Although a Chinese educator introduced the idea and ideals of the Olympic Games to his country in 1908, China’s participation in the Olympics didn’t begin until 1932—and was then interrupted because of World War II and the “two-China” conflict. After re-entering the competition in 1984, China quickly moved up the medals rank, eventually hosting the Games in Beijing in 2008.

In August 1908, the fourth modern Olympic Games took place in London, and it was there—in the city that will host the 2012 Games—that the first steps were taken to set China on the path to Olympic glory. Even though China was not yet a member of the International Olympic Committee and Chinese athletes did not compete, an influential Chinese educator, Zhang Boling, was in London, on his way to visit several schools and universities in Britain. He was impressed by the principle of the Olympics—fair play. He returned to China in October and introduced the idea—and ideals—of the Olympic Games to his students in Tianjin.

After Zhang’s introduction, students of Nankai University held a seminar that would become famous for asking the “Three Questions about the Olympics.” These questions were: When would China send its first athlete to participate in the Olympic Games? When would Chinese athletes win their first gold medal at the Olympic Games? When would the Olympic Games be held in China?

It took the Chinese twenty-four years to answer the first question. In 1932 China sent Liu Changchun, a sprinter, to participate in the Olympics in Los Angeles. He was eliminated in the earliest of the preliminary heats. It was another seventy-six years before the second question was answered. On 29 July 1984, Xu Haifeng won China’s first gold medal, in another Los Angeles Olympics. And it took a full century to provide an answer to the final question—“When would the Olympic Games be held in China?” as the Games at last came to China in August 2008.

On 13 July 2001, Juan Antonio Samaranch, then president of the International Olympic Committee, announced in Moscow that Beijing would host the twenty-ninth Olympic Games in 2008. Hosting these Games proved controversial in many ways, but it also came to be a symbol of China’s “linking up with international standards” —the biggest event in China since the Communist revolution of 1949. Acclaimed Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou— the director of the lavish opening and closing ceremonies at the 2008 Beijing Olympics— spoke for the nation when he said: “It is not just an opening ceremony for the Olympics—it is a way of showing China to the world and what is happening today.”

China’s Olympic Dream

Examining China’s role in history, especially over the last two centuries, helps to explain why the Olympics mean so much to the Chinese. China, the world’s oldest civilization, cherishes the memory of its long
supremacy at the center of the world and the knowledge that China has contributed greatly to global scholarship, philosophy, and scientific innovation. As a consequence, the Chinese people feel abiding pain and deep chagrin over what can only be described as repeated humiliations at the hands of the Western and Eastern imperialist powers in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

Modern Chinese history is one of struggle and striving to restore national pride. The Olympic Games, the largest sport event and one of the biggest social and corporate enterprises in the world, became a stage upon which China could achieve some of its political, social, and economic objectives. Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, sport has been a powerful tool, and in the Maoist era between 1949 and 1978 sport was for China, as well as for other nations, right at the center of politics and diplomacy—a way to demonstrate the superiority of socialism over capitalism.

Since the 1980s China’s sporting success has been regarded not only as evidence of ideological superiority and economic prosperity, but also a powerful symbol of national revival. The government and most of the Chinese people believed that Chinese athletes’ excellent

### Changing Perceptions of Chinese Athleticism

Why has hosting the Olympic Games been so important to China for the last hundred years? The answer to this question begins with label “sick man of East Asia” (dongya bingfu). This label seems to have had its roots in the port city of Tianjin, where the North American YMCA was particularly active. YMCA educators seem to have held a stereotype of sickly, effeminate, overly intellectual Chinese men. A popular story circulated among Western physical educators about a British consul in Tianjin who invited a high Chinese official—the Daotai—to dinner and afterward personally demonstrated for him the game of tennis. When he asked the Daotai what he thought, the Daotai responded that the consul was covered in sweat, and it would be better to hire someone to play in his place.

This story made its way from the Western educators to their Chinese pupils and is still widely cited in China today as an example of the corruption of the “old society.” Also bolstering the stereotype of the sickly Chinese was the publication in 1911 of The Changing Chinese by Edward Ross, a prominent U.S. sociologist. In that book Ross complained that young men imitated the stooped shoulders of the scholar and wore broad-rimmed glasses even when they didn’t need them, so they could look like scholars. He decried what he perceived as a lack of admiration for martial virtues. And perhaps most damning of all, he said that the young men played tennis like girls.

Of course the notion of the effeminate, intellectual Chinese is strongly contradicted by the martial arts tradition. Indeed, one can argue that kung fu films, more than anything else, have erased the perception of the effeminate Chinese among young Westerners, who admire Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li. Although the stereotype was not accurate, from early on it was taken to heart by Chinese nationalists dismayed at China’s weakness, and it was written into the narrative of national humiliation that has become the standard in China’s history. Chairman Mao was one of the reformers who took steps to make sure the stereotype would not apply to the country as a whole. In his first published article, “A Study of Physical Culture” (1917), he complained, “Exercise is important for physical education, but today most scholars are not interested in sports.” Throughout his political career, Mao held to the belief that yundong (“activity” or “movement”) was the remedy for the passivity and weakness that ailed China. Yundong is also one of the words that can be translated as “sport,” and it was the word used to label the endless political “campaigns” of the Maoist period.

Susan BROWNELL
performances on the Olympic stage would be the best proof of China's great achievements in economic reform and modernization. Brilliant victories achieved by Chinese athletes at the Olympics would not only show China's ability to stand proudly and independently among the other nations of the world, but would also strengthen the national spirit and confident vision of its citizens. Most Chinese people believed they could witness the glory of China, feel proud of being Chinese, and experience unity as a great nation by participating in, and eventually hosting, the Olympic Games.

China’s Influence on the Olympics

The slogan of the 2008 Olympics was “One World, One Dream”同一世界,同一梦想, and the Beijing Games were also characterized as “humanistic Olympics” 人文奥运, “green Olympics” 绿色奥运, and “high-tech Olympics” 高科技奥运. These core concepts derive from shared international principles, but have also been influenced by Chinese cultural understandings about social interaction, environmental protection, and modernization.

The perception of some Western people and the Western media of what the Games would bring about was often different from what the majority of ordinary Chinese people might have hoped for. For the Chinese, especially the 94 percent of Beijing citizens who voted to support the Games, the Olympics provided the best opportunity to show the world the unique identity of the Chinese culture and its people. The Games provided the opportunity to invest in programs to control air and water pollution, which raised awareness of environmental issues. They provided job opportunities for many people, and thus contributed to raising living standards. At the same time, neighborhood streets became cleaner and public transportation improved. New construction and upgrades to the city’s infrastructure helped to ensure that Beijing will remain a first class world city after the Games.

Olympic Participation

The history of China’s participation in the Olympic Games can be divided into three periods: the latter part of the Qing dynasty 清 (1644–1912), the Republic (1912–1949), and the People’s Republic (1949–present).

Long before the Olympic Movement spread to China, a few Western sports existed there. Some were military exercises imported from Europe and the United States, which were in accord with the Chinese martial spirit and could be used to support the traditional Chinese ideal of a unified regime known as the “Middle Kingdom” Zhongguo 中国. This regime, the Qing dynasty, had been deteriorating gradually in authority since the end of the eighteenth century, but still dominated the nation culturally as well as militarily. In addition, a number of Western sports that are now contested at the Olympics came to China in the nineteenth century, usually due to educators at missionary schools and universities, or under the auspices of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). The British brought modern soccer to Shanghai in 1856. Basketball, which originated in 1891 at the YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts, arrived in China only four years later.

The first modern Olympic Games were held in 1896, thanks to the work of Pierre de Coubertin. Coubertin had traveled widely in England and the United States to learn about sport and physical education in private and public schools as well as in colleges and universities; he then convened a conference in Paris to discuss the revival of the ancient Olympic Games. The first modern Games were a huge success, with over sixty thousand people attending in the restored grand marble stadium at Olympia, Greece. Coubertin told the world that he had revived the Games with these goals:

1. as a cornerstone for health and cultural progress;
2. for education and character building;
3. for international understanding and peace;
4. for equal opportunity;
5. for fair and equal competition;
6. for cultural expression;
7. for beauty and excellence; and
8. for independence of sport as an instrument of social reform, rather than government legislation.

It is generally agreed that when the French envoy forwarded an invitation to the Chinese government to
participate in the first modern Olympic Games, officials showed no interest in taking part. In 1904, when the Third Olympic Games took place in St. Louis, the Chinese media began to report it. In 1907, before the Fourth Olympics took place in London, a few Chinese educators suggested that China should participate in the games. But there was no response from the Qing government and without it no other impetus sufficient to take China into international sporting competition. Nevertheless, the notion of such an event clearly intrigued some outward-looking Chinese educators.

The Qing dynasty, which had ruled China since 1644, was overthrown in the Republican revolution of 1911 (although the emperor refused to abdicate until 1912). In 1911 the YMCAs of the Philippines, China, and Japan proposed that an Asian Olympic Games among Asian countries be held every two years. In 1913 the first Asian Olympic Games took place in Manila, Philippines. It was an imitation of the Olympic Games including all the regulations, rules, ceremonies, and even the use of the English language. It was called the Far Eastern Olympiad. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) welcomed the games but suggested that the word Olympiad should not be used in the future. Therefore, in 1915 when the games took place in Shanghai, the name was changed to “Far Eastern Championship Games” (FECG). The IOC sent a telegram of congratulations to the games.


**China Enters the Olympics**

In 1928, when the Ninth Olympic Games took place in Amsterdam, China sent one observer, Song Ruhai. Then in 1932 China participated in the Tenth Olympics in Los Angeles by sending a single athlete, Liu Changchun 刘长春, a sprinter and national champion, and his coach to the games. After twenty-five days at sea, when Liu finally arrived in Los Angeles, he was too exhausted to perform well and was eliminated in the heats. Four years later, China sent its first substantial contingent: 141 Chinese athletes traveled to Berlin to compete in the Eleventh Olympic Games. They did not win a medal, but after World War II, when the Games resumed in London in 1948, China sent forty athletes. There was still no medal to take home in this Games, the last one before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. In 1949 the Chinese Communist Party, under the leadership of Mao Zedong 毛泽东, defeated the Nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石, took over China, and established the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The Nationalists fled to Taiwan. Both Communists and Nationalists claimed that they were the legitimate government of China. Thus began the era of the “two Chinas” in political and sports history.

The Communists lost no time in recognizing the
importance of the Olympic Games as an international stage on which China’s identity could be asserted. In 1952, when the Fifteenth Olympic Games took place in Helsinki, the IOC invited both Beijing and Taiwan to participate. Taiwan claimed that it could not “compete with Communist bandits on the same sports field” and withdrew from the games in protest.

China is said to have received the invitation from the IOC just one day before the opening ceremony. They managed, nonetheless, to send a delegation of forty to Helsinki one week later to raise the national flag at the Olympic Village and watch the last few events.

Beijing prepared to participate in the Melbourne Olympics in 1956. However, when it was informed that Taiwan would attend, Beijing withdrew, despite the fact that the qualifying events had taken place and more than fourteen hundred Chinese athletes from twenty-seven provinces, cities, and autonomous regions had attended the preparatory competitions in China, and ninety-two athletes had been selected for the PRC sports delegation and were waiting to go to the Olympics. Instead, Taiwan participated.

Two years later, in August 1958, disappointed with the IOC’s ambiguous attitude toward the “two Chinas,” the PRC withdrew its membership from the IOC. Therefore, between 1958 and 1980, Taiwan represented China at six Olympic Games.

The situation started to change in the 1970s. In 1972 Lord Killanin became the new president of the IOC, a position he would hold until 1980. He felt that the IOC should not continue to ignore the PRC and exclude one-fourth of the world’s population from the Olympic Movement and the games. He visited Beijing in 1977. The famous “Olympic formula” was produced in 1979 and China renewed its membership in the IOC. Taiwan, according to the Olympic formula, would change the name of its Olympic committee from the “Chinese Olympic Committee” to “Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee” and change the name of its team from the “Chinese Olympic Team” to “China Taipei.” In this way both Beijing and Taiwan would be able to participate in the Olympics.

PRC Reemerges at the Los Angeles Games

In 1984 at Los Angeles, the PRC reemerged at the Olympics after an absence of thirty-two years, and would strengthen its performance for the next twenty-four years. (See table 1.)

The PRC won fifteen gold medals and finished fourth in the gold medal tally in the 1984 Los Angeles Games. Although the good showing was partly attributed to the absence of the Soviet Union and the Democratic Republic of Germany, it excited the Chinese—from government officials to ordinary citizens. “Develop elite sport and make China a superpower in the world” became both a slogan and dream for the Chinese.

But the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, were a nightmare for the Chinese. When two sport superpowers, the Soviet Union and the Democratic Republic of Germany, returned to the Olympics, China’s gold medal tally shrank to five. China had slipped from fourth to eleventh in gold medals.

In 1992 China fought back at the Barcelona Olympics. Although the Soviet Union had broken up into several

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countries, it still took part in the Games as a unit under the name “Commonwealth of Independent States” (CIS). The two Germanys had reunited, and the country was even more powerful than before. Nevertheless, China won sixteen gold medals and returned to fourth place in the gold medal count.

In Atlanta in 1996, the Chinese again won sixteen gold medals and remained fourth on the gold medal count. But in Sydney in 2000, China achieved a historical breakthrough. It increased its gold medal count to twenty-eight and finished third.

In Athens in 2004, the Chinese competed in 203 events and won thirty-two gold, seventeen silver, and fourteen bronze medals. Among thirty-two gold medals, four were won in events traditionally dominated by Western athletes: track and field, swimming, rowing, and canoeing. With sixty-three medals in total, China finished third in the medal rankings after the United States and Russia. With thirty-two gold medals China beat the Russians and finished second to the United States. Furthermore, Chinese athletes established six world records, and they broke Olympic records twenty-one times.

After their triumph in Athens, the Cable News Network (CNN) commented: “In the six Olympic Games they have competed in, China has moved up the medal tally in world record time.” China had become one of the three superpowers, with the United States and Russia, in the Summer Olympics.

In the Beijing Olympics of 2008, China finally surpassed the United States in the number of champion athletes it brought home from the games. The games traditionally try to ignore the competition of nations between one another in overall medal counts, but in this case both China and the United States claimed victory, China according to the number of gold medals (51 as opposed to 36 for the U.S. athletes), and the United States according to overall medal counts (110, as opposed to China’s 100). The U.S. method would seem to imply that a country whose range of medals was more equally distributed (36 gold, 38 silver, and 36 bronze medals) had more athletic prowess than a country scoring 51 gold. But there is no doubt that China currently stands at the top of the world athletically until the 2012 Olympics in London.

Ma Yanhong won gold in the 1984 Olympics.

Further Reading

Conceiving a Green Olympics

China faces serious pollution problems, but its position as host of the 2008 Olympics provided a strong impetus for ecological reform while simultaneously creating opportunities for critics to say that the country is not doing enough, or doing it fast enough.

Originally, the environmental organization Greenpeace drafted the concept of a green Olympics for the 2000 Olympic Summer Games in Sydney. The International Olympic Committee subsequently mandated that all summer Olympic Games be green Olympics. In 2005, the United Nations Environment Programme and the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games agreed to try to make the summer Olympics of 2008 environmentally friendly. The Beijing Organizing Committee promised to make environmental protection a priority, not only in designing and construction of Olympic venues, but also through afforestation campaigns, beautification of urban and rural areas, increased public awareness, and promotion of green consumption.

