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The Beijing Olympics and Hong Kong Sporting Culture

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In recent decades the Olympic Games have become mega sports events watched by millions around the world and there is little doubt that the 2008 Beijing Olympics will follow within that tradition. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) reports show that the preparations for the 2008 Olympics are well-advanced and there is little doubt that the event will be a great success. However, once the excitement of competition is over, will these Olympics leave lasting legacies on Beijing, China and the Chinese people in the mainland and elsewhere? The modern Olympic Games are a complex phenomenon that embraces a range of historical, social, political and economic aspects’ (Girginov and Parry 2005:234). Clearly cities bid for the hosting rights with the expectation of significant local and national benefits, but judging from the experience of other host cities and countries in the past, Beijing is likely to find that there will be both costs as well as benefits, in social, sporting, economic and political terms.

As the 2008 Beijing Olympics approaches, Hong Kong finds itself in an anomalous situation. Although now a part of China politically and administratively, Hong Kong has retained its separateness from China as regards its sporting recognition within the Olympic movement. Formally, Olympics are granted to cities (in the 2008 case, of course, Beijing), not countries; yet, Hong Kong is also due to act as a host for a small part of the Olympics. With the approval of the IOC, in July 2005 Hong Kong was given the responsibility of hosting one of the sports, the equestrian events, that for quarantine and other logistical reasons Beijing was unable to host. Although many Hongkongers have a strong interest in horse-racing, it has to be admitted that very few have previously participated in or watched equestrian events, whether dressage, eventing or show-jumping. Equestrianism is not a sport that has widespread popular appeal in Hong Kong. Undoubtedly Hong Kong people will be avid watchers on television of the whole Olympic Games, not just the equestrian events, but will the hosting of the Olympics by Beijing (and Hong Kong) generate a long-lasting impact on the Hong Kong people’s physical well-being, sports involvement and sports participation?

This paper examines first the sporting culture within Hong Kong and the reasons for its relative under-development. Cultural, social, economic and political factors have all played a role in creating this situation. Then the paper briefly surveys the ways in which the Olympics have impacted in the past on host cities and countries in other parts of the world. Finally, the paper discusses the extent to which Hong Kong and its people could be affected by the 2008 Olympics. By analysing the interactions of public policies, popular nationalism and sporting lifestyles in Hong Kong, this paper seeks to differentiate the short-term from the long-term influences and discover not only whether Hong Kong may finally be able to shed its reputation as a sporting under-achiever, but also whether the health and happiness of Hong Kong citizens may be better assured.

Sports Development in Hong Kong

If we take as an assumption that a healthy, positive and wholesome lifestyle is the goal of individuals in society, then clearly sport should be able to contribute to achieving that goal. That implies both the consumption of and participation in sporting activities. However, a report by the Hong Kong Sports Development Board a few years ago

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concluded that Hong Kong has an underdeveloped sports culture relative to many other countries’ (HKSDB 2003a). This assessment can be substantiated by both the levels of awareness of sports, participation rates and spectator support rates in Hong Kong and also by Hong Kong’s relatively poor record in international sporting competition.

Although there is evidence of the very ancient origins to Chinese physical culture, in the case of Hong Kong, as indeed in many other British colonies, the development of modern sport was strongly linked to the British predilection for taking their sports with them as their chief spiritual export’ wherever they conquered territories (Hwang and Garvie, 2003:77-81; Morris, 1968:283). Although the British forces and expatriates set up sporting clubs from the 1850s, in those early days the Chinese residents of Hong Kong had little interest in foreign’ sports. However, by the early twentieth century, some Chinese had joined in the clubs, if only because they felt the need to interact more with British residents, while missionary schools in particular introduced sports into the school curricula (Fu 1993:1-2). Nonetheless, outside the expatriate-dominated clubs, sporting activities were haphazard and limited. Published histories of Hong Kong in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries rarely, if ever, mention sporting activities, apart from the almost inevitable reference to the local and expatriate enthusiasm for and patronage of horse racing.

Indeed, arguably, not until the early 1970s, with the creation of the Council for Recreation and Sport, did the Hong Kong government begin to take sports development for the majority of the population seriously. Even then, the impetus seems to have come from a desire by the government to control social disturbances in the aftermath of the 1967 riots by providing alternative, non-political, avenues for releasing emotional energy and building responsible citizenship (Fu, 1993:2; Vertinsky et al:822-3). In due course, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Hong Kong Sports Institute (HKSI), for training elite athletes, and then the Hong Kong Sports Development Board (HKSDB) were set up, while gradually the government itself tried to devolve more responsibility for sports facilities management down to the Urban and Regional Councils. In recent years, the relationship between the HKSI and the HKSDB has been rearranged several times, culminating in late 2004 in the HKSDB’s merger into the HKSI and the creation of a new Sports Commission, which is tasked with bringing more coherence to the development of sport in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has competed regularly in international sports competitions such as the Olympic Games, the Asian Games, and, until 1997, the Commonwealth Games. However, Hong Kong’s sporting record has been rather poor, at least until the last decade, when it seems that some of the efforts put into developing talent have begun to pay off. Hong Kong has won a total of 75 medals at 14 different Asian Games since 1951, but more than half of them were won at the 1998 and 2002 Games.

Crucial in raising public awareness of local sporting achievement, however, was Lee Lai-shan’s gold medal for windsurfing at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. This was the first ever Olympic gold for a Hong Kong athlete and was enthusiastically celebrated across the territory. It also accorded San San’, as she is popularly known, celebrity status within Hong Kong. She was unable to repeat her success at the Sydney Olympics and so the next Olympic success did not come until the 2004 Athens Olympics, when Li Ching and Lo Lai-chak won a silver medal in the men’s table tennis, but their success was tempered in some Hong Kong people’s minds by concerns over whether these China-born and China-trained athletes should really count as Hong Kong players’. It should be noted, however, that Hong Kong does have a much better record of achievement in the parallel Paralympics.

Having failed in its bid to host the 2006 Asian Games, Hong Kong has, of course, been much interested in and enthused by the successful Beijing bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games, and, to a lesser extent, by its own success in gaining the 2009 East Asian Games.

There is little doubt that sports fans do exist in Hong Kong, but the vast majority of them are sedentary ones. Spectator levels for all forms of sport (excluding the special case of horse-racing) have remained very low in Hong Kong. According to my calculations from data supplied by the Hong Kong Football Association, in the 2002-03 season the top league’s games attracted an average of 538 spectators per game! An informal survey conducted by my students amongst themselves in 2004 showed that 94% watched soccer on television (it is regularly available on several cable television channels in Hong Kong), but only 2% ever went to watch live local soccer games (Bridges, 2006:226). The same will almost certainly apply to other internationally-broadcast sports.

So, how can this comparatively poor record of sporting activity in Hong Kong and its underdeveloped sporting culture be explained? Clearly geographical space constraints are a factor: Hong Kong is a highly urbanized and modern city, with excellent infrastructure but limited space available for sporting facilities. However, my own surveys amongst students taking my sports course at Lingnan University suggested a number of other factors
involved. The two most frequently cited were: the past lack of encouragement by the British colonial government (because the British feared nationalism') and family pressures to concentrate on study rather than sport (which offered few if any employment prospects).

Let me briefly examine these two perspectives. Firstly, the idea that Britain, determined to keep control of its colony, tried to avoid anything that might stimulate nationalism or anti-British activism. All colonial powers like to keep their colonial subjects submissive, but it is not clear that the British deliberately tried to prevent sports nationalism' developing. It seems rather that, much in the same way that sporting policy back in Britain was often irrational and incoherent, so too did the colonial authorities in Hong Kong lack any vision of creating a well-organised structure and integrated policies for sports development. Indeed, as discussed earlier, only from the early 1970s was sport actively encouraged, and then primarily as a means of ensuring stability (a diversion from more political' forms of activity). This attitude by government seems to have survived the 1997 handover. For, although the current administration evidently does want to encourage sport partly for reasons of patriotism' and identification with the mainland and partly because of health and lifestyle concerns, at the same time echoes of past colonial thinking remain, as shown in a recent report of the HKSDb, which argues that sport can be a stabilizing force in part because it tends to redirect economic, social and political frustrations into a “safe” channel’ (HKSDb 2003a).

Secondly, the Chinese perspectives on the value of sport. Frank Fu’s surveys in the early 1990s showed that in Hong Kong both students and adults have been becoming more health conscious and as such participating in sporting activities was perceived as being beneficial to their health. At the same time, Hong Kong people also thought that sport helped them develop a sense of belonging (to a team or club) and it also would help them to make new friends and socialize with them (Fu 1993, pp.7-10). These attitudes seem to have remained constant over time, for in a 2004 survey by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups 71% of the young people interviewed thought that becoming physically fit was an advantage of participating in sport and 32% gave making friends as another positive aspect (University of Hong Kong 2005). However, the reality may be slightly different from the perceptions, in so far as this appreciation of the benefits does not translate into high levels of sports participation. The HKSDb’s survey of sports participation in the year 2000 showed that although 81% of those interviewed agreed sports participation was good for their health, only about half (44%) actually participated regularly in one or more sports (HKSDb 2001). In a recent five-year study carried by the Hospital Authority, 80.5% of the subject population were classified as physically inactive’ (South China Morning Post, 21 October 2005).

Why might this be? The HKSDb has noted that the many pressures on young people in Hong Kong, including an overemphasis on academic achievement, are often at the expense of their health and well-being’ (HKSDb 2003b). As Cecilia Au has argued, in Chinese societies such as Hong Kong physical activities are viewed with disdain when they are perceived to compete with time and attention for study”; vestiges of traditional Confucian values, which marginalized physical activity, may also be present (Au 2006:160-161). So, feelings, largely inspired by parental and wider societal thinking, that sport could be a distraction from the more important’ need to study hard and that, anyway, there were no professional sports careers available in Hong Kong even for the most talented youngsters are widely held. It is true, in this context, that the success of professional sports leagues in Hong Kong has been negligible’ (Bachner 2002). Consequently, this view of the lack of utility for sports is widespread across Hong Kong. The philosophy of healthy body, healthy mind’, much beloved by British educators, does not seem to have taken root in Hong Kong society.

Olympic Hosting

Studies of previous Olympic Games suggest that the staging of these Games can become part of a strategy for social change, can produce both positive and negative impacts on the economy and environment of the cities/countries concerned, can become highly politicised, and can be an important educational and cultural experience (Girginov and Parry, 2005).

These aspects can be briefly examined in turn. Firstly, as the originator of the modern Olympic Games Baron Pierre de Coubertin himself believed, organised sport can be an agent of physical and cultural change. As Girginov and Parry argue, hosting the Olympic Games means introducing strategies aiming to raise public awareness and provide better conditions, ensuring that education in and through physical activity can take place’ (Girginov and Parry 2005:118).
Secondly, economic benefits arise from improved sports facilities, better transport infrastructure, urban regeneration, increased consumption by visitors, athletes and sponsors and the creation, albeit sometimes temporarily, of new employment opportunities. Costs might include, for example, rising land, housing and rents in and around the host city and even increased taxes. Estimates and analyses of past host cities show a mixed record: the Seoul Olympics of 1988 gained US$9 billion and Sydney in 2000 $500 million (immediate revenue versus expenditure), but Montreal in 1976 was a significant loser financially (over US$1 billion) and so too were the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer in 1994 (where revenue outweighed costs by twice) (Griginov and Parry 2005:119-129, 240-243). One recent study suggests that several host nations have enjoyed a sharp acceleration’ in economic growth prior to the games but suffered an abrupt slowdown’ afterwards (Holger Preuss’s research cited in South China Morning Post, 3 August 2006).

Thirdly, political considerations cannot be kept out of international sport, and the Olympics are no exception. At the nation-state level, the Olympics can perform an important function in nation-building and enhancing national prestige, showcasing a nation’s history, culture and lifestyle. To take earlier Asian examples, the Tokyo Olympics of 1964 were a kind of coming out party’ for Japan to regain its place in the international community and the Seoul Olympics of 1988 enabled South Korea to signal its enhanced international standing, particularly in contrast to its northern rival (Taylor 1988:191-192).

Finally, the Olympics can be utilised to foster interest in the ideals of the Olympics and, particularly amongst young people, stimulate programmes of physical education and sport. Olympic rituals and ceremonial activities such as the torch relay and the increasingly elaborate opening and closing ceremonies may have only short-term impacts in raising consciousness and stimulating national pride and identity, but the build-up to and hosting of the Olympics are also expected to generate, in a more nebulous form, self-confidence and enthusiasm amongst the sporting and non-sporting youth of the host country.

The Impact on Hong Kong?

The newly-appointed chief executive officer for the Hong Kong equestrian games, Lam Woon-kwong, has suggested that the Olympic spirit is what I think is the best legacy that will come from this city being part of the games’ (South China Morning Post, 8 August 2006). But what does this mean in concrete terms? Can we expect the 2008 Olympic Games to have any impact, short-term or long-lasting, on Hong Kong’s sports development and sporting culture?

Let’s go back to the four aspects identified in the previous section. Firstly, the Olympics as an agent of social change. The guidelines for the new secondary school curriculum in liberal studies being introduced in Hong Kong argue that sport is not only a vital element in healthy living, it is also closely relevant to the social, emotional, physical and mental development of a person’ (Curriculum Development Council, 2005:64). A variety of factors can affect sports participation: age, attitude, access to facilities, finance, schooling and even fashion. These elements are unlikely to be drastically changed in Hong Kong purely by the hosting of the Olympics, but at least the possibility of an attitudinal change towards sports and sports participation is possible. Hopefully, some Hong Kong youngsters will see Olympic athletes, in particular Chinese stars such as hurdler Liu Xiang, as inspiring role models. But to make this more than just a temporary upsurge in interest, it will require better planning, focus and coordination from the government and the various local sporting bodies to create a supportive sporting infrastructure, in the broadest sense, and a coherent public policy for sport.

Britain’s double-gold medallist Kelly Holmes writes in her autobiography about London’s success in gaining the hosting of the 2012 Olympics as follows: As a nation we are passionate about sport and to have the Games in our country is going to change so many people’s lives for the better and bring the nation together as we welcome the world’ (Holmes, 2006:265). As argued above, Hongkongers may not be as passionate about sport as the British, but it is to be hoped that some of this enthusiasm to be generated in the summer of 2008 will rub off on administrators and the public.

Secondly, the Olympics as an economic benefit. The Hong Kong government is likely to commit around US$110 million to upgrading existing facilities and building new ones for the equestrian events (part of Fanling golf course is being dug up to create the Olympic eventing course and the HKSI is being temporarily re-located). There will not be an Olympic Village constructed as local hotels will be used, but the enhanced facilities will remain afterwards and should be available for other international events in the future. Short-run economic benefits should come from
what the government assumes will be increased visitor arrivals, both for attending the equestrian events and for travelling onwards to the main Beijing events. Less certain, however, is whether the Olympics will be the catalyst for the development of a strong indigenous sports industry in the longer term. Nonetheless, at the very least, a successful equestrian competition should show-case the ability of Hong Kong to manage international sporting competitions. If this were to be followed up by an equally successful hosting of the East Asian Games in 2009 and by the construction of more world-class sporting facilities (the old airport is one recommended site), then Hong Kong could indeed aspire to become a hub’ for international sporting events.

Thirdly, the Olympics as an enhancer of national prestige. Under the one country, two systems’ principle, Hong Kong and Hongkongers have been struggling to reconfigure their relationship to mainland China since the handover from Britain in 1997. While Hongkongers accept that they are indeed part of China once again and draw pride and quite often profit-from the economic growth record of the reforming China, there have been nonetheless frequent debates within Hong Kong during the past decade about the evolving nature of the relationship, particularly in political terms. Government leaders and pro-China’ figures have stressed the importance of patriotism’ and the one country’ part of the formula, but other social and political groups have argued that the two systems’ part is also vital to Hong Kong’s special identity in the international system.

As in the case of Tokyo and Seoul in the past, the Beijing Olympics will vaunt the host country’s arrival as an economic, political and sporting power. Amongst Hongkongers, joy and pride, to use two words already evident in Hong Kong government press releases, over the Chinese achievement, both in terms of a trouble-free hosting and of medal hauls (host countries tend to perform above expectations), would be understandable. Such a successful outcome for China could also have social, cultural and political implications in Hong Kong. It would certainly be useful, from the Chinese perspective, in deepening Hongkongers’ identification with China. It may also have a short-term political pay-off by helping to boost, even if only marginally, the standing of pro-China political parties going into the Legislative Council elections less than a month after the Olympics.

Finally, the Olympics as an educational catalyst. Undoubtedly there will be tremendous interest in Hong Kong amongst the media and the general population in the sports to be held in Beijing and, to a lesser extent, in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government has already staged an official countdown ceremony (although the promised giant countdown clock’ has yet to materialise) and will no doubt stage other events as 2008 approaches. The Olympic torch will be carried through Hong Kong on its way to Beijing. The Beijing Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and its Hong Kong counterpart can be expected to launch various marketing initiatives for commemorative stamps, coins, five friendlies’ mascot dolls, and other memorabilia. Hongkongers, who love to snap up such kinds of issues, will undoubtedly respond positively.

But, a more long-lasting impact will only come from greater educational activity. The Hong Kong government has already opened an East Asian Games Gallery’, which contains exhibits on the history of the Olympic Games, but rather than passively waiting for interested people to visit this exhibition, the government should take information and exhibitions out into the schools and the wider community. The Hong Kong government is aware of the need for physical education curriculum reform, better teacher training, and more accessible sporting infrastructure (see chapters 11-14 in Johns and Lindner, 2006). These changes to the ethos of physical education in Hong Kong schools cannot come overnight, but hopefully the Olympic fever’ can reinforce this ongoing process.

Let me end with two quotations. One comes from a recent media interview looking forward to the equestrian events to be held in Hong Kong. Princess Haya bint al-Hussein, the President of the Federation Equestre Internationale, said that for the [Hong Kong] people, the run-up to the games is just as important as the games itself and the energy it creates will provide a lasting legacy’ (South China Morning Post, 8 August 2006). The second one comes from more than thirty years ago, when one of Hong Kong’s most distinguished sports administrators, A. de O. Sales, commented: The people of Hong Kong regard spectator sports as a variety of visual amusement. The appreciation of performance seems to be very difficult, if not impossible, to divert into active participation’ (Amateur Sports Federation, 1972:15-16). On the assumption that sports participation is of benefit to Hongkongers’ health and happiness, it is to be hoped that Princess Haya’s assessment will be the more accurate. Unfortunately, the resonance which De Sales’s comments still have, all these years later, suggests changing mind-sets even with the Olympic impetus may be a slow process.
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