



China's Moment in the Olympic Spotlight by Anne Meng

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Amidst the glint and glamour of the 2008 Summer Olympics, China confronts a question of dueling national identities. On one side is patriotism, with Chinese people expressing pride in their country's remarkable accomplishments and emerging power. On the other side is nationalism, as foreign criticism has prompted defensive reactions from the Chinese government and public. The Beijing Olympics may reveal which perspective dominates.

George Washington University Professor David Shambaugh has outlined two types of Chinese nationalistic attitudes that have emerged in response to increased international attention. The first is a "xenophobic type rooted in past indignities experienced by the Chinese people"; the second, a "more cosmopolitan version taking shape along with globalization and China's integration into the international community." The former reflects a defensive strain of nationalism, while the latter is more closely associated with patriotism.

Although the terms "patriotism" and "nationalism" are often used interchangeably, they carry significant differences in their underlying connotations. Both concepts center on love and devotion to one's country, but patriotism emphasizes the positive attributes and accomplishments of a country without denouncing other states. Patriotism is proactive and can emerge organically out of pride in being Chinese and part of a long historical and cultural tradition. It implies a self-confidence that can make a country more open to constructive criticism and better able to make efforts to acknowledge and address its problems.

Conversely, nationalism connotes an ethnocentric and hierarchical approach that implies superiority over other nations. It is frequently a defensive reaction, triggered by negative external actions or criticism. Nationalism often prompts a country to reject all outside criticism, regardless of its validity, in order to perpetuate an image that problems within the country are insignificant or non-existent. Although both terms represent national pride, nationalism has exclusionary undertones that impede integration and cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world.

What inspires patriotism and what triggers nationalism? The Sichuan earthquake inspired Chinese people to demonstrate their patriotism through voluntary relief efforts

and support for the victims. Immediately following the quake, Sichuan province experienced a flood of assistance from students and ordinary people around the country who donated blood and collected money to help fellow Chinese citizens. However, these demonstrations of patriotism did not preclude demands for investigations into the collapse of school buildings or denunciations of local governments for allowing construction of shoddy elementary schools in the first place.

In contrast, foreign criticism following the Tibetan protests placed the Chinese government on the defensive and forced it to aggressively defend its official position on a matter China regards as an internal dispute. This government response, coupled with the perception that much of the foreign media took a clear anti-China stance on the issue, prompted much of the Chinese populace to respond nationalistically.

In a tumultuous year brimming with overtly politicized events and unforeseen tragedies, it would serve both foreign observers and the Chinese themselves well to recognize the difference between patriotism and nationalism.

In the past, the Chinese government has found the defensive quality in nationalism to be useful for deflecting foreign criticism and covering up problems in China. However, this strategy is ultimately destabilizing because it has the potential to increase domestic social discontent and to damage China's reputation abroad. The Chinese government needs to differentiate between promoting a positive pride in a country's achievements and instigating a defensive reaction that seeks to elevate China's interests above other countries.

The Chinese government – and most of the Chinese people – view the Beijing Olympics as a long-awaited chance to display pride in the "new China" that is modernizing, growing rapidly, and expanding its international influence. But if China cannot face criticism without being excessively defensive, positive patriotic impulses may quickly transform into negative nationalist feelings. If this is the case, then China will not receive the respect it feels it is due and the world will lose an opportunity for China to move one step closer towards a positive role as a responsible stakeholder in the international system.

The 2008 Olympics provide a prism that allows us to see both the good and bad sides of China. We have witnessed the Chinese government's best efforts to showcase China as a globally integrated cosmopolitan giant, as evidenced by its grandiose opening ceremony as well as the impressive sports facilities designed by world class architects. The negative aspects of China's system, such as media censorship and environmental problems, are also on display as China enters the global limelight. As the Summer Olympics unfold, the international media has descended upon Beijing, with the resulting stories and images reflecting both China's accomplishments and shortcomings. Observers should not

only watch the medal count, but also be looking to see whether patriotism or nationalism prevails during China's moment in the Olympic spotlight.

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