Asian Soft-Power: Globalization and Regionalism in the East Asia Olympic Games

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It is popular to use “soft power” and “coming-out-parties” to discuss the East Asian Olympic Games of 1964 Tokyo, 1988 Seoul and 2008 Beijing. There are limits, however, to using soft power and coming out parties as valid socio-cultural categories in analyzing the East Asian Olympic Games. I argue that the East Asia Olympic Games are symbolized to legitimate the Olympic Games as abstracted, universal parade of nations that is severed from their specific, geopolitical conditions. The East Asian Olympic Games are visual spectacles of the abstraction and the globalization of the Olympic Movement. Central to countering these Games as allegories of the “universalization of universalism” is to historicize these East Asian Olympic discourses. This essay outlines how the discourses on the East Asian Olympics function as both a category of practice (how they work) and as a category of analysis (what do they mean) for global modernity.

The East Asian Olympic Games as Visual Spectacles of the Abstraction of Globalization

After the spectacular conclusion of the historic 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, various Chinese officials declared that Beijing successfully held a “coming out party” that had ultimately increased China’s soft power. Despite the protests by numerous international organizations surrounding the Games, the Beijing Olympics realized China’s celebrated entry into the global community as a reliable and peaceful member. Although the legacy of the Beijing Games is still being established, many in the West were supportive of the positive effect that the Beijing Olympics had on China’s soft power and international standing. The Beijing Olympics, Susan Brownell optimistically assessed, was China’s “peaceful integration into the international community.” Not only was China’s culture and soft power showcased, but also China’s globality, as Marc Blecher of the Asian Survey noted: “The message was that China has arrived as a country with a sophisticated global (and not just Chinese or Asian) sensibility, the wealth to match, and a capacity for producing far more than cheap exports.” Through the sumptuous Olympic Games, China showcased the distinctive allure of its national culture and realized its international ranking as a global power to both itself and the world community.

The extensive uses of “soft power” and a “coming-out-party” are often unchallenged descriptors of the Beijing Olympic Games. Soft power was popularized by Joseph Nye to describe the non-economic and non-military forums for exerting national influence and encapsulates earlier notions of public diplomacy and cultural relations. The relationship between soft power and the Olympic Games, Wolfram Manzenreiter furthers, “seems to be an appropriate occasion to enhance the soft power of their hosting nations, particularly because of the easy association with the Games’ positive
images of excellence, fairness, universal friendship and mutual exchange.”6 President Hu Jintao has also framed the 2008 Olympics as key to promoting China’s soft power in recent years.7 In addition, the image of a “coming out party” is also popular and may seem apropos given the fact that China is a rising power and rapidly developing economy. In fact, many have likened the “coming-out-party” of the Beijing Games to the other two summer Olympic Games held in East Asia during their developing economic periods: the 1964 Tokyo and 1988 Seoul Games.8 The Olympic Games provided high-profile events for all three of these East Asian nations to demonstrate not only the “political reliability” of these host cities to their international audiences but also their national identity to domestic citizens.9

Despite the popularity of the terms “soft power” and “coming-out-parties,” there are limits to using soft power and coming out parties as valid socio-cultural categories in analyzing the Olympic Games held in East Asia. Central to understanding how the discourses on Asian Soft Power and the Olympic Games interact is situating them within their larger, global political economic contexts in which they emerge. By using the discourses on “Asian Soft Power” and “Coming-Out-Parties” as a prism, I argue that the East Asia Olympic Games are symbolized to legitimate the Olympic Games as an abstracted, universal parade of nations that is severed from their specific, geopolitical conditions. When the East Asian Olympics are celebrated as “soft power” and as “coming out parties” that transformed each Asian host city into a member of the global community, the significant differences of each Asian Olympic Games is bracketed. The political, economic, and social problems inherent in how the Olympic Games work in each East Asian country is displaced by the seemingly more sensational aspects of being incorporated into the elite group of Olympic hosts. Hosting the Olympic Games serves as an allegory of the “universalization of universalism” in that the East Asian Olympics display the inevitable unfolding of the universal aspirations of the Olympic Movement. The East Asian Olympic Games are visual spectacles of the abstraction of the Olympic Movement made global.

The East Asian Olympic Games discourses make “visible” the grand historical narrative of the Olympic Movement as the natural progression of “Olympism” throughout the world.10 Without East Asian Olympic hosts, the Olympic Games remain a western phenomenon of developed nation-states. As such East Asian Olympics prove not only that the Asian city/country has arrived as an elite member of the world community, but they also legitimate the universality of the Olympic Games. The logic of incorporation according to terms defined by the West is never challenged. The East Asian Olympics also reveal how the grand narratives of the Olympic Games mirror the grand narratives of modernity. That is to say, they are inscribed by the same processes of knowledge formation and institution building that abstracted the history of global capital from its European roots of industrial capitalism and the international system of nation-states. As Maurice Roche has argued in his influential book, *Mega-Events and Modernity*, industrial capitalism and the international system of nation-states in the 19th century espoused a putative universalism based on western rational thought and science that is also concomitant with the Olympic Games.11 That is why, despite the self-reputed slogan that the Olympics are “above politics,” when there are major shifts in the world system, these also underscore the Olympic Games. As the discourses of modernity have shifted to address different frames of reference and agency—Eurocentrism, westernization, Americanization, the postcolonial, the “glocal”, and multiple modernities—today’s themes of “soft power,” globalism and regionalism are also indicators that earlier approaches to modernity are shifting. The discourses on the East Asian Olympics are also inscribed by these larger projects of representing local inflections of global processes, or what Arif Dirlik labels “global modernity.”12
In this essay, I am most concerned with specifying how the process of abstraction inherent in globalization continues to function in the East Asian Olympic discourses. Many of the dominant discourses on the East Asian Olympic Games, as argued by elites in both the East and West, are informed by a logic that is complicit with modernity’s abstraction. Recently, Close, Askew and Xu, argued in their collaborative work, *The Beijing Olympiad*, that an Asian Olympics discourse focuses on economic propaganda and this differentiates them from Western Olympic discourses. Indeed, their analyses of Asian Olympic discourses reveal many informative insights, but in a move of “reverse orientalism,” they fail to specify these Western Olympic discourses. Both Asia and the West are mutually constituted in the discourses on Olympic Games, but there are historical differences in their asymmetrical relations and specific geopolitical contexts that must be addressed. East Asian Olympic discourses reveal as much about Asia as they do the West.

The discourses on the East Asian Olympics function as both a category of practice (how they work) and as a category of analysis (what they mean) for the Olympics of global modernity. As such, the categories of practice will focus on reading each Olympic Game as an event and categories of analysis will focus on their symbolic representation. Analyzing the East Asian Olympics through the framework of its global political economy is central to revealing how the East Asian Olympics are a category of practice of institutional forms of organization and control, governed by various regulations in the legal policies, governance structures, global financial strategies, etc. that are associated with hosting the Olympic Games. This entails reading how the Organizing Committee of each East Asian Olympic host, the IOC and other involved municipal, national and international organizations constitute the successful hosting of the Olympic mega-event. The relationship forged among the host city, capital sponsors, the National Olympic Committee (NOC) and the IOC is central in the consolidation of the hegemony of power practiced within the Olympic Movement. If each Asian Olympic host city as a group focused on economic development, this is in part because of the assumption that as late developers of global capitalism, they lagged behind their western counterparts. This assumption, however, is based on an abstraction of their historical contexts, and only furthers the abstraction of global capital. In addition, East Asian Olympic discourses can also be seen as a category of analysis that communicate meaning and significance to both national and international audiences through myriad narratives, symbolism, rhetorical and representational strategies in printed and broadcast media. The Opening and Closing Ceremonies provide rich areas for symbolic interpretation, but so do the numerous events, videos, publications and performances surrounding the East Asian Olympics. Taken as a group, East Asian Olympics signify their civilizational difference from the West based on different historical strategies of negotiating between the particular, local culture of the host city, the regional identity of East Asia and the universal culture espoused by Olympism.

The three summer Olympic Games hosted in East Asia (1964 Tokyo, 1988 Seoul and 2008 Beijing) constitute a discursive formation called the “East Asian Olympic Games.” They are comparative to one another and can be contrasted to the Olympics held in the “West.” In comprehending the political economy and in representing the historical uniqueness of each of these three East Asian Olympics, there are common strategies that cut across national boundaries and time periods. For all of the East Asian Olympics, the East-West dichotomy is a common trope that informs why “soft power” and “coming out parties” are used to represent these Games. This syncretism is rooted in the historical experience of the lingering anxieties that East Asian host cities have about participating in the Western hegemony of the Olympics. This dichotomy is also evoked to represent the uniqueness of East Asian hosts in terms of their tradition (culture) and modern (political economy). Furthermore, in East Asian Olympic discourses there is continued emphasis on Asian regionalism rather than
on their commonalities with western Olympic hosts. As the axis of power shifts from the West to the East, there is a re-newed emphasis on Asian regionalism. Often this regionalism focuses on the tension between Japan and her neighbors given the militaristic and imperial past of interwar Japan. Asian Regionalism, however, is not a new development of globalization, but rather, as Leo Ching described, “a mediatory attempt to come to terms with the immanent transnationalization of capital and the historical territorialization of national economies.” Regionalism is just another stage in the abstraction of the earlier debates on modernity and globalism. The earlier confrontation between the West and the East is being replaced with a sense of regional confrontation within Asia in order to distract from the larger shifts in the globalization of capital as characterized by the recent 2008 mortgage-backed security financial crisis.

The Discourses of the East Asian Olympic Games:
1964 Tokyo, 1988 Seoul and 2008 Beijing

Implicit in many assessments of the East Asian Olympics is the sense that these East Asian hosts have reached parity with the West. As such, the terms “soft power” and a “coming-out-party” play into specific images that the West has of itself and of East Asian host cities, namely versions of Orientalist discourse in which the West remains the barometer of progress and the East struggles to reach these western definitions of modernity. Unsurprisingly, these images are often Orientalist in that they posit the developmental backwardness of East Asia as compared to the West, as various scholars have underscored. Here, the unevenness perceived is from the perspective of the West and is predicated on the silence of the East. Tensions erupt, however, when these East Asian “others” author their own subjectivity in the world system and often reiterate the differences between the East and West as constituted in some ahistorical and native difference.

As such, it is not surprising that all East Asian hosts adopted themes that accentuated “harmony” to help characterize their joining the international community as “coming out parties.” The themes of harmony were used by all three East Asian host cities in their Games: for 1964 Tokyo it was framed as the harmony between the East and West, in 1988 Seoul’s motto “harmony and progress,” and for the 2008 Beijing, “One World One Dream” reflected the theme of harmony. Brownell notes that the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee (BOCOG) and the Chinese government softened the image of Beijing Olympics to symbolize the “peaceful rising” of China and to use non-confrontational themes.

In the East Asian Olympic Games discourses, traditional culture becomes a flashpoint of how to identify the different pathways to modernity that have been dominated by western categories. Despite the emphasis on the role of the Olympics as a mega-event to help the economic development of Asian host cities, traditional culture is used as a key strategy to negotiate for some native difference against the backdrop of the Western Olympic Games. This tactic of erasing history may be informed by the need to placate the Orientalist desires of the West (1964 Tokyo), to assert the uniqueness of long, cultural traditions despite a problematic modernization as self-Orientalism (1988 Seoul) or even to underline the historical indebtedness that western civilization owes to the East as the Orient in the West (2008 Beijing). Although there is much more work to be done on the discourses of the East Asian Olympic Games, I would like to briefly sketch how we can examine them as categories of practice (how they work) and of analysis (what they mean). By examining some of the assessments of the East Asian Olympic Games, one can see how the notion of “traditional culture” is often evoked to signal the symbolic difference between the East and the West, despite the fact that the specific practices of demarcating the East from the West are not often acknowledged. East Asian Olympic hosts
are anxious to confirm that they are politically aligned, economically developed, and sufficiently westernized to host the world’s most successful mega-event as a “coming out party.”

**Case Studies: 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games**

Just as Japan would serve as a model of modernization for the Asian region as the first Asian nation to resist western colonialization in the 19th century, so too, would the Tokyo/Japan bidding and organizing campaigns emerge as successful models for the East Asian Olympic Games. Not only did the organizers of the 1964 Tokyo Games focus on the theme of harmony to reinforce their “peaceful rising” in their “coming out party” so as not to exacerbate western fears of a shifting geopolitical order, but traditional culture within the East Asian Olympic Games would also be very carefully codified to essentialize Japan’s postwar national identity. Japan won the right to host the 1964 Games in 1958, only six years after the American-led Allied Occupation of Japan formally ended in 1952 despite the fact that Japan would remain “America’s Japan” for decades thereafter. Through the high-profile international event, the postwar Japanese nation-state, with its unprecedented $3 billion budget, projected an image of Japan as a “cultural nation” to both itself and the world. The emphasis on Japan’s status as a cultural nation was undoubtedly informed by the impulse to re-write its militaristic prewar history and to focus on the economic and organizational capabilities of the Japanese. The postwar Japanese Olympic bid campaign adopted the successful interwar strategies of the 1940 campaign to universalize Olympism, and in 1964 they argued that in order for the Olympic Games to be truly universal they would need to be held in various countries throughout the world. The Tokyo representatives stressed that a Tokyo Olympics would help “close the gap and let the Olympic Games come to the fifth circle” and referenced the Olympic logo of five interlocking rings that symbolized all five continents of the world. Despite Japan’s interwar failure to establish “The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” to combat western colonialization in Asia, Tokyo/Japan would usher the postwar normalization of the Japanese nation-state that would accomplish many of its interwar economic goals in Asia.

Through the international stage provided by the 1964 Olympic Games, there were different ways in which the traditional culture of Japan was being used to articulate an image of Japanese national identity and its world standing as a harmonious, cultural nation. In many ways, Japan was careful to present a balance between modern and traditional qualities explaining that “Japan has only modernized, not Westernized.” Although the use of traditional culture in the 1964 Opening Ceremony was understated, this has less to do with showcasing Japan’s westernization and more to do with IOC President Avery Brundage’s preference for simple ceremonies that would not “become a commercial carnival or circus.” As such, Tokyo Organizer’s endeavors “to create a Japanese atmosphere” showcased an abstracted version of traditional, national culture that was more sacred and iconic. The seemingly uncomplicated usage of His Imperial Majesty Emperor Hirohito (who was not the political head of state but the symbolic icon) and the Japanese national anthem “Kimigayo” in the 1964 Tokyo Opening Ceremony erased the domestic controversies surrounding Japan’s postwar national identity as Christian Tagsold has researched. Traditional culture would serve as the sign of the difference between the East and the West and between interwar and postwar Japan; Japan’s militaristic history was erased. It was outside of the stadium of the Olympic Games, however, where the traditional culture of Japan was featured in the various Art programs held throughout Tokyo. Going against the tradition to invite artwork from the world that represent sport, Japan only focused on “The Exhibition of Fine Arts” of Japan which involved not only objects of traditional art valorized by the ruling classes but also cultural performances such as kabuki, Noh, flower arranging and tea ceremony to expose all
to the “subtle facets of Japanese culture.” Folk art, ethnic crafts or everyday art from various prefectures were bracketed; the art of the elite classes was severed from its historical context and abstracted to represent all of postwar “cultural” Japan as undivided and unmarred by Japan’s 1960 political or economic issues.

Despite Brundage’s assertion that the Olympics would not serve as a barometer of a nation’s social or political standing, Japan subtly flexed its military might throughout the Opening Ceremony. Not only did Japan’s Air Self-Defense Forces create the five Olympic rings in the sky, but the various musical scores, such as the Olympic fanfare composed by Mitsuya Imai, were performed by the bands of the Air Self Defense, Police, Fire and Maritime Defense Forces. Instead of Olympic athletes, members of the Self-Defense forces escorted the Olympic flag and hoisted the Olympic Flag in the stadium. The 1964 Tokyo Games glossed over the various socio, political and economic issues that plagued the Japanese nation in the postwar era. The Anpó demonstrations against the renewal of the US-Japan Security Pact, the riots over the expansion of US military bases within Japan, and the social dislocations of the Japanese state-managed economic programming were not visible. Japan’s modern technology helped broadcast Japan’s image of an ancient civilization of traditional culture and a modern, peaceful international member to itself and the world. A subtle sub-text of the 1964 Games was perhaps that in celebrating Tokyo/Japan the world was in essence supporting the United States in the increasing globalization of the 1960s world economy, especially given the dominant role the U.S. played in the postwar history of Japan. In an era re-writing the history of westernization as modernization, what a Tokyo Olympics represented for the precarious world system was the economic rise of the country of Japan governed by liberal democracy and state-capitalism under Pax-Americana. What the hegemony of the West as led by Americat gained was proof that the processes of westernization could be abstracted as modernization given the successful transformation of Japan into the new world order of the 1960s.

Case Studies: 1988 Seoul Olympic Games

Even as the lines of alignment along the East-West divide of the Cold War were being erased by the inevitable hegemony of liberal capitalism, South Korea also presented itself as cultural nation for the gaze of the West despite its fragile, transitional national politics and developing economy. Along with Japan, South Korea was politically aligned with the United States and this relationship was never questioned by either side, even during the 1979 military coup that established the dictatorship of General Chun Doo-Hwan. Despite the parallel U.S. Security Alliances forged with both Japan and South Korea, South Korea was defining itself as culturally different from Japan in their Olympic Games in order to legitimate its new political leadership and to define a particular version of national culture for a divided Korea. Aware that the West had almost no diplomatic contact with the “Hermit Kingdom” of South Korea, the Seoul Olympic Organizing Committe (SLOOC) chose the theme, “Harmony and Progress,” and showcased numerous traditional cultural performances in the 1988 Ceremonies. The shift in more commercialized Olympics and elaborate ceremonies was made possible by the new leadership of the IOC, Juan Antonio Samaranch, and his quest to secure the financial future of the Olympic Games. The Seoul ceremonies would build on the 1980 Moscow Games presentation of large group choreography and the Hollywood commercialization of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics but provide a subtle alteration. Elaborate versions of traditional Korean culture would provide a flexible symbol through which the precarious South Korea government could mirror not only the modern values of western nation-states but also the ancient civilization traits to erase the trauma of being a divided country. Even the emblem of the 1988 Olympics, the sam-t’aeguk, a
common motif in traditional Korean architecture and crafts, was described by the SLOOC as the “rich in symbolism that echoes the motto [“Harmony and Progress”]. The theme “Harmony and Progress” was meant to help heal the shock and horror of the brutality of Munich and the political divisions of Moscow and Los Angeles and to harmonize between “the East and the West.” The cultural motif became a commercialized way of mirroring the values of the West through the traditional icon of the East.

Similar to the logic employed by Japan in their Olympic bids, South Koreans also declared that the Olympics must be ambulatory in order to be universal. The 1988 Olympics, Park She-Jik, President of the SLOOC emphasized, would provide “Korea with the opportunity to join the league of advanced nations of the world” and would provide developing nations “a chance to witness firsthand the Korean success story” as a role model for other nations. What is unique about the Seoul Games was that Olympic organizers claimed that the Seoul Games held in South Korea would help reunification efforts with the North. This sentiment, however, was not shared by the North, as Yu Sun Kim, the President of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea telexed the IOC, that North Korea “will not allow the Olympiad to result in encouraging the permanent division of the nation by having its site in the south of split Korea.” Perhaps if the IOC had understood that the political ideology of the governments of the North and the South could not be overcome, IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch would not have spent so much time and effort to gloss over the division in pushing for the 1988 Games to be co-hosted in both North and South Korea.

South Korea would also mimic the Tokyo model and represent itself as a hybrid of the traditional and the modern. An official handbook also invited westerns to see “Seoul is both an ancient and a modern phenomenon.” With an estimated budget of $2 billion, the SLOOC wanted the 1988 Games to symbolize Korea’s “orientation towards peace, ...and to emphasize the “excellence of traditional culture.” The President of SLOOC, Park, described the abstract theme of “Harmony and Progress” would be made more specific with the slogan “Beyond the Barriers” which informed both ceremonies. The long Opening Ceremony was to help stage a “festivity for promoting peace among mankind, transcending ethnic, cultural, ideological and religious difference.” The Opening ceremonies were, SLOOC President Park would boast, “the largest in Olympic history in terms of material volume and scale.” The Seoul Opening Ceremony sparked a trend for subsequent Asian Olympics to showcase the unfolding of traditional ceremonial and ritual performances within the Olympic stadium and ceremonies. In Seoul, the traditional konori battle ceremony was performed to provide a dramatic tension within the Olympic stadium. The large traditional Dragon Drum also helped establish a solemn and grand atmosphere for the Opening ceremony that linked the Han River outside the stadium to the inside. These ceremonies would be complemented by the use of international skydivers landing within the Olympic stadium which was represented as inviting traditional Korean “blessings from above” albeit in a modern, westernized way. There were massive group choreographies of both modern and traditional dances that seemed to visually suggest that the Korean nation performed as one national body. The last forty minutes of the Opening Ceremony, or epilogue performances, provided a narrative of the Seoul Games as a harmonious reconciliation between the East and West: “Great Day,” “Chaos,” “Beyond All Barriers,” “Silence,” “New Sprouts,” “Confrontation,” and “One World.” The Opening Ceremony was historic in both its use of traditional cultural performances and length that clocked in at five hours long. The Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee provided a self-Orientalized version of native culture for the gaze of the West in order to demonstrate just how exotic the treasures of this East Asian host were. AS SLOOC President Park explained, 1988 Seoul would be the place where “East and West, oriental and occidental, old and young joined together to share in
the beauty and strengths of our individual cultures.” 1988 Seoul became the place where South Korea could showcase its economic might, political stability and cultural nationalism as modern yet “Oriental.”

Despite the centre stage that traditional culture received, the Seoul Olympics, as Park Sei-Jik, President of the SLOOC proclaimed, were used as “an ignition for national development.” South Korea wanted to shed its image as broadcast by the popular American television series, MASH, as “a country of war” or “a country of rapid economic development” and to announce its status as having arrived as a “country which hosted the Olympics like the developed countries.” For the SLOOC, this newly minted image as an international player was “worth at least US$10 billion in advertising.” The SLOOC proudly reported that “the image of Korea worldwide has taken on a new, positive look” and that “it was essential that Korea be recognized for her competence and credibility internationally in order that her people be acknowledged on the world stage.” The 1988 Seoul Games would be the last Olympics before the historic end of the “Cold War” and would symbolically usher in a new era of global politics. For the developing nation, the Olympic Games provided an international forum to celebrate its modern national identity rooted in deep traditional cultural practices despite the trauma of its division from the North. And the international world was invited to form diplomatic and economic relations with the southern half of the “Hermit Kingdom” as the shifting transnational order rewrote previous forms of global power. And regionally, South Korea would pay homage to the model of Japanese economic development without diminishing its cultural chauvinism.

Case Studies: 2008 Beijing Olympic Games

Within the history of the East Asian Olympics, the 2008 Beijing Games are unique for several reasons. As Susan Brownell has pointed out, China was never occupied by any American military installations or entered into any Security Pact agreements with the United States as 1964 Tokyo and 1988 Seoul had. The historical context is one in which the axis of global economic power is shifting from the West to the East, and the world order continues to vacillate between celebrating the panoply of multiple civilizations within globalization and warning of the impeding war among civilizations. Nonetheless, the Beijing Olympic Bid Committee (BOBICO) and the subsequent Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG) both adopted similar strategies of emphasizing “harmony” and modern hybridity in the 2008 Games. In fact, Beijing went further than previous East Asian hosts in arguing not only for a modern hybridity but also mutual co-evality of the East and West. That is to say, what the grandeur of the Opening Ceremony revealed was Beijing’s attempt to not only elevate the ancient civilization of China to the West but to also identify how western civilization has been constituted by the East.

In the campaign for the 2008 Olympics, the theme “New Beijing, Great Olympics” was ambiguous given that the characters in Chinese could also be read as “New Beijing, New Olympics.” Some have theorized that the English motto was used to allay western fears that Beijing/China was attempting to alter the Olympic Movement. Concerned, the Organizing Committee thus used the slogan “One World One Dream.” In its glossy publication commemorating its successful bid, BOCOG announced that “The Olympic Games will open the Gates of China wider than ever, revealing to all humanity its ancient mysteries and modern allure through broadcasts that will carry its engaging imagery to the corners of the earth.” China’s bid rhetoric mirrored Japan’s and South Korea’s by emphasizing that “Through its 2008 decision, the IOC can fulfill its mission of placing sport everywhere and leading the world toward greater global unity by taking the Olympic Games to Beijing.” There is a subtle difference to the logic of the Beijing bid, however, in that it involves a longing by
China to join the world system, as witnessed by the following statement, “China’s dream of hosting
the Olympic Games reflects its desire to become more fully integrated into the community of
nations.”61 BOCOG was careful to differentiate Chinese culture from Korea’s (5,000 year old) and
Japan’s (2,624 years old) by highlighting that “The Olympic Games will foster global interest in
China’s 3000-year long cultural history” by “revealing its ancient mysteries and modern appeal.”62

As with other East Asian Olympic hosts, the BOCOG could not escape the abstraction inherent in
showcasing traditional culture within the modern framework of the Olympic Games. The Olympic
mascots, Fu Wa, essentializes the socio-cultural differences within the vast ethnic and regional differ-
ences of China, but also the temporal differences of traditional influences of Chinese folk art and
ornamentation. Most notably, the Tibetan antelope, yingying, was included in the entourage symbol-
ically erasing any of the tensions between Beijing and Tibet. Even the proposed Olympic Torch relay
was envisioned to abstract the history of the Silk Road as a harmonious cultural encounter between
the world’s major civilizations. By linking all six of the world’s civilizations (Greek, Italy, Egypt, Pers-
 sia, India, and China) in the Torch Relay, it was almost as if Beijing wanted to also politically integrate
sensitive regions by incorporating Tibet and Taiwan into the route.63

Again, Beijing was depicted as being “a modern metropolis blessed with rich cultural heritage,”
but BOCOG added a different dimension to the Beijing Games.64 For BOCOG, the Beijing Olympics
were an opportunity to represent an alternative modernity to the narrative often controlled by the
West. BOCOG stated the “Beijing Olympic Games will be the embodiment of the cultural pluralism
of Olympism, and will replenish the connotations of the Olympic spirit through this occasion of East-
West exchange.”65 Throughout the bidding and planning of the Beijing Games, the motto of “har-
mony” was emphasized. The Mayor of Beijing, Liu Qi, invited the Olympics to Beijing so that “The
athletes and people all over the world will be able to see the brilliance of the Chinese civilization and
harmonious convergence of the cultures of East and West.”66 The Chinese wanted to provide a “new
and exciting Chinese cultural dimension” to the Olympic Games.67

Thus, in the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony, Chinese elites authored not only an almost
unfathomable scale of showcasing Chinese cultural traditions but also a unique acknowledgement of
the coevality of looking East from the West. The Opening Ceremony was different from previous East
Asian Olympic ceremonies, as Manzenreiter acknowledges, in that it “instructed how much world his-
tory and Western modernization were indebted to Chinese civilization” and that it showcased what
Susan Brownell coined as the “coming together of separate civilizations of East and West.”68 The
Opening Ceremony Chief Director Zhang Yimou explained that he used many historical and cultural
themes of China, and specifically discussed the use of the Chinese painting as a vector for the cere-
mony, “Chinese painting is one of the oldest art forms in the world, one that has influenced many eastern
cultures and symbolizes China to the western world.”69 In one such performance before the
movable type blocks, three thousand “disciples” of Confucius entered the stadium wearing feathered
headgear and carrying bamboo slips. They recited excerpts from the Analects of Confucius, “Isn’t it
great to have friends coming from afar?” For many western viewers, the scene would have symbolized
China’s long, scholarly tradition of Confucianism welcoming western visitors; for many Chinese well
versed in Confucian sayings, however, they would have recalled the following sentence to complete
the above verse, “If people do not recognize your worth, but this does not worry you, are you not a
true gentleman?”70 This verse is a subtle allusion to the fact that from the perspective of China and
Asia, there is still the lingering sense that the West does not consider the East to be an equal in terms of
civilizational value. The government of China, however, played subtle roles in the Opening Ceremony
to represent itself: President Hu Jintao stood with IOC President Jacques Rogge at the same time, per-
haps a nod to the equal footing Beijing/ China wanted to give to the IOC/ West. In addition, the ceremo-
nial performance of having children escort the national flag of the People's Republic of China to
then be hoisted by soldiers along-side the Olympic flag within the Olympic stadium was new. In 1964
Tokyo and 1988 Seoul, the Olympic flag flew alone within the stadium floor, although the national
flags of Japan and South Korea could be found near the royalty box. Again, despite the uniqueness of
the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Games, it should come as no surprise that the central theme of
the Beijing Olympics was to showcase a “Cultural China” and the “peaceful rising” of China given the
imagined fear the West continues to harbor in this era of changing world dynamics.

Conclusion

The discourses on Asian Soft Power and the East Asian Olympic Games are connected to the larger
process of Global Capitalism. In an age when the colonial forcefulness of the term “westernization”
has been forgotten and replaced with “modernization” and now “globalization” as universal pro-
cesses, China’s ascendance challenges the West as the barometer of inevitable global development
and success. In many instances, the continued critique of the failures of the Beijing Olympic Games
by the West are over-determined given that they emerge from the larger framework of shifting global
geopolitics as Susan Brownell has noted. The West fears that their previous command over global
capital will be replaced by the “new” region of the East as Giovanni Arrighi has suggested. Even the
emerging academic discourses on globalscapes as posited by Arjun Appadurai and multiple moderni-
ties by Tu Wei-Ming are attempts to incorporate the role of other nations and cultures in the Western
hegemony of global development. While the fashionable discourses on globalism are an attempt to
accommodate, as Dirlik has noted, “the possibility of different historical trajectories in the unfolding
of modernity,” they cannot escape being part of the overall project of global modernity.

East Asian hosts are complicit in these self-Orientalizing presentations by framing their long, civi-
lizations and traditional cultures as unchanging and essentialized so as not to challenge the world
order as defined by the West since the nineteenth century. All of the East Asian Olympics—Tokyo,
Seoul and Beijing—used their traditional culture to represent their status for the gaze of the West and
international community, but they suppressed, as Dirlik has pointed out in another context, “their
complicity with new forms of hegemonic power.” The elites involved with the various East Asian
Games—city officials, politicians, state bureaucrats, capitalists and even intellectuals—have not
acknowledged the often masked relationship between the Olympic Games and global capitalism
because neither has the West. If the East Asian Olympics focus on economic development, it is only
to emphasize that while they are modern and economically developed enough to host the Olympic
Games as an event, they have not surpassed the Western hegemony of the modern. East Asian Olym-
pic host cities are praised when they play by the rules of the world order but often critiqued if they
stray too far into the realm of nationalism in asserting their own subjectivity. It is the very failure of the
Olympic Games to acknowledge its historical collaboration with industrial capitalism and nation
building which also informs the unsaid power dynamic of the continuing unquestioned status of the
superiority of the West informing the East / West binary.

Much of Asian culture and civilization had profound influence on the development of world his-
tory that is often glossed over and forgotten by the West. Current academic research on “multiple
modernities” is an attempt to address the existence of different paths and trajectories of moderniza-
tion, as is the allure of the role of culture in explaining these different pathways advocated by Samuel
Huntington. And when a western power loses its supreme pathway, there are explanations of how
the West remains dominant in the realm of culture and “soft power.” The context of Joseph Nye’s
argument for “soft power” was an attempt to rescue the attractiveness of America despite its waning economic and political authority in the world system in the mid-1980s. Despite the resuscitation of the role of culture, it may be more productive, as Harry Harootunian and Arif Dirlik have argued, to recognize these alternative trajectories as local inflections of the global process of capitalism. Co-vality serves as a useful term to acknowledge how the East and the West can participate in intercultural communication, and nowhere is this more spectacularly showcased that in the discourses on the East Asian Olympic Games.

The East Asian Olympic Games are categories of analysis in which Asian host cities and countries symbolically define their national place within the world system, but they are also categories of practice in which hosting the Olympic Games also serves as a form of organizational and institutional practice. Much has been written on the twin function of the Olympic Games in both exalting national prestige and promoting the international standing of host cities and their respective nations. By underscoring the formation of how “soft power” functions within the East Asian Olympic discourse, we may see how East Asian hosts are burdened with the contradictions of the global system itself when they attempt to author their own version of their subjectivity for national audiences and the global community. The formal incorporation of East Asian nation-states into the hierarchy dictated by western powers could not help but underscore the various tensions of the encounter of the East and the West, in which the Olympic Games serve as one forum.

Endnotes


3 Susan Brownell, “The Beijing Olympics as a Turning Point?”


7 In his address to the 17th Communist Party Congress in 2007, President Hu Jintao declared that China must increase its soft power “to meet domestic demand and enhance China’s competitiveness in the international arena” (see Li Mingjiang, “China Debates Soft Power,” The Chinese Journal of International Politics 2, no. 2 (2008), 288.

Manzenreiter, “The Beijing Games in the Western Imagination of China,” 33.

“Olympism” references the discourses by the IOC on the universal values of the Olympic Movement (goodwill, fair play, universal ethics, etc.) that have unfolded for over a century. Please see the official website of the IOC for detailed description, http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_122.pdf.


Although specifics on Western Olympic discourses have not been detailed, Close, Askew, and Xu’s work is instrumental in outlining what constitutes a discourse on Asian Olympics (see, Close, Askew and Xu, The Beijing Olympiad, 126).


This approach was inaugurated by the work of John MacAloon, Rite, Drama, Festival Spectacle: Rehearsals toward a Theory of Cultural Performance (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), and further outlined by Maurice Roche, Mega-Events, 14-15. I have also used this approach in my own work on the 1940 Tokyo Olympics; see, Sandra Collins, The Missing Olympics: 1940 Tokyo (London: Routledge, 2007).

I detail the use of the East-West dichotomy in understanding the logic of the ceremonies of the East Asian Olympics. While Western host cities tend to present themselves as world-class cities, Asian host cities subscribe to a narrative of modern hybridism, uniting cutting-edge high technology with rich cultural heritage and exotic civilization; see Sandra Collins, “Fragility of Asian National Identity in the Olympic Games,” in Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China, eds. Monroe Price and Daniel Dayan (University of Michigan Press, 2008), 186.


As the familiar passage from Edward Said states, “In discussions of the Orient, the Orient is all absence, whereas one feels the Orientalist and what he says as presence; yet we must not forget that the Orientalist’s presence is enabled by the Orient’s effective absence” (Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 208).

Building on Said’s work on orientalism, Partha Chaterjee revealed how non-western nations still adopt Post-Enlightenment rationalism which supports the geopolitical power of Western nations that essentializes the difference between East and West in his work, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) as read by Hill, National History, 38-39.


Brownell, “The Beijing Olympics as a Turning Point?”


Yasui glosses over the historical context of the 1940 Games and of the military imperialism of interwar Japan by stating that the 1940 Games were “cancelled due to the unfortunate circumstances” (Sei-ichiro Yasui, Governor of the Metropolis of Tokyo to International Olympic Committee 1958, IOC Archives, Candidature File for 1964 Olympic Games).

29 “The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” was the attempt by interwar Japan to create “imperialism without colonies.” See Peter Duus, “Imperialism without Colonies: The Vision of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” in Diplomacy and Statecraft 7 no.1, (March 1996), 54-72.


31 Brundage would serve as IOC President from 1952-1972 and his stance on amateurism as being essentially anti-commercialism would also influence the format of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies. Manzenreiter states that “References to traditional elements of Japanese culture were understated, since the producers of the spectacle were more concerned with demonstrating a new and largely Westernized variant of Japan.” CH Tagsold, however, argues that the Tokyo Olympics functioned as a mechanism of re-nationalization. See Manzenreiter “Beijing,” 45, and CH Tagsold, “The Tokyo Olympics as a Token of Renationalization,” in: Olympic Japan. Ideals and Realities of (Inter)Nationalism (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2007). Avery Brundage Presidential Address to IOC Session Tokyo 1958. IOC Archives, 1964 Olympic Games Candidature File. The Tokyo OCOG, Official Report, 244; 246.

32 The fact that the IOC supported the Tokyo Organizing Committee choice of the Emperor instead of the Prime Minister to declare the Games Open is interesting and may also reflect Japan’s/Brundage/IOC preference to frame 1960s Japan in cultural rather than political terms. See Tagsold, “The Tokyo Olympics,” 115.

33 The Tokyo Organizers used the most novel of all the senses to create a “Japanese atmosphere”: some 28.8 kg of chrysanthemum perfume was released with sprayers from dugouts under each stand as the Olympic Torch entered the stadium. The Tokyo OCOG, Official Report, 250.

34 Avery Brundage, The Games of the XVIII Olympiad Tokyo 1964, Volume I (Tokyo: The Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games, 1965)

35 Close, Askew and Xu detail this historical context of political unrest in Japan, Beijing Olympiad, 132.

36 OCOG, 1964 Tokyo, p. 14

37 See Susan Brownell, What the Olympics Mean to China (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

38 The motif is described: “Its three swirls represent the harmony of heaven, earth, and man. The outward motion is progress through the realization of the Olympic ideal, and the inward motion stands for the gathering of people from all over the world for the Games.” SLOOC, Official Souvenir (Seoul: SLOOC, 1988), 20.


40 Cho Sang-Ho, President of the Korean Olympic Committee (KOC) states, “Considering the Olympic principle of universality, of free and full participation of all peoples and nations, it is important, and indeed stated many times at this congress, to share the hosting role among nations and thus spread the Olympic Movement throughout the world” Park Sei-Jik, ed., How to Prepare Olympics and Its Task, 9.

41 Many credit the IOC President, Juan Antonio Samaranch, for helping to persuade the IOC to vote in favor of Seoul 52 over Nagoya 27. Indebted to the strong support IOC President Samaranch gave to Seoul, SLOOC made a cash contribution of one million US dollars as a founding member of the Olympic Museum, Samaranch’s pet project. Park Seh-Jik President SLOOC to Samaranch, 18 April 1987, IOC Archives, 1988 Olympic Games Organizing Committee File and SLOOC, Official Souvenir (Seoul: SLOOC, 1964), 56.2.


43 Kim Yu Sun, Pyongyang DPR Korea to Samaranch, 18 December 1984. IOC Archives, 1988 Olympic Games Organizing Committee File.


46 Park, The Stories 1990, 34.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 35.

49 Apparently, local wood for the drum belly was too small and cow-hide was too scarce, so Mr. Kim imported five 1,650 kilogram bulls, and a log of Oregon pine with 198 annual rings, despite Mr. Kim’s fear that they would be too American. Park, “The Stories 1990,” 25, 26.

50 Park Seh-Jik, President of SLOOC, to IOC Present Samaranch, 16 July 1987. IOC Archives, 1988 Olympic Games Organizing Committee Dossier, Communications File.

51 Park, How to Prepare Olympics and Its Task, 1.

52 Ibid., 1, 222.
53 Ibid., 222.
54 Ibid., 1.
55 Brownell, “The Beijing Olympics.”
56 Thomas Friedman, _The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century_ (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005) and Samuel Huntington, _The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order_ (New York: Touchstone, 1996) remain the main texts on these views held by American intellectuals.
57 Brownell, “The Beijing Olympics.”
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 The Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Bid Committee (BOBICO), _Beijing 2008. Candidate City, Vol. 3_ (Beijing: BOCOG, 2001), 115.
67 Ibid.
68 Manzenreiter “Beijing Olympics,” 50, and Brownell, Beijing Games, 42.
71 Brownell, _Beijing Games_, 179-180.
74 Dirlik “Global Modernity?” 284.
76 Tu Wei-Hang “Multiple Modernities.”