

Beijing's Olympic Education Programme: Re-Thinking *Suzhi* Education, Re-Imagining an International China*

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ABSTRACT Starting in 2005, the largest “Olympic education” programme ever implemented by an Olympic host country was carried out in schools in Beijing and across China. By looking at the ways in which the policies for this programme were created and implemented, this article challenges the common perception that there was a “master plan” surrounding all aspects of the Beijing Olympics that was imposed by the party-state from the top down with the singular goal of promoting nationalist and communist ideology. It makes the point that by contrast with the *suzhi* (“quality”) education that preceded it, Olympic education contained a depoliticized patriotic education that linked national identity with sports heroes rather than political systems, and re-situated Chinese national identity within an international community in which it would now take its place as an equal partner.

Starting in 2005, the largest “Olympic education” programme ever implemented by an Olympic host country was carried out in schools in Beijing and across China. Olympic education is the label for educational curricula and activities about the Olympic Games, which are required by the charter of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and its contract with the Olympic host city. There were academic and professional conferences, textbooks and courses for schools and universities, educational television and radio shows, magazine and newspaper essays, websites, museum exhibitions, teacher training classes, public lectures, and more. This article focuses on the Olympic education activities that were carried out in primary and secondary schools.

In many respects, Beijing's Olympic education programmes built upon the “quality” (*suzhi* 素质) education that had first been officially promulgated in 1999 to promote “all-round education” as a corrective to the over-emphasis on written tests. By analysing why Olympic education had some success where *suzhi* education failed, this article makes the point that hosting the Olympic Games aided China in imagining a future in which it would be more closely

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integrated into the international community and this, in turn, made possible a reduction in politicized content and nationalist ideology in the curriculum.

By focusing on the process through which the guiding policy documents for the programmes were created and implemented – put another way, on the intersection where “state” met “society” – this article argues against the perception that there was a “master plan” surrounding the Beijing Olympics that was imposed by the party-state from the top down with the singular goal of promoting nationalist and Communist ideology.

Methodology

Most of the research for this article was done during the 2007–08 academic year, when I was on a Fulbright Research Award affiliated with the Olympic Studies Centre at the Beijing Sport University, with which I had had a 21-year relationship since doing dissertation research there in the 1980s. When the right to host the Olympics was awarded to Beijing in 2001, there were only a few scholars in China who specialized in the Olympic Movement.¹ The most influential among them was Ren Hai 任海, director of the Olympic Studies Centre, who had received a PhD in history from the University of Alberta in 1989. In 1993, during Beijing's first bid for the Olympic Games, he had edited the first college-level textbook for Olympic education, *The Olympic Movement (Aolinpike yundong 奥林匹克运动)*, revised and re-published in 2005.² Because he was the first Olympic scholar with functional English and international experience, Ren's work was the foundation for almost all subsequent materials about the Olympic Games published in mainland China. In 2007–08 I was asked to join the work of his Centre, aiding them in collecting English-language materials and in translating Chinese into English. I participated in relevant meetings, events and activities of the Division of Olympic Education at the Beijing Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games (BOCOG) and the Olympic Education Standing Office (Beijing shi Aolinpike jiaoyu gongzuo lingdao xiaozu bangongshi 北京市奥林匹克教育领导小组办公室) of the Beijing Municipal Commission on Education (BMCE).³ These two organs were the highest levels of administration that were directly concerned with Olympic education; they implemented policies that were approved by higher-level administrators but only loosely overseen by them.

1 “Olympic Movement” is the official term used by the IOC to define the global structure over which it presides and I use it in that sense here, without affirming that it is a social movement in the social scientific sense of the word.

2 Ren Hai, *Aolinpike yundong (The Olympic Movement)* (Beijing: People's Sports Publishing House, 1993, 2005).

3 The Olympic Education Standing Office was formed by the BMCE under the Beijing Academy of Educational Science in late 2004. It was dissolved in late 2008. It had nine employees in addition to the director. It collaborated with a fluid “experts group” consisting of university professors with expertise in Olympic studies who were called on as needed; the core had about ten members, and the author was added to this group.

The Capitol Institute of Physical Education also played a large role in Olympic education. In association with Donnie Pei (Pei Dongguang 裴东光), a faculty member there whose role in the genesis of Olympic education is described below, I took part in ceremonies, observed classes, and interviewed principals and teachers at five schools in Beijing; I also interviewed students and teachers from a sixth distant “mountain area” school when they came to Beijing for a “hand-in-hand sharing” activity with a Beijing school. In addition I engaged in social activities outside the schools, and joined a team led by Zhou Chenguang 周晨光, discussed below, that organized “mock Olympic Games” (*moni Aoyunhui* 模拟奥运会) at six schools in the earthquake disaster area in Sichuan province. I attended two teacher training sessions for several hundred Beijing schoolteachers and administrators, where I interviewed cadres and teachers, and took part in a question-and-answer session. I also interviewed IOC staff involved in education.

Olympic education generated a huge amount of text on websites and in publications, which were collected for the research. The homepage of BOCOG had a link for “Olympic education”⁴ that contained a large amount of material in both Chinese and English, and BOCOG published five textbooks from primary to college level and distributed 1.1 million copies to schools across China, as well as publishing a series of posters distributed to 400,000 schools nationwide.⁵ The Olympic Education Standing Office had its own website⁶ with a large amount of material, and published a number of books. District Olympic education offices also produced their own books. Since publication is inexpensive in China, many schools had their own books printed.

The Creation of Beijing’s Olympic Education

When Beijing signed the host city contract in 2001 it committed itself to carry out Olympic education programmes. The founder of the IOC (est. 1894), Pierre de Coubertin, was above all an educational reformer. His vision of the importance of an all-around education is enshrined in Fundamental Principle No. 1 of the IOC’s constitution, the Olympic Charter, which states that “Olympism is a philosophy of life ... blending sport with culture and education.”⁷

The “official” efforts

BOCOG was the organization officially responsible for working with the IOC to meet the requirements set out in the host city contract. Although it is not

4 <http://en.beijing2008.cn/education>.

5 Interview with Yang Zhicheng, Chief of the Division of Olympic Education at BOCOG, Beijing, 25 March 2008.

6 www.bjoe.org.cn.

7 International Olympic Committee, *Olympic Charter 2007* (Lausanne, Switzerland: International Olympic Committee, 2007), p. 11.

explicitly stated in the Olympic Charter, IOC members have used the aphorism that “sports should be kept separate from politics” since the Cold War period, and because this was often used as an excuse to avoid dialogue with China during the period when it had withdrawn from the IOC over the Taiwan issue (1958 to 1979), Chinese Olympic experts are well aware of it.⁸ BOCOG was generally very concerned to maintain a good relationship with the IOC, and it was also the conduit for publicizing Beijing's Olympic education to the outside world.⁹ This was one factor in the de-politicization of the content of Olympic education that is described below. However, the outside pressure to keep political content out of the programmes was not very heavy: there was no requirement that the IOC must see English translations of key documents, BOCOG was free to transmit whatever English-language summaries that it wanted to in its official reports, and the BMCE had no obligation to submit any reports at all. Furthermore, since the IOC was much more concerned with the weightier issues of infrastructure and operations, it devoted only superficial attention to Olympic education.

Any Olympic organizing committee, including BOCOG, has a limited ability to carry out educational programmes and must rely heavily on those organs that administer the educational system, in this case the central Ministry of Education and the Beijing Municipal Commission on Education. China's Olympic education programmes contained some collaborative efforts between the BMCE and BOCOG as well as activities that they engaged in independently, and there was sometimes rivalry between them. Since BOCOG was the international interface the IOC assumed that it was spearheading all activities, and Western media were better informed about the BOCOG activities; but since the BMCE had control over the schools it had greater practical involvement in organizing and carrying out programmes and providing funding.

The BMCE and BOCOG produced two separate but similar guiding policy documents. The BMCE's *Beijing Municipal School Olympic Education Action Plan* (*Beijing shi xuexiao Aolimpike jiaoyu xingdong jihua* 北京市学校奥林匹克教育行动计划), was first drafted in late 2002, approved in principal by the BMCE a few months after the conclusion of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, and issued on 6 December 2005.¹⁰ Two days later, the Ministry of Education and BOCOG jointly issued the *Beijing 2008 Primary and Secondary School Olympic Education Programme* (*Beijing 2008 zhongxiao xuesheng Aolimpike*

8 See ch. 5, “Mixing sport and politics: China and the International Olympic Committee,” in Susan Brownell, *Beijing's Games: What the Olympics Mean to China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

9 My assertion about BOCOG's desire to please the IOC is based on discussions with persons associated with the IOC and the Chinese government, who wished to remain anonymous.

10 Beijing Municipal Communist Party Education Working Commission and Beijing Municipal Commission for Education, *Beijing shi xuexiao Aolimpike jiaoyu xingdong jihua* (*Beijing Municipal School Olympic Education Action Plan*), Document No. 53 in 2005 (6 December 2005) (Beijing: Office of the Leading Small Group of Beijing Municipal Olympic Education, 2006), www.bjoe.org.cn/bjeduao/y/1227512373435170816/20060914/23016.shtml.

jiaoyu jihua 北京2008中小学生奥林匹克教育计划).¹¹ The prologue to the BMCE plan stated that its aim was to implement the BOCOG programme – even though it was issued two days before the BOCOG document and appeared to have been the product of a long consultative process not guided by the BOCOG document.

It is important to emphasize that these guiding policy documents were not simply handed down from above. The BMCE *Action Plan* was developed through an intense consultative process that began in 2002, involving a large number of forums and meetings that brought together Beijing government officials, BOCOG officials, university experts, district education officials, principals and teachers. Even after the original document was promulgated, the consultative process continued until the day of the opening ceremony, since the conceptual framework for Olympic education was constantly evolving and building on previous experience.¹² The BOCOG document was largely produced in-house by BOCOG, whose chief of the Division of Olympic Education, Yang Zhicheng 杨志成, was well-educated, having received a MEd from Hope International University in California.

BOCOG's Beijing 2008 Primary and Secondary School Olympic Education Programme

The BMCE document states that it was issued in order to implement the BOCOG document, and the BOCOG document seems to provide a more general conceptual framework. Item 1 in the “guiding thought” (*zhidao sixiang* 指导思想) states that the *Programme*

is closely centred on the working goal of a “unique and high-level” Olympics, on fully implementing the three guiding ideals of “Green Olympics, High Tech Olympics, People’s Olympics” and the “one world, one dream” publicity theme, and links Olympic education with the cultivation of the comprehensive quality (*suzhi* 素质) of youth, promoting physical education and sports among primary and secondary school students, spreading the Olympic spirit, the spirit of internationalism and the spirit of patriotism, strengthening the thought and moral education of non-adults, striving to create a good humanistic atmosphere for the successful hosting of the Beijing Olympics, shaping a legacy of Olympic education with Chinese characteristics.

Olympic education was implemented under the rubric of one of the three main themes of the Beijing Olympics, the “People’s Olympics” (sometimes translated as “Humanistic Olympics”) (*renwen Aoyun* 人文奥运), and served the other

11 I was given a hard copy of the Chinese document by Yang Zhicheng but have been unable to find a copy of it on the website of BOCOG or the Ministry of Education; this is unusual since most key government documents are now available on official websites. There is a version of it on the Chinese information website Baidu (<http://baike.baidu.com/view/1092898.htm>). I have not found a complete English translation, making it unlikely that the IOC knew its contents.

12 A brief overview of the history of the creation of Beijing’s Olympic education is given by Geng Shen in his preface to *Beijing Aolimpike jiaoyu gongzuo rizihi* (*Work Diary of Beijing’s Olympic Education*) (Beijing: Beijing Sport University Press, 2008), pp. 1–14 (in Chinese and English).

two (“Green Olympics” and “High-Tech Olympics”) by including content in environmental and science education.

The “working goals” (*gongzuo mudi* 工作目的) of the *Programme* are, first, to popularize Olympic knowledge, spread the Olympic spirit, and publicize Olympic ideals, goals and preparatory work; second, to broaden students’ international field of view and teach them to pursue world peace and progress; third, to reduce the distance between primary and secondary school students and the Olympics, stimulating the development of the Olympic Movement and promoting physical education and good fitness habits among school students; and fourth, to increase primary and middle school students’ understanding of the Olympic Movement, allowing them to experience the Olympic Games personally. This section concludes with a portrait of the type of young people the programme aims to cultivate: “a generation of young students who understand the Olympic spirit, comprehend Olympic knowledge, and possess international vision and habits of civility and politeness.”

In an interview, Yang Zhicheng repeated these themes. He was passionate about the “Olympic spirit” and felt that it could contribute “a new strength, a new theme” to the effort to cultivate the all-round development of Chinese students. He felt that the Olympic spirit resonated in China because, like China, it was both ancient and modern, containing both roots in ancient Greek traditions that were similar to ancient Chinese traditions and ultra-modern elements developed in the 100-year history of the modern Olympic Movement. It offered a model for Chinese educators as they sought to train the next generation of Chinese for a high-tech future while also anchoring them in Chinese traditions.¹³

The Beijing Municipal Commission on Education’s Beijing Municipal School Olympic Education Action Plan

The BMCE *Action Plan* is similar to the BOCOG *Programme*, but one of its working goals is to “conscientiously promote *suzhi* education and raise the quality of education.” It has a slight political flavour in places. It states that the content of the programmes should “cultivate the internationalism, patriotism, collectivism and teamwork ability of the students and raise the general quality (*suzhi*) of young students,”¹⁴ and also that Olympic education should be linked with the *Programme for Implementing the Construction of Citizen Morality* (*Gongmin daode jianshe shishi gangyao* 公民道德建设实施纲要),¹⁵ which was promulgated in 2001 by the Central Committee of the Communist Party. This was a politicized document in which the word “socialism” appeared 33 times, so this might seem like a call for Olympic education programmes saturated

13 Interview, Beijing, 25 March 2008.

14 *Beijing Municipal School Olympic Education Action Plan*, p. 4.

15 Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, *Gongmin daode jianshe shishi gangyao* (*Programme for Implementing the Construction of Citizen Morality*), 20 October 2001, <http://news.sohu.com/20081020/n260121037.shtml>.

with “socialist morality.” However, in conversations, principals and administrators did not list the *Citizen Morality* document as an important influence on their Olympic education programmes, while they did state the importance of the 1999 and 2001 educational reforms discussed below, which the *Action Plan* also links with Olympic education.

The final working goal was unusual because it concerned China’s contribution to the Olympic Movement and not the Olympic Movement’s contribution to China: “To explore rules and practices for a model of Olympic education unique to the developing world, and leave behind an educational legacy for the Olympic Games that has Beijing features.”¹⁶

Neither the BMCE nor the BOCOG Olympic education documents used the word “socialism” – not even once. This was echoed in the way that practitioners talked about their programmes. For example, at the exhibition of the achievements of Olympic education at the Capitol Institute of Physical Education on 16 May 2008, I attended one-and-a-half hours of presentations by schoolteachers and principals whose Olympic education programmes had been selected as exemplary. In those one-and-a-half hours the words “socialism” and “communism” were not uttered once.

Pei said that the non-political nature of the BMCE document was because “we people there understood that the Olympics have nothing to do with politics – keep it clean and beautiful, students and teachers will accept it more.”¹⁷

The Olympic education demonstration schools

The promulgation of the BMCE *Action Plan* was also accompanied by the announcement of the first group of 20 Beijing schools that were designated as “Olympic education demonstration schools” (*Aolinpike jiaoyu shifan xuexiao* 奥林匹克教育示范学校) with the responsibility of devoting at least two hours per month to Olympic education activities.¹⁸ In 2006, the BMCE, BOCOG and the Ministry of Education, working together, expanded upon those numbers in two more batches: a total of 200 primary and secondary schools in Beijing and 356 schools nationwide were selected through a process in which the school put

16 *Beijing Municipal School Olympic Education Action Plan*, p. 3.

17 E-mail communication, 21 December 2008. This was to some degree an implicit criticism of the government’s political appropriation of the Olympics, but this must be understood in the wider context of the relationship of intellectuals to the Olympic Movement. It is common worldwide that educators consider themselves the true “keepers of the flame” and reject attempts by the political and corporate worlds to appropriate it. This conflict extends into the relationship between intellectuals and the IOC and is particularly strong in Germany and France. In China, Olympic scholars collaborated more closely with the local organizing committee and the government than was true of Olympics held in Western Europe and North America in the last two decades. Close collaboration with educators also occurred in the Olympics held in Japan and South Korea.

18 BOCOG, Ministry of Education, Beijing Municipal Government, “Guanyu mingming shoupi Aolinpike jiaoyu shifan xuexiaode tongzhi” (“Circular on the naming of the first group of Olympic education demonstration schools”), 6 December 2005, in *Beijing Municipal School Olympic Education Action Plan*, pp. 11–12. The framework for the activities of the demonstration schools is also described in the *Action Plan* itself, section 3, part 1, articles 1–5, pp. 3–5.

forward an application at the recommendation of its local education commission. The applications were judged by a committee consisting of university professors, BOCOG representatives and education officials.¹⁹

In Beijing, the chosen schools received an annual financial subsidy from the Education Commission, and some schools also received further subsidies from their district. Because it was a way to receive subsidies and government accolades, those that most enthusiastically engaged in Olympic education activities were often low or middle-ranking schools seeking to improve their status. Beijing has a system in which tuition is lower for students who reside within the school district, but parents from outside the district may elect to send their children to the school at a higher tuition rate. This creates a competitive system in which a school that develops a good reputation can increase its revenues by attracting outside students; the increased revenues are then used for investments that can improve the school's status further. Primary schools were more enthusiastic about Olympic education than middle schools because the latter were more oriented towards their students' results in the National College Entrance Examination as the basis for their reputations.

By the end of 2007 hundreds more schools nationwide had engaged in "hand-in-hand sharing" with the Olympic education demonstration schools, taking the total number of schools involved to 1,100. It was estimated that these programmes touched the entire school-age population of 400 million students nationwide (a figure that cannot be considered reliable).²⁰ In addition, a "heart-to-heart" sister school programme was organized among 210 schools in Beijing. Each school established a relationship with one of the 205 national Olympic committees and five national Paralympic committees. Finally, about 10,000 Beijing primary and secondary school teachers were bused to the suburbs for two days of lectures on Olympic topics by the university experts.

The "people's" efforts

The above sections contain the "official" (*guanfang* 官方) history of Olympic education. It is recorded in the most publicly visible documents, and BOCOG's version of it will go into the Official Report of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, the most important written record for future historians and Olympic organizing committees.

Actually, there was also a subterranean, non-official "people's" or civil (*minjian* 民间) history. Efforts by BOCOG and the BMCE built upon and were complemented by civil efforts that were supported by the eight legally-recognized

19 "Di29jie Aoyunhui zuweihui, Jiaoyubu guanyu mingming Beijing 2008 Aolimpike jiaoyu shifan xuexiao tongzhi" ("Circular on the naming of Beijing 2008 Olympic education demonstration schools from the organizing committee of the 29th Olympic Games and the Ministry of Education"), BOCOG Document No. 222 in 2006 (13 October 2006), www.moe.edu.cn/edoas/website18/52/info35952.htm.

20 Beijing Olympic Education Standing Office, *2007nian Beijing shi Aolimpike jiaoyu gongzuo zongjie (2007 Year-End Summary of Beijing Municipal Olympic Education)*, document in possession of the author.

non-communist parties, known in China as “democratic” parties (*minzhu dangpai* 民主党派). Those that were most active were the September Third Society (*Jiusan xueshe* 九三学社), the Democratic League (*Minmeng* 民盟) and the Association for the Promotion of Democracy (*Minjin* 民进). The present article focuses on the September Third Society; the Democratic League also played a key role in the formulation of the plan for the “People’s Olympics.”

Donnie Pei received a Master’s Degree from the International Olympic Studies Centre at the University of Western Ontario, Canada. At the 1999 postgraduate session of the International Olympic Academy (an institution largely funded by the Greek government and located in Ancient Olympia), Pei had been inspired by his conversations with the Dean, Kostas Georgiadis, who had led the Olympic education projects for the 2004 Athens Games. As the Olympic bid process started to accelerate in 2001, Pei received a grant from the IOC’s Olympic solidarity programme and went to Lausanne to do research in the Olympic Studies Centre. He designed a set of posters on Olympic history and philosophy that was exhibited in Beijing in 2001 and then on a nationwide tour, eventually ending up in Yangfangdian primary school’s outdoor “Olympic knowledge corridor.” After the success of Beijing’s bid in July 2001, Pei, who had worked as a PE teacher for ten years before going to Canada, began visiting schools in Beijing to try to persuade them to start Olympic education activities. He found that most principals and teachers did not understand and were not interested, but finally on his tenth attempt he met PE teacher Zhou Chenguang at Yangfangdian primary school. While Zhou did not know much about Olympic history and values, he was immediately attracted by Pei’s discussion of sports as a way of teaching values because of his own crisis of conscience:

In the 1980s we still understood physical education as similar to that of the Soviet Union. We required students to line up in straight lines. [For the exercises] I was very proud when 1,000 children lined up straight. I would put a lot of effort into it. I’d stand on the platform to direct them, jump off and run up to them to straighten them up [motions hands as if adjusting a child’s torso], run back to the platform, and so on. I had put out so much effort. I started to wonder what had I trained them for? They would go out into society and what would they do with what they had learned? Did it have any use? I had produced little soldiers. What had I accomplished? They knew how to be obedient.²¹

In 2002 Pei and Zhou initiated China’s first experiential Olympic education activities in a school, a re-enactment of the ancient Greek pentathlon. Pei had learned this idea at the International Olympic Academy, where it was an annual tradition initiated by Ingomar Weiler, a professor in classics at the University of Graz in Austria.

Initially, Pei had found that the teachers and principals he approached had a low opinion of the Olympic Games, believing them to be “just games.” It had taken some work to persuade them that there is a philosophical system based on Olympism. For Pei, the ancient Greek ideal of all-round education was the remedy for the over-emphasis on testing that was plaguing China’s educational

21 Interview, Beijing, 28 January 2008.

system. He felt that there was a similarity between today's China and the late 19th-century Europe that had spawned the Olympic Games, since both were in the early stages of industrial capitalism and were sacrificing human mental and physical health for economic development.²²

The September Third Society's membership is limited to intellectuals in the fields of science and technology, and education is one of its platforms. From 2002 to 2005, the chair of the Beijing branch of the September Third Society was Tian Maijiu, a professor at the Beijing Sport University who was the first Chinese sport scholar to go abroad to study, at the German Institute of Sport Science in Cologne in the 1980s. Tian helped to turn the Society's attention to Olympic education, and in 2003 it received a three-year grant from the Beijing Municipal Science and Technology Commission for research on how to utilize Olympic education to carry out the "People's Olympics." The Society invited Donnie Pei to become a member in 2004.

By late 2004, Yangfangdian primary school had already held three annual instalments of its mock Olympic Games, complete with an opening ceremony in which students marched into the stadium representing different countries, wearing their traditional dress, shouting "one world, one dream" in their language and performing their traditional dances. Before each mock Olympics, Zhou Chenguang had faxed multiple invitations to BOCOG with little response from it or other official VIPs. In November 2004, the Beijing People's Political Consultative Conference²³ organized two events that brought the September Third Society, Democratic League, Association for the Promotion of Democracy and BOCOG to Yangfangdian school to learn from its experiences. When CCTV covered the second event Yangfangdian became famous and the concept of Olympic education developed there began to be popularized. In 2005, Yangfangdian was designated the "pioneer Olympic education demonstration school." According to its current principal, it had previously been a low-ranking school, but the media coverage and government accolades helped it achieve a mid-ranking status and it began attracting students from outside the district, thus increasing school revenues.²⁴ The previous principal who had presided over this growth was promoted.

Early in 2005, the September Third Society presented its "Proposal on how to effectively formulate a plan for Olympic education to put into actual practice the People's Olympics" to the Beijing Municipal People's Congress and BOCOG. On 30 August 2005, Tian Maijiu convened a forum to which members of the Beijing Municipal Communist Party and government were invited. Zhu Shanlu, secretary of the Education Working Commission, was impressed, and proposed that they should collaborate with the Commission on the formulation

22 Interview, Beijing, 1 January 2008.

23 The democratic parties have members who are representatives in the municipal People's Political Consultative Conference and People's Congress, giving them the important political connections that enable them to attract the attention of government officials.

24 Interview, Beijing, 25 October 2007.

of the Olympic education *Action Plan*, which was still three months away from its final version. Three of the members of the September Third Society (Donnie Pei, Yang Tieli 杨铁黎 and Huang Wenhui 黄文卉 of the Capitol Institute of Physical Education) then took part in formulating the BMCE *Action Plan*, selecting the Olympic education demonstration schools and many other activities.²⁵

Because of this history, Pei and Zhou believed that Olympic education originally came from “the people” and not from the government. Pei was the only person in China who had been a PE teacher on the one hand, and on the other hand had connections with three of the main global centres for Olympic scholarship – the International Olympic Studies Centre at the University of Western Ontario, the International Olympic Academy and the IOC’s Olympic Studies Centre in Lausanne. While he was only one among many conduits between China and the Olympic Movement, it is doubtful that Olympic education in the schools would have been the same without him. He was only an associate professor at the Capitol Institute of Physical Education, and before he became engaged in Olympic education was out of favour with the leadership there. Without the backing of the September Third Society, it is unlikely that he would have had much input into Olympic education.

In 2008, Donnie Pei was recognized as a “model worker” for Beijing city, the highest form of recognition by the municipal government.

The consultative process in the formulation of Olympic education

There were at least three main groups of actors in the formulation of the Olympic education policies: BOCOG, the BMCE and intellectuals with expertise in Olympic studies. This was an unusual situation; under normal circumstances, the BMCE would not have to collaborate with an outside organization to such an extent. While it might have caused difficulties for the BMCE, in analysing the situation from a greater distance it appeared that something very interesting occurred. BOCOG in itself was an unprecedented organization: technically speaking an NGO as required by IOC regulations, in fact it was designated with the status of a “State Council temporary ministry-level office” (*guowuyuan linshixing zhengbuji banshi jigou* 国务院临时性正部级办事机构), the first organization ever to have this temporary designation. At its peak it employed several thousand people, many on loan from government branches, and offered a degree of job mobility that the previous nomenklatura system never had. This unusual organization bridged schisms between branches of government (*xitong* 系统) that did not normally work closely together. And because the expertise of intellectuals was needed by both BOCOG and the BMCE, they formed a conduit

25 Jiusan xueshe (September Third Society), “Guanyu shishi Aolinpike jiaoyu de jianyi” (“Proposal on implementing Olympic education”), in Wu Ning, Sun Baolin, and Long Yu (eds.), *Canzheng yizheng anli xuan: Beijing juan* (*Selected Case Studies in Participatory and Consultative Government: Beijing Volume*) (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2007), pp. 19–23.

between the two organizations and to a large extent their ideas formed the glue that held together the entire Olympic education effort. As Donnie Pei put it:

They [the government] give us a lot of recognition. We do not take the credit. As scholars we must rely on the government. We cannot be too naïve. We are members of social life, we cannot isolate ourselves. ... The government needs our knowledge. We should not be the “lonely flower appreciating itself” (*gu fang zi shang* 孤芳自赏).²⁶

In addition, the non-communist parties also started to serve a stronger function as a bridge between intellectuals and the government. Without the institutional backing that the Olympic experts received from the non-communist parties, it is doubtful that their ideas would have been as influential.

This ethnographic research indicated that instead of reinforcing the old status quo, the organization of the Olympic Games encouraged a higher level of fluidity and democratic inclusiveness in the political system. This demonstrates the importance of ethnographic research in China and the limitations of relying on policy documents. One conclusion from this research is that ultimately the written products of this social process – the policy documents themselves – were merely a by-product of the more important social relationships and discussions that took place in the process of producing the documents.

In an interview Geng Shen 耿申, the director of the Olympic Education Standing Office, laid out a vision for Beijing's Olympic education that was far broader than anything in the policy documents.²⁷ He had a tremendous thirst for knowledge about Olympic history, had read all of Coubertin's works that had been translated into Chinese, and when he could not find the answers in Chinese had asked Olympic experts to find answers for him in English sources. He was frustrated by his inability to communicate in English, and this was one reason that he felt strongly that the next generation of Chinese should possess the language skills that he lacked. By building on what had been done before, he aimed to create the best Olympic education programme ever. This would be Beijing's contribution to the Olympic Movement, and would mark its place in Olympic history.

In his foreword to the book that summarized his years as the director of the Olympic Education Standing Office, *Experiencing the Olympics (Tiyān Aolimpīkē 体验奥林匹克)*, he wrote:

The work of Olympic education during these years has tested me spiritually and physically. Through the hard but fun work of the millions of teachers and students, through the course of down-to-earth but inspired practical experience – ultimately, as seen from the international perspective, a “Beijing model” of Olympic education actually took shape. And at this we are gratified.²⁸

26 Phone interview, Beijing, 16 January 2008.

27 Interview, Beijing, 18 October 2007.

28 Geng Shen, *Tiyān Aolimpīkē (Experiencing the Olympics)* (Beijing: Beijing Sport University Press, 2008), p. 5. The English translation in the book was done by the author.

The Content of Olympic Education

So, what concrete activities grew out of these discussions about guiding thought and working goals? Schools were given a great amount of freedom to design their own Olympic education activities, and a tremendous variety of activities resulted. Some schools designated one course as the location for Olympic education while others incorporated Olympic themes into compulsory courses or extracurricular activities. Students formed their own organizing committees following the organizational chart on BOCOG's website, or conducted bid competitions modelled on the Olympic bid. The activities at Yangfangdian were particularly colourful: in the 2005 opening ceremony for the mock Olympics, the group of students who marched onto the sports field as the "United States" wore blue jeans and cowboy hats, their interpretation of American ethnic costume. An "Olympic angel" holding a cardboard imitation of the Beijing Olympic torch lit the Olympic flame (red crepe paper blown by a fan – fire being too dangerous) to the accompaniment of the Olympic anthem. The school turned its choral group into the "Little Olympic Angel Chorus," which performed a moving rendition of Bach's "Ode to Joy" or the "Olympic Volunteer's Song" while wearing angel wings. Following Yangfangdian's example, dozens of schools organized their annual sports day as a mock Olympic Games with an opening ceremony. Students produced a huge amount of artwork in every conceivable medium, even beans or bottle tops glued to cardboard. They developed innumerable performance types, including "cheerleading" squads that were a Sinicized version of the American original, recitation of Coubertin's ode to sport in Chinese, or breaktime exercises in which several thousand students formed the Olympic rings on the sports field. Many schools emphasized Chinese traditional games and *wushu* (武术).

Case Study: Hujialou Central Primary School

The Olympic playing cards created by Hujialou central primary school in Chaoyang district provide an easily quantifiable illustration of the content typically found in Olympic education projects. The project consisted of two packs of 54 playing cards with images selected from the poster exhibition that Pei had designed in 2001. The cards became an object of pride and a status symbol used to motivate students. The students created ten new card games and teachers used them to reward performances while students strove to acquire a full set.²⁹ Hujialou gained recognition when the IOC's Olympic Museum acquired the cards for its collection.

The first pack, labelled the "Little Olympic encyclopaedia," has images and text in both Chinese and roughly translated English. It contains 15 cards with information about China and 30 with information about the international Olympic Movement. Of the 15 cards about China, seven provide information

29 Interview with Hujialou Central Primary School principal, Beijing, 8 January 2008.

and symbols of the Beijing Olympic Games and eight (15 per cent of the total cards) contain patriotic themes in the form of China's Olympic "firsts" (such as first sports meet in China, first Olympic participation, first medal).

The second pack, labelled "Chinese children walking with the Olympics," is only in Chinese and is more focused on China. Fourteen cards feature China's Olympic heroes and heroines. Many of the cards juxtapose national symbols of China with international symbols: one reads "Chinese civilization hand-in-hand with the Olympics," another "Magnificent Beijing embraces the world." They link the children with the Olympics, as in "I'm a little ambassador for the image of the Olympics." Several of the cards cover political events but emphasize the pursuit of world peace, such as the "Olympic regret" that three Olympic Games were cancelled due to the world wars, which concludes "let us together create a peaceful and friendly world." The most political card is the one for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, which reads, "Chinese Taipei sent 21 athletes to take part in the competition. In order to protest against the plot to create 'Two Chinas,' China withdrew from the Olympic Games."

This provides a good snapshot of the content found in some of the most widely viewed projects (the posters on which they were based were seen by approximately 90,000 people in their three-year history, including students at 15 Beijing universities³⁰). Where patriotism was promoted, it was done through Olympic heroes and symbols; where politics were presented, it was in an Olympic context. The dominant message was not nationalism but internationalism: national symbols were linked with statements about China joining the international Olympic Movement, Beijing welcoming the world and the world pursuit of peace.

Suzhi Education

As mentioned above, the *BMCE Olympic Education Action Plan* considered Olympic education to be a way of improving *suzhi* education. Yang Zhicheng and school principals also stated that the 1999 and 2001 educational reforms that promoted *suzhi* education were the foundation that made the successes of Olympic education possible. *Suzhi* in this context does not have a good English equivalent, though its basic meaning is "quality" (of people). "*Suzhi* discourse" has received a fair amount of attention from China scholars, who have argued that it is a strategy by the government to shape the population for modernization.³¹ Unlike the broad agendas and the vagueness attributed to *suzhi* by

30 September Third Society, "Proposal," p. 19.

31 Ann Anagnost, "The corporeal politics of quality (*suzhi*)," *Public Culture*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2004); Andrew Kipnis, "Suzhi: a keyword approach," *The China Quarterly*, No. 186 (2006); Andrew Kipnis, "Neoliberalism reified: *suzhi* discourse and tropes of neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2007); Yan Hairong, "Neoliberal governmentality and neohumanism: organizing *suzhi*/value flow through labor recruitment networks," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2003).

these scholars, I found that educators assigned a narrow definition to *suzhi* education as a call for schools to cultivate more well-rounded students who could do more than take written tests. Physical educationists sometimes defined *suzhi* education even more narrowly as a call for a greater emphasis on physical education.

Ann Anagnost describes the “emptiness of *suzhi*” by noting that her informants laughed about their inability to define it, and that on a multitude of websites teachers and educators attempt to describe what *suzhi* education means to them and how they have implemented it. She feels this emptiness is a result of the way it functions as a floating signifier as it traverses economic, social and political relationships.³² I interpret its emptiness in a slightly different way. As described below, teachers and principals agreed with the basic concepts and goals of *suzhi* education, but they had been frustrated because they could not develop activities to carry them out at a concrete level that engaged the students. Olympic education engaged the students where *suzhi* education had not; the reasons were multiple, but two important factors were the substitution of sportive for political content and the market-oriented appeal of the Olympic symbols. Perhaps it was only when a more stimulating alternative was available that the real reasons for the frustration with *suzhi* education became apparent.

According to the theory that has guided Chinese education since the founding of the People’s Republic, humans have a multiplex nature that should be cultivated by moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic education (*de, zhi, ti, mei jiaoyu* 德、智、体、美教育); moral education always came first in the list. However, after the restoration of the college entrance exam in 1978 and along with the economic reforms, intellectual education quickly become the focus nearly to the exclusion of the other categories because of an excessive emphasis on written tests. This, it was said, resulted in a decline in the physical health of students. In the late 1980s the fact that 75 per cent of Chinese students wore glasses was taken as a barometer of the ill effects of excessive studying.³³ In 2007, 21 years later, the general consensus was that the situation had become worse. The university experts frequently cited a statistic that 90 per cent of college students wore glasses.³⁴

Suzhi education had been officially promoted by the Ministry of Education in 1999 in its *Action Plan for Revitalizing Education for the 21st Century* (*Mian xiang 21 shiji jiaoyu zhenxing xingdong jihua* 面向21世纪教育振兴行动计划).³⁵ It set out two important structural reforms: nationwide promulgation of nine-year compulsory education; and a loosening of the curricular structure and

32 Anagnost, “The corporeal politics of quality (*suzhi*),” p. 197.

33 Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People’s Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

34 While it is common wisdom, the source of this statistic is not clear. It may be that the perception of a general decline in the health of children is related more to fears about social change than to a statistically significant decline.

35 Chinese Ministry of Education, *Mian xiang 21 shiji jiaoyu zhenxing xingdong jihua* (*Action Plan for Revitalizing Education for the 21st Century*), Document No. 9 in 1999 (24 December 1998), www.moe.edu.cn/edoas/website18/37/info3337.htm (accessed 16 November 2008).

content, and of the system of evaluation, to allow greater experimentation. After laying out the core of the reform, it called for “cultivating students with good morality, healthy psychology and lofty values” and improving physical and aesthetic education, stating that physical education is an important part of *suzhi* education, and that students should have healthy and strong bodies.

Six months later the Party Central Committee and State Council added details with a resolution.³⁶ As is to be expected of a Party document, it was more ideological than the first one. Article 1 began: “Implementing *suzhi* education is to carry out fully the educational policy of the Party ... in order to create constructors of the socialist endeavour and their successors who have morals, have culture, have discipline, and have all-round moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic development.” It calls for more attention to moral education, “taking Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory as the guide” and emphasizing “education in patriotism, collectivism and socialism; education in outstanding traditions of the Chinese people and in revolutionary traditions; education in ideals, morality and ethics, and the cultivation of civilized habits...” Article 5 charges physical education with cultivating students’ awareness of competition, a spirit of teamwork and strong willpower. It also contained a reform that became important for Olympic education six years later: reform of the curriculum system to eliminate the unified, centrally dictated curriculum by adding three levels of courses: national, local (*difang* 地方) and school-based (*xiaoben* 校本).

In 2001, the State Council issued another resolution that repeated the main points of the 1999 document.³⁷ It reiterated that all-round education includes moral education that teaches patriotism, collectivism, a warm love of socialism, carrying on the outstanding traditions of the Chinese people and the revolution, awareness of the socialist legal system and obedience to social morality, and more. It proposed a new kind of activity, “comprehensive practice activities” (*zonghe shijian huodong* 综合实践活动).

A comparison of the guiding thought of the *suzhi* education policies with that of the Olympic education policies reveals a big difference. Olympic education revolved around the Olympic Games and did not contain the conventional political categories advocated in the *suzhi* documents. As mentioned above, the BOCOG and BMCE documents did not even contain the word “socialism.”

As fate would have it, Beijing won the bid to host the Olympic Games two-and-a-half months after the Ministry of Education issued the 2001 reform of basic education. Olympic education meshed well with *suzhi* education and

36 Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and State Council, *Zhonggong Zhongyang, Guowuyuan guanyu shenhua jiaoyu gaige, quanmian tuijin suzhi jiaoyu jue ding* (Resolution of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and State Council on Deepening the Educational Reforms and Fully Promoting *Suzhi* Education), 13 June 1999, www.moe.gov.cn/edoas/website18/info3314.htm.

37 State Council of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, *Resolution of the State Council on the Reform and Development of Basic Education*, Document No. 21 in 2001 (29 May 2001), www.edu.cn/20010907/3000665.shtml (accessed 15 November 2008).

the reforms. This appeared to be unplanned: the long process that finally resulted in Beijing's Olympic education has already been described, and the intellectuals who were involved in Olympic education felt that it was only after Beijing won the bid that government education officials started to learn about Olympic history and values, and that they only became serious about it after the 2004 Athens Olympics when the IOC's attention turned to Beijing. Thus, it does not appear that the 2001 reform was issued with the Olympics in mind.

Yang Zhicheng wrote that the Olympic education programmes "are not just because the International Olympic Committee requires it of the host country. It is more because the educational values borne by the Olympic Movement are closely related to the *suzhi* education that we are now carrying out."³⁸ He says that the "harmonious development" advocated by Olympic education is the same as the "all-around development" (*quanmian fazhan* 全面发展) advocated by *suzhi* education.³⁹ He argues that the morality called for in the 1999 State Council resolution is identical with that in Olympism, and gives as an example the Olympic motto of "swifter, higher, stronger," which encourages a fighting spirit in young people. This seems like a stretch since "swifter, higher, stronger" generally refers to the pursuit of individual excellence and not the "arduous fighting spirit" (*jianku fendou jingshen* 艰苦奋斗精神) advocated in the State Council resolution with its emphasis on collectivism. He also argues that other Olympic aphorisms, such as "the important thing is to take part, not to win," and "mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play" are in accord with *suzhi* education – but I would argue that the equivalency is not immediately obvious.

An important way in which Olympic education meshed with the reforms was that it provided content for the "school-based classes" or the "comprehensive practice classes" that had been called for in 2001. Lacking experience in designing their own teaching materials, or in combining intellectual knowledge with physical practice, teachers had had difficulty filling the framework that had been created by their new freedom. As Yang explained: "The 2001 reform caught up with the Olympic bid. It provided an extremely convenient platform for integrating Olympic education into the school curriculum system. The concept needed concrete action. Olympic education provided themes and content. The Olympic Games became China's biggest theme. We want the children to be interested, to enjoy the theme, to participate."⁴⁰

In Zhou Chenguang's conception of Olympic education, first the instructor organizes the activity then the students learn through the activity, so that physical activity precedes moral education rather than following it. He believed that Olympic education brought dynamism into activities by emphasizing felt

38 Yang Zhicheng, "Aolimpique jiaoyu yu suzhi jiaoyu youji jiche" ("The organic link between Olympic education and *suzhi* education"), *Zhongguo jiaoyu bao* (*Chinese Education News*), 6 August 2007, p. 2, www.jyb.cn/cm/jycm/beijing/zgjyb/2b/t20070806_103010.htm (accessed 27 January 2008).

39 Fundamental Principle No. 2 of the Olympic Charter mentions "the harmonious development of man."

40 Interview, Beijing, 25 March 2008.

experience (*ganshou* 感受). He also stressed that it should stimulate emotions such as passion, happiness and romanticism, which he considered to be neglected in the Chinese educational system. He argued: “Not until you’ve reached a person’s inner heart can you motivate them – it has to come from the heart.”⁴¹

Olympic Education and Internationalism

When the Olympic Games were about to begin, Ren Hai thought back over his years of producing materials for Olympic education and felt that he had achieved a new insight into what it was all about, which he summarized in an essay:

Because of its inherent nature – its goals, field of vision and content – it is difficult for traditional education, which is based on the standpoint of one nation and circumscribed within the confines of one state, to fulfil the needs of the present era of globalization. Today’s world lacks a focus on a global horizon and education that is firmly based on the interests of humankind as a whole. It was precisely this lack that sparked the emergence of Olympic education. Olympic education aims to cultivate qualified citizens of the “global village,” to help them break through the various limitations of their respective societies, to impress the seal of a world citizen on top of the existing identity of a national citizen.⁴²

Internationalism along with an emphasis on learning a foreign language, usually English, occupied an important place in Olympic education. In the heart-to-heart programme, students took part in the welcoming ceremony in the Olympic village for the team of their partner country. Members of the national delegation visited the school, and students were given tickets to sports events to cheer for “their” country.

Teachers who were interviewed felt that Olympic education was *nonpolitical*, and thus contrasted with the previous moral education campaigns. As one teacher told me in reference to previous campaigns: “After the national leaders have stated the policy, if the only way you can think to implement it is to shout slogans, it becomes irritating after a while.” With Olympic education, they could use concrete activities to teach children fair play, teamwork, mutual respect, selfless service, international friendship, the pursuit of world peace and many other concepts. And unlike the previous moral education, their students enjoyed the projects.

Students at the Information Management Vocational school, most of whose parents were migrant labourers, spent two years of their after-school time producing a computer-generated animated film in which the Fuwa mascots introduce Olympic history. This film was shown on Beijing Television’s educational channel. In the project that had preceded this one they had made a cartoon book to illustrate the “eight prides and eight shames” promoted by President Hu Jintao in 2006. By comparing the two projects, one can see what Olympic education offered that socialist moral education lacked. When they were issued, the

41 Interview, Beijing, 28 January 2008.

42 Ren Hai, “Olympic education and cross-cultural communication,” in Hai Ren, Lamartine Dacosta, Ana Miragaya and Niu Jing (eds.), *The Olympic Studies Reader*, Vol. 1 (CD Rom version; to be published by the Beijing Sport University Press).

“eight prides and eight shames” were accompanied by an eight-line rhyme, a clapping song and a list of heroes. Olympic education was a much larger package that linked ethical values with Olympic history, national and international heroes, symbols and graphic images, slogans and mottos, and figures like the Fuwa mascots – which had either been distilled out of 104 years of Olympic history or had been designed by the best artistic and/or marketing minds in China and the outside world. In illustrating the “eight prides and eight shames,” the Information Management School had struggled to develop cartoons by themselves that were appropriate and appealing – a difficult task, given the paucity of the topic. Olympic education came with the five Fuwas, designed by the famous artist Han Meilin, already in the package.

The schools that were visited for this research were held up as models and were particularly enthusiastic about Olympic education, so it is not surprising that they often stated that it had brought a “fresh wind” and new “dynamism” into their school. *Suzhi* education and the new school-based classes and comprehensive practice activity class had created empty vessels into which Olympic education, in some cases, fitted very well. The morality associated with Olympic education was similar enough to fit into the familiar framework of moral education.

Yet a closer look reveals two key differences. One is that the Olympic ideology of “swifter, higher, stronger” was very popular in Olympic education programmes and, while not directly contradicting the morality promoted in the *suzhi* education documents, it would seem to be somewhat at odds with the collectivism that was emphasized there. Another is that the Olympic brand of patriotic education was a de-politicized version that linked national identity with sports heroes rather than political systems, and re-situated Chinese national identity within an international community in which it would now take its place as an equal partner. Old nationalist symbols were re-shaped by new associations with symbols of internationalism, the global community and world peace.

This is the paradox of the Olympic Games: they reinforce nationalism and internationalism at the same time. It was because of this internationalism that Olympic education could enter into the framework of *suzhi* education and then empty its contents like a Trojan horse – looking a lot like *suzhi* education, but in fact not like *suzhi* education at all, because it had its origins in a fundamentally different philosophy. Olympic education emphasized the individual pursuit of excellence and health, and connection with a friendly outside world; the old “socialist morality” had been born in war and emphasized sacrifice for the collective in order to survive in a hostile world.

One final point is that the symbols and slogans used in Olympic education – such as the five interlocked rings, the Fuwa mascots, “one world, one dream,” “swifter, higher stronger” and “the important thing is to take part” – are part of the marketing package of the most commercialized mega-event in the world. Communist Party educational programmes are no match for the Olympic marketing industry in terms of appeal.

BOCOG and the BMCE Olympic Education Standing Office were disbanded in November 2008, and while some Olympic education programmes are currently still preserved, they will slowly die out or evolve over time. Those intellectuals and teachers who were most enthusiastic wonder if it will be possible to find other ways to stimulate the interest of students and teachers as the Olympics did. Only time will tell if the “fresh wind” is here to stay. It is impossible to outline a single factor that could preserve it because of the tremendous variety in the ways in which Olympic education affected each school and even each individual. However, a main conclusion of this research is that two essential pre-conditions came out of the educational reforms: the freedom of teachers to create their own teaching materials and the emphasis on active, practical activities. So long as both pre-conditions remain in place, there is hope that the creativity and dynamism of Olympic education will live on.