic diplomacy and offer more insights into China's subtle use of different modules of the Olympics to achieve the desired political narrative. After a comprehensive and inductive analysis, this paper defines Beijing's use of the successful hosting of the Games itself, the opening ceremony, some "vignettes", and media coverage for the underlying political narrative and reconstructs its main objectives.

Keywords: Olympic winter games, Olympic diplomacy, Sports diplomacy, International relations, Political narrative, Beijing.

1. Introduction

Sports are often considered to encompass all activities based on sportsmanship or physical coordination, which transcend geographical and cultural differences and allow people from different parts of the world to participate together. Some argue that sport is inherently apolitical, particularly when it comes to mega-events like the Olympic Games. Cha claimed that the original Olympic Charter unswervingly rejected the exploitation of sport for political ends and criticised its negative impact on the Games [1]. However, in reality, the use of sporting events, athletes (as celebrities and national icons), and even Olympic mascots to complement diplomatic efforts or make political narrative are commonly seen [2]. As the premier international sporting event, the Olympic Games have always been held at the appropriate time and on the right occasion, with sophisticated and substantial political connotations. Generally speaking, the function and narrative of the Olympic Games are multifaceted: to promote national pride, cohesion, and patriotism, to polish international image and prestige, to clarify misconceptions and dispel prejudices, to gain international recognition, to display and enhance cultural soft power, to complement and promote diplomatic efforts, to showcasing the institutional ascendancy and statecraft, to send a signal and convey implications, and so on. Given the enormous diplomatic effort and economic costs involved in successfully qualifying to host the Games, the purpose of hosting it is bound to be divorced from being a purely sporting event, and additional political narratives are always attached to it. This 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics also came with a complex background: the lingering celebrations of the centenary of the China Communist Party (CCP), the adherence to the characteristic "dynamic zero" policy in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the questions and challenges about human rights issues in certain areas that are gathering momentum, the recurring and intensifying cultural disputes with South Korea, and others. These contexts are not just a prelude to the coincidence of the Winter Olympics but, more importantly, are central to the underlying political narrative of the Games orchestrated by Beijing. It is therefore worth inquiring into the role of the Olympic Games in the political narrative.

In conclusion, as the Olympic Games are an internationally concerned and acclaimed sporting event, the political objectives and narrative of the previous hosts have been fully explored and analysed. However, there is a lack of case studies on Beijing's political narrative and concrete analysis

of official directed political behaviour in the 2022 Winter Olympics. Thus, as a bit of step to bridge this research gap, through a case study, this paper will explain how the Winter Olympics can be used for political narrative, and the objectives and functions of that narrative, by deconstructing and dissecting China's concrete behaviour during the Winter Olympics. It is expected that the results of this study will not only enrich the empirical basis of Olympic diplomacy and explore the role of the Olympic Games in the political narrative but also offer more insights into China's subtle use of different modules of the Olympics to achieve the desired political narrative.

To set the stage, this paper begins with the elaboration of the theoretical framework, which serves as the rationale and logical basis of the whole analysis. It is followed by an integrated case description to introduce the background of the Winter Olympics and draw forth controversies. Then, a comprehensive analysis of the four selected events leading up to and amid the Winter Olympics and the subsequent discussion is central to this paper. Finally, it ends with a conclusion and an expectation.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Olympics as A Diplomatic Tool

Sports diplomacy, an embranchment of public diplomacy, has gained momentum for the past few years, and corresponding diplomatic boycotts have been commonplace [2]. Sports diplomacy, as a process of politicising sport, is defined as a bilateral or multilateral diplomatic activity in which countries, international organisations, and relevant parties exchange sports to achieve certain political and diplomatic goals. It has two properties. On the one hand, sports diplomacy demonstrates the attribute as a tool and regards sports as a model diplomatic tool; on the other hand, sports become the object and content of a country's diplomacy [3]. In addition to their function as the largest and most recognised international sporting events, Olympic Games have always been carefully conceived by their hosts as a stage for sports diplomacy, either implicitly or explicitly used in political narratives. After all, even if the Olympic Games themselves were not imbued with any political agenda, the process of hosting them, such as the host city, the opening ceremony, the venue and facilities and the closing ceremony, would undoubtedly be an ideal stage for showcasing and shaping the host's international image and finally bring diplomatic and political implications. The past Olympic Games entwined with weighty political themes are as shown in Table 1 [4].

Table 1. The past Olympic Games and their political themes

Olympic Games	Political Themes	Olympic Games	Political Themes
Berlin 1936	Nazi Germany's rise	Munich 1972	Middle East conflicts/host states' political rehabilitation
Helsinki 1952	The Cold War	Moscow 1980	the Cold War
Melbourne 1956	Middle East conflicts	Los Angeles 1984	the Cold War
Rome 1960	Host states' political rehabilitation	Seoul 1988	arrival on the world stage
Tokyo 1964	Host states' political rehabilitation/arrival on the world stage		

2.2. Objectives Reconstructed from Context and Behaviour

Based on the obvious facts that this Winter Olympic was attached to the political complexion, this paper focuses on the reconstruction of Beijing's objectives of political narrative through the Winter Olympics by analysing the pre-Winter Olympics context and the external environment and by discussing the officially guided political, diplomatic, or civic actions during the Winter Olympics. Thus, the qualitative case study approach is served as the main rationale and logical basis for the following analysis.

3. Case Study

3.1. Case Description

Beijing, the capital of People's Republic of China, has held the XXIV Olympic Winter Games, also known as the 2022 Olympic Winter Games from 4 to 20 February 2022. Some outdoor snow and ice events of the Games were also hosted by the Zhangjiakou city of Hebei Province. The host of this Winter Olympics has made Beijing the first "double Olympic city", namely a city has hosted both the Summer and Winter Olympics. The Winter Games are being held in Asia back-to-back with the PyeongChang 2018 and Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, the first time in history that the Games have been held back-to-back on a continent other than Europe. With the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics by one year, the gap with the Beijing Winter Games has been shortened to just six months. Beijing was finally confirmed as the host city in 2015, beating Almaty by a narrow margin from the six cities initially nominated. Specifically, the mascot "Bing Dwen Dwen" for the Winter Olympics is based on the Chinese national treasure, the panda, and combines the image of the panda with an ice crystal shell. Three main elements can be detected from this peculiar panda: snow sports, ice, and modern technology. The slogan of the Winter Olympics is "Together for a Shared Future", where "a Shared Future" is the same word as President Xi proposed the concept of "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind". At the same time, the slogan also happens to be the name of the promotional song.

It is worth pointing out that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, "closed loop" management was implemented throughout the Winter Olympic Games. Persons who have not been medically exempted and have not completed their vaccinations will be subject to a 21-day mandatory quarantine. All participants and staff must be tested for the virus once a day. Only special vehicles and high-speed trains will be used to travel to and from the Winter Olympics venues. Most importantly, there will be no public sales of tickets for the Winter Olympics [5].

During the Winter Olympics, many controversies deserved to be analysed and explored, from environmental and climatic issues, diplomatic boycotts and political protests, and pandemic control measures to human rights issues [6]. A selection of these will be examined in the case studies.

3.2. Case Analysis

3.2.1. Pre-Winter Olympics Context

In July 2021, the centenary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, President Xi Jinping emphasised in his speech the necessity and importance of the Communist Party for the realisation of "the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and the indispensability, uniqueness, and irreplaceability of the Communist Party for the future development of China [7]. Since then, the corresponding great fanfare has officially kicked off and overlapped with the lead-up to the Beijing Winter Olympics, which was inevitably given a political complexion. It was pointed out by Bennett & Garrick that after the centenary celebrations, CCP needed an influential international stage to show the world that China is prosperous and on track to achieve the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation, showcasing the political ascendance and statecraft of CCP and its legitimacy [8]. Unlike most of the larger, less demanding sporting activities of the Summer Games, the Winter Games require a higher level of a location, cultural barriers, upfront costs, and technology [9, 10]. Lee also pointed out that the events of the Winter Olympics are filled with an atmosphere of wealth and power. A few aspirant nations plan to organise this opulent athletic event in order to enhance their worldwide reputations as prominent players in the capitalist system [11]. In addition, the mainstream coverage of the recently concluded Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in China has tended to be critical and condemnatory. The targets ranged from the "netherworld" and "horrifying" opening ceremony and the "deformed" costume to the discharge of nuclear wastewater and the resulting poor water quality [12]. The proximity of the two Olympic Games created a sense of contrast and contrasts domestically, thus serving as a foil to the great success of the Beijing Winter Games. Ultimately, the gorgeous Beijing Winter Olympics reflected the prosperity and strength of the new China under the

effective governance of the CCP and the much more excellence of the organisation and staging than the Tokyo Olympics, which served as the best underpainting of the political narrative.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019, China's prevention and control philosophy has been relative tougher, with countermeasures focusing on city lockdown and centralised quarantine of infected people. At the end of 2021, the National Health Commission's Leading Group for Outbreak Response and Management issued a new "dynamic zeroing" policy, which means that new cases of infection and their transmission chains are controlled promptly to prevent further transmission. This policy is considered China's current general approach to COVID-19 prevention and control and is based on the state-claimed rationale that the people's right to life and health is paramount. In contrast, since 2022, many countries worldwide, particularly those that depend on tourism, have focused on relaxing restrictions and controls, despite the potential pandemic backlash that would accompany this [13]. China's persistence in highly restrictive "dynamic zeroing" policy and the city lockdown measures it entails have faced widespread criticism and challenges internationally and at home. Therefore, with the Winter Olympics on track and schedule, Beijing wants to show the world that China's good control of the pandemic and its current "dynamic zeroing" policy are correct and appropriate. Further, it is a demonstration of the superiority of centralism and the CCP's outstanding ability to govern, thereby enhancing the people's reliance and support for the regime. Despite that, these are all based on a more stringent prevention and control policy in Beijing during the Winter Olympics run-up and the aforementioned strict "closed-loop" management of athletes and staff during the games [14].

3.2.2. Amid Winter Olympics

The Olympic Winter Games were held at a timing when the West was particularly harsh on China for human rights violations, ranging from the mass persecution and detention of Uyghurs and Tibetans far western areas, to the crackdown on Hong Kong protests and the resulting "Hong Kong national security law." [14]. In addition, after world tennis star Peng Shuai posted lengthy posts on several Chinese social media platforms accusing the former Vice Premier of sexual assault, she suddenly disappeared for months, along with her media accounts, sparking a massive boycott of the Winter Olympics by several democratic countries and athletes [15]. Finally, the day after the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics, Peng appeared again and met with IOC President Thomas Bach and former Athletes' Commission President Kirsty Coventry. However, it was suggested by Keh that the revelation of the meeting might do little to satisfy critics who question whether Peng has been speaking freely in the seemingly highly orchestrated public appearances [16]. Coincidentally, during the opening ceremony, Dinigeer Yilamujiang, a Chinese cross-country skier of Uyghur ancestry, was chosen as one of the two final torch-bearers at the Beijing Winter Games' opening ceremony. It was believed by Ma that this action prompted some to speculate whether China was using her as a response to accusations concerning violation of the human rights of Uyghurs in "re-education camps" [17]. Moreover, Zumretay Arkin, a Uyghur-Canadian advocate and programme manager of World Uyghur Congress, an international organisation of exiled Uyghurs, criticised China's arrangement as politically targeted and politicising Olympics. Some media even compared her to the Chinese Helen Haye, the Jewish fencer who represented Germany in the 1936 Berlin Olympics to protect her family from persecution by the Nazis. Although China has repeatedly denied that Yilamujiang's appointment was not politically motivated, it is doubtful that it was part of the Chinese political narrative with the utilisation of the Winter Olympics, given controversial human rights issues before the Games and the appropriateness of this coincidence.

Similarly, another "coincidence" concerning Sino-South Korea cultural disputes occurred during the Winter Olympics opening ceremony. The geographical proximity of China and South Korea has foreshadowed the close cultural exchange and frequent wars between them for hundreds of years, thus making the two cultures retain their own uniqueness while having certain commonalities, which has become the source of cultural disputes at present [18]. For instance, ownership of the pickled/fermented cabbage, the Dragon Boat Festival, the traditional costume of Korean ethnicity, and the ancient kingdom "Goguryeo", as well as the birthplace of poet Qu Yuan, the Confucius'

ancestry, and others [19]. During the opening performance, one of the performers happened to be wearing a controversial ethnic costume, which was seen as a response to the cultural disputes between China and South Korea. This controversial ethnic costume is considered by China to be the traditional costume of one of its 54 constituent ethnic groups, the “chaoxianzu” (literally means Korean), and by Korea to be the traditional Korean costume “Hanbok”. In reality, the cultural dispute is rooted in the fact that the Korean ethnicity has belonged to two sovereign states in recent times and that both sides claim ownership of the legacy of this ethnicity. The deliberate display of controversial costumes during the opening ceremony was therefore considered by South Korea to be provocative and a form of “cultural appropriation” [20]. This act could also be seen as a deliberate attempt to intensify the cultural dispute between the two countries, a unilateral declaration of cultural sovereignty and an embodiment of the Winter Olympic Games being used in a political narrative role.

4. Discussion

In addition to the four issues discussed above, several vignettes during the Winter Olympics are also worthy of discussion and reflection, such as the extensive coverage and compliment of the renowned skier Eileen Gu with sensitive dual nationality controversy and the international promotion and marketing of the mascot Bing Dwen Dwen— “quasi-Panda Diplomacy” [21, 22]. It can be summarised that the clarification of political controversies, the concentrated self-presentation of CCP’s legitimacy, political ascendancy, and statecraft, and the shaping of the international image, i.e., the promotion of soft power, are the main objectives of the political narrative of the Winter Olympics. Furthermore, the utilisation of media coverage to channel the public’s favorability or abomination towards a particular country for diplomatic purposes cannot be ignored. Examples include the massive positive coverage of figure skating star Yuzuru Hanyu and Japanese journalists who were deeply fond of the mascot [23]. Conversely, negative coverage of athletes who disliked Winter Olympics diets, athletes with controversial fouls and human rights sceptics is used to stir up nationalist sentiment and divert the country’s internal conflicts into an outward catharsis.

Overall, the Winter Olympic Games were a rare and precious opportunity for Beijing that could not be missed, and Beijing has also utilised the different modules of the Games promptly to achieve the desired political narrative. It is worth pointing out that the media played a decisive and irreplaceable role in this process, especially in the context of the Great Firewall. Carefully designed behaviours and vignettes, combined with selective and provocative media coverage, ultimately achieved a satisfactory result at home, while the actual effectiveness of the external propaganda is subject to subsequent empirical studies.

5. Conclusion

By focusing on four main issues, combined with an analysis of other vignettes during the Winter Olympics, this paper illustrates the role of the Olympic Games in the political narrative. To be specific, how Beijing utilised the media publicity, the opening ceremony, and the successful and timely staging itself to create an underlying political narrative and its main objectives: the clarification of political controversies, the concentrated self-presentation of CCP’s legitimacy, political ascendancy, and statecraft, and the shaping of the international image, i.e., the promotion of soft power. Of which, an isolated media environment and the role of government-affiliated media cannot be underestimated. In fact, with the increasing deepening and universalisation of the politicisation of sport, people are also slowly going through a process of “desensitisation”. Beijing’s use of the Winter Olympics for political narrative is not deserved to be overly blamed. Nevertheless, it is still expected that sporting events, particularly the Olympic Games, will be de-politicised and prevented from becoming a political arena with the joint efforts of the whole world.

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