"BRAND CHINA" IN THE OLYMPIC CONTEXT

COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER INITIATIVE

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Abstract

The Beijing 2008 Olympics were widely considered to be China's moment for improving its national image worldwide. However, the consensus both inside and outside China was that although the Olympics succeeded in advancing an image of an emerging powerful, prosperous, and well-organised nation, the message was hijacked by interest groups critical of government policies on human rights and Tibet, who were more successful in putting forward their positions in the international media than the Chinese government was. The article analyses the communications challenges that created obstacles for genuine dialogue on sensitive issues. In its post-Olympics assessment, the Chinese government acknowledged the weakness of China's voice in international (especially Western) media and responded with a planned US$6 billion investment for strengthening its foreign communications capacity as part of its "soft power" initiative (first called for by President Hu Jintao in 2007).

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For the eight years from the time that Beijing announced its bid for the 2008 Olympic Games until the conclusion of the games, observers both inside and outside China widely considered the Beijing 2008 Olympics to be China's moment for improving its national image worldwide. Beneath this attention to "national image" lay a power struggle. Politicians in the developed West, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and occasionally even members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) itself hoped to leverage the Chinese leadership's concern about their national image into pressure that could accelerate political reforms. The Chinese leadership, on the other hand, hoped to use the games as a tool in China's "soft power" initiative to extend its global influence. The medium for the struggle was the huge communications platform provided by the global press coverage surrounding this media-event. The result of this convergence of medium, event, and actors was a situation in which national governments, NGOs, the IOC, and the Beijing Olympic Organising Committee (BOCOG) were drawn together into a field of heated contests over putting forward their messages in the mass media.

Caught in the middle were the international media, who generally knew only what the actors wanted them to know and as a result often ended up serving the agendas of the actors who possessed the superior communications strategies. However, ultimately what occurred in the realm of communications was largely ineffective in bringing about the political reforms that the China critics desired, and may have set back political transformation by several years. The most immediate and evident legacy of this contest was not a decision by the Chinese leadership to initiate political reform but a decision to make a massive investment of US$6 billion dollars to strengthen its foreign communications capacity.

This article is critical of the tendency to misrecognise the degree of influence that the field of communications actually possesses. This misrecognition is enabled in part by research methods that only analyse communications and not the power structures that underlie them. This essay utilises a social science approach focusing on the social construction of knowledge. The author is a China scholar and anthropologist who has been engaged in China since 1985. She was in China for the year leading up to the Olympics, as well as for four months during the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. This paper is based on work with Chinese organisers of these media events; interviews of IOC members and staff and review of internal IOC documents; interviews with members of Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders and other NGOs, and the United Nations Office of Sport for Development and Peace; and extended discussions with an Associated Press (U.S.) reporter specially assigned to the Beijing Olympics. From 2008 to 2011, the author conducted more than 30 hours of interviews with Hein Verbruggen, the Chairman of the IOC's Coordination Commission for Beijing (CoComm) – and an IOC member until 2008 – and was allowed to review all of the Commission's files. The paper also draws on her extensive contact with the media, since she was interviewed by about one hundred journalists from more than twenty countries, and was a guest commentator on the morning preview show "17 Days" for China Central Television during the games. This essay is primarily based on discussions with people in the form of ethnography and interviews – including interviews with journalists themselves - combined with a review of the media and publicity that these people produced.

The Debate

The Beijing 2008 Olympics were the most-watched Olympic Games ever, and probably the most-watched event in human history. Approximately 70 percent of the world's population, 4.7 billion viewers, accessed television coverage (BOCOG 2008, 129). Some 94 percent of the Chinese population of 1.3 billion tuned in at some point during the Games. In the US, the games ranked as the most-viewed television event ever (Nielsen 2008a, b). A total of 32,278 journalists (26,298 accredited and 5,980 unaccredited) from around the world covered the Games, the largest contingent for any event ever (BOCOG 2008, 123). A total of 61,700 hours of television coverage of the Games aired around the world in 220 countries and territories. They were the first Games to have global digital coverage, with 153 million people watching live broadcasts online. The IOC's free digital channel on YouTube received 21 million views in 78 territories across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (IOC 2009, 1).

The Games provoked an international debate about the political system of the host country that had not been seen on such a scale since, perhaps, the Berlin 1936 Olympics. In its risk assessment in 2007, the IOC had identified 28 NGOs that had announced plans to highlight political issues in the lead-up to the Games; the most active were considered to be Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders, Students for a Free Tibet, Coalition to Investigate the Persecution of Falungong, Support the Monks, and Save Darfur Coalition.[1] Riots broke out in the Chinese province of Tibet in March 2008, and shortly afterwards the Secretary-General of the NGO Reporters sans frontières (Reporters Without Borders) disrupted the Olympic torch-lighting ceremony in Ancient Olympia by unfurling a banner depicting handcuffs in place of the five Olympic rings. Although not all the details are publicly known, it appeared that the Central Tibetan Administration, the administrative organisation under the spiritual leadership of the Dalai Lama, organised international protests under the umbrella of the International Tibet Support Network (Saunders 2008). The Tibet-related protests merged with other protests, disrupting the international torch relay in London, Paris, and San Francisco.

An idea of the scale of the debate can be gleaned from the numbers generated by a search of the terms "Beijing" AND "Olympic*" AND "human rights" (and equivalent in other languages) in major world media in the LexisNexis Academic database. In the period from one month before the opening ceremony to the day after the closing ceremony (8 July to 25 August 2008), a search in the database produces a total of 5243 items: English (1938 items), German (1220), French (1004), Dutch (590), Italian (325) and Spanish (166). Although the database does not allow searches in non-Roman alphabets, the global scope of the debate is indicated by articles in English-language publications in Asia, Central and South America, Israel, and South Africa. The 1938 reports on human rights in English constituted only 6 percent of the 33,665 Anglophone items called up by the search terms "Beijing" AND "Olympic*" (Brownell 2012, 308). The vast media coverage of the Olympics is also put into perspective when one considers that another important event that would shape the future policies of the other global superpower was going on at the same time – the U.S. presidential election. However, the word "Obama" in the same time frame only pulls up 7,839 articles, or less than ¼ of the articles on the Olympics.[2]

Media in Hong Kong and Taiwan devoted a great deal of attention to these issues, but due to government censorship on the topic of human rights inside China, the few reports that did appear criticised the debate taking place outside China. A search in a Chinese database using the Chinese equivalents of "human rights" and "Beijing Olympics" calls up twenty articles in July and August.[3]

The Importance of Communications

The interviews and archival research revealed that for all of the major actors, the debate about human rights was primarily conceived of as a question of *communications* rather than *policy*. This included the Chinese central government, the IOC, BOCOG, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters Without Borders.

Soft Power and Brand China

Actually, in the years before the Beijing Olympics, China's foreign communications policy had been greatly influenced by the works of two Americans. Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" had gained attention after the publication of his book by that title in 2004, which discussed the growing importance of soft power – co-option and attraction – rather than "hard power" – the use of coercion and payment – in international relations. This American input also augmented a long-term strategy among China's East Asian rivals. In the mid to late 1990s, first Japan and then South Korea had implemented government policies for promoting the "cultural industry" as a means of increasing their international influence (Yim 2002).

In February 2007, former *Time Magazine* Foreign Editor and then-partner at Kissinger Associates, Joshua Cooper Ramo (2007), wrote a report for a British thinktank, the Foreign Policy Centre. It was entitled *Brand China.* It observed that many Chinese intellectuals were discussing the concept of soft power and stated, "China's greatest strategic threat today is its national image." He argued that China's perception of itself did not correspond to the world's perception of it, that the outside world's perception was disconnected with reality due to China's rapid changes of the last decades, and that the perception of a "China Threat" was a danger to China's own interests. He suggested, "Thinking about national image doesn't come easily for Chinese," and proposed that thinking about China as if it were a "brand" might help China communicate a clearer image of itself. He put forward several proposals that were later implemented after the Beijing Olympic Games in the government effort that will be described below.

Eight months later, President Hu Jintao advocated for strengthening China's soft power in his address to the 17th Party Congress, the main occasion on which the President lays out future policy orientations. In his address, President Hu said, "Culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength … enhanc[ing] culture as part of the soft power of our country [will] better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests."[4]

All of these developments converged around the Beijing Olympics to produce a general consensus both inside and outside China that the Olympic Games could be a vehicle for improving China's national image and strengthening its global soft power. Ramo's report was supported by Hill and Knowlton, the prestigious inter-

national communications consulting firm hired by the IOC right after the success of Beijing's bid. It had moved from the IOC to BOCOG in 2006, and was working for BOCOG when Ramo's report came out. Ramo would later serve as the expert commentator for NBC television's broadcast of the Olympic opening ceremonies. One critic from the far right summarised these connections by noting:

> *Kissinger, who has been the ChiCom's [Chinese Communism's] best asset since the days of Chairman Mao, accompanied President Bush to the Beijing Games and strategically placed the manager of his Kissinger & Associates Beijing operations, Joshua Cooper Ramo, as NBC's "China expert" for the Games. Together with Hill & Knowlton, they helped the PRC's Propaganda Department make sure that when the world wasn't being legitimately dazzled by the genuine achievements of Michael Phelps, Usain "Lightning" Bolt, or Nastia Liukin, they were being stupefied by flashy spectacles, choreographed travelogues, and gushing commentary on the wonders of today's China* (Jasper 2008).

Ramo's report did not mention human rights or any other sensitive topic, and with its use of Chinese characters and its recitation of Chinese history, it appears to have been written for a Chinese audience rather than an Anglophone one. It was a *communication about communication*, not about the real issues. In this sense it was an example of a position often adopted by the foreign organisations working with the Chinese government on issues of national image, including the IOC. These organisations were not in a position to exercise much if any influence on government policies and actions, so they did not directly pressure the government on human rights issues, and indeed the consulting firms would probably not be hired if they did. So they could only provide recommendations to the Chinese government on *how to communicate*, not *how to act.*

It was widely agreed that human rights issues were one of the major obstacles to China in its attempt to improve its national image, but this issue was largely ignored in the background research on the promotion of China's national image through the Olympics that was conducted in three key point research projects commissioned by the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science, which is administered by the Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party. These grants are the government's way of channelling academic research in directions that serve its needs. The first relevant Olympic project was the 2003 project entitled "Improving China's International Position and Reputation through the 2008 Olympic Games." The Beijing Sport University won the bid for this project and in April 2007 published the results in *Research on Improving China's International Position and Reputation through the 2008 Olympic Games* (Yang et al 2008). Its 65 chapters contained thorough summaries of the issues that had provoked negative media reports in past Olympic Games, such as delays in venue completion, transportation problems, media information glitches, and terrorist acts. The lesson that Beijing learned was that these particular problems should be avoided at all costs. Since the late timeline for venue construction had been the major public relations disaster for Athens, the host of the previous summer Games, timely venue completion was a top priority. Ultimately, Beijing avoided all of these typical problems, perhaps the first-ever host city to succeed in doing so. However, since the host country's

government itself had not been a hot issue for recent Olympic Games, there were few historical lessons about how to handle that issue. The analyses of Western media coverage of the Beijing Games since 2001 indicated that "political" issues – as they are called in China – would dominate coverage.[5] The recommendations in this report emphasised the importance of treating the media and other important opinion-makers well.

The chapter "Avoid Political and Economic Risks with a High-Level Strategy" does have a section that discusses the risk that the "human rights" problem will become even more sensitive. As is required by the Chinese censorship standard, the article puts "human rights" in scare quotes, implying that the issue does not actually exist. Its recommendations include "avoid separatism and internal disorder."

The second key point project was the 2006 project "Construction of the Humanistic Concept, Social Value and National Image of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games," which was awarded to the People's University. Through this project and elsewhere, the People's University promoted its concept of the "Cultural Olympics." They argued that research shows that culture constitutes the core of China's national image, and "therefore in the construction of a national image, we should hold the line on "Cultural China," in order to make the idea of "Cultural China" into the core theme for dialogue between China and the international community in Olympic discourse" (People's University 2008).

The third relevant key point project was the 2005 project, "The Design of China's National Image in Communications with the Outside World," which was awarded to the Foreign Communications Research Centre, a unit administered by the Foreign Languages Publishing Bureau, which is in turn under the Party Central Committee. The major results of this project, which involved scholars in communications at China's top universities, were published in April of 2008, *Communication of a National Image*. Among the 60 chapters, there is not one specifically on the Beijing Olympics. The chapters that touch upon the Olympics agree that Olympic Games are an excellent opportunity to promote a national image; but they use the examples of the Tokyo 1964 and Seoul 1988 Olympic Games as models for promoting a positive image, and they do not offer the possibility that the Games can promote a negative image (Zhou 2008).

And so three years of government-funded analysis by the academic researchers who did the background research on national image in the Olympic Games and made policy recommendations did not even directly address the issues considered most problematic in the West.

Chinese Government Position on Human Rights

The sports scholars, philosophers, and members of non-communist parties who were developing these documents were not likely to address such a sensitive topic as human rights, because they were not empowered to do so.

China was admitted to the UN in 1971 and began its policy of opening up to the outside world in 1978, in the midst of the Cold War. It immediately encountered criticism from the West on human rights issues. Paramount leader Deng Xiaoping laid down a guiding principle that was created then and is still in effect: "national sovereignty is much more important than human rights." The leadership's uncompromising standpoint is that no interference in the party-state's sovereignty over

its territory will be tolerated in the name of "human rights" (Wu 2007, 357-8). Criticism by other nations of China's human rights record or policies toward Tibetans is considered interference in internal affairs and an attack on national sovereignty.

China's constitution guarantees the usual fundamental political rights found in liberal democracies. However, the Cold War's politicisation of human rights left a legacy that still exists today in the fact that the Chinese leadership has considered human rights primarily as a problem of foreign communications rather than of domestic policy. In recent years it does seem that there has been an increasing number of voices acknowledging that human rights is a concept that might have internal benefits, and a passage explicitly using the Chinese phrase for "human rights" was first included in the revision to the Constitution in 2004. Nevertheless, the government agency most active in the human rights realm is a communications organ, the State Council Information Office, which is simultaneously the Office of Foreign Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Its function is to act as the media conduit between China and the outside world, and one of its official responsibilities is to "be responsible for introducing the state of affairs of the development of China's human rights endeavour to the outside world and to organise and initiate exchange and collaborative activities with the outside world in the realm of human rights."[6] The Information Office did not appear to take any proactive communication measures on Olympic issues, except for the "Olympics" link on the English version of the China Human Rights Webpage, which did not contain even *one* article that discussed human rights in conjunction with the Olympics. There was one article about the failure of the German Parliament to pass a boycott resolution, taken as proof of China's progress in human rights (China Human Rights Webpage 2008). The Chinese version of the webpage did not even have an "Olympics" link.

The Chinese government tightly controls interchange with the outside world in official settings, so the Information Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were responsible for establishing messages on sensitive political issues, and neither the Olympic bid committee (BOBICO) nor BOCOG were empowered to do so. Since neither was empowered to speak about human rights, in press conferences they held to the official position that sport should be separate from politics, and political questions should be addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the U.N., and other such organisations.

The memoirs of two of the most influential figures in Beijing's bid show how this division of labour played out during Beijing's Olympic bid in 2001. He Zhenliang, China's senior IOC member, and Yuan Weimin, former Minister of Sport and Executive Director of the BOBICO, both believed that "human rights problems" were an excuse that Western governments and public opinion used to attack China because they were threatened by its rapid development. The message that they put forward during the bid contest was that China's human rights situation is currently the best it has ever been, although of course much work remains to be done. The Olympic Games would help them better solve human rights problems. Yuan Weimin stated in his story of the bid process, "If we proactively spoke about this problem, it was possible that it would 'draw fire upon us' and bring trouble" (Brownell 2008, 143; Liang 2008; Yuan 2009, 80).

The question of whether or not to orally mention "human rights" in the bid presentation before the IOC Session in Moscow was considered very carefully.

Although He and Yuan favoured proactively raising the issue, which would demonstrate confidence, some members of the bid committee were very persistent in opposing mention of human rights, and discussions became increasingly heated. At one point someone said, "If we can't even dare to mention the two words 'human rights,' then what are we bidding for?" (Brownell 2008, 243; Yuan 2009, 82). Forty-eight hours before the bid presentation the question was not yet decided when Li Lanqing, the Vice Premier, arrived in Moscow and an emergency meeting was held. Li declined to mention human rights in his address to the Session, but eventually Beijing Mayor Liu Qi was able to secure agreement from him that he himself could do it (Brownell 2008, 243). The final result was that in his speech to the Moscow Session, Mayor Liu said:

> *I want to say that the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games will have the following special features: They will help promote our economic and social progress and will also benefit the further development of our human rights cause. They will promote an exchange of rich Chinese culture with other cultures. They will mark a major step forward in the spreading of the Olympic Ideals.*[7]

This message formed the prototype that could be repeated to the media; thus, the later statements by the other bid team members were all variations on this theme.

The published memoirs by He and Yuan do not even mention the P.R. firm that was hired by BOBICO, Weber Shandwick. It was credited by *USA Today* and Reuters with bringing about Beijing's win with its sophisticated and aggressive public relations strategy, which disengaged human rights from the bid. A triumphalist account by the firm stated, "WSW had affirmed the efficacy of public relations as a tool that can positively influence global discourse and harmony" (Holmes 2002).

Afterwards, individuals from other high-powered communications firms such as Hill and Knowlton, Ogilvy and Mather, and IMG – then the most influential firm in sports marketing – stated that they had provided advice on the bid. Quite a few top international consulting firms were working with various Chinese partners, and with the IOC, in the context of the Beijing Olympics, and they were frequently credited in the media with having great influence over the Chinese organisers or public opinion. However, interviews with the people in BOCOG, the Chinese government, or the IOC who were engaged in the real work of organising the Olympic Games, revealed that they considered these communications firms to be of limited effectiveness. Assessments of their work ranged from feelings that a firm was almost totally ineffective, to feelings that a firm was effective in liaison work with the media or as an intermediary between BOCOG and the IOC. At both BOCOG and the IOC there was a feeling of frustration that their messages had not had a strong position in the mass media, along with the conclusion that this was a goal that communications firms were incapable of realising for various reasons – some due to the nature of communications, and some to external factors beyond their control.

The IOC's Position

In the case of BOCOG, it is questionable how much of the advice from Western-based communications firms was actually utilised, but the presence of these international firms served the purpose of assuaging concerns about the Chinese commitment to communication. Based on discussions with IOC members and staff,

it appears that the IOC's vote for Beijing in 2001 placed priority on the fact that the Games would be held outside the West in a country that had never hosted them. If there were IOC members who believed the Games would improve the human rights situation in China and voted for Beijing on that basis, they were probably a very small minority. However, it does appear that it was important that BOBICO had demonstrated a commitment to implementing best practices in communications. Many of the IOC members had been through Beijing's first bid for the 2000 Olympics in 1993, only four years after the 1989 Tian An Men incident. There had been a big public relations gaffe during the IOC Session in 1993, when the Vice Mayor of Beijing had been shown on Australian television making a careless statement that China could respond to the U.S. House of Representative's resolution against Beijing's bid by boycotting the Atlanta 1996 Olympics. In 2001 Chinese politicians were a bit better prepared to function in a media-saturated environment, although the bid committee members were continually nervous that they would slip up. Furthermore, the Chinese bid committee itself showed understanding of the importance of the issue to many IOC members, and they demonstrated that they were up to the task of handling the media scrutiny that they would face if they got the Games. The influential Canadian IOC member Dick Pound recalled that in 1993 the bid team had been "surly and defensive" on the topic of human rights, but in 2001, "They were a lot more cosmopolitan. They had people who spoke much better English, they had some very high-powered P.R. communications and advice, and the presentation was slick in the way we expect those presentations [to be] in this day and age. It was really quite different from the first one in 1993."[8] However, from the memoirs of He and Yuan published years later, we now know how narrowly China passed the test of their ability to communicate about human rights in 2001.

Hein Verbruggen was the IOC's liaison with Beijing as Chairman of the Coordination Commission, a committee of 18 IOC members and staff that met with BOCOG annually to assess the Games preparations. From the very beginning, Verbruggen believed that "communication" would be the main challenge of the Games: in his follow-up letter to the Coordination Commission after its first meeting in 2002, he wrote, "On this subject, we all share the view that it will be the main issue in the coming years."[9] The topic of communication comes up repeatedly throughout the records of the Coordination Commission, where it is clear that a better communication strategy is considered the remedy for the criticism endured by the IOC and Beijing over human rights issues.

Human Rights Advocacy Groups

Amnesty International. In Spring 2008 Verbruggen engaged in a public conflict with Eduard Nazarski, the Director of Amnesty International Netherlands, in the Dutch media over Amnesty's "Broken Promises" theme for their Olympic campaign. Amnesty asserted that Beijing had broken the promise that it made to improve human rights when it was bidding for the games. As described above, such a promise was never clearly articulated or intended. When the controversy was discussed with Nazarski, his response was:

> *[F]or the public discussion and for the promise the IOC made, I'm not sure whether we would have to check into legal contracts that they had with whomever. They just made a public announcement that said, "Well,*

> *the human rights would improve, and we have an understanding with the Chinese government that it will be" – and that's enough later to say, "Hey, what did you say in April 2001, and what's the reality now? And why are you now not repeating what you said then?"*[10]

Human Rights Watch. On the same point, Minky Worden, the Public Relations Director of Human Rights Watch, stated that express promises were made voluntarily by the Chinese government in order to get the Games, which were "like a contract." When pressed about whether she had studied the actual legal contracts, she stated that she had done some work on the candidature file, but since their interest is in openness and transparency, they are "looking for obvious things to pick up." She also concluded that it was the right decision to give China the Games because it gave her organisation a chance to spotlight human rights abuses in China.[11]

Reporters Without Borders. Jean-François Julliard, the Secretary-General of Reporters without Borders who unfurled the pro-Tibet banner during the torch-lighting ceremony in Ancient Olympia, stated that they had decided to conduct a protest at the ceremony in order to "ensure that freedom of press would be on the front page."[12]

International Tibet Support Network. The pro-Tibet groups were particularly media-savvy. A well-researched report in *The Globe and Mail* revealed that in May 2007, the Central Tibetan Administration (the "government in exile" headed by the Dalai Lama and located in Dharamsala, India) put together a meeting in Brussels of all the major Tibet organisations, which number in the hundreds and are organised under a Washington-based group, the International Tibet Support Network. At the meeting they decided that the Olympics should be the single focus of their activities, and they hired a full-time organiser from Students for a Free Tibet for the Olympic-disruption campaign. This group is also headquartered in Washington D.C., has 650 chapters around the world, and was perhaps the leading group in the Olympic protests. The campaign director sent letters to 150 organisations providing detailed instructions on how to organise disruptions of the international torch relay. The executive director of Students for a Free Tibet told a reporter:

> *The Chinese government wants something from this; they want world acceptance. That's why they're taking the risk of inviting the world in for these Games. They want to be part of the club and to be liked. And our job as young activists is to deny them this, to tell them that their approach to Tibet is going to cost them something, it'll cost them face. And loss of face is the most serious thing we can deliver* (Saunders 2008).

In sum, the international NGOs that continually drew the attention of the media to human rights issues considered the issues from the point of view of a publicity campaign. As indicated by the number of media reports on the topic, they were very successful in gaining media exposure for the human rights issue, sometimes at the expense of other equally valid issues. To give one example, the search terms "Beijing Olympics" and "legal reform" in the LexisNexis Academic (World News) database do not pull up any articles in the time period used for the previous search, even though significant legislation in multiple areas from anti-corruption to media freedom to intellectual property protection was enacted in the context

of the Games, and was one of the realms most likely to contribute to lasting social change in China.[13]

Communication about Communications in the Absence of Real Power

The Coordination Commission had been defined as a technical commission, so "political issues" were not discussed *as such* in its meetings with BOCOG. Instead, they were defined as "communications" issues. Communication about sensitive issues in the name of "communications" provided a neutral ground for discussing what otherwise could have been considered "political issues" outside the purview of CoComm. BOCOG's "communications" effort was one of the few aspects of the preparatory work that was frequently criticised and marked with a "yellow" card in the progress dashboard produced annually (almost everything else got a green, indicating no problem; almost nothing got a red, indicating a warning).

The problem was not the day-to-day work of the Department of Media and Communications. That department, which employed several people whose skill in crisis communication had been honed in the SARS epidemic of 2003, handled the tasks handed to them in a competent manner. The department was not prepared for the breadth of questions that media would ask, and replies about political issues either had to be handed off to other government agencies, or answers requested from them, which sometimes led the foreign media to complain about their slowness. From the IOC's perspective, the problem was bigger than that – the Beijing Olympic Games were being severely criticised in the media, and their Chinese counterparts did not seem able to mount an effective response.

Due to domestic media censorship and – more importantly – due to the fact that most Chinese people are much more concerned about issues such as government corruption than they are about civil rights, most Chinese people were not very aware of the issues and specific cases raised in the Western media by Western-based NGOs. Chinese employees of BOCOG who liaised with the international media were also not especially well-informed on the issues raised, since their job was to refer such questions to the relevant government agency and then relay the reply back to the journalist. The result of this structure of communications was that the debates about political issues largely functioned as a publicity campaign to raise awareness among the public in the developed West and did not create channels for genuine dialogue between Chinese and Western publics (Brownell 2012).

Since BOCOG was not empowered to answer the political questions, what was needed was a person who would be the "face of the government," but there was no designated single spokesperson on these issues. Top government leaders did not regularly issue press statements on the political issues – such statements generally came from a range of lower-level functionaries; they did not write op-eds to be placed in leading international media; they did not appear on evening talk shows; and, with some exceptions, they did not accept interviews. In short, the Chinese government did not function in the current public relations paradigm. This was true of their engagement with the domestic media, but even more so with the international media. In short, there was a lack of a communications strategy for dealing with the media, particularly crisis communications that could integrate the central and municipal governments, BOCOG, and the IOC.

Verbruggen stated that over the years, he repeatedly hammered on the importance of communications for maintaining the image of the Olympic Games, the "Olympic Brand." In summarising his eight-year experience as Chairman of CoComm, he said:

> *Then at the end of this I would like to plead for a little conclusion… [T]he Chinese did an excellent job for themselves in organizing the Games and in receiving the foreigners with the smiling faces and everything you want, but I wish they had done the same excellent job in communication before the Games.*[14]

Olympic China National Image Ad

While everything discussed above had been going on in the context of the Olympic preparatory work, the Information Office was involved in a separate effort, which involved a different group of intellectuals in the field of communications whose core was located at the Communication University of China. The question of China's national image, apart from the Olympic Games, had been the subject of a fair amount of intellectual work. The thick report funded by a key point grant that was mentioned previously, *Communication of a National Image*, involved this circle of researchers.

It is likely that Li Dongsheng was a key figure behind the Information Office's effort to produce a 90-second television commercial for "China" at the end of 2007, targeted for CNN and BBC. He was simultaneously a member of the Party Central Committee, Vice Minister of the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, and – more to the point here - Deputy Director of the Central Propaganda Department, chief of BOCOG's Media and Communications Coordination Group,[15] and president of the China Advertising Association.

The difficult eight-month birthing process of the "Olympic China National Image Ad" indicates that there may have been resistance in the top echelons of leadership toward developing more proactive communications with the outside world. The ad had been approved at the start of 2007, but due to internal debates, it was shelved for almost one year until December. It was finally pushed through at the last minute before the end of the fiscal year while the allocated funding was still available. It was aired on CNN and BBC on August 8, the day of the Olympic opening ceremony. Its release had been delayed from the original planned date of April due to the torch relay protests in March and the devastating Wenchuan earthquake in May. Leading intellectuals and figures in the advertising world had been mobilised to support it via a long article entitled "Raise China's Face – Where is China's National Image Ad?," which appeared in November 2007 in *Modern Advertising Magazine,* a publication of the China Advertising Association of which Li was president (Shi and He 2007). The article was written with the help of scholars at the Communication University of China and demonstrated the widespread support of the heads of China's major advertising firms for producing a national image television advertisement. One of the people interviewed in the media who echoed the ideas found in this article was a P.R. consultant to BOCOG. One section, "Using the Opportunity of the Olympics to Build a National Image," reviews the risk of negative media coverage but, like the other publications mentioned above, it does not develop a communications strategy for responding to it.

Thanks to a recommendation by Luo Qing (Eileen Luo) at the Communication University of China, I was invited to be the only non-Chinese on the panel of academics that evaluated the bid presentations by eight of the top advertising agencies with offices in China. The project was not ultimately awarded to one of the advertising firms, but instead to a production team formed by the Information Office. The final product was essentially a tourism ad that abandoned any attempt to project an image of China to the outside world as was initially intended. From what I observed in the bid presentations, I can understand why this happened. The multinational firms did not have a good enough understanding of China to produce something that Chinese people would feel was true to China, and seemed oblivious that some of the themes that they had selected were highly controversial within China, such as the design of the National Theatre in Beijing by the French architect Paul Andreu. The Chinese firms did not have a good enough understanding of the international audience to produce something that would appeal to them and produced images suggestive of government propaganda campaigns, and seemed equally oblivious to themes that were controversial outside China, such as the Beijing-Tibet high speed railway. The Hong Kong-based firms struck a better middle ground, but ultimately the challenges of communicating an image of China that would be acceptable inside China, in a way that a Western audience would find attractive, seemed insurmountable.

At the time, we were told that we were making history, because for the first time China was reaching out to the world to try to shape its image, rather than waiting for the world to come and understand it. The staff from the Information Office involved in the process seemed to feel that it was an extremely important first step. They had also been very nervous about including a foreigner in the process and were afraid that I would not look favourably upon the government control exercised over the process. It seemed illogical for Chinese people to choose the best communications strategy without testing the idea on foreigners, but it was clear that in the first place they had to please their leaders and the domestic audience rather than a foreign audience. So in December 2007 the Information Office had already expressed that it knew it was not effective in communicating a positive image of China to the world, echoing what Hein Verbruggen had been saying for several years.

The Wake-up Call

The Beijing Olympic Games were a wake-up call for the top leadership. In December 2008, Li Changchun, the propaganda chief of the Communist Party of China (CCP) and a senior member of the Politburo Standing Committee, made an important speech acknowledging China's weakness in foreign communications and outlining the plan to strengthen its "communications capacity." After praising China's journalists for their outstanding work during the difficult year of 2008, which included the snow disaster in the south, the unrest in Tibet, the Wenchuan earthquake, and the Beijing Olympics, he said (echoing Ramo's report, *Brand China*):

> *At the same time, we must observe that while our economy and society have been rapidly developing and our international standing has continuously improved, our communications capacity has not correspondingly adapted to the demands of our socioeconomic development...It is of vital importance to*

> *strengthen our communication capacity domestically and internationally, it is of vital importance to the overall interests of China's opening-up and modernization, it is of vital importance to our international influence and international standing, it is of vital importance to the rise of China's soft power, it is of vital importance to the standing and influence of China's media in international public opinion* (Li 2008).

To address the deficiency in China's international communications, the central government invested a sum of US$6 billion in international media, with the goal of exponentially increasing the amount of content that China's media could deliver internationally as well as the size of the audience they could reach. It was decided that new technology was not only the wave of the future, but also the best way to get around the West's control of the conventional media of television and print. Therefore the biggest initiative was the creation of CNTV.cn, an online TV portal for China Central Television (CCTV), which was launched on December 28, 2009. It is now possible to watch all nine channels of CCTV live on the internet or on a mobile device in the U.S. The website reportedly received US$29.4 million in government investment. One of the most important platforms was the news platform, which offered 24-hour around-the-clock news. It was targeted at correcting the perceived bias of Western news media by "passing on the true situation of the original on-the-spot news in a well-rounded way." It also aimed to "assemble opinion leaders" and offer a "space for grassroots conversation" where the "people's online voice" could be heard, functioning as a platform where "China has influence" (CCTV 2009a; Sun 2010).

CCTV's television broadcasting was also expanded internationally through individuated arrangements with overseas providers. At the end of 2009, CCTV programs could be seen by 132.48 million households in 140 countries and territories, and 300 international media were using CCTV signals. Arabic and Russian broadcasts had also been added in that year. In addition to CCTV, in July 2009 Xinhua News Agency began collaboration with more than ten European broadcasters to transmit 90 minutes of English-language television news programs in a selection of supermarkets, as well as on television screens outside various Chinese embassies in Europe. China Radio International (CRI) rapidly increased to 117 international FM radio partners and 32 AM radio partners in Asia, Africa, North America, Europe, and Oceania. *China Daily,* the English-language paper that has traditionally been the government's foreign propaganda newspaper, launched a second paper intended to have more popular appeal, the *Global Times.* Same-day editions of the *China Daily* were made available in five major U.S. cities (CCTV 2009a; Sun 2010). In Houston – which has one of the largest Chinese communities in the U.S. – free editions of *China Daily* were distributed every Friday on the doorstep of homes in some areas off and on for periods of several months.

In December 2009, a "Made in China" television advertisement debuted on CNN Asia and had a six-week run on cable networks in the United States, Europe and Asia. The theme of the ad was "Made in China, made with the world": it highlighted the collaboration between overseas designers and Chinese firms to produce high-quality goods (CCTV 2009b).

During President Hu's state visit to the U.S. in January 2011, a second "China National Image Ad" was shown on the big screen in Times Square and on CNN, which highlighted accomplished Chinese citizens.

Conclusions

In the years leading up to the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, serious issues that deserved deep discussion were frequently reduced to a contest of publicity campaigns, disconnected from the reality on the ground. The materials produced by the Western-based communications and advertising firms tasked with communicating an image of China to the outside world revealed only superficial understanding of the substantive issues facing either China or the Olympic Games, which was compounded by their Western-centric viewpoints. Although they were frustrated by what they considered biased reporting in the media, neither the IOC nor BOCOG identified the reliance on communications firms as a problem because they provided the valuable skill of expertise in reaching the media, i.e. they were skilled in the medium if not the message.

I believe that, at a deeper level, all of this attention to China's national image was underlain by a harsher reality. Beneath it lay the desire of influential Westerners and perhaps of some high-ranking Chinese, too, to push forward political reforms. Because Henry Kissinger, the IOC, and the large communications firms did not have the capacity to directly influence policies on Tibetans, property evictions, freedom of speech, and the other key issues, they could only pressure China to improve its national image instead, leaving unspoken the real measures that would accomplish this goal. This returns us to the start of this article, which described how, until recently, Chinese leaders had considered human rights to be the West's way of controlling China, and had not believed that either the concept or the critics had a capacity to bring positive gains to China. When the imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, he became the first recipient who was not represented at the award ceremony. Most observers in the West felt that this was a P.R. disaster for China's image. Certainly it seems to indicate that the government effort to strengthen China's soft power through investments in the *form* of its messages has not been accompanied by reforms in the *content.* "The medium is the message" appears to be a major lesson that the Chinese government took away from its Olympic experience – if it is, then it may be that they learned it while working with the large number of international partners who provided advice and services up to and after the Beijing Olympics.

Postcript: The World Expo Shanghai 2010

For six months from May to October 2010, China hosted its second mega-event, the World Expo Shanghai 2010. Measured by the number of visitors, it was the biggest mega-event in human history – 73 million spectators passed through its gates. Having studied the Beijing Olympics experience carefully, the Shanghai government and the Expo Coordinating Bureau felt that they were ready with communications strategies and a crisis communication plan exceeding what Beijing had had. But they hardly needed it: Shanghai Expo did not attract nearly as much media attention as the Olympics had. In discussions with both Chinese and international journalists, they complained that there was "no story." But one reason there was no story was that Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters without Borders had decided not to use the World Expo as a platform for attracting media attention, mainly because the timing was too close to the Beijing Olympics. Publicity campaigns on the scale that they conducted leading

up to 2008 are expensive and time-consuming. Equally important, they have to be careful not to fatigue their audiences and donors. There is a reputational risk in being seen as ineffective in solving the problems that they raise. They have to consider their images, too.

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Notes:

1. IOC, "Protests and the Olympic Games," 14 December 2007. CoComm Files.

2. The English count is based on the Major World Publications (English) Database. Other languages were input into the Non-English Language News, World Library Database.

3. Search terms input into "theme" window were *Beijing aoyun* AND *renquan*. <www.cnki.net> Retrieved 9 May 2011.

4. Hu Jintao, *Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all: Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 15, 2007*. <http://www.china.org.cn/english/congress/229611.htm> Retrieved June 9, 2012.

5. Certainly there was criticism of governments at previous Games, but for various reasons the issues had not become global issues. The Okinawan protests against U.S. occupation during the torch relay for the Tokyo 1964 Olympics gained little attention outside Japan; the U.S. boycott of the Moscow 1980 Olympics and the U.S.S.R. boycott of the Los Angeles 1984 Olympics reduced the media attention to the Games inside the boycotting countries.

6. 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室网站[Website of the People's Republic of China State Council Information Office], March 13, 2006, translation by the author. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/jbqk/xwbjs/200603/t95734.htm> Retrieved January 18, 2008.

7. BOCOG Official Website, "Mr. Liu Qi's speech," <http://en.beijing2008.cn/spirit/beijing2008/candidacy/presentation/n214051410.shtml> Retrieved May 19, 2011.

8. Dick Pound, phone interview, 27 April 2011. Pound was ineligible to vote because Toronto was a candidate city.

9. Letter from Hein Verbruggen to Members of the Coordination Commission, Salt Lake City, 14 February 2002, files of the Coordination Commission.

10. Telephone interview March 2, 2011.

11. Minky Worden, telephone interview, 13 April 2011; see website at <www.china.hrw.org>.

12. Telephone interview, July 18, 2011.

13. In the book edited by Minky Worden for Human Rights Watch, the two chapters on legal reform are the only two chapters that take a comparatively optimistic and positive outlook (Cohen 2008, Roth 2008). The search terms "Beijing Olympics"' and "intellectual property law" pull up 24 articles.

14. Interview, Maison du Sport, Lausanne, Switzerland January 12, 2010.

15. Shadow "leadership small groups" composed of top leaders in the central government oversaw the work of the major BOCOG departments.

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