How Host Nations Use the Olympics to Burnish their Country's Public Image

China is asking the world to appreciate its culture, admire its economic miracle

By Greg Vitiello

Hosting an Olympics holds the allure of a Cinderella-like dream of transformation. In the dream, a nation living in the past suddenly appears modern. An obscure nation appears accessible and compelling. And, wonder of wonders, a repressive nation appears benign and free.

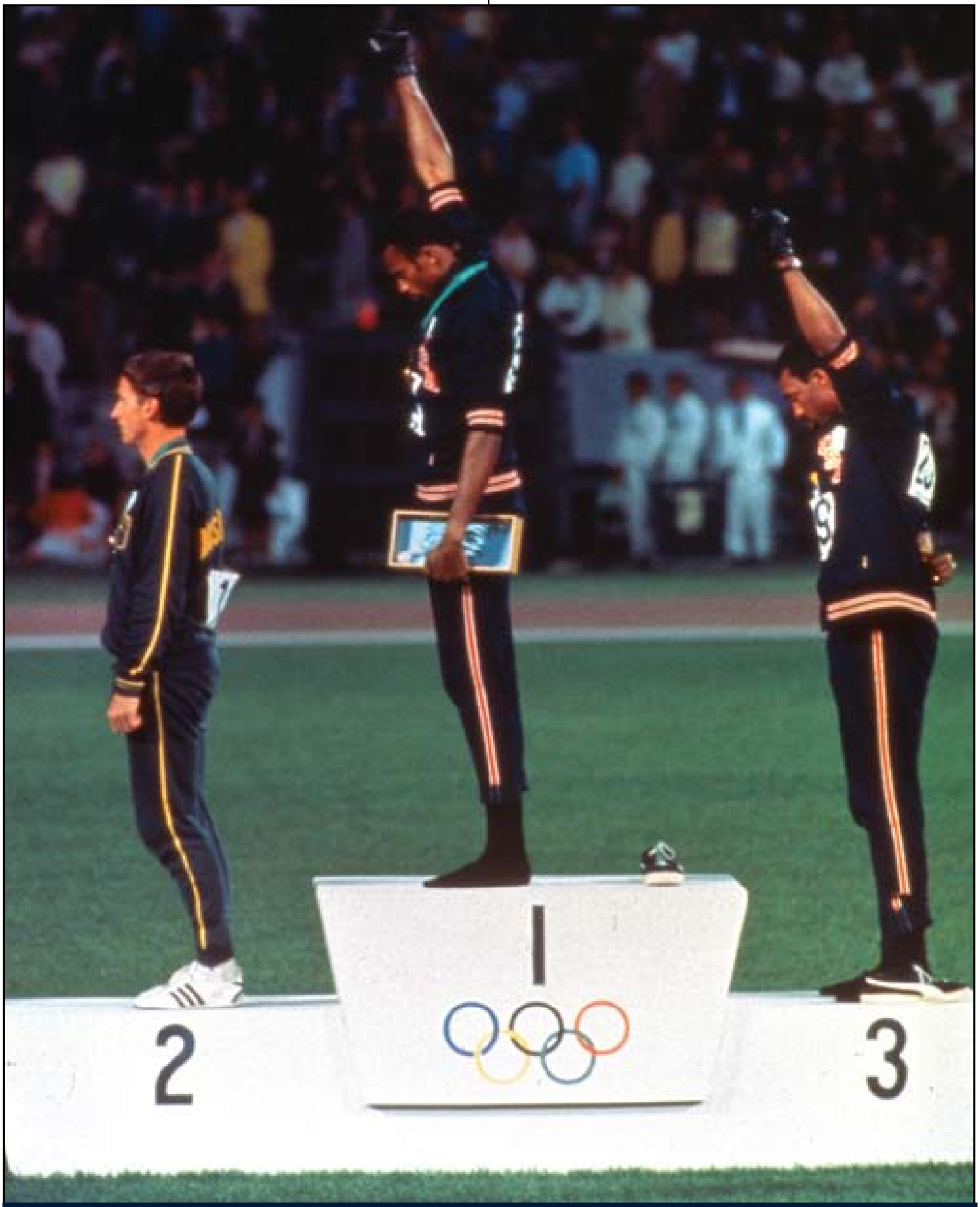
What can produce this overnight alchemy? The bright light of worldwide television coverage. Through its myriad images and exhaustive commentary – and its vast audience -- television can be a collaborator or denier of each nation's dreams.

Or so these host nations believe.

China, as it prepares for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, is but the latest dream seeker, investing billions of dollars to prepare its venues, painstakingly planning its ceremonies, and managing its public relations.

When China bid on the Games in 2001, its successful promotional package included a film by Bud Greenspan, the eminent Olympic documentarian. Greenspan's forte has always been his ability to tell compelling stories of famous and even obscure athletes. And so it's no surprise that he proved adept at capturing the endearing face of China's people. When a CNN interviewer asked him whether his film touched on human rights, he said that wasn't his job. Others would cover the human-rights story. And indeed, they have.

At that time, China promised to make substantive changes in its human-rights policies. Ah, but there's the rub. What the Chinese promised and what



Black power saluted by American athletes at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics.

Photo: Photofest

they have achieved in the years prior to the Games are two different things. Small wonder that they are facing escalating demonstrations criticizing China's policy in Tibet and its ties to Sudan. Protesters have tried to snuff out the torch as it is carried from nation to nation, and leaders from France, Germany and other countries are vowing not to attend the Games' opening ceremonies. In its concern about how television will cover the Games, the Chinese government plans to deny the networks access to Tienanmen Square, where protesters were gunned down in 1989 and where protests are likely during the Games.

A naïve response? Yes. But then the Chinese are the victims of their own isolationism. Now they are asking the world to come, embrace them, appreciate their culture, admire their economic miracle – above all, watch the flood of television images. Be beguiled. Fall in love with Cinderella.

Perhaps the Chinese were dazzled by television coverage of the Sydney Games, where the city's breathtaking vistas and welcoming spirit made Australia more accessible to billions of television viewers. And perhaps they watched enviously when television focused on Barcelona's grand boulevards, eerily majestic architecture and spirited nightlife, helping that city to shimmer in the viewer's imagination during the 1992 Olympics.

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But do they remember the Seoul Games of 1988? South Korea, like China, sought world approval for its own economic miracle. And yet the world's press riled the Korean government by continuing to raise human-rights issues. The nation's collective irritation reached full boil when the television coverage dwelt on a Korean official's seemingly biased handling of a boxing match. Didn't the press understand the fragility of the nation's self-image? Didn't they appreciate how hard Korea had worked to mount the Games, hoping to endear itself to the world? All those sparkling venues, all that hospitality and efficiency in organizing the Games.

Korea, like other host nations before and since, also worked hard to manipulate the impression that television conveyed to the world. This manipulation is most effective when a host's national television company controls the images carried to other countries. This was the case with events such as the men's and women's marathon, which were run through Seoul's streets and surrounding areas. Roger Robinson, a writer, broadcaster and literature professor who covered the 1988 Games for Television New Zealand and the Asia Broadcasting Union, recalls: "When we covered the marathon, we were working entirely from images provided by the host broadcaster. As the race progressed, we had no choice but to use the host broadcaster's feed. There we were, focusing on a closely contested race when the camera would cut away to an impressive bridge – one of many opportunities for the Koreans to show how beautiful everything was. Never mind that we were losing the drama of the race."

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Robinson's wife, Kathrine Switzer, a U.S. broadcaster of major international marathons in Boston, New York and elsewhere, recalls the coverage of that same race: "The Koreans had covered over the more rundown parts of the city with fuchsia, white, pale blue and green banners. Some of the banners were 30 to 40 feet high and were hung on scaffolding to hide the grimness of the city's poorer neighborhoods."

These "beauty shots" exemplify the ways in which host countries may try to paper over their less flattering features. Sometimes whole video packages go out to other nations' broadcasters, showing off a country's cultural treasures and physical beauty and ignoring its social and political problems.

These efforts to burnish a nation's image serve as a potent reminder that the Olympic Games aren't merely a great sporting event but what Robinson calls "a cultural display." In purely sporting terms, a host nation can at best hope to improve its medal count – being at home does have its advantages, which include athletic spirit, partisan crowds and sometimes partisan officials. But this upsurge in medals won't turn the host nation into a perennial sports power. Of more enduring value are the sports facilities it will build as an imperative for hosting the games. This becomes a strong rationale for nations like Great Britain, which are secure enough about their self-image but see the value of hosting the Games – as London will in 2012 – as a spur to improve their sporting venues and infrastructure.

These improvements may capture admiring nods from television audiences without doing the harder job of changing perceptions. If anything, the architecturally impressive stadia can be a thorn in the host country's side, especially if that country struggles – as Greece did in 2004 – to complete its Olympic preparations on time. Bombarded by negative press, the Greeks summoned their sense of collective umbrage, kept muttering that the velodromes and aquatic centers and other facilities would be complete, and were vindicated when the city of Athens kept its promise. But then, the damage had been done. Greece was a bit of a laughing stock.

Still, the Greeks rallied and staged an opening ceremony that captured the attention of the global television audience. The ceremony combined traditional Greek culture, ancient mythology and a modern sensibility. In one memorable sequence, a Greek boy waving his nation's flag sailed into the stadium on a paper ship. He was followed by a centaur and a giant head of a Cycladic figurine that broke into many pieces, symbolizing the Greek islands. Beneath the head was a Hellenic representation of the human body, reflecting the belief in perfection as embodied in Greek art. NBC received a rude shock when a topless Minoan priestess appeared, forcing the network to hastily pixilate her breasts to avoid censure.

Whether the venue is Greece, Australia or China, the centerpiece of each host country's sales pitch is its opening ceremony. No other event is so clearly staged with television's world audience in mind. No other event tries so artistically and at such vast cost to convey a nation's pride – and often its subtle recasting of its own history.

The Sydney Games were a classic case of historical revisionism – or, one might more kindly say, atonement for Australia's past neglect toward its Aboriginal people. The opening ceremony contained a tableau of the country's early history, including the Aborigines' original occupation of the land. And 200 Aboriginal women dancers from Central Australia represented the heart of the country when they depicted "the mighty spirit of God to protect the Games." Sydney then played its trump card when Cathy Freeman, an Aboriginal woman who later won the gold medal in the 400-meter run, carried the torch that lit the cauldron atop the Olympic Stadium.

The Australians deserve credit for bringing off this accommodation with its racist past without widespread comment or protest. The Aboriginal people should be recognized for their contribution to the nation's evolution. And yet it all seemed a bit artificial.

Worldwide television viewers are accustomed to the sheer excess of these opening ceremonies. But it doesn't have to be that way. In 1994, the Norwegian town of Lillehammer hosted the Winter Olympics and held an opening ceremony that had a haunting simplicity, even as it summed up thousands of years of history. The actress Liv Ulmann narrated Norway's story to a child through a metaphoric tale about the trolls, ugly but good-natured Nordic gnomes. In another memorable moment, skiers in national dress glided downhill holding lit candles. Meanwhile, the great jumping square of Lillehammer was adorned with some 90,000 anemones, which would later be replanted elsewhere.

The ceremony's simplicity reflected the fact that Norway had nothing to prove. The country and the charming village of Lillehammer were just being themselves.

Host nations might argue that they're just being themselves in embellishing the traditional elements of the opening and closing ceremonies, which include the parade of nations, the Olympic flame and the torch relay. Or perhaps they consider these embellishments a potential return on their multi-billion-dollar investment to host the Games. Whatever their argument, the time and money they devote to these ceremonies grows exponentially with each succeeding Olympiad. None will be more ambitious and undoubtedly more expensive than the Chinese ceremonies, which remain veiled in secrecy at this date – though we do know that there will be major absentees and protests galore.

And the television coverage will be more extensive than ever before, reflecting the growing commitment of NBC, the BBC and other worldwide broadcasters – and inviting the dreams of nations in hopes of transformation.

Was that the spur that drove Nazi Germany to provide the first Olympic television coverage? Perhaps not, considering that television barely existed in 1936. More likely, it became a modest way for the Germans to demonstrate their technological savvy. And, in fact, their broadcasts were the first live television coverage of a sports event in history. Two German firms, Telefunken and Fernseh, televised the Games, using RCA and Farnsworth equipment, respectively. (For more on the pioneering efforts of Farnsworth and RCA, see "Who Invented Television?" in the Winter 2008 issue of this publication.) The 72 hours of live transmission reached a limited audience, being transmitted to two special viewing booths called "Public Television Offices" in Berlin and Potsdam.

Imagine if the medium had been more advanced and the Germans had put Leni Riefenstahl in charge of their television coverage. Instead, she directed the groundbreaking film "Olympiad 1936." Turning propaganda into art, Riefenstahl captured images of athletes in motion that reinforced Hitler's claims that the Germans were a master race. She also managed to objectify the competitors. In writing about the film, she described marathoners who became "the perfect symbol of mental as well as physical beauty." And she described her depiction of the swimming stadium as "a symphony of beauty – those flying bodies, floating above us like birds, rolling, turning and twisting through the air in consummate physical harmony."

Television's early Olympic coverage was more prosaic than Riefenstahl's film. At the 1948 London Games, the BBC was able to reach local audiences from cameras at the city's Wembley Stadium. The 1960 Rome Olympics were the first Games to provide live international coverage. Four years later, pictures from Tokyo were the first to be sent via satellite. And in 1968, the Mexico Games featured the original color broadcast.

With each subsequent Olympics, television found a larger audience – and a greater international story – fueling the hopes of host nations for glory or redemption or respectability or the prospect of more tourists. The Munich Olympics in 1972 became an opportunity for the Germans to demonstrate their recovery after World War II. The killing of Israeli athletes by a group of Palestinian terrorists provided a shocking counterpart to the Olympic ideal – and Germany's hopes for the Games.

The scale of the Olympics – with more than 10,000 athletes representing over 200 nations – creates a tempting stage for acts of civil disobedience or worse. Television coverage enlarges the stage, magnifying heroic as well as heinous behavior. No wonder host nations try to manipulate opinion through positive images of themselves. And yet the world isn't so easily gulled. No matter how many adorable pandas and goofy mascots and smiling people flash on our screens from Beijing, we'll still know that there's another side to the story. In this case, that side includes oppressed Tibetans; suffering Africans victimized by the Chinese supply of arms to Sudan; and the export of shoddy goods and harmful foods. We can count on television to give us this side of the picture as well.

Perhaps the International Olympic Committee should hang a sign over its door reading "Let the Host Nation Beware." But as an entity that earns millions of dollars from each Olympics – most of it from selling television rights – it's not likely. That kind of probity from the IOC would be too much to expect.

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