

THE OLYMPIC EFFECT: NEW ZEALANDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA IN 2008¹

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In 2008, China hosted the 29th Olympiad. It was the first time China had hosted such a significant global event and, coming less than twenty years after the Tiananmen Square massacre, marked a significant entry/appearance for China onto the world's stage. This article asks whether there has been an "Olympic effect" on New Zealanders' perception of China. Methodologically, this article explores the relationship between short-term events and long-term changes. The overall conclusion of this paper is that New Zealand's attitudes to China (and indeed those of other countries) are as likely to be affected by the long-term rise of China (and its combination of positive and negative facets) as they are by specific events such as the Olympic Games, the Sichuan Earthquake and, broadly, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) (which also have positive and negative facets). Empirically, this article uses the Asia New Zealand Foundation's (Asia:NZ) annual tracking survey of New Zealanders' perceptions of Asia, complemented with international surveys of perceptions toward China.

However, such empirical investigation needs to be understood in context. One important contextual factor was the symbolic importance of the Olympics for China. This was not just any Olympic Games held in any capital city in the world. Beijing was specially chosen – the capital city of not only the world's largest country, but also a country that was becoming increasingly economically and politically powerful in the Asian region and the world. The date and time of the Opening Ceremony, 8 August, 2008 at 8pm was also specially chosen. In Mandarin, the word 'eight' sounds like 'prosperity' and thus is seen as a particularly fortuitous number. But the symbolism was very nearly marred in the lead-up to the Olympics – and here are the other significant contextual events. Events like the protests that surrounded the progress of the Olympic torch through the world's capital cities played a significant role in the way people perceived China. But the global ambivalence toward China was not just centred on the Olympic flame. These protests represented a strongly negative sentiment towards China, which stemmed from a range of issues, but included China's human rights record, constraints on free press, and, in light of the Melamine milk scandal, questions about China's food safety practices.

¹ An earlier and shorter version of this paper was presented at the 18th Biennial International New Zealand Asian Studies Society Conference, Wellington, July 2009. I am grateful for the very thoughtful and constructive comments of the two anonymous peer reviewers and Paul Clark on an earlier version of this paper.

Set against these negative perceptions of China, however, was a more positive perception, garnered on account of the Chinese government's impressive response to the devastating Sichuan earthquake earlier in 2008, particularly as this contrasted to a slow response by Myanmar/Burma to the devastation of Cyclone Nargis. However, all of these 2008 events, including the Olympic Games themselves, ultimately became overshadowed by the GFC, the severity and global nature of which became clear in late 2008. While the GFC may have overshadowed the Beijing Olympics, it nonetheless worked in China's favour and, if anything, gave greater cause to the 'Olympic effect'.

New Zealanders' Perceptions of Asia and China

Since 2007, Asia:NZ has commissioned the social research company Colmar Brunton to annually measure New Zealanders' attitudes towards, and perceptions of, Asia.² Over the last 10 years, this programme of research has tracked the growth in New Zealanders' greater contact with Asian peoples and the growing importance of Asia to New Zealand across a range of areas.³

Attitudes and perceptions are created in many different ways. One of the most significant ways in which perceptions are formed is through experiences; these perceptions, in turn, are then measured in opinion surveys on public attitudes. To that end, in 2008, Asia:NZ commissioned Colmar Brunton to undertake pre- and post- Olympics measures to evaluate the likely impact of the Beijing Olympics on New Zealanders' perceptions of Asia. The pre-Olympics measure was conducted in July 2008 with 500 New Zealanders aged 15 years and over. The post-Olympics measure was part of Asia:NZ's 2008 annual tracking survey. That survey involved surveying 1000 New Zealanders aged 15 years and over from 17 September 2008 until 20 October, 2008. This nationwide random survey had a margin of error of +/- 3.1% at the 95% confidence level and was post-weighted to represent the population according to the 2006 Census. In order to ensure consistency between the pre- and post-survey results, a representative sample of only 500 was used from the September-October (annual) survey in reference to the Beijing Olympics.

The annual survey questionnaire was adopted from previous versions of the survey to ensure comparison could be made year-on-year. The first three questions in the 2008 annual survey were designed to gain an understanding of New Zealanders' conceptions of Asia and to measure New Zealanders' feelings towards China, Japan and India. Regarding China, respondents were also asked if they thought New Zealanders generally felt warmer, less warm or about the same towards people from China compared to a year ago (i.e. in 2007). Those respondents who felt warmer or less warm about people from China were asked to think about why they thought it was. For the remainder of the survey, respondents were asked to think about Asia as a whole (as opposed to a specific Asian country) when responding to the survey questions.

2 From 1997 to 2007, the survey was undertaken by market research company, UMR.

3 See Andrew Butcher, "Well, they're very good citizens': New Zealanders' perceptions of Asians in New Zealand", *Sites: A Journal of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies*, 5 (2), 2008 for analysis of the 2008 survey results.

The 2008 annual survey found two statistically significant positive increases between the pre- and post- Olympic measures:

1. The average feeling of warmth for the people of China increased by four degrees from 65° to 69° (this is measured as degree of warmth and favourability from 0 to 100).
2. Following the Olympics, 22% of New Zealanders (up 5% from 17%) thought that New Zealanders felt warmer towards the people from China compared to 12 months before.

The survey also asked those who said that they thought that New Zealanders felt warmer towards people from China why they thought this. The single most common reason given for the increased warmth towards people from China was the Olympics Games in Beijing.

Nevertheless, New Zealanders' perceptions of China will extend beyond just one event of the Olympics, no matter how significant its impact on their perceptions of China. New Zealand's growing population of Chinese origin, which is constituted of a combination of second-, third- and fourth-generation local-born Chinese families, new migrants, and international students, also plays a role in how Chinese people (and thus, to some extent, China itself) are perceived by New Zealanders. This is a distinctive issue for New Zealand. While Australia, the US and Canada have their own numerically large Asian populations, the percentage of the Asian population to the total population is larger in New Zealand (at 11%) than in any of these other countries, although is comparable with some states/provinces, notably British Columbia.

Asia:NZ's annual surveys of New Zealanders' perceptions of Asia demonstrate that increased contact with Asian peoples in New Zealand leads to better perceptions of Asian peoples generally. Results over time indicate that New Zealanders' personal involvement with Asian people has been steadily increasing since 1998.⁴ In 2007, 48% of New Zealanders said they have 'a lot' or 'a fair amount' of personal involvement with people from Asia, which increased to 58% in 2008 and 62% in 2009.⁵

In many of New Zealand's major cities, New Zealanders who are not of an Asian ethnicity will have more to do with New Zealanders who are. These interactions are not just transactional. They are also relational. While in the 2009 survey, 92% of New Zealanders' had contact with Asians in what we might call a transactional relationship (shopping, shops or services) (an increase from 89% in 2008), over two-thirds (70%) of New Zealanders had at least some relational contact with Asian people through work or business (up from 67% in 2008), or through friends (72%; a comparable result to 2008).

4 Colmar Brunton, *New Zealanders' Perceptions of Asia*, Wellington: Asia New Zealand Foundation, 2008, p.5 <http://www.asianz.org.nz/files/Perceptions%20of%20Asia%20report08.pdf> [retrieved 8 May 2009].

5 Colmar Brunton, *New Zealanders' Perceptions of Asia*, Wellington: Asia New Zealand Foundation, 2009, p.14.

In 2009, just over half of New Zealanders had contact with Asian peoples through social events or clubs (55%, up from 47% in 2008), while almost a third (32%, up from 29% in 2008) had contact with Asians through kinship links (formed most often through their own marriage or that of a family member).⁶

According to the 2008 annual survey, contact remained a key factor when it came to New Zealanders' beliefs about, and feelings toward Asian people. New Zealanders who have 'hardly any' contact with Asian people on average feel significantly cooler towards people from China, Japan and India, than those who have had at least some contact with people from Asia. So while the same (2008) survey indicated that the Olympic Games had had a positive impact on New Zealanders' perceptions of Asia and Asian peoples, this warmth was not confined to this event alone. It could be argued that fertile ground already existed, in terms of pre-existing positive perceptions toward Asia and Asian peoples.

However, the picture was not wholly positive. In the 2008 survey, just over one quarter (27%) of respondents thought that New Zealanders in general felt 'less warm' towards people from China compared to a year earlier (i.e. in 2007). This contrasts with the lower percentage of New Zealanders (22%) who thought that New Zealanders felt 'more warm' towards people from China. In other words, five percent more New Zealanders felt 'less warm' toward China than 'more warm'. When prompted, the main reasons respondents gave for feelings of 'less warmth' were the contaminated milk scandal, adverse media publicity, and a concern that people from China would have too large an influence on New Zealand society. This clearly ambivalent attitude towards China illustrates that while there was a significant increase in warmth because of the Olympics, noted earlier, other events relating to China took away some of this. This may illustrate fickleness in New Zealanders' attitudes toward China and may call into question whether the Olympics had any tangible positive effect at all. This ambivalence may also reflect concern about the changing ethnic landscape of New Zealand society, which is clearly documented elsewhere in other social surveys⁷ and through surveys of New Zealand media.⁸

6 Colmar Brunton, 2008, pp.20-21; Colmar Brunton, 2009, p.15

7 Andrew Butcher, Paul Spoonley and Andrew Trlin., *Being Accepted: The Experience of Discrimination and Social Exclusion by Immigrants and Refugees in New Zealand*, New Settlers Programme Occasional Publication No. 13, Palmerston North: New Settlers Programme, Massey University, 2006; Philip Gendall, Paul Spoonley, and Andrew Trlin, *The Attitudes of New Zealanders to Immigrants and Immigration: 2003 and 2006 Compared*, New Settlers Programme Occasional Publication No. 17, Palmerston North: New Settlers Programme, Massey University, 2007; Paul Spoonley, Philip Gendall and Andrew Trlin, *Welcome to our World: The Attitudes of New Zealanders to Immigrants and Immigration*, New Settlers Programme Occasional Publication No. 14, Palmerston North: New Settlers Programme, Massey University, 2007.

8 Paul Spoonley and Andrew Trlin, *Immigrants, Immigration and the Media: Making Sense of Multicultural New Zealand*, Palmerston North: New Settlers Programme Massey University, 2004.

Looking beyond the direct measures of perceptions, the 2008 annual survey found that the Olympics did not change New Zealanders' level of awareness of China as one of the countries that make up Asia. This appears to be because China already heavily dominated New Zealanders' awareness of Asian countries (nine out of ten New Zealanders identified 'China' as the first country that came to mind when they thought about 'Asia'; a finding that remained consistent in the 2009 annual survey).

The Olympic Games, however, were not the only event that might have had a bearing on New Zealanders' responses to the questions relating to China. The 2008 annual survey identified a number of other events which featured prominently in the New Zealand media relating to China and other Asian countries and events, including:

- The Sichuan Earthquake in May 2008.
- The murder of 80-year old Yin Ping Yang in Manurewa, Auckland in June 2008.
- Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in April 2008.
- A flood in China, killing 57, in June 2008.
- The kidnapping of a Chinese girl in Auckland in July 2008.
- Bomb-blasts in Kunming, Southern China in July 2008.
- The New Zealand Parliament voting to adopt New Zealand's FTA with China in July 2008 (in effect from October 2008).
- Likelihood of Asian pollution creating hot-spots (September 2008)
- Milk scandal costing Fonterra \$139m in September 2008.
- Chinese astronauts returning as heroes in September 2008.
- An earthquake in Central Asia killing 72 in October 2008.
- Asian countries stepping up their response to the economic crisis in October 2008.
- North Korea threatening South Korea in October 2008.

The results of any survey need to be read in context. This article argues that not only were the Beijing Olympics in 2008 statistically significant in New Zealanders' warming perceptions towards China specifically and Asian peoples generally, but that they were significant in less tangible ways as well, in shaping, forming and impacting upon positive *or* negative views that New Zealanders *already held* about China. The various other media stories at the time the survey was undertaken would also be part of the mix of how perceptions were made. Some of those stories and the events had a greater impact than others. Some particular story-lines – the Olympic torch protests, the Sichuan earthquake, the melamine milk scandal – will be discussed in further detail below. But before that, we depart briefly from this discussion to consider the experience of Korea in hosting the Olympics and the extent to which that experience makes China's experience unique or distinctive.

The Korean experience

South Korea hosted the Olympics in 1988. However, Japan was the first Asian country to host the summer Olympics, in 1964: “for Japan, the Tokyo Olympics were much more a declaration that it was reentering the world system as a respectable member of the international community after the ignominy of defeat. It is noteworthy that the Olympics in Rome and Munich served the same purpose for the other two Axis powers in World War II.”⁹ In contrast, Korea’s reasons for hosting the Olympics were different to those from Japan’s and more akin to China’s. Korea and China share more in common than both having *hosted* Olympic Games. They both: had had previously failed bids to host the Olympics (Korea in the 1970s and China in 2000); at the time of hosting their respective Olympics, were experiencing rapid economic growth and industrialisation; had histories of conflict that had involved Western countries (the Korean War, and China’s role in the second world war and various other intra-Asian conflicts respectively); had remarkably (and perhaps coincidentally) similar unifying Olympic slogans (‘Toward One World, Beyond All Barriers’ for Korea and ‘One World, One Dream’ for China); and had hosted Olympics following previous bloody uprisings (in Korea, the Kwangju pro-democracy uprising in May 1980 and, in China, the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989).¹⁰ As this article goes on to demonstrate, the public perception of China prior to the Olympics was both negative and positive. Largely negative perceptions about Korea, by contrast, were established (in the US at least) prior to the Olympics and even extended to disrupting the Olympic Games themselves.¹¹ While the Beijing Olympics were not disrupted, China nonetheless invested them with great symbolic importance.

The symbolic importance of the Olympics for China

For China, the Olympics were not primarily about hosting a major international event or for economic gain (which Olympic games rarely are, in any case) but were rather symbolically important to China: “the platform from which China will announce its arrival as a great power and shed its ‘victim mentality’ resulting from a ‘century of shame’ under Western domination”.¹² As Brady notes, for China, “hosting the Olympics was always more about international and domestic image and prestige than it was about sport”.¹³ China wanted to prove that it was not the ‘sick man of East Asia’ anymore.¹⁴

9 James Larson and Heung-Soo Park, *Global Television and the Politics of the Seoul Olympics* Boulder and Oxford, Westview Press, 1993, p.17

10 Larson and Park, pp.1-4

11 Jinwung Kim, ‘Recent Anti-Americanism in South Korea: The Causes’, *Asian Survey*, 29 (8), 749-763, 1989, p.749

12 Robert Ayson and Brendan Taylor, ‘Carrying China’s Torch’, *Survival*, 50(4): 5-10, 2008, p.9.

13 Anne-Marie Brady, “The Beijing Olympics as a Campaign of Mass Distraction”, *The China Quarterly*, 197: 1-24, 2009, p.7.

14 Xu Gouqi, ‘Beijing Olympic torch relay and its implications for China and the rest of the world’. Off the Page: The Harvard University Press Author Forum, 2008 http://harvardpress.typepad.com/off_the_page/2008/05/beijing-olympic.html [retrieved 20 June 2009].

China had unsuccessfully bid for 2000 Olympics¹⁵ (which went to Sydney instead) but its success in its bid for 2008 repaid its adoption of a new bidding strategy. In 2000, China's bid to host the Olympics had been led by Chen Xitong, who had played a role in the 1989 Tianamen Square massacre; in 2008 China engaged two international public relations firms to do its bidding for them.¹⁶ However too much credit for winning the hosting of the Olympics should not be ascribed to the singular factor of employing such firms. In the eight years between its unsuccessful and successful bids for the Olympics, China had been admitted to/joined the World Trade Organisation (discussed briefly below), had almost successfully completed its first Free Trade Agreement with a Western country (New Zealand, which was enacted in the months after the Olympics), was rapidly becoming one of the world's strongest economies and, despite a continuing murky human rights record, had seen no oppression on the scale of Tianamen.

At the time of the Olympics, therefore, China was already emerging as a significant international power. China's ascension to the WTO in 2001 had raised both China's international standing and Western expectations of democratic change in China. Then US President Clinton went so far as to suggest that China's accession to the WTO would "unleash forces that may hasten the demise of the mainland's one-party state"¹⁷ while others held nationalist and/or (political and economic) liberalist ambitions for China¹⁸ and expectations that China would become more transparent and would reform its economic and domestic policies.¹⁹ Beyond its growth as an economic super-power, the Olympics gave China the opportunity, the forum and the audience to significantly shape how it was (and wanted to be) seen by the world generally. As an increasingly powerful country with an authoritarian regime with communist roots, after centuries through which two capitalist democracies (the UK and the USA) had dominated world affairs, China has had to contend with many negative reactions to its rise. So putting the numerical symbolism of the opening ceremony aside, the success of the Olympics was important for China to assure its neighbours, friends, allies and enemies that it was more benevolent than not, had moved on from the kind of oppressive politics characterized by Tianamen, and was prepared to open up to the world politically and socially as well as economically. Given these pressures, aspirations and expectations therefore, it is important to consider some significant countervailing events, which very nearly set China off-course in the way it presented itself to the world.

15 Brady, p.7.

16 Brady, p.8.

17 Cited in Joseph Fewsmith, 'The Political and Social Implications of China's Accession to the WTO', *The China Quarterly* 167:573-591, 2001, p.584.

18 Fewsmith, 2001.

19 Jeffrey Gertler, 'What China's WTO Accession is all about' (pp.21-28), in Deepak Bhattasali, Shantong Li and Will Martin (eds.), *China and the WTO: Accession, Policy Reform, and Poverty Reduction Strategies*, Washington: The World Bank, 2004.

Olympic torch protests

Beijing had reasonably expected that the international Olympic torch relay, which had preceded other Olympics, would be a fitting prelude to the 29th Olympiad. China had grand ambitions for the Olympic torch relay. Announcing its route, the Beijing Olympics' Organising Committee proclaimed that the torch "will traverse the longest distance, cover the greatest area and include the largest number of people".²⁰ The torch would even ascend Mount Everest.²¹ Only the latter ambition was ultimately achieved as the relay was prematurely ended. The President of the International Olympic Committee, Jacques Rogge remarked that "I have no doubt the Beijing 2008 Olympic Torch Relay will leave many extraordinary memories and create new dreams for people around the world."²² Rogge was right to an extent: the torch relay certainly left extraordinary memories. The passage of the torch was heavily disrupted by demonstrations in the early portions of its relay, notably in London, San Francisco (where its route was shortened) and Paris (where the flame was extinguished by the Chinese for security reasons and ultimately the route through Paris was abandoned because of anti-China protests).²³ Even attempts by China's Asian neighbours to make the torch's journey as benign as possible didn't entirely prevent further protests as the torch travelled the world. Protests also took place in Seoul and Canberra and even in Wellington and Auckland in New Zealand, even

20 The cities along its route were Beijing; Almaty; Istanbul; St.Petersburg; London; Paris; San Francisco; Buenos Aires; Dar Es Salaam; Muscat; Islamabad; Mumbai; Bangkok; Kuala Lumpur; Jakarta; Canberra; Nagano; Seoul; Pyongyang; Ho Chi Minh City; Taipei; Hong Kong; Macao; Hainan Province (Sanya, Wuzhishan, Wanning, Haikou); Guangdong Province (Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Huizhou, Shantou); Fujian Province (Fuzhou, Quanzhou, Xiamen, Longyan); Jiangxi Province (Ruijin, Jinggangshan, Nanchang); Zhejiang Province (Wenzhou, Ningbo, Hangzhou, Shaoxing, Jiaxing); Shanghai; Jiangsu Province (Suzhou, Nantong, Taizhou, Yangzhou, Nanjing); An' hui Province (Hefei, Huainan, Wuhu, Jixi, Huangshan); Hubei Province (Wuhan, Yichang, Jingzhou); Hunan Province (Yueyang, Changsha, Shaoshan); Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (Guilin, Nanning, Baise); Yunnan Province (Kunming, Lijiang, Xamgyi' nyilha); Guizhou Province (Guiyang, Kaili, Zunyi); Chongqing; Sichuan Province (Guang'an, Mianyang, Guanghan, Leshan, Zigong, Yibin, Chengdu); Tibet Autonomous Region (Shannan Diqu, Lhasa); Qinghai Province (Golmud, Qinghai Hu, Xining); Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (Urumqi, Kashi, Shihezi, Changji); Gansu Province (Dunhuang, Jiayuguan, Jiuquan, Tianshui, Lanzhou); Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (Zhongwei, Wuzhong, Yinchuan); Shaanxi Province (Yan'an, Yangling, Xianyang, Xi'an); Shanxi Province (Yuncheng, Pingyao, Taiyuan, Datong); Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (Hohhot, Ordos, Baotou, Chifeng); Heilongjiang Province (Qiqihar, Daqing, Harbin); Jilin Province (Songyuan, Changchun, Jilin, Yanji); Liaoning Province (Shenyang, Benxi, Liaoyang, Anshan, Dalian); Shandong Province (Yantai, Weihai, Qingdao, Rizhao, Linyi, Qufu, Tai'an, Jinan); Henan Province (Shangqiu, Kaifeng, Zhengzhou, Luoyang, Anyang); Hebei Province (Shijiazhuang, Qinhuangdao, Tangshan); Tianjin; and Beijing (source: <http://torchrelay.beijing2008.cn/en/news/headlines/n214042288.shtml>).

21 Xu Guoqi, 2008.

22 The Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad, 'Beijing 2008 Olympic Torch Relay Planned Route and Torch Design Unveiled' <http://torchrelay.beijing2008.cn/en/news/headlines/n214042288.shtml> [retrieved 20 November, 2009]

23 MSNBC, 'Paris protests force cancellation of torch relay' May 6, 2008, <http://nbcports.msnbc.com/id/23978408/> [retrieved 20 November, 2009].

though the torch was never intended to come to New Zealand. The protests escalated to the extent that the IOC considered cancelling the torch route altogether.²⁴ The torch relay provided a lightning rod for those with a range of grievances against China to gather and express those grievances publicly. Many of the protestors saw this as the opportunity to take China to task in a way that international leaders were neglecting to do. (For example, then-US President George W. Bush was strongly lobbied by human rights' organisations in the United States to boycott the Olympics opening ceremony to protest China's human rights record; he did, however, attend.) It's notable that it was internal issues that provoked a response against China, rather than anything China was doing elsewhere in the world (excepting Taiwan, perhaps).

The protests were noteworthy for the counter-protests by Chinese diaspora populations in these cities.²⁵ The counter-protests revealed much about the way China corralled its diaspora populations toward a nationalist goal.²⁶ One Chinese commentator went so far as to suggest that the West's response to China during the torch relay was counter-productive (to the West) and instead emboldened China's resolve:

However, perhaps surprising to many ill-informed Westerners, their humiliation of China through politicizing the torch relay and the coming Olympic Games seems to have backfired. 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 and has led to the rise of outpouring of patriotism and nationalism. ... [T]he West seems to have alienated the majority of Chinese and lost its credibility among the well-educated young Chinese. ... In other words, due to the West's self-inflicted wounds, the Chinese government seems to start to enjoy some popular support and the Chinese people seem to share the government's dream to make the Games a great success regardless of the West (sic) responses and criticisms.²⁷

The relay thus provided a show of China's power, its (benign) control over its diasporic citizenry, including its student populations in many Western countries, and China's determination to respond aggressively to global criticism of it in matters of internal politics. Indeed, the force that China used may have "ended up highlighting a China that was not what most Chinese had hoped to see on display during the run-up to the games. Old-fashioned police controls were tightened and rhetoric that harkened back to Mao's revolution made China look retrograde, just when it desired to look most modern".²⁸

24 *USA Today*, 'IOC mulls cancellation of torch relay', April 4, 2008, http://www.usatoday.com/sports/olympics/2008-04-08-torch-relay_N.htm [retrieved 20 November, 2009]; *Times* online, 'IOC may scrap Beijing Olympic torch relay over protests' April 8, 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article3704640.ece> [retrieved 20 November, 2009].

25 Ayson and Taylor, pp.5-6.

26 Ayson and Taylor, pp.6-7; on this point, see Brady, p. 15.

27 Xu Guoqi, 2008.

28 Orville Schell, "China, Humiliation and the Olympics", *The New York Review of Books* 55, 13, August 14, 2008.

The Sichuan Earthquake

It's important to note that the global views about China are both positive and negative. That's the very nature of their ambivalence. While there are negative views expressed about China's rise and its role in global politics, these are countered by positive views about its economic growth, as noted earlier, as well as other particular events, such as China's response to the Sichuan Earthquake. In May 2008, the devastating earthquake in southern Sichuan killed approximately 70,000 Chinese. In contrast to the disaster wrecked by Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in April of the same year, China appeared more open to foreign assistance. China's response to the earthquake and the international response to China need to be seen in contrast to the cyclone in Myanmar. It was this contrast that played in China's favour.

Aid to China, of one form or another, was received from a range of countries including Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Finland, France, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Singapore, South Korea and the United States.²⁹ China's response as "more transparent, accountable and responsible managers of a serious natural disaster" provided it with a boost in its international reputation prior to the Olympics.³⁰ 'Transparent', 'accountable' and 'responsible' would not be words readily associated with China and, outside this particular situation, would not have been. But, contrasting the Myanmar Generals who did not allow outside aid into their country for weeks, China appeared to be more open and willing to accept help and to allow outside media coverage: 545 foreign reporters from 30 countries were allowed access to the earthquake area.³¹

However, the poor quality of the buildings which collapsed in that earthquake was subsequently conflated with the poor quality of China's food when the Melamine scandal broke in the weeks following the Olympics. The sympathy towards China during the earthquake was not universal: some saw the extent of the devastation as more evidence of poor practices, a lack of quality control, and a sign of corruption by the Chinese government. Those who already held negative views about China were not easily persuaded by China's response to the Sichuan earthquake to change their minds.

The torch relay, the Sichuan earthquake, the global ambivalence about China's political rise – these all go some way to explaining the results reflected in the public polling in the United States and Australia, noted below.

Global ambivalence toward China

Anti- (and pro-) China sentiment wasn't only manifest through protests on the streets of the world's capital cities however; it also filtered into public perceptions. Pew polling in 2008 noted that there was muted global enthusiasm for the Beijing Olympics. There

29 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reactions_to_the_2008_Sichuan_earthquake [retrieved 6 May, 2009].

30 Ayson and Taylor.

31 Dennis Lai Hung Hui, 'Politics of Sichuan Earthquake, 2008', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 17 (2):137-140, 2008, p.138..

was also concern that China was unilateralist (a perception that was also shared about the US) along with worries about the safety of Chinese products.³² In France, where there were strong anti-China demonstrations when the Olympic torch went through Paris, Pew polling found that a majority (55%) of French thought having the Olympic Games in China was a mistake.

In their 2008 survey of Australia and the world, the Australian international relations think-tank, the Lowy Institute of International Policy, found an increasing number of Australians becoming very ambivalent about China. It was ambivalence, not complete negativity: the majority of Australians (52%) said relations with China were improving, while 62% agreed that China's growth had been good for Australia (this was particularly positive given that China recently overtook Japan to become Australia's largest trading partner). But the poll *did* show some concern evident in the broader implications of China's rise: 64% disagreed that Australia's interest would not be harmed if China gained more power and influence and Australians were more or less divided when it came to containing China. In 2009, 95% of Australians thought China is or will become the leading power in Asia (an increase of 9% since 2008) while 52% (a decrease of 6% since 2008) were 'very uncomfortable' or 'somewhat uncomfortable' about this.³³ In the 2008 poll, a slim majority of Australians were in favour of joining with other countries to limit China's influence in the world³⁴ while in the 2009 Lowy Poll, about half of the Australian population (46%) favoured limiting China's influence.³⁵ The 2008 Lowy Poll also found trust in China was down in 2007 from 60% trusting it 'somewhat' or 'a great deal' in 2006 to 47% in 2007³⁶ However, trust had improved by the 2009 Lowy Poll, with 59% trusting China 'somewhat' or 'a great deal'.³⁷

Australia's ambivalence about China was also reflected in the Australian government's 2009 Defence White Paper.³⁸ In his commentary on the White Paper, Australian journalist and blogger Graeme Dobell noted "China keeps popping into the frame — implicitly and explicitly — as the unlikely-but-conceivable great power threat. The White Paper worries that over the next 20 years, major powers will clash dramatically in the approaches to Australia "as a consequence of a wider conflict in

32 The Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 12, 2008 <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/260.pdf> [retrieved 6 May, 2009].

33 Fergus Hanson, *The Lowy Institute Poll 2009: Australia and the world – public opinion and foreign policy*, Sydney: Lowy Institute for International policy, p.8.

34 Hanson, p.2.

35 Hanson, p.8.

36 Lowy Institute for International Policy, *The Lowy Poll 2008: Australia and the World – Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*, Sydney: The Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2008 <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=895> [retrieved July 9, 2009]. pp.8-9.

37 Hanson, p.7.

38 Commonwealth of Australia, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific: Force 2030*, Defence White Paper, 2009. http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/defence_white_paper_2009.pdf [retrieved July 9, 2009].

the Asia Pacific.”³⁹ While Hugh White, in reference to China, noted,

It requires more complex and nuanced judgments of where Australia’s interests lie and how we can best serve them than those we have generally made in the past. But that is the nature of the situation we face on the margins of Asia in the Asian century.... [We cannot assume that] Australia’s strategic choices will always be framed in the same terms as they have been in the past. This underestimates just how profound the changes we might face in Asia over coming decades might be, and how deeply those changes could challenge the way we have thought about our security for the past two hundred years.”⁴⁰

Writing a year later White restated that sentiment, noting, “From any perspective, China’s rise is the most consequential long term trend in the world today — economically, environmentally, culturally and strategically — and it probably constitutes one of the great transformations in history”⁴¹ China’s rise, in other words, cannot help but present significant strategic challenges for Australia.

It was not only in Australia that unease was found about China’s ascendancy. A poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs had similar findings to Lowy’s poll, at least in respect of US opinion. In that poll, the majorities of respondents in all the surveyed countries⁴² assessed China’s regional influence as “very” or “somewhat” positive and all surveyed countries (except Indonesia) believed that China will be the leader of Asia in the future. But strong majorities in the United States (71%), Japan (89%) and South Korea (77%) reported being “somewhat” or “very” uncomfortable with China becoming the leader of Asia.⁴³

It is worth noting, however, as Brendan Taylor did in subsequent commentary on Lowy’s 2008 poll (and as the 2008 Lowy poll report itself noted), these poll results (in this context from Australia, but true of any other polls) need to be read in the context of the Tibet crackdown and the torch relay controversy as well as in the context of the

39 Graeme Dobell, ‘White Paper: China Nightmare, Indonesia Dream’, *The Interpreter: The Weblog of the Lowy Institute for International Policy*, 2009, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/05/Defence-White-Paper-China-nightmare%2c-Indonesian-dream.aspx> [retrieved 14 May, 2009].

40 Hugh White, “Constraining China is counterproductive”, *The Interpreter: The weblog of the Lowy Institute for International Policy*, 2008 <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2008/02/Constraining-China-is-counterproductive.aspx> (retrieved 14 May, 2009).

41 Hugh White, *A Focused Force: Australia’s Defence Priorities in the Asian Century*, Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2009, p.3 <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=1013> [retrieved 14 May, 2009].

42 The countries surveyed included the United States (n=1029), China (n=1237), Japan (n=1000), South Korea (n=1029), Vietnam (n=1000) and Indonesia.(n=811). The margins of error ranged from 3 percent to 3.5 percent.

43 The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Soft Power in Asia: Results of a 2008 multinational survey on public opinion*, pp.4-5 http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/POS_Topline%20Reports/Asia%20Soft%20Power%202008/Chicago%20Council%20Soft%20Power%20Report-%20Final%2006-11-08.pdf [retrieved 6 May, 2009].

international media scrutiny on China in the run-up to the Olympics on issues including human rights, pollution and its capacity to host a terror-free games.⁴⁴ Had the Lowy poll, for example, taken place in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake, which engendered considerable Australian (and international) sympathy, or after the feel-good Olympics, Taylor noted, then the poll results may have been quite different. Moreover, despite increasing ambivalence towards China on the part of Australians, the 2008 Lowy poll showed that the people of that country still see China, on balance, in a positive light. At the time of the poll at least, ambivalence had not turned negative.

But is this view/that itself, as Gyngell and Wesley suggest, a reflection that the Australian public's views about China are shallow? Should the complexities of Australia's relationship with China, they suggest, temper public opinion? As they go on to note, "[p]ublic opinion will have an important place in this process because it helps to shape the parameters within which Australian governments must operate."⁴⁵ In other words, does or should government response lead or follow public opinion with respect to a government's foreign policy? The Australian government (indeed any government) has to negotiate a range of issues in relation to China: "Whether in our attitude to human rights in Tibet, or Chinese ownership of Australian resources, or the labour market dimensions of a free-trade agreement, or the price for Chinese co-operation on climate change, Australia has difficult balances to strike."⁴⁶ Public opinion, it could be argued, rests on simplicities of events rather than the complexities and nuances of diplomatic relations and foreign policy. The Olympics goes well; the Chinese government responds quickly and effectively to the Sichuan earthquake; the public's opinion of China becomes positive. Alternatively, China's heavy-handedness demonstrated through its response to protests around the Olympic torch relay can quickly turn public opinion negative. In short, public opinion waxes and wanes according to particular events. Perceptions created by these particular events may of course reinforce pre-existing views.

These polls clearly demonstrate the challenge in striking the balance between short-term events and long-term challenges. As China's economy grows and it becomes more important to the economic growth of other countries, there is warmth toward China. However, where that economic growth becomes (as it inevitably will be) linked to China's growing political influence in the world, there is increasing ambivalence and even negativity. This reflects the unique reality in international relations likely to prevail over the next century: that there will be simultaneously two super-powers in the world – the United States and China. The United States, partly as a result of the soft-power lost during the Bush Administration, more because of its economic difficulties, dramatised by its place at the heart of the GFC, is in relative decline. Its status as a super-power is not in doubt, but China's rise, economically and politically, means that

44 Brendan Taylor, 'Lowy Poll: Interpreting the China results', *The Interpreter: The Weblog of the Lowy Institute for International Policy*, 2008, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2008/10/Lowy-poll-Interpreting-the-China-results.aspx> [retrieved 6 May, 2009].

45 Alan Gyngell and Michael Wesley, "Regional diplomacy has new impetus", *Australian Financial Review*, 3 April, 2008, p.79.

46 Gyngell and Wesley, p.79.

the US will have to share the super-power stage with another country, for the first time since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The response to the Olympic torch relay, indeed the Olympics generally, needs to be read within this broader context of China's rise. The ambivalence about China hosting the Olympics would not be there if China were not an emerging super-power. Moreover, were China a democracy and more politically transparent, many of the concerns expressed through forums such as the Australia Defence White Paper, would not be an issue. So the global ambivalence about China is much wider than just the one event of the Olympics; the Olympics, however, provided the context in which this ambivalence could be expressed. This is the key argument of this article, which is developed below.

Whither the Olympics effect?

So what then of the Olympics' effect? Was it all smoke-and-mirrors, a mirage, an illusion? Despite these various and serious countervailing trends noted above, were the Olympics as a kind of 'coming-of-age' for China on the global stage still timely? Is there still an ongoing 'Olympic effect'? There is good reason to suggest that there is. For example, the following post on the blog China Beat (<http://thechinabeat.blogspot.com/>), which is a replication of a viral text message that was sent around on the May 1st holiday in 2009, suggests that there's a feeling in some parts of China that while the rest of the world is suffering from the GFC, China is surviving nicely.

五一何所见?
 北美猪疫黯.
 美汽车破产.
 法总统服软.
 韩审卢武铉.
 朝嚷放火箭.
 巴伊阿泰惨.
 街头扔炸弹.
 他乱由他乱.
 咱享咱平安.

It's May First: What's the bottom line?

North America hit by flu from swine.

U.S. car companies in sharp decline.

The French president has lost his spine.

Roh Moo-hyun's on the firing line.

The North Korean missile fell into the brine.

Israel, Afghanistan, Thailand, Palestine – Everywhere you step, a potential land mine.

The rest of the world can worry and whine.
Let's you and me enjoy China's Cloud Nine.⁴⁷

The Olympics may not be specifically mentioned in the blog; however, the blog's triumphant tone suggests that the blog's author (and indeed its readers, given its popularity) saw the Olympics succeeding as a 'coming-of-age' for China. As one commentator puts it: "In one grand, symbolic stroke, the Olympic aura promised to help cleanse China's messy historical slate, overthrow its legacy of victimization and humiliation, and allow the country to spring forth on the world stage reborn – "rebranded" in contemporary parlance – as the great nation it once had been, and has yearned for so long to once more become".⁴⁸ There are good reasons to suggest that China believes it is well on its way to "rebranding".

Generally, the Olympic Games went smoothly. Despite controversy around the opening ceremony, in particular over the performance of one of the artists (where a young Chinese girl who appeared to be singing was in fact only mouthing words to a pre-recorded track), computer-simulated fireworks for television viewers, and children falsely representing China's minority groups,⁴⁹ there were no disruptive protests, security breaches or international condemnations from the world leaders (at the time, in China). However, en route to China President Bush gave a speech criticising China. Indeed, the opening ceremony "surpassed all expectations", in combining 14,000 performers with special effects, on a phenomenal scale. It reached two billion viewers around the world.⁵⁰ One Chinese commentator positively (and perhaps optimistically) noted that "[t]hanks to the Olympics, China has also become a more open and tolerant, as well as a more tolerated, society."⁵¹

A number of world leaders – including France's Sarkozy, the UK's Brown and Germany's Merkel – heeded calls to boycott.⁵² But, as noted earlier, the then-US President George W. Bush attended, as did over 100 other heads of state, sovereigns and heads of government, including the Brazilian President and Russian Prime Minister.⁵³ Gordon Brown, the British Prime Minister, attended the closing ceremony, along with the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, and a significant British delegation; appropriately, given that London was to be the host of the next Olympic Games in 2012.

47 <http://thechinabeat.blogspot.com/2009/05/chinas-bottom-line.html> [retrieved 6 May 2009]. I'm grateful to Brian Moloughney for drawing this to my attention.

48 Schell, 2008.

49 See Kevin Latham, "Media, the Olympics and the Search for the "Real China"", *The China Quarterly*, 197:25-43, 2009, pp.31-32; 42.

50 Brady, p.19.

51 Yongsheng Zhang, 'China: testing for a major role on the world stage', *East Asia Forum Quarterly*, 1, 1, 2009, pp.16-18.

52 Ayson and Taylor p.8.

53 http://www.olympic.org/uk/news/olympic_news/full_story_uk.asp?id=2698 [retrieved 6 May 2009] and see also <http://www.reuters.com/article/olympicsNews/idUST30989220080806?sp=true> for a full delegation list [retrieved 6 May 2009]. New Zealand was represented by the Governor-General.

But what of the Games' role in setting the agenda for how the world sees China? We could consider the counter-factual of 'if China had *not* hosted the Olympics, would that have made a difference?' Probably, yes. The Games provided China the opportunity to recover from the bad press it had received prior to the Olympics; it allowed 30,000 journalists from around the world to broadcast (a particular representation of) China back to their domestic audiences.⁵⁴ China will get another chance to host the world at the Shanghai Expo in 2010, but that will not be on the scale of the Olympic Games.⁵⁵

But the Olympics effect is not overwhelmingly positive. We have already noted the countervailing trends both pre- and post- Olympics, of the protests and counter-protests around the torch relay, the melamine milk scandal and, more positively, the international response to the Sichuan earthquake. But there is one event, above all of these, to which we now turn our attention – not only because of its scale and magnitude, but also because of what it means for China, namely, the GFC.

The global financial crisis

While the Olympics was the major event of the 2008 calendar, historians who look back on 2008 will probably not put it on the top of their lists of the most significant events of that year. September 2008 and the collapse of the US-based firm the Lehman Brothers marked the beginning of what would come to be termed the GFC. While the United States had entered troubled economic waters earlier in 2008, the events of September 2008 and onwards provided stark evidence that the economic crisis would not be confined to the US alone.

The GFC was barely on the radar at the time of the Beijing Olympics but whatever positive press coverage about China was derived from the Olympics was rapidly overshadowed/superseded by the constant coverage of the GFC. Even China, one of the few economies in the world which continued to project economic growth, was doing so at half the rate it had projected before the GFC. (However, by late 2009, most economies are registering a small amount of economic growth.) China, the 'world's factory' found that the rapid and substantial decline in manufacturing for export increased unemployment in China had put increased pressure on its domestic politics and its ambitions for a "harmonious society". China's leadership faced the challenge of responding to the domestic challenges the GFC wrought upon it while still positioning China to grow and enjoy a 'peaceful rise'. Indeed the fact that the Chinese economy continued to grow through the initial months of the GFC, whilst other major world economies did not, provided a way for China's leadership to use the GFC for its political and economic advantage. So also did the fact that China was by far the US's largest creditor.

54 Latham, p.25.

55 Although even then, Chinese legislator Wu Bangguo started a timer counting down the days until the Expo in Tiananmen Square. Source: <http://english.eastday.com/e/0502/ula4346063.html> [retrieved 11 May, 2009].

That China's strategy may have worked is illustrated through public polling. In the same Pew survey noted earlier, majorities in Western Europe believed that China has already replaced the US as the world's super-power or think it will replace the US at some point. Chinese, by contrast, are less inclined to agree that China has already overtaken the US as the world's super-power but agreed that someday it will.⁵⁶ If such polls are to be believed, the rise of China to super-power status is inevitable.

Whether China comes out stronger, more confident and geo-politically more powerful because of the GFC won't necessarily address the ambivalence reflected in the public perceptions' polling noted earlier. It is precisely *because* of China's growing strength that there is such ambivalence. As Barmé notes, "While China presented the world with a flattened vista of its own history, the events surrounding the 2008 Olympics – the torch relay, an unprecedented security operation, vehement rhetoric and populist fervour – presented a more uneven terrain, one that, in the post-Olympic years, may prove to be difficult to navigate, both for concerned people in China and for the international community."⁵⁷

It may not be the Olympic Games, *per se*, that create a kind of "Olympic effect" for China, but the fact that the Olympics came on the cusp of the GFC and it is the GFC that China is using to its advantage on the international stage. As Philip Stevens in the *Financial Times* noted, the GFC is marking out a new geopolitical order: "the west can no longer assume [that] the global order will be remade in its own image. For more than two centuries, the US and Europe have exercised an effortless economic, political and cultural hegemony. That era is ending."⁵⁸ However others, such as *Australian* journalist Greg Sheridan, are less inclined to predict the Fall of the Western Empire and notes, perhaps too wistfully, that "[t]he US has shown time and time again that it can rise to any challenge and constantly evolve. So nobody should ever underestimate the ability of the US to maintain its global leadership role."⁵⁹ But Sheridan's view is not universally held. Rajiv Kumar argued that the London Summit of the G20 in 2009 allowed China to emerge as a major player on the global scene.⁶⁰ Diplomatic chatter indicated that the impact on China's foreign relations came not through the Olympics but through the GFC. China is becoming more confident and assertive in its foreign relations as it safeguards or promotes its own interests. China recognises that the world needs China as

56 Pew, pp.35-36.

57 Geremie R. Barmé, "China's Flat Earth: History and 8 August 2008", *The China Quarterly*, 197: 64-86, 2009, p.86.

58 Philip Stevens, "Crisis marks out a new geopolitical order", *The Financial Times*, October 9, 2008 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/0ed4a750-961e-11dd-9dce-000077b07658.html> [retrieved 11 May, 2009].

59 Greg Sheridan, "No pandering to China in PM's Asia plan", *The Australian*, November 5, 2008, <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,24565762-25132,00.html> [retrieved 14 May, 2009].

60 Rajiv Kumar, 'Dragon conquers G20 summit', *East Asia Forum*, 2009, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2009/04/23/dragon-conquers-g20-summit/> [retrieved 11 May, 2009].

much as the reverse is true.⁶¹ That the US's economic recovery is now so closely linked to China⁶² will not go unnoticed by the Chinese, or indeed others in the region.

Conclusion

2008 was not just any year and the Olympics of that year were not just any Olympic Games. History will consider 2008 for a year of staggering global changes, economically through the GFC but also, politically through the growing ascendancy of China. Already on its way toward becoming a super-power, the Beijing Olympics put China firmly on the map as a country that was transforming itself from its perceived place as 'the sick man of Asia' to a strategically important economic and political power. Amongst other things, the Olympic Games were China's attempt to make the world perceive it differently, even better, than it had done before. Its road to hosting the Olympics was not without its twists and turns, however. On the one hand, China received international sympathy after the devastating earthquake in Sichuan. On the other hand, China received international condemnation during the passage of the Olympic flame and the counter-protests by Chinese diaspora that accompanied it. But the Beijing Olympics was superseded in every respect by the GFC, not only in the news headlines but also in its effect on China and may speed its emergence as a world super-power. The Olympics, therefore, could be seen as a prelude to China's attainment of regional, if not global, pre-eminence. Alongside that rise will inevitably be ambivalence by others, including those who would see China as a threat rather than an ally. How New Zealanders' see China will be part of this mix. New Zealand's proportionately high Asian ethnic population in contrast to other settler societies may lead to an interesting, if speculative, conclusion that New Zealand may be more relaxed than other economies about China's rise because New Zealanders, both Asian and non-Asian, are becoming more Asia- (and China-) literate. Certainly, when compared to Australians, New Zealanders have significantly warmer regard for Asian peoples and countries.⁶³ However, notwithstanding the increase in positive New Zealand perceptions of China after the Beijing Olympics, there is no reason to suggest that this increase is part of an upward *trend*. Indeed, for the reasons already noted in this article, New Zealanders' (and others') perceptions of China may harden and become more negative. The Olympic effect, in concert with the GFC and China's economic and political rise, may, in fact, be a negative one.

61 Confidential correspondence with diplomatic staff in China.

62 See US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates' address to the Shangri La Dialogue, 'America's Security Role in the Asia Pacific', 30 May, 2009 <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2009/plenary-session-speeches-2009/first-plenary-session/dr-robert-gates/> [retrieved July 16, 2009] and the address by US Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner to Peking University, 'The United States and China: Cooperating for Recovery and Growth', 1 June, 2009, <http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/tg152.htm> [retrieved July 16, 2009].

63 Colmar Brunton, 2009, p.20.