HS4008 Social Institutions of Contemporary China: Literature Review

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A study on the impact of the Beijing Olympic Games on China’s human rights records:

Introduction

More than just the pizzazz that these Global Sporting Events bring, being in the global spotlight also means that the political, social and economic aspects of the country are scrutinised. Hence, the politics of international human rights have become increasingly intertwined with these Global Sporting Events. The Fundamental Principles of Olympism in the Olympic Charter speaks of “rights and freedoms… without discrimination of any kind” (International Olympic Committee, 2014) amongst others, which mirrors the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). When Beijing was awarded with the 2008 Olympic Games, scholars like David Black and Shona Bezanson drew parallels to the 1988 Seoul Games.

When Chun Doo Hwan submitted his bid for Korea to host the Olympics in 1981, he hoped that the successful execution of the Games would legitimise his authoritative rule (Manheim, 1988) and also to showcase the ‘Miracle on the Han River.’ The International Olympic Committee (IOC) indeed, did pick South Korea and granted them the coveted title of hosting the games, as an example to other developing countries that they too could play host to the Games in the future. (Lee, 1988) Because sports often have political purposes despite claims proving otherwise (Goldberg, 2000), the main political goal of Seoul Olympics was to democratise the country (Zimelis, 2011) and this was coupled with the increased pressure from the international community and the citizens (Kim, 1989). With the increased exposure, internal and external pressure, South Korea was forced to be more transparent and this had a liberalising effect that resulted in the actualisation of the move towards democracy and the improvement of human rights.

In accordance to its stance towards Olympism and the value of human rights, the IOC awarded the 2008 Olympic Games to Beijing hoping that it would bring about democratic change to a country that is plagued with human rights violations, just like Seoul. During the bidding of the Games, Beijing’s government officials pledged to make improvements with regards to its human rights record (George & Pratt, 2012) As part of its Olympics commitments, China has made efforts to improve human rights specifically in terms of
the freedom from oppression and expression, which saw improvements in media liberalisation. However, these were superficial and the limited allowance of which came with a myriad of more stringent official regulations, which in turn worsened CCP repressive rule during the Olympics.

It has since been seven years since the 2008 Summer Olympics, and we have seen major soci-political events like the Sichuan Earthquake to China’s recent 70th post-war anniversary. Hence, this study seeks to evaluate the effects of their current human rights records. It is important to first contextualise China and also recognise the problematic debates and political agendas behind a universalistic approach of human rights.

This study uses a variety of texts that examines the impact of the Beijing Olympic Games on China’s human rights. These authors are handpicked because they enquire into the realms of the soci-political aspect of human rights, the internal and external institutional pressures on Beijing, and also assess the influence and impact of media on the Olympics. While books written in 2007-2008¹ were useful in providing the reader with a background of the events from the preparatory period leading up to the actual Olympics, they are insufficient in providing enough information of the events after the Olympics.

Body

1. The Universality of Human Rights

Before we start this study proper, we first have to define and study the value of human rights. The United Nations Organisation (UNO) and the International Olympics Committee (IOC) both share the same philosophy: moral universalism. The universal principles of democracy and personal liberties are mirrored in the Olympic Charter, which tends towards a Eurocentric bias (Patsantaras, 2013). Patsantaras claims that

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¹ Books written in 2007-2008 pertaining to the Beijing Olympics
the Olympics can be used as a means of ‘internalisation and globalisation,’ but it does not reflect a cultural exchange due to cultural imperialism.

This cultural imperialism has proliferated with the Olympic Model and Olympism, which Cazorla, Minguet, & Fernández states fulfils the social function of the dominant political and economic groups, which in this case will be the West. China in turn has been plagued by its bitter history with the West and Japan, and perceives itself to be the ‘sick man of East Asia.” By participating in the Beijing Olympics, China will finally be able to break out of that label (Brownell, 2008, p. 35).

This is not going to be easy for China, since China and the West look to different values when it comes to human rights. Traditional Chinese culture is influenced by Confucianism and values the five basic relations. A good individual, therefore, is one who fulfils his social role in order to promote social harmony (Xiao, 2005). Xiao also goes on to survey and study four countries: China, Britain, the United States and Sweden. In her survey, it is seen that China values equality, stability and order in the economy and nation more than the Western countries. Conversely, the Western countries value freedom of speech and the support for human rights more than China. This is not to say that China lacks human rights; but it prioritises different values over certain others. This can also be attributed to the fact that China is considered to be a collectivistic society, and the Chinese are thus willing to subordinate their personal goals to the goals of the various ‘in’ groups (Ibid).

During the bidding of the 2008 Summer Olympics, the Chinese officials stated that the Games would help China open up, and benefit the development of their human rights cause (Adi, 2012). Part of the bargain of their bid included the promotion of rights for Chinese citizens. As such, the organising committee for the Olympic Games issued its own Beijing Olympic Action Plan which laid out the principles and promises to advance the institutional protection of human rights in China (Baier, 2011). In this plan, environmental reforms and freedom of religious expression were listed as priorities. This resonates with the Universal
Declaration of Human Rights, and thus shows the *de jure* conformance to universal human rights and their submission to cultural imperialism.

2. **Milestones in China’s human rights records**

In order to facilitate a better understanding of China and the way she acts, this study will begin to contextualise China, and Baier does so by identifying three major primary cultural attitudes that shapes China’s legal framework. These are: rule-of-man, emphasis on the collective well-being, and relational contracting. Vastly different from the practices of the West, rule-of-man allows political expectations to general rules and laws for the sake of ‘saving face.’ (Baier, 2011). Collective well-being refers to the importance of the members of the in-group over self, which again, contradicts American political ideals. Lastly, unlike the West, Chinese parties regulate their relationships through the continued association of established contracts, while making adjustments as needed. This allows us to understand China’s stance on freedom of religion and human rights, and also her experience with international law.

a. **External factors**

“*Five years ago you couldn’t even say the words ‘human rights’ in China, so the government should be commended for uttering the phrase at last.*”

- Sara Davis, executive director of Asia Catalyst

Ever since the Beijing Olympics, China has been thrown into the global gaze. This is also slowly increasing due to the ‘China threat’ (Brownell, 2008) perceived by the West. There are more Non-Governmental Organisation human rights watchdog groups keeping an eye on China’s human rights record and with all

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2 A support organization for Chinese human rights groups
these external pressures, China in turn has also seen the political importance behind her engagement of human rights.

Following the Olympics, China has formally participated in the international human rights systems in a variety of ways by ratifying human rights treaties, participating in the drafting of new instruments, engaging in multilateral, regional, and bilateral dialogues on human rights issues, and hosting regional and global human rights meetings (Zhao, 2015). China has also been granted a seat in the U.N. Human Rights Council despite her bad track record. This however, seems to be deeply political. In 2004, Beijing was suspended from the US-China Human Rights Dialogues after being criticised by the U.S. and U.N. on her human rights record. Talks resumed in 2008, and suspiciously, the US removed China from her list of top ten human rights violators, despite reports showcasing the widespread problems in China (Ibid).

Despite this, China still maintains its stance that the country’s sovereignty should be respected as a universal principle. She also respects and acknowledges the universality of human rights (Ibid); however, it is another story as to whether she practices it.

The National Human Rights Action Plan was put forth by China in the 2009, and it focuses on advancing respect for human rights within existing bureaucracies (Baier, 2011). While it is also an absolute improvement, the recognition of human rights does not translate to China’s commitment to it. Persecution of religious groups of all faiths is still occurring despite the ratification of the National Human Rights Action Plan (Ibid). China’s lack of progress in the National Human Rights Action Plan are largely institutional, to which will be covered in the later part of my essay, but Baier proposes that the Action Plan will gain its greatest impact with the help of two parties. The US and the International Committee firstly have to seek practical methods of enforceability while respecting China’s cultural framework. Secondly, the Chinese religious followers should strive to prove their worth as a beneficial citizen that promotes the common good of their country (Ibid).
When examining China’s action with regards to human rights, we also have to study the impact of foreign media on China. Cazorla, Minguet, & Fernández has acknowledged that Olympism serves the dominant political and economic groups and utilise media to legitimise their social practices. Through framing and priming (Adi, 2012), the dominant groups are able to reinforce attitudes that have already been shaped in their idealist interpretation of their social reality (Cazorla, Minguet, & Fernández, 2011). In this case, this will refer to the universalistic approach of human rights and the Western media’s constant admonishment of China’s lack of human rights. In response, China has acknowledged her weakness and is willing to seek improvements – both that are major milestones. However, the act of conformation could merely be an attempt for China to ‘save face’ (Ibid).

b. Internal Factors

Hegel has an extremely apocalyptic vision of human rights: he believes that any institution or practice, which is inimical to abstract right and freedom, will be worn away in the end (Lai, 2010). That however, is highly idealistic since the West also does not have perfect human rights to speak of. Lai however, applies Hegel’s concept of human rights as a cyclical dialectic through the Beijing Olympics to understand Chinese’s people’s pursuit of a truly harmonious society that embraces differences. This is an ongoing dialogue between its people who might or might not have affirmative knowledge of human rights, struggling to actualise their free will by changing the existing institutions and a liberalising nation that has yet to become fully liberal for a progressively better society (Ibid).

In 2003, a tenants’ rights advocate wrote an open letter to Hu Jintao to protest against the forced eviction in the capital. Human Rights Watch then published a report on the violation of the Beijing residents’ rights, and these actions spearheaded a flurry of protests. In true Hegelian fashion, the top officials in China led a campaign against illegal land seizures and evictions, and the vice-mayor overseeing the demolition was removed from office and accused of corruption. This showcased China’s increasing engagement with the international human rights regime.
The opening of the web during the Olympics had a significant long-term impact as the Chinese were exposed to other values. This is believed to have contributed to growing public demands for greater web freedom, openness in the government and for society in general (Hewitt, 2012). With the rising popularity of microblogging sites like Weibo, the voices of ordinary Chinese people have grown louder over the past year. Coupled with Xiao’s findings in her World Values Survey which discovers that the Chinese do not respect authority and younger people are more likely to desire a greater voice in the government decision making for a more humane society (Xiao, 2005), it is highly introspective of Hegel’s human rights cyclical dialectic. It is very possible that with the proliferation of the Internet in China, the Chinese government will pay more than just lip-service to its people.

As mentioned previously, the National Human Rights Action Plan was a good milestone in China’s journey but lack progress with regards to actual enforcement. The reasons behind this are largely institutional. Firstly, the Action Plan could be a response to the instances pointing toward China’s need for human rights improvements as well as a “face-saving” motive for its prior political embarrassments (Baier, 2011). Therefore, the Action Plan could just be a façade. Secondly, the Action Plan lacks enforcement methodology and judicial access. This further exemplifies rule-of-man as a primary cultural attitude that shapes China’s legal framework.

**Conclusion**

The effects of the Beijing Olympic Games are apparent and are considered to be an absolute improvement given China’s human rights records. As mentioned in the introduction, the liberalising effects of China and South Korea are different since the latter followed a Western style liberal democratisation. However, this liberalising effect will take time to set in due to China’s institutional framework. China’s involvement in the UN Human Rights council and the ratification of treaties will force her to strike a balance between
collectivistic and individualistic human rights. Changes have to first be done within China’s legal framework before it can translate into tangible actions and results.

The pursuit of human rights takes a cyclical process, and the Chinese people will have to engage in a dialogue to change the existing institutions to strive to be fully liberal. This is facilitated and expedited with the help of the Internet and globalisation. China has one of the world’s most active blogospheres which constantly interacts and engages with events and interests shared by the general public. Therefore, the increasing popularity of new media fits perfectly well into Hegel’s dialectic.

In light of this, it is likely that educational and cultural exchange will play a significant role in the future development of Chinese human rights thinking, as well as improving relations between China and the West (Zhao, 2015). With an all-time high of Sino-US exchange students, this will open up doors to cultural understanding and the development of a uniquely Chinese human rights protection.

It is impossible to divorce the Olympics from the realms Social Science. The IOC changes with its social milieus and changes are made constantly to Sporting rules and expectations. After all, mega events are media events and the media is capable of framing and priming an active audience into the ideologies of the dominant party, which is its intended outcome. Despite this, there are still calls for the IOC to step up to take an active role to enforce human rights (Kidd, 2010). China still has to be careful of the invocation of international human rights by some countries and groups on the pretext of advancing their own interests and agendas. I am confident that we will continue to see improvements to China’s human rights, however, these improvements will be constrained within a carefully constructed framework of the balance between China’s value system and the universalistic human rights.
References


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