

Beijing's Games: What the Olympics Mean to China, by Susan Brownell.
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Around the time of the Beijing Olympiad in August 2008, many friends and colleagues from North America and Europe asked me if I thought the Olympics had changed, or was going to change China. The question stuck me as strange, because I couldn't recall anyone ever asking if the Atlanta Olympiad would change the United States – would the Olympics help change the fact that 3% of the adult population at a given time, and 10% of Black males, is incarcerated or on parole? And I couldn't recall the American government ever having been required to make promises to this effect to the International Olympic Committee, as a condition for hosting the Olympics. What *does* it mean for China to have hosted the Olympic games? This book offers a fine and multi-faceted analysis of this question, by an American anthropologist who has been a nationally ranked athlete in both the United States and a Chinese college team, as well as advisor to the International Olympic Committee IOC).

Beijing's Games discusses the issue from several perspectives. Chapter 1 considers the long and arduous process of China's involvement and integration into the Olympic movement, a tale which is told by Brownell through the mirror lenses of Classicism and Orientalism, and their effects on the role of Greece and China in the Olympic movement. Classicism assigned Greece a foundational role in the birth of Western civilization, and in competitive sports as an expression of the virile spirit of Western freedom; while Orientalism depicted China as a land of weak and effete bodies, where sports could not even be conceived of. A millenia-long history of sport, which had nothing to envy of Greece, was thus ignored. For China to take its place within the Olympic movement was thus a process of reclaiming its own sporting history, and of asserting its bodies on the global arena. Chapter 2 shows how the Eurocentric bias of the Olympics remains strong, through the example of the Chinese martial arts which were rejected as an official sport by the IOC in 2006, because they deviate too much from Western models of competitive sports. Chapter 3 discusses the relationships between sports stadiums and state power in China, from the early 20th century up to the construction of Beijing's new Olympic stadium and facilities. The next chapter is a fascinating analysis of the centrality of gender in understanding popular nationalism and attitudes to sports in China – from images of female warriors in Chinese martial tradition, to the role of female athletes in holding the banner of Chinese patriotism in the post-Mao period, during which their teams were far more successful in international tournaments than their male counterparts – reinforcing widespread images of emasculated, humiliated Chinese men. This condition began to change in the 1990's, and the Beijing Olympics occurred at a moment when Chinese masculinity had become more confident and assertive. Chapter 5 recounts the relationship between the IOC, the Republic of China (based in Taiwan) and the Peoples' Republic of China, from the establishment of the socialist regime in 1949 until 2008. The next chapter debunks many of the stereotypes which persist in much American sports reporting on China, from the "state-supported sports machine" to the persistence of cold war rhetoric. And finally, the author returns to the question of how much the Olympics will change China – looking

mostly at mundane issues such as the legal legacy, more intense media scrutiny, and expanded international exchanges – and asks why public discourse has not focused on the question of how China might change the Olympics?

Beijing's Games is a well-written and lively account of sports in contemporary Chinese public culture and politics, and offers a timely context for understanding the issues surrounding the Beijing Olympics. It is a must-read for anybody interested in sports in China and in the anthropology of body and gender in the contemporary PRC. It's a pity that, likely for marketing reasons, the book was released a few months before the Games – causing it to be “dated” after a short shelf life. As it stands, the narrative anticipates, but does not provide, the climax of the Games itself. The book would have been far richer and useful in the long term if the publisher and author had waited a few months and included an analysis of the Beijing Games themselves in relation to the many themes discussed in the book.