

2008 Summer Olympic Games

Beijing 2008 Q & A:

An Interview with Susan Brownell

By Daniel Beeknaan

Few foreigners know Chinese sports and the Olympic Games like American anthropologist Dr. Susan Brownell.

Since her championship performance in track & field at China's second annual National College Games in 1986, Brownell has worked to build cultural bridges between Beijing and the 'West'.

Her first major work, Training the Body for China, was well received in 1995, and her second, Beijing's Games: What the Olympics Mean to China will hit bookshelves this March.

A member of the International Olympic Committee's Selection Committee and anthropology department chair at the University of Missouri - St. Louis, Brownell feels, more or less, at home here. From 2002-2006, she translated Olympic diplomat He Zhenliang's biography.

I spent an afternoon with Brownell at her current base of operations, Beijing Sport University. A Fulbright US. Research Scholar for 2007-2008, she is working closely with Chinese academics and officials. Below is a truncated version of that interview.

What do you recall from your first years in Beijing—1985-1986?

I first came here in 1985 to study Chinese at Bei Da (Beijing University). At that time I was a national-class track & field athlete in the United States - in the heptathlon. Actually, I had just competed in an international meet. I'd already begun my PhD at the University of California - Santa Barbara. I'd studied Chinese for two years



and written two master's theses. My plan was to research sports in China.

After arriving, I went to the coach of the track team at Bei Da. He said I could join. I still remember that conversation - him asking me my best performances and times. My Chinese wasn't good at that point and he had a thick provincial accent. I had trouble understanding him. He couldn't believe that I'd just been training at such a high level - only a few weeks before. He kept thinking I was a retired athlete, because in China at that time you just didn't see high-level college athletes. All the athletes with promise were tracked into the state sports system, where their education was de-emphasized. In fact, that was a major problem back then. The state sports system was producing more high-level athletes than could be absorbed back in as coaches and administrators. They called it an 'exit problem' - *chulu wenti*. Even at that time, people were making efforts to hook up the state sports system with colleges - like in the U.S.

Anyway, as it happened, China's second National College Games were to take place that year. Other universities had been recruiting student athletes like crazy - accepting those with low admission scores and, in some cases, waiving entrance exams. All the universities hoped to gain face from the Games. But Bei Da (generally considered China's top university) had refused to lower its, admission standards. The coaches there were worried that Bei Da was about to lose face.

That year, the Games were to consist of only two sports: track & field and basketball. So when Bei Da's coaches and administrators realized that they had a legitimate student on their doorstep who had passed all the requisite tests and who was a heptathlete capable of setting records and medaling in a number of events (Brownell), they were ecstatic. I was the answer to their prayers.

How was Beijing different back then?

At that time, though China's 'era of reform' had officially begun in 1978, there was still a state-planned economy. There were very few private markets on the streets and few private enterprises. You could get vegetables, peanuts - some kinds of food and clothes, especially in the embassy district- That was about it. I don't think there were any privately-run Beijing restaurants in 1985-86. Going outside of campus for a meal was really quite an endeavor. All the public restaurants closed at 7:00 or 7:30 in the evening. We'd go out early and even then the restaurants would always

be full. The service was bad. The food was bad. The standard of living was also much lower than it is in Beijing today. In the foreign students' dorms at Bei Da we had hot water for two hours in the morning and in the evening each day. The Chinese dorms didn't have any hot water. I learned how to take cold showers that year.

Now people here
have so much hope
for the future.
Whereas this
generation of
young Americans
are, for the first
time in U.S, history,
doubting that
their standard
of living will be
higher than their
parents' standard,
Chinese students
seem sure of it.

There were specific places to buy stuff with foreign currency. When you changed your American dollars into Chinese currency you didn't get 'People's money' - *renminbi*. You got 'foreigners' money' (FEC - Foreign Exchange Currency). With foreigners' money, you could buy things that *renminbi* couldn't buy. A black market developed. The rate was one U.S. dollar - to three bills of foreigners' currency - to eight *renminbi*. So we foreign students all went to the black market and changed our U.S. dollars into *renminbi*. The Uyghurs (a predominantly Muslim Chinese ethnic minority) were mostly the ones handling those transactions. Anyway, it was just this whole way of being a foreigner in Beijing that's gone now. Now you have to elbow out the Chinese businessmen at the five-star hotels - they're everywhere and they aren't very respectful of foreigners.

At that time there was also a job assignment system. You were assigned your job by the Labor Bureau. You weren't allowed to choose on your own. And it was pretty much a lifetime assignment, so people had very little hope for the future. College students, for

example, were really pessimistic. It was depressing. I remember meeting very few, if any, happy people. My Chinese friends all wanted to leave China - get graduate degrees in the U.S. They mostly live abroad now. Of course, they were the cream of the cream of the crop. It's different today. There isn't the same desperate desire on the part of China's top students to get out. Now people here have so much hope for the future. Whereas this generation of young Americans are, for the first time in U.S. history, doubting that their standard of living will be higher than their parents' standard, Chinese students seem sure of it.

What about China's sports scene?

What was it like in 1986?

I felt that my coaches at Bei Da were very well trained - probably better than the average American coach. There was a centralized training system in China. Presumably, all my coaches had graduated from Beijing Sport University. They were extremely professional. In that sense, their view of sports was not really that different from that held by American coaches.

However, 1985-1986 was the height of women's volleyball fever here. So that was a phenomenon unlike anything I'd ever seen in the U.S. The Chinese national team had won its fourth straight world championship. Their victories kicked off this huge wave of patriotic fever. They were national heroes. There were regular campaigns to "learn from women's volleyball." Back then everyone still had to attend weekly political study sessions. So, in your politics class, for example, you might have "learned from women's volleyball." You were taught to "eat bitterness" and "struggle" like them.

The team visited Bei Da in 1985 and I was there. There was a mob on the sports field. Actually, that's something I really remember from my first year here - the mobs. You don't see those as much now. I was caught in crowds multiple times. It was scary, especially that day.

There were 3,000 students on the field to watch the volleyball players give speeches. I was

on the periphery and the mob was undulating back and forth. The people on the outside would press in until the people on the inside were getting crushed. Then the people on the inside of the crowd would press back. If you were in the middle, it was potentially dangerous. Whenever Bei Da held a function like that people would get hurt. I remember a Chinese friend asking me matter-of-factly later that day how many people had gotten hurt. Nevertheless, there was this general feeling that China had rejoined the world, and that Chinese athletes had led the way.

What is the relationship between the 2008 Olympics and Chinese politics?

In general, I think the outside world doesn't realize that the 2008 Olympics are being used to press China's government to do things for the Chinese people. Change usually occurs slowly here, but the Games have sped Beijing's political process up. There has been a huge push to clean up the city, for example.

There is a lot of inertia in Chinese government. A big reason for that is China's enormous population. The country is so big - it takes a lot of effort to accomplish anything. And the nature of Chinese politics contributes to that inertia as well. In Beijing, government consists entirely *guanxi wang* ('webs of personal relations'). When you do something, as an official, you must consider how that something will affect everyone connected to you and everyone connected to them - ad infinitum. So political actions are like stones dropped into ponds. They send ripples moving outwards. No one particularly wants to make waves, and so only very slowly do things normally get done.

Consequently, Chinese leaders have, for decades now, used big events to accelerate change and get things accomplished. This is not just true for the 2008 Olympics - it's been done for years and years. Foreign reporters keep making a big deal of Beijing's Olympics-related politeness and anti-spitting campaigns. But those campaigns are decades old. They were certainly around in the 1980s. I was here right before the

United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 and at that time Beijing was doing similar things - there were campaigns to improve the politeness of taxi drivers, to curb spitting and to improve public health and hygiene. Just before the 1990 Asian Games, disposable chopsticks were finally adopted citywide in Beijing restaurants, in China, events are often agents for change. It's just that the Olympics are bigger.

If China's leaders are using the 2008 Olympics to get things done, what have been their objectives?

The government has really pushed forward both environmental protection and Olympic education. In the context of Beijing, Olympic education has meant training China's next generation to be 'international.' Many young Chinese have been trained via Beijing's Olympic volunteer programs.

But what does 'international' mean? Good question. 'Becoming more international' is a great all-encompassing slogan, but to realize it is a bit more of a problem. If you list what is being emphasized to these college students in Beijing, who account for most of the volunteers, the main thing is 'you need to learn to dare to talk to foreigners.' It's 'don't be afraid of them - go up to them - speak English with them - open your mouth.' The IOC pinpointed Chinese volunteers' English abilities as an area of concern a few months ago. But investigations here have showed that language isn't what's wrong. What's causing trouble is intimidation. Those volunteers observed by the IOC were afraid to open their mouths. In the end, young peoples' language abilities and attitudes are getting a lot of government attention.

Besides 'internationalism,' the Olympic ideals most emphasized in China with respect to the 2008 Games have been friendship, understanding, unity and peace. Olympic education here has been aimed at two distinct groups - volunteer college students and schoolchildren. The government has invested a

lot in the teaching of the Games in Beijing primary and secondary schools. Basically, the idea is to teach international friendship and world peace through the Olympic Games, while also preparing young Chinese people for the world. Here in Beijing, the history of the Olympics is taught in a way that emphasizes first the Games' western origins, then China's slow incorporation into the Olympic movement, and finally China's ascendance to its place as an equal partner in that movement with these 2008 Games. It's not only Olympic history - it's a narrative of China's relationship with the outside world as well.

How did you become interested in sports? In the Olympics? In anthropology? In China?

Actually, I think my interests in anthropology and sports stemmed from the same basic motivation: I wanted to be a citizen of the world. That was what drew me to Olympic sports as an athlete. I grew up during the cold war. I competed in track & field. The big meet every year was the USA-USSR dual meet. It was a way of meeting Soviets you couldn't otherwise meet. For my generation, Olympic sports were really one of the few channels for international understanding - one of the few channels for communication with the 'Eastern Bloc' I gravitated towards anthropology for the same reason. I wanted to understand people unlike myself. Anthropologists study those people who are most unlike them - western anthropologists typically focus on the non-western world.

So I was first drawn to anthropology, and later to China. I'd always been interested in China. My grandmother grew up in the Mississippi delta - her father was a prominent politician in, and at one point the governor of, Mississippi. He was known as a fair-minded lawyer and at that time there were a number of Chinese in the state. The Mississippi Chinese Association invited him to be their lawyer because they knew he'd defend their rights. So my grandmother grew up close to the Chinese community. Every Christmas Eve, they would knock on the door of her father's mansion and present him with a present. My grandmother kept

the presents and gave one to me fifty years later - a woven silk tapestry with garden and pavilion scenes.

I decided to work here in China when I was at UC Santa Barbara. A classmate of mine was one of the first scholars to visit the mainland after diplomacy was restored in 1979. I settled on sports because things were really tightly controlled in China when I arrived here. You couldn't necessarily do fieldwork on most things. Sports were less politically sensitive than other areas of study - I suspected they might be my entree into Chinese society and that turned out to be true. I never encountered the problems and restrictions others did. In fact, I've never had trouble at all. I've been amazed at my access to top officials through the years. Sports have really been a leading realm - the leading realm - in China's 'opening up,' China's 'internationalization,' if that's a word you like.

How so? What role have sports played in China's 'opening up'?"

Well, the main thing to realize is that the Chinese government is not stupid - you can't supervise rapid economic growth alongside an amazing level of social order and be stupid. People in the Chinese government know what they're doing. And one way they've always operated is to experiment.

They target certain areas with which to test out ideas and later implement those ideas throughout. That's what they did with the Special Economic Zones in Shenzhen and Xiamen, for example.

Sports have been a major experimental area. China's Sports Ministry was its first to do away with 'eating from the big pot' when it initiated an incentive system in the 1980s. Other ministries look to the Sports Ministry as a model. Why choose sports with which to implement the incentive system? Two reasons. First, in sports there is a clear winner and a clear loser. Performance may be judged on the field - where *guanxi* ('personal relations') doesn't matter. Second, sports are entertainment. They attract

media attention. There is a level of transparency associated with sports that other realms of Chinese society don't naturally enjoy. If someone fails on the field, it's easier to hold them accountable.

In a way, sports have served as a model for how some of China's leaders would prefer Chinese society to function as a whole - transparent, emphasizing efficiency and performance. They want to get away from *guanxi* and *zou houmen* ('going through the back door' - relying on bribes, favors and *guanxi*). Sports have come to represent a non-corrupt, fair and upright society.

In the West, we tend to associate sports like basketball, tennis, track etc. with 'fair play.'

Is that what you mean?

Not quite. The YMCA missionaries and administrators who introduced (western) sports to China were clearly hoping to teach Chinese people democracy and fair play. But they were naive. Things didn't play out how they expected. Even today, I don't think Chinese people have the same notion of fairness that we have. It's not that they lack the notion - it's just that our notion of fairness is different from theirs.

Basketball, tennis, track and the rest - western sports have been domesticated here. They've been modified to fit Chinese culture. Look at Olympic education in Canada and Germany - fair play is stressed more than anything. Yet fair play comes second for Beijing. In the U.S., we teach our children to share - 'I give you my toy and you give me yours.' That's fair play. In China, humility is emphasized from the beginning and, consequently, Chinese teach their children self-confidence. American kids are raised to excel and taught to share, Chinese kids are raised to share and taught to excel. 'Faster, higher, stronger' - that's been a focus of Olympic education here.

Who is He Zhenliang and why does he matter?

He Zhenliang is China's 'Mr. Olympics.' He was born in 1929 and educated at a French Jesuit school in Shanghai. He joined the communist student underground during the period just before Liberation (1949) and met his wife. When the new (communist) government was formed, he was brought to Beijing. By 1950 he was working with the Chinese Democratic Youth League and soon became a high-level French interpreter. Mr. He assisted both (Premier) Zhou Enlai and (Chairman) Mao Zedong. That's how he got into diplomacy.

His first major assignment was the 1952 Olympics at Helsinki. These were the first Games China had ever taken part in - and the last for years to come. The Chinese didn't participate in the Olympics again until 1980 and 1984. The cause of that drought was a conflict involving China, the IOC and Taiwan. Mr. He spent 30 years trying to get China recognized by the IOC as the sole legitimate government of mainland China. He was co-opted as a member in 1981, which seems kind of amazing after you've read the letters he drafted to then-IOC president Avery Brundage back in 1958 - their correspondences were amusingly rude.

(Note: The Chinese withdrew from the IOC after pulling out of the 1956 Melbourne Games when the IOC allowed Taiwan to participate.)

A few years ago, I started to feel that the story of China's relationship with the Olympic Games during the Cold War needed to be told in English. What had been written in English at the time barely included Chinese sources and Chinese points of view. The English literature presented China's absence from the Games in the 1960s and 1970s as a boycott - which it wasn't. The West was shutting off mainstream diplomatic channels to and from China. At that time, China reached out to the 'Third World.' The Chinese built lots of sports stadiums during the 1950s and 1960s in Africa, for example. These days, people are upset about China's role in Darfur, in Sudan. But if the West is upset, it's the West's own fault. We drove China there. I really feel that China

wanted to be a player and be part of the international community. They were excluded.

If the Chinese had agreed to co-exist with Taiwan, would China have been excluded from the IOC?

No, I don't think they would have. But, to me, it's important to look at the situation from the Chinese point of view. People like Mr. He remember life in the communist underground. They were in danger of being grabbed by nationalists and executed at any time. Some of Mr. He's friends were killed.

Back before Liberation they had a keen sense of social justice. They looked around and saw Chinese society falling apart. The nationalists were corrupt. So Mr. He and his friends fought back. Years later, after a bloody civil war, they emerged victorious. They'd risked their lives to win it. They thought they had finally gained control of their own fate, and then the nationalists withdrew to Taiwan, claiming to be the sole legitimate government of China. And the rest of the world supported that claim. You can understand Mr. He's predicament. They'd fought a long, hard battle and they wanted their victory to be recognized.

How did you end up translating Mr. He's biography?

What was that like?

Initially, I was going to try and write the story of China's relationship with the Olympic Games myself. I contacted Mr. He for an interview. The day before we met, I saw his biography on a bookshelf (Mr. He's biography was penned by his wife). I assumed it would be another boring piece of propaganda about a Chinese official. But I bought it and when I started reading it, I was amazed. Here was a real insider's account.

I hadn't known it was possible to be so candid in China. That's when I realized I didn't need to do the research myself - my story had already been written. The next day, I asked Mr. He if he had plans to translate the book and he said I could do it. That was in 2002. I spent four

years of my free time working on the translation. The book launched in April 2006 with a celebration at the Great Hall of the People in Tiananmen Square attended by current IOC president Jacques Rogge.

In terms of Chinese Olympic history, where do we stand today?

In 1993, Mr. He and China made a bid for the 2000 Games to be held in Beijing. They failed. Why? There was a huge amount of anti-Chinese sentiment in the world at that time, of course - but today there is probably more. The real reason may have been the money that Australia gave two African IOC members the night before the vote. At that time, what they did was quasi-legitimate - they accepted money for their national committees' sports development programs. However, it wouldn't be considered legitimate now. China lost by two votes.

What people don't understand is that a huge number of IOC members are African. A huge number are from the Third World. Those men and women don't care much about pollution or human rights violations in China. In 1993, a western bloc voted for Sydney. It was solidly against China. And still, Beijing nearly won.

What made the difference in 2001 was eight years of steady economic growth. In 1993, China wasn't ready to host the Olympics. By 2001, it unquestionably was. In 1993 no one knew whether the country's economic growth would continue and there were questions about political stability. By 2001 those weren't really issues. Organizationally, Beijing had the ability. It had hosted many international competitions by then.

So, what do the Olympics mean to China? How do various sorts of Chinese people view the 2008 Games?

Well, the first written record of a call for an Olympic Games in China dates from 1907. So, for Chinese patriots, the idea of hosting the Games has been a fixation for 100 years now. In that time, the U.S. has hosted eight Olympics,

starting in 1904. It's hard for Americans to understand what the Games mean to China.

I think that for all Chinese people - officials, intellectuals, common people - hosting the Olympics is the culmination of a 100-year desire to see China take its place as a major player in world politics. Because of that, people here who may have specific complaints about aspects of the Olympic Games differentiate between personal interest and national interest. National pride and support is so widespread. And that's not just true of Chinese people living in mainland China. It's also true of those living in Taiwan and overseas.

Why the Olympics? How will the 2008 Games confirm China in its new role as a global heavyweight?

How do you know that you have become a major actor on the world stage? That's tough. There aren't a whole lot of symbolic markers. Where's the proof? In many ways, the Olympic Games can serve as the proof. Tokyo marked Japan's emergence by hosting the Games in 1964 and Seoul did the same for Korea in 1988. Now it's Beijing's turn in the Far East.

If you take a look at the U.S.'s first Olympics - St. Louis in 1904 - you'll find a lot of the same rhetoric being used in Beijing today. The US. had just acquired its first colonies, including the Philippines (in 1898) following the Spanish-American War. The Games were held in conjunction with a World's Fair, which featured a display on the people of the Philippines. 'We are a major civilizing force in the world,' the Americans were saying at their first Olympics. 'Look at us.'

And the U.S. hadn't been nationally humiliated. We still haven't been. The Chinese have. Their understanding of modern history is that China, a great empire, was brought to its knees by the West and by Japan in the mid-19th century. At that time, we called China 'the sick man of East Asia.' That label has loomed large in the Chinese imagination for over 200 years. 'The

West and Japan do not respect us,' the thinking goes. 'They don't respect Chinese culture.'

This is a big deal because, for the Chinese, symbolic respect between nations has always been extremely important. In China there have long been highly ritualized ways for polities to express respect to each other, and the West lacks those traditions. The Olympic Games have a meaning here they don't have in western culture. Here the Games are like a big party. You're inviting people into your home. You are showing them hospitality. You are gaining 'face.' Mr. He argued this to his fellow IOC members a long time ago. 'You have hosted us many times,' he said, 'and we haven't yet hosted you. This has embarrassed us. We want to repay our debt to you. We want the chance to invite you to our home.'

This is China's moment to be the host and to express its respect for other nations. China will do this very well. But guests are also supposed to express respect to their host. When the western press comes and criticizes China on human rights or Tibet, the Chinese become angry. From their perspective, a big party is not the occasion to express those kinds of feelings.

What about regular people here in Beijing?

Common people here don't think the Olympics affect them too much. They feel rather distant from the whole process. Most anticipate that they may not be able to buy tickets, for example. But recently the Games have served as impetus for improving the environment and local infrastructure. You can look around and see the energy and optimism the Olympics have encouraged in people here, and you can see the construction.

What is one crucial misconception held by most Americans when it comes to the 2008 Olympics, Beijing and China?

The stereotype Americans have is that China is a dictatorship - that Chinese leaders don't have a lot of popular support and are therefore using the Olympic Games to legitimize themselves. None of that is true. It's not a

The government's primary goal here is not to legitimize itself. I think it is trying to shape the next generation of Chinese people to be international, which will benefit China economically and politically.

dictatorship - it's a pretty well-run, open society. In some ways, the Chinese are more open than we are in the West. China's government has a lot of popular support. I think that Chinese people believe in government more than we do in the U.S. The government's primary goal here is not to legitimize itself I think it is trying to shape the next generation of Chinese people to be international – which will benefit China economically and politically.

###

Daniel Beekman was a US. Fulbright research grantee to China from November 2007 -September 2008. He blogged about Chinese culture and Beijing's Olympic campaign for The Seattle Times. Beekman earned a bachelor's degree in anthropology from Whitman College (Walla Walla, WA), graduating in 2007. In 2006. He studied Chinese language at Beijing Foreign Studies University. Beekman, a Seattle native, lives in New York City.