Elite Athletes, National Identity and the Olympic Games:

Winning Glory for China

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Without exaggeration, sport is a mirror in which nations, communities, men and women now see themselves. The reflection is sometimes bright, sometimes dark, sometimes distorted, sometimes magnified. This metaphorical mirror is a source of mass exhilaration and depression, security and insecurity, pride and humiliation, bonding and alienation.

J.A. Mangan, 2006
Splendid history

China has four millennia of documented history and two millennia of centralized rule. For centuries it saw itself as the centre of the world. With some justification- it was a sophisticated, advanced culture when Europe was backward and America did not exist.

However, China suffered over a century of humiliation by Western foreign powers from the nineteenth century until the end of the Second World War.
The Chinese wished to create a new global identity—one characterised by prestige, esteem and respect—after the communist regime came to power in 1949. Success in sport was immediately seen as useful for this purpose. How to outperform these countries at sports of their own making obsessed the Chinese from the first moments of the creation of a new society with its face turned to the future and its back turned on the past.
Centralised training

Due to the scarce resources of capital and expertise in the early 1950s, centralised training for the national teams for various sports was put in place with full government endorsement. Elite sport was the focus of action and aspiration. It remains so today.
As the apex of Chinese elite sport, national teams enjoy better training conditions, larger food and clothing subsidies and more opportunities for top class international competitions and rewards than local athletes. Thus, to join a national team is the aim of, and a great achievement for, all elite athletes.
GO BEYOND ASIA: JOIN THE WORLD’s ADVANCED RANKS
(the Chinese Diving Team, 1980)

It encapsulated a national desire. Sport became an national instrument for the global creation of positive self-image, self-esteem and self-confidence.
Between 1981 and 1986, it won five world titles in succession. These victories gave the Chinese a chance to enjoy the experience of international success. A surge of patriotic pride resulted from North to South and from East to West. The playing power of the team was translated into political power.
REVIVE THE NATION

In a march of celebrating the volleyball victories in 1981 students from the prestigious Peking University and other universities for the first time symbolically voiced the further slogan: “unite together, revive the Chinese nation”! It was a declaration of intent.
Los Angeles Games

In 1984 the Chinese ended their humiliating ‘nil’ record in the Olympic gold medal table once and for all winning fifteen gold medals at the Los Angeles Games.

This performance evoked an intense patriotic response among the Chinese and fuelled Chinese ambition to become a world sports power.
Olympic Strategy (1985-): STRIVE FOR SUPREMACY

National sports policies and management were adjusted.

- The timing of the National Games was changed from the year before the Olympics to the year after.
- Only Olympic sports and the traditional Chinese sport of Martial Arts were incorporated into the National Games.
A winning-oriented sports policy dominated the sports community,

- from athletes to coaches,
- from researchers to administrators.
- Only success generated funding; the ultimate motivation.

The consequence of this unswerving pursuit of success was the astonishing achievements of Chinese athletes in the Olympics in the last decade and more.
Table 1  Medals won by Chinese in the last four Olympics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>golds</th>
<th>silvers</th>
<th>bronzes</th>
<th>total</th>
<th>rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>4th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Global Sports Success

These achievements greatly changed the Chinese image in the world and encouraged people from all walks of life to work to strengthen and modernise the Chinese nation. Success in sport became an inspiration for the whole society. It produced an energized, confident and thrusting China.
Women & Sport

It is now well known and acknowledged that Chinese women have made the greatest contribution to China’s meteoric rise in international sport and in doing so have won recognition and respect for themselves and the nation.
Graph 1 Comparison between men and women in terms of the gold medal tally.
Rising status of women

Success in international sport with the consequent financial and social rewards raised the status of sportswomen and by extension, the status of women in the public’s esteem. By way of example, since the launch of voting the “Best Ten Athletes of the Year” in 1978, women have made up 62.3 per cent of the total in the twenty-five years between 1978 and 2003. In 1998, only one of the Best Ten Athletes was a man!
CONFIDENT WOMEN: CONFIDENT NATION

WOMEN ILLUSTRATE THAT IN SPORT THEY HOLD UP MORE THAN HALF THE CHINESE WORLD; THEY HAVE GONE FROM FOOT-BOUND CRIPPLES TO FLEET FOOTED CHAMPIONS IN SOME ONE HUNDRED YEARS!
Sports success is the reflection of China’s rising prosperity.

For the past 25 years China's economy has grown an average of 9.4% annually, the world's 4th-largest economy in 2006. Real per capita income--both in cities and in rural areas--has multiplied more than five times.
Successful bid: EUPHORIA

When Beijing was awarded the right to host the 2008 Olympic Games in 2001, all the Chinese watching the live telecast of the voting burst into thunderous cheers and applause. For the first time, public demonstration of national pride was witnessed on a scale rarely seen in Chinese history.
The Beijing Games can help restore China’s national grandeur by Bringing to an end the century of humiliation and Subordination to the West and Japan. To this end, the Chinese are making a concerted effort to ensure the Beijing Games is the BEST EVER in Olympic history. i.e., BOCOG invited proposals for a slogan, theme songs and ideas for the opening and closing Ceremonies from all parts of the world; Foreign financial institutions were encouraged to invest with domestic banks in BOCOG projects.
To become an Olympic power has been the persistent dream of China.

- The Beijing Games in 2008 will provide a golden (literally) chance to fulfil this dream.

- To ensure Chinese athletic success in 2008, the “Plan to Win Glory in the 2008 Olympics” was drafted in 2002 with this clear sighted aim.

- Chinese athletes will participate in all 28 sports competitions and wish to win at least 180 medals out of the 300 events, aiming to be at least one of the top three powers.
Summary

Contemporary competitive sport in China is driven by a proud nationalism and a vengeful patriotism. Beijing 2008 seeks to erase past memories of defeat and to ensure present memories of victory. The Games has the potential to advance the international image, esteem and dignity of China. No effort has been spared to achieve this.
The Games has accelerated international interaction and will continue to do so with implications for change at many levels of the Chinese nation. The Olympic Slogan “One World, One Dream” clearly demonstrates future aspirations: to become part of the global community; to be more open to the outside world.