



Greatest Games Ever or Potemkin Village? By Victor Cha

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Yes. With the conclusion of the Beijing Olympics, one cannot but marvel at how well the Chinese pulled off the 17 days of events. In the run-up to the Games, skepticism proliferated about how the Olympics would be a disaster for China. The journal *Foreign Affairs* devoted a set of articles enumerating how the Olympics were blowing up in China's face. When the torch processions through London, Paris, San Francisco, and Seoul were disrupted by demonstrators, even the Chinese started to look nervous. In retaliation, Chinese citizens were in the streets demonstrating against CNN and foreign retail outlets in China, decrying attempts to keep China down during their moment in the sun. Did the Chinese snatch victory from the jaws of defeat? What accounts for the unfounded pre-Olympic predictions of disaster? And what are we to expect for the future?

China needed to hit four marks for the Games to be a success. First, they needed to perform; their athletes needed to win a lot of medals and compete seriously with the United States for top medal count. Otherwise, it would have been an Olympics without the beef – i.e., much fanfare and symbolism of a great China, but without the performance. Second, they needed to host the Games well, in terms of logistics and servicing athletes. Third, they needed clean air. And fourth, they needed to marginalize political protests as best they could.

From the perspective of the Games' organizers, China didn't do too poorly. While the Chinese teams did not win the overall medal count, coming in second to the United States, they did dominate the gold medal count. As hosts, they operated with frightening efficiency in making the Games user-friendly. Few complaints were heard from athletes about facilities or late transportation. While the air in Beijing has never been clean, this ended up being one of the biggest non-stories of the Games. Not surprising, though, since the bar had been set so low in advance of the Olympics, if there was anything resembling non-suffocating air, the Chinese would have been relieved. Despite worries, none of the outdoor endurance events were postponed. And much of the pre-game hysteria about pollution proved unjustified, as was also the case in Mexico City (1968), Los Angeles (1984), Seoul (1988), and Barcelona (1992).

Regarding the protests, the political activists who sought to use the Games to highlight China's deficient human rights practices found sport to be their biggest adversary. Despite all

of the pre-game attention to the protests, once the Games began, the world became captivated by the sports. Few if any athletes used the stage to make political statements. Stories about detainments of applicants for the designated "demonstration areas" were buried under news about Michael Phelps, Usain Bolt, and other athletes. NBC was unusually uncritical in its coverage of the Games, going no deeper in its non-sports pieces than "travelogue-lite" segments. This might have been a business decision since the network had the monopoly on sport coverage for the U.S. audience while every other news outlet could have reported on politics. But, the coverage contrasted with past Games, where there were as many critical pieces about politics and society as there were "fluff pieces" about the host city. In any event, the Chinese organizers must have felt their Games were placed well in the U.S. news cycle – with so much attention on the crisis in Georgia as well as the upcoming Democratic and Republican conventions, there was little room to report on anything but the sport stories.

The question that emerges, then, is whether these Games were *too* perfect. Rather than being the "genocide Olympics" as pre-game protestors complained about the validating of a human rights-treading regime's place in the world, perhaps these were the "Potemkin Olympics." The picture perfect staging of a 17-day performance, down to the graphics enhancement of fireworks over the Bird's Nest, or the dubbing of children's singing voices, left everyone mesmerized and marveling at the spectacle.

But beneath this, some would argue, was an emptiness, an organic quality of the Olympic spirit that was missing. The Olympic Green was beautiful according to many accounts, but it was also quiet and barren as access was restricted. Arenas were half-empty, but then filled with "phony fans" (security-screened people were bused in) to ensure good camera shots of spectator enthusiasm. The village-like global party atmosphere that was so evident in Atlanta appeared strangely absent in Beijing.

As I discuss in a forthcoming book, the biggest political story about the Olympics has yet to be written. This is the extent to which Chinese authorities will meet the world expectations it has set for itself with these Games. The Olympics was China's announcement to the world that it is a global power. But with this prestige comes global responsibilities in foreign policy and in domestic human rights. The expectations of the international community as well as the Chinese people is for Chinese authorities to do better. Let's see if they can hit that mark – which would bring the country far more international acceptance than any Olympics ever could.