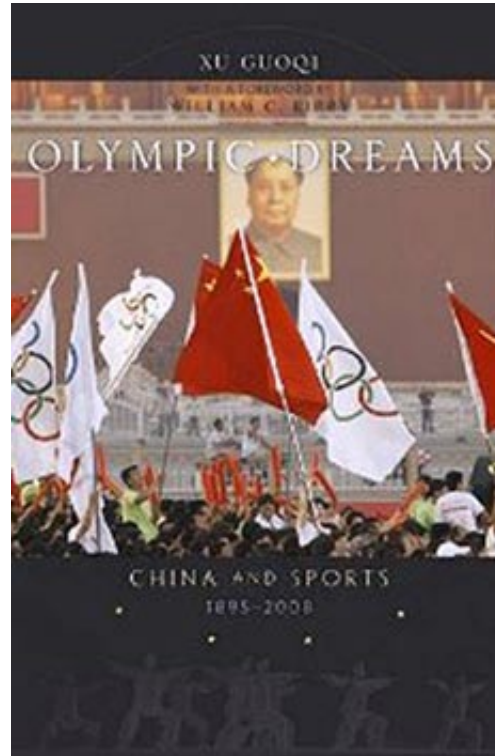


Xu Guoqi

In 2001, the International Olympic Committee awarded Beijing the 2008 Olympic Games. The choice of Beijing has been controversial, not least because of China's long-standing reluctance to participate in international sports competition. For years, China did not compete in the Olympic Games; only in 1984 did China return to the Olympic Family.

In "Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008" (Harvard University Press), historian Xu Guoqi examines the upcoming Beijing Olympic Games as well as China's unique sports culture. In tracing how China rose from being the "sick man of Asia" to its present-day status as a world super-power, he writes that China has used sports to reach its goals of internationalism. Notes Xu: "Sports have represented the broad Chinese determination to achieve national independence and rejuvenation and has served as an expression of defiance at critical moments."

Xu Guoqi was born in Anhui province, China. He became a student and later a faculty member at Nankai University (whose founding president, Zhang Boling, was both instrumental and influential in introducing modern sports to China). In 1991, he went to Harvard as a graduate student in the History Department and earned his doctorate in 1999.



That year, he was appointed as the first holder of the newly established Wen Chao Chen Chair of History and East Asian Affairs at Kalamazoo College in Michigan. He has taught there for the past nine years. For 2008-09, he will become a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard to work on two books: “Fusions of Civilizations: Chinese Laborers in Europe and their Role in China’s Internationalization” and “Chinese and Americans: A Cultural and International History.”

Due to Professor Xu’s busy schedule, we conducted this interview via email.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: What prompted you to write this book?

Xu Guoqi: As an historian of China’s internationalization, for over a decade I have been interested in the issue of China’s search for a new national identity. In the 1990s, I mainly focused on China and the Great War, using the First World War as a reference point to study the question of how China used the defining moment of the war to join the world system and establish itself as an equal member. The result was a book entitled “China and the Great War” (Cambridge University Press).

Starting in 1993, when Beijing lost its first bid to host the Olympic Games to Sydney, I have become fascinated with the role of modern sports — and especially the Olympic Games — in China’s internationalization. This fascination became an obsession in 2001, when Beijing won the bid to host the 2008 Olympics. Why did the Chinese criticize the West for its attempt to block China’s rise in world order by claiming the West was responsible for Beijing’s loss of the initial bid? Why did the Chinese celebrate its victory in its second bid by linking the hosting the Games to China’s national renewal and its recognition by the world? Puzzled by these questions, starting in 2002, I began to prepare and research “Olympic Dreams.”

SL: You write that, in the 1890s, the YMCA was responsible for introducing sports to China and that, later, other countries and cultures

imported sports to China. Why did China begin to embrace physical culture during this era? How would you characterize the contribution of the West to the development of sports culture in China?

XG: The year 1895 was a turning point in Chinese history. China suffered a heart-breaking defeat at the hands of Japan that year. The defeat triggered elite Chinese to conclude that China was “a sick man” and needed strong medicine to cure it. To join the West-dominated world order as an equal member and embrace Western sports were their prescriptions for national salvation. In the same year, 1895, the YMCA set up its first branch in China and started to introduce Western sports to the Chinese. Coincidentally, the modern Olympic Movement started in 1894, with the first modern Olympic Games taking place in 1896. The timing could not have been better for the Chinese to use Western sports, including the Olympic Games, as an important vehicle for its internationalization drive.

The West, especially through the YMCA, contributed enormously to the development of modern sports in China. The YMCA provided the crucial link between Chinese and Western sports at the turn of the twentieth century by organizing Chinese national games, educating Chinese about the value of the modern sports, and even helping China join the modern Olympic Movement.

SL: You write that China, in the 1920s, began to take control of its sports culture. How did China do this?

XG: Chinese nationalism reached a high tide in the 1920s, with the search for a new national identity and national salvation. Many Chinese elite continued to embrace Western sports. But they wanted the Chinese to control sports activities in China by taking away the leadership from many YMCA foreign officials.

SL: You note that, in this same time period, Pierre de Coubertin revived the Olympic Games, with the idea that sports competition between nations would promote foster international cooperation. China did not participate in the Olympic Games until the 1932 Los Angeles Games. Why did China not participate in the Olympic Games until 1932?

XG: Although Chinese elite members were deeply interested in Olympic Games at the turn of the twentieth century, it took time for them to get involved in the Olympic Movement. China finally became a member of the Olympic Family in 1922, and Wang Zhengting became the first IOC member in China (and the second from Asia). In 1932, due to the lack of funds, Chinese initially did not plan to take part in that year's Los Angeles Olympics. But the Japanese plot to use the Games to legitimize the Manchukuo, by sending a Manchukuo team to the Games, motivated the Chinese to send Liu Changchun, the sole athlete from China to take part in the Games. Los Angeles and Americans responded to him sympathetically and enthusiastically, with moral support and encouragement, and the American government refused to recognize Manchukuo.

SL: How would you characterize China's participation in the 1936 (Berlin), 1948 (London) and 1952 (Helsinki) Olympic Games? How would you characterize the relationship between China and the Olympic Movement during this era?

XG: China's participation in these three Olympics was motivated more by diplomatic and political consideration than their love of the Games. Although China was in a terrible situation during this time, its relationship with the Olympic Movement was quite close and strong. Despite China's weak status as a sport power, the IOC had three members in China during late 1940s and mid-1950s. This position put China at par with most strong nations — at least as far as the number of IOC members was concerned.

SL: In 1949, Mao Zedong and the Communist Party took power, with the Nationalists displaced to Taiwan. Why did the People's Republic of China withdraw from the Olympic Movement after 1952? Why did they decide not to follow the Soviet model and compete against the world?

XG: The PRC withdrew from the International Olympic Movement because Taiwan was a member of the Olympic Family and also represented "China." Beijing wanted to be the sole representative of China in the Olympic Movement. For Beijing, the China issue was more important than anything else. The USSR did not have such a problem.

SL: How would you characterize Mao's philosophy about sports? How about Zhou Enlai's?

XG: Mao enjoyed sports. His first published article was on sports. For his whole life, Mao liked to swim and climb mountains, among other activities. Zhou, perhaps due to his busy schedule, did not engage actively in physical exercise. But both men understood the importance of sports in politics and international relations and used them brilliantly.

SL: During this same era, Taiwan fielded teams to compete in the Olympic Games. Why was the "two-China question" so vexing for the IOC?

XG: The IOC claimed to be a non-political organization and had no business in politics. But for both Taipei and Beijing, membership in the Olympic Family conveyed political legitimacy. Both maintained the position that the other was illegitimate and did not belong there. The two-China question was too complicated for the IOC to handle effectively.

SL: You characterize the IOC's handling of the two-China question as "inconsistence and incompetence." How did the IOC mis-handle this situation?

XG: The IOC was always one step behind in dealing with the two-China issue. During the 1950s and 1960s, it used Taiwan's membership in the United Nations as justification for Taiwan to represent China in the Olympic Family. In 1971, when Beijing replaced Taipei in the UN, the IOC was put in a difficult position to explain why tiny Taiwan still represented China in the Olympic Family. But it chose to close its eyes and refused to take any effective action.

In 1976, when the Canadian government unilaterally made the decision to keep Taiwan out of the Montreal Olympics under its existing name, the IOC was helpless and hopeless. After the United States switched diplomatic relations between Taipei and Beijing in 1979, the IOC was forced to take action to address the issue finally. In October 1979, the IOC forced Taiwan to change its name to the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee in order to welcome Beijing back as the Chinese National Olympic Committee. With Beijing's return to the Olympic Family, the two-

China issue was finally put into rest.

SL: What were the “Games of the Newly Emerging Forces” — and why did they not succeed?

XG: In the early 1960s, when the IOC punished Indonesia for its refusal to have Israel and Taiwan take part in its Asian Games, Indonesia with strong support from the PRC decided to organize the “Games of the Newly Emerging Forces” as a challenge to the West-dominated Olympic moment. Beijing was the most important force behind GANEFO. Beijing had withdrawn from the Olympic Movement in 1958 and was determined to find a way to challenge the seemingly hostile IOC; secondly, it hoped to use GANEFO to convey its revolutionary ideas to other developing countries. But GANEFO lasted only briefly and failed to achieve its goals for the following reasons. First, the PRC and Indonesia split diplomatically; secondly, China soon was consumed with Mao’s Cultural Revolution.

SL: How did China deal with sports during the Cultural Revolution?

XG: Sports in China suffered a major setback during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). China withdrew from many international sports federations where Taiwan had membership. Its athletes were discouraged from focusing on their training. But China was not totally cut off from world sports. It still used so-called friendship games to interact with countries which it had good relations or with which Beijing wanted to cultivate good relations.

SL: From the late 1950s and through the mid-1960s, China participated in the World Table Tennis Championships. Why did China remain an active member of the International Table Tennis Federation?

XG: The major reason Beijing remained a member of the ITTF and participated in its championships was that Taiwan was not a member of that organization.

SL: What was the purpose behind Mao’s inviting the American table tennis team to visit China in 1971? What did this trip mean to Sino-American relations?

XG: In the late 1960s, both Mao and President Richard Nixon wanted to improve bilateral relations. Due to their deep level of mistrust and long hostility, they did not know how to extend the olive branch to each other. To get the message out to Washington that Beijing was sincere in improving its relations with the U.S., Mao personally decided to invite the American ping-pong team to visit China after both China and the U.S. teams took part in the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships in Japan. It is a regular practice for Beijing to invite foreign teams to visit China for friendship games after the championships. Since China was good at table tennis, foreign teams (including the Americans) were happy to be invited for a visit. Since Nixon was also eager to improve Sino-American relations, Mao's Ping-Pong Diplomacy paved the way for Nixon to visit Beijing soon afterwards and helped both countries become strategic allies in dealing with the Soviet Union.

SL: Who gained more from Ping-Pong Diplomacy — China or the U.S.?

XG: Both Beijing and Washington benefited enormously from this new development. It is tough to say who gained most.

SL: Why did China decide to compete at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games? Why did China decide to ignore the Soviet Union's boycott in 1984?

XG: After Beijing returned to the Olympic Movement in 1979, it could not wait for the opportunity to compete in the Olympic Games. But China had to control its excitement until 1984, since it decided to follow President Jimmy Carter's call to boycott the 1980 Moscow Games. Thus, the 1984 Los Angeles Games turned out to be the first real participation of the PRC in the summer Olympic Games. (Beijing arrived too late to compete in the 1952 Helsinki Games.) No place seemed to be a better place than Los Angeles, since 52 years previous China took part in its first Games here. As for why Beijing ignored the USSR's call for a boycott of the Los Angeles Games, the answer is easy. Since the early 1960s, Moscow had had very bad relations with Beijing. Remember, the PRC boycotted the 1980 Moscow Games. So, there was no reason for Beijing to follow Moscow in 1984.

SL: How would you describe the importance of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games to Asia and to China?

XG: The 1988 Olympics were very important to China and Asia. First, it paved the way for both countries to establish diplomatic relations. Secondly, South Koreans reciprocated Chinese good will for their 1988 Games with their own support and help for Beijing's hosting the 1990 Asian Games. The success of hosting 1990 Asian Games further helped Beijing gain confidence to bid for the Olympic Games.

SL: What do the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games mean to China?

XG: It means many things, including international prestige, legitimacy, national pride. It means that a new and strong China has emerged, and it means that China is desperate for world attention, recognition, and respect. It also means dangers and opportunity for China.

SL: What will a "successful" Olympic Games this summer mean to China?

XG: Technically, Beijing will host one of the most successful Olympic Games in Olympic history. No question about that. A successful Olympics for Beijing means many things. The Olympics will prove to the world that China deserves to be respected as a great power. It proves that China is not the "sick man of Asia."

SL: Do you think Taiwan will decide to boycott the Games?

XG: No. On May 20, 2008, the nationalist party came to power in Taiwan. Unlike its predecessor, which advocated independence, the Nationalists prefer the status quo and to pursue close relations with Beijing. In the meantime, leaders in the PRC seem to be more flexible and forward-looking with their Taiwan policy. Thus it is extremely unlikely that Taiwan will boycott the Games. On the contrary, I will not be surprised if both sides use the Games to further improve their relations.

SL: Are you surprised at the protests that have emerged concerning the Beijing Games — including the issues of Tibet and Darfur?

XG: No. As I wrote in the book, Beijing's Games will present China with "weiji," a Chinese phrase for crisis. It consists of two characters: "wei," or danger, and "ji," or opportunity. For both Chinese and Westerners, the Beijing Olympics present a great opportunity to carry out their respective political goals. While it is clear that Beijing wants to use the Games to convey its best face to the world, it is not surprising that many external groups or organizations would like to use the Games to shame and humiliate China to achieve their own political agendas.

SL: Why has the torch relay before the Beijing Olympic Games been so controversial?

XG: For the XXIX Olympiad, Beijing had many ambitious plans, including its Olympic torch relay, which was supposed to traverse the longest distance, cover the greatest area, and involve the largest people in the Olympic history. The Olympic flame has even reached the peak of the Mt. Everest. Beijing also designed its torch to be a so-called "lucky cloud" and chose the theme and slogan of the torch relay as "the journey of harmony" and "light the passion, share the dream," respectively.

However, since the start of the torch relay, it seems that many Westerners did not share the same dream and that the torch routes were not harmonious. The torch seemed also to have lit anti-Chinese passion among some Western media and politicians. The torch relay legs in London, Paris, and San Francisco turned into fiascos. "Free Tibet" groups and human right groups, among others, seemed to be determined to use the torch relay and the coming Olympic Games to humiliate and shame Beijing and squeeze concessions from China. The Chinese seemed not to be able to enjoy the historical moment due to the Western criticism. Through their coverage and handling of the Beijing's torch relay, the West seemed to remind the Chinese that they were still not equal and they were still not good enough.

But instead of undermining Beijing's legitimacy and credibility, the torch relay has become a rallying force to mobilize Chinese at home and abroad to support their government and defend China's honor. It's led to an outpouring of patriotism and nationalism. By trying to use the torch relay and the coming Games as leverage to force China to change its behavior

and score political and diplomatic points, the West seems to have alienated the majority of Chinese and lost its credibility among the well-educated young Chinese. Instead of undermining Beijing's legitimacy, this seems to have strengthened the Communist regime's power and support base among its own people.

Regardless, the year 2008 has seemed to be a year of bad luck for the Chinese. The terrible snow storm earlier this year froze much of the nation and destroyed many celebration plans for spring festival. Then, the Tibet unrest in March seemed to turn China into a target of world denunciation. In April, there was a deadly train crash; in May, China was hit with the most deadly earthquake since the PRC was founded. But in the long run, the year 2008 may prove to be a significant year in China's relations with the world. What happened to their torch relay in the Western countries will fundamentally change China's perception of the West. For many thinking Chinese, if they can overcome disasters like this earthquake, and if both the government and the people can work together to turn the shared dream into reality, they won't have to prove anything to the West. They'll have proved it to themselves. If that is the case, the year 2008 may be indeed a pivotal and perhaps lucky year for China.

SL: What effect will hosting the Games have on China and its image in the world?

XG: For more than a century, Chinese have been obsessed with internationalization. And, the Chinese have had a dream of hosting the Olympic Games. Now, the dream will become a reality this year and China's drive for internationalization might also reach a turning point. For the last several years, despite China's fast economic growth, China suffered from what I call in the book "a syndrome of can-do spirit and inferiority." The successful Games might cure this syndrome and help China become a more confident nation and open to the wider world. But the Games also serve as a challenge for the West. If the West continues to treat China with disrespect and dampen Chinese high expectations for the Games, the relationship between China and the West might reach a point beyond repair.

SL: Do you think the Games will change the way in which the Chinese

government governs sports?

XG: At this point, I don't see any major changes in the Chinese government's management of sports. But changes may arrive soon after the Olympic Games is over.

SL: What have historians and journalists gotten wrong — or mis-judged — about China's sports history? What was the most surprising finding that you made during your research on this book?

XG: Few have systematically studied the history of sports in China. Fewer have paid attention to the link between modern sports and international politics and China's search for national identity and internationalization. This book has many surprising arguments, including how the idea of the "sick man of Asia" in the late 1890s motivated Chinese to become a strong sport power one century later; how China's obsession with winning in the Olympic Games and their people's neglect of physical education may make the country a new "sick man of Asia" again; how the Beijing Games could present both dangers and opportunities for China and the rest of the world; and how both Chinese and the West used the Olympic Movement and the Games for political purposes.