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China's Games: How Xi Jinping Is Staging the Olympics on His Terms

From Beijing's unexpected [bid](#) through the coronavirus pandemic, China has managed to fulfill its promises and [cow](#) its critics.

[bid](#) 명령 선언 시도 노력 입찰 [cow](#) 위협하다

By [Steven Lee Myers](#), [Keith Bradsher](#) and [Tariq Panja](#)

When the International Olympic Committee met seven years ago to choose a host for the 2022 Winter Games, China's leader, Xi Jinping, sent a short video message that helped tip the scale in a close, controversial vote.

China had limited experience with winter sports. Little snow falls in the distant hills where outdoor events would take place. Pollution was so dense at times that it was known as the "[Airpocalypse](#)."

Mr. Xi pledged to resolve all of this, putting his personal prestige on what seemed then like an [audacious](#) bid. "We will deliver every promise we made," he [told](#) the Olympic delegates meeting in Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur.

With the Games only days away, China has delivered. It has plowed through the obstacles that once made Beijing's bid seem a long shot, and faced down new ones, including an unending pandemic and mounting international concern over its [authoritarian](#) behavior.

[Airpocalypse](#) = Air + apocalypse(대재앙) [audacious](#) 대담한 [authoritarian](#) 독재적인 관료적인

As in 2008, when Beijing was [host of the Summer Olympics](#), the Games have become a showcase of the country's achievements. Only now, it is a very different country. China no longer needs to prove its standing on the world stage; instead, it wants to [proclaim](#) the sweeping vision of a more [prosperous](#), more confident nation under Mr. Xi, [the country's most powerful leader](#) since Mao Zedong. Where the government once sought to [mollify](#) its critics to make the Games a success, today it [defies](#) them.

proclaim 선언하다 prosperous 번영한 번창한 mollify 달래다 defy 무시하다 도전하다 허용않다

Beijing 2022 “will not only enhance our confidence in realizing the great **rejuvenation** of the Chinese nation,” said Mr. Xi, who this year is **poised** to claim a third term at the top. It will also “show a good image of our country and demonstrate our nation’s **commitment** to building a community with a shared future for mankind.”

poise 태세를 취하다 rejuvenation 다시젊어짐 원기회복 commitment 약속 헌신

Mr. Xi's government has brushed off criticism from human rights activists and world leaders as the **bias** of those — including President Biden — who would keep China down. It has **implicitly** warned Olympic broadcasters and sponsors not to bend to calls for protests or **boycotts** over the country’s political **crackdown** in Hong Kong or its campaign of **repression** in Xinjiang, the largely Muslim region in the northwest.

bias 편견 implicitly 암묵적으로 boycott 불매운동 crackdown 탄압 repression 탄압

It has **overruled** the I.O.C. in negotiations over health **protocols** to **combat Covid** and imposed stricter safety measures than those during the Summer Olympics in Tokyo last year. It has insisted on sustaining its “**zero Covid**” **strategy**, evolved from China’s first **lockdown**, in Wuhan two years ago, **regardless of the cost** to its economy and its people.

overrule 기각하다 뒤엎다 무효로하다 protocol 규약 의정서 lockdown 제재 감금

Very few people today **harbor** illusions, unlike in 2008, that the privilege of hosting the event will **moderate** the country’s authoritarian policies. China then sought to meet the world’s terms. Now the world must accept China’s.

harbor 항구 돕다 품다 moderate 완화하다

“They don’t need this to legitimize their rule,” said Xu Guoqi, a historian at the University of Hong Kong and author of “Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008.” “And they don’t need to please the whole world to make the event a big success.”

The I.O.C., like international corporations and entire countries, has become so dependent on China and its huge market that few can, or dare to, speak up against the direction Mr. Xi is taking the country.

China’s critics, activists for human and labor rights and others have accused the committee of failing to press Mr. Xi to change the country’s increasingly authoritarian policies. However, that presumes the committee has leverage to use.

When Mr. Xi’s government faced an international furor after smothering **an accusation** of sexual assault by the tennis player Peng Shuai, a three-time Olympian, the I.O.C. did not speak out. Instead, it helped deflect concerns about her whereabouts and safety.

China’s tenacious — many say ruthless — efficiency was precisely what appealed to Olympic delegates after the **staggering costs** of the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, and the **white-knuckle chaos of preparations** for the 2016 Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro.

As Mr. Xi promised, the toxic air that once choked Beijing has largely, if not entirely, given way to **blue skies**. High-speed **railways** have slashed the trip from Beijing to the most distant venues from four hours to one.

In an area perennially short of water, China built a network of pipelines to feed a phalanx of snow-making machines to dust barren slopes in white. Officials this week even claimed the entire Games would be “fully carbon neutral.”

Christophe Dubi, executive director of the upcoming Games, said in an interview that China proved to be a partner willing and able to do whatever it took to pull off the event, regardless of the challenges.

“Organizing the Games,” Mr. Dubi said, “was easy.”

The committee has deflected questions about human rights and other controversies overshadowing the Games. While the committee’s own charter calls for “improving the promotion and respect of human rights,” officials have said that it was not for them to judge the host country’s political system.

Instead, what matters most to the committee is pulling off the Games. By selecting Beijing, the committee had alighted on a “safe choice,” said Thomas Bach, the committee’s president.

“We know China will deliver on its promises.”

Where Snow Seldom Falls

Beijing’s bid to become the first city to host a Summer and Winter Olympics took root when Lim Chee Wah, the scion of a Malaysian developer of casinos and golf courses, moved to a booming Beijing in the 1990s and wanted a place to ski.

He drove up winding roads northwest of Beijing for five hours to a mountainous region populated by cabbage and potato farmers. The area’s only ski resort was a single wooden building with a dining room, a handful of hotel rooms and a small ski shop.

“I went out and said, ‘Where is the ski lift?’ and they said, ‘You see this road going up?’ ” he recalled in an interview. A Toyota Coaster minibus ferried skiers up the road to the top of the slope.

Mr. Lim, who had learned to ski in the American resort town of Vail, Colo., soon struck a deal with the local authorities to turn 24,700 acres of mostly barren hills into China’s largest ski resort.

In 2009 he met with Gerhard Heiberg, Norway’s representative on the executive board of the Olympic committee, who had overseen the organization of the 1994 Winter Games in Lillehammer. Together, they began envisioning how to hold the Games in the hills near the Great Wall of China.

China had previously sought the Winter Olympics, proposing to hold the 2010 Games in Harbin, the former Russian outpost that is the capital of the northeast province of Heilongjiang. The city did not even make the shortlist in a competition ultimately won in 2003 by Vancouver, British Columbia. The authorities in Harbin mulled another bid in the heady aftermath of Beijing 2008, but scrapped the idea when they seemed destined to fail again.

By then, the luster of hosting the Winter Games had worn off. Vancouver was dogged by unseasonably warm weather. Sochi 2014 — intended as a valedictory of Vladimir V. Putin’s rule in Russia — cost a staggering \$51 billion.

Growing wariness of organizing the quadrennial event gave China an unexpected advantage. Beijing — no one’s idea of a winter sports capital — could reuse sites from the 2008 Games, including the iconic Bird’s Nest stadium for the opening ceremony. The Water Cube, which held the swimming and diving events 14 years ago, was rebranded as the Ice Cube.

Figure skating and short-track speedskating (which provided China its only gold medal in the 2018 Winter Games) will take place at the Capital Indoor Stadium, the venue of the “Ping-Pong diplomacy” between the United States and China in 1971 and Olympic volleyball in 2008.

China promised to spend only \$1.5 billion on capital projects at venues, plus that much in operating expenses, a fraction of the cost for Sochi or the 2018 Games in Pyeongchang, South Korea, which cost nearly \$13 billion.

“When you don’t have the pressure of money the way we do in other contexts, it is really different,” said Mr. Dubi of the Olympic committee.

Even so, China’s bid seemed unlikely to succeed, especially since the 2018 Games were also taking place in Asia and officials expected the next host to be in Europe. Then one European city after another pulled out, leaving Beijing competing only against Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan, once a republic of the Soviet Union.

The final tally was 44 to 40 for Beijing, with one abstention. Almaty’s supporters were left to fume over a glitch in the electronic voting system that prompted a manual recount to “protect the integrity of the vote.” That Kazakhstan has plunged into political turmoil on the eve of the Games seems now, in hindsight, further validation of the choice to pick Beijing.

“I don’t think it’s a stretch and I’m not being disingenuous or negative toward the Chinese — they probably would not have been victorious had some of those European cities stayed in the race,” said Terrence Burns, a marketing consultant who worked on Almaty’s bid and for Beijing when it secured the 2008 Games. “But you know what? They hung in there, and you know, winners find a way to win.”

An Underdog Turned Olympic Power

With the bid in hand, Mr. Xi decreed that China would become a winter sports wonderland, even though very few in China skied. He vowed in a letter to the Olympic committee that the Games would “ignite the passion” of 300 million people.

Underdog 사회적 부정의 희생자

There are now six resorts in the mountains near Chongli, a small city near Zhangjiakou, one of two Olympic clusters created in the mountains north of Beijing. They have spurred a budding interest in skiing, with 2.8 million visitors in the winter of 2018 and 2019, according to [Xinhua](#), compared to 480,000 three years before.

Mr. Lim’s resort was chosen by China’s Olympic organizers for the snowboard and freestyle skiing events. Nearby is the venue for ski jumping, a complex built to resemble a [ceremonial scepter](#) popular in the Qing dynasty, complete with a 6,000-seat stadium at the bottom that is supposed to hold soccer matches after the Olympics.

Events that require longer, steeper slopes — the Alpine races — will take place in another cluster in the mountains near Yanqing, a district on the northern edge of greater Beijing. Creating the seven courses there required extensive blasting to chisel ski runs out of gray cliffs near the Great Wall.

At a time when climate change has created worries about whether many ski resorts may become too warm for snow, the hills northwest of Beijing do not lack for winter temperatures. What the area lacks is water and, thus, snow. When Beijing bid, the evaluation committee raised concern that events would take place in a landscape of barren brown slopes. “There could be no snow outside of the racecourse, especially in Yanqing, impacting the visual perception of the snow setting,” the committee’s report said.

China’s solution was to build pipelines and reservoirs to supply the machines that will cover the courses in snow. (Almaty’s slogan was a subtle dig at Beijing’s plans for artificial snow: “Keeping it Real.”)

Late last month, in the village in Chongli where many athletes will stay, the machines hummed day and night to blow plumes of snow not only on the runs, but also into the woods and fields nearby to create an Alpine veneer — at least for the television cameras.

Workers have also planted tens of thousands of trees, watered by an elaborate irrigation system. Many stand in long, straight rows and look less like natural forests than giant Christmas tree farms.

The Olympic Helmsman

In the months before the 2008 Olympics, Mr. Xi was put in charge of the final preparations. He had only recently joined the country’s highest political body, the Politburo Standing Committee. The role was effectively a test of his leadership potential.

He took a particular interest in [military preparations](#) for the Games, including the installation of 44 antiaircraft batteries around Beijing, even though the likelihood of an aerial attack on the city seemed far-fetched.

“A safe Olympics is the biggest symbol of a successful Beijing Olympic Games, and is the most important symbol of the country’s international image,” he said then.

Preparations for these Games reflect Mr. Xi’s style of governance. He has been at the center of each decision — from the layout of the Olympic Village in Chongli, to the brands of skis and ski suits. In keeping with increasingly nationalistic policies, he voiced a preference for Chinese ski equipment over imports.

When Mr. Xi went to inspect venues in the Chongli district of Zhangjiakou for the first time in January 2017, he ordered the local authorities to make sure that they did not build too much — a frequent tendency of officials in China who use any international event as an excuse for extravagant projects.

He has visited the Olympic venues five times altogether to check on progress, most recently earlier this month, when he said managing the Games well was China’s “solemn pledge to the international community.”

The political resolve that attracted Olympic officials has also become a challenge. Relieved but exhausted after managing the Summer Games in Tokyo, top officials tried to convince Beijing organizers to stick with a similar playbook in dealing with the coronavirus. China’s insistence on continuing with its “zero-COVID policy” created “a lot of natural tension,” Mr. Dubi said.

In the end the Olympic committee bowed to China’s demands for a far more invasive daily testing regimen, requiring thousands of individuals inside a bubble to provide daily throat swabs in an operation that Mr. Dubi said would be “massive” and “complex.”

When Peng Shuai's [accusation of sexual harassment](#) rocked the sports world last fall, the committee found itself caught in the furor.

The official she accused, Zhang Gaoli, oversaw China's preparations for the 2022 Games for three years until his retirement in 2018. The authorities in China scrubbed her accusation from the internet and sought to deflect attention away from the issues — only to see concern over her fate redouble calls for a boycott of the Games or their sponsors.

Cloistered inside their offices in Lausanne, Switzerland, officials could do little except issue a statement suggesting that “quiet diplomacy” was the correct course.

Officials with some national Olympic committees [fumed in private](#). Without the protective cover of the international committee, they feared reprisals if they spoke out individually.

The 2008 Olympics also faced harsh criticism. A campaign led by the actress Mia Farrow called the event the “genocide games” because of China's [support](#) for Sudan despite its brutal crackdown in the Darfur region. The traditional torch relay was hounded by protests in cities on multiple continents, including Paris, London, San Francisco and Seoul.

The accusations against China today are, arguably, even more serious. The United States and other countries have declared that China's crackdown against the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang amounts to genocide. Ms. Farrow's biting sobriquet has resurfaced for 2022, with a Twitter hashtag.

“The severe repression that China has rolled out in Xinjiang, in Tibet, in Hong Kong has all taken place since 2015,” the year that the Olympic delegates awarded Beijing the Games, said Minky Worden, who has followed China's participation in the Olympics for Human Rights Watch for more than two decades.

“The I.O.C. would be within its right to say that these issues have to be addressed,” she said. “They haven't.”

There have been hints of misgivings about the choice of Beijing — “All the political issues driving the agenda today were not on the radar seven years ago,” Michael Payne, a former Olympic marketing director, said — and yet the Games will go on.

Because of the coronavirus, foreign spectators, and even ordinary Chinese, are prevented from attending the Games. Instead, China will allow [only screened spectators of its own choosing](#). It will mostly be a performance for Chinese and international television audiences, offering a choreographed view of the country, the one Mr. Xi's government has of itself.

If the coronavirus can be kept under control, Beijing could weather the Olympics with fewer problems than seemed likely when it won the rights to the Games seven years ago. Mr. Xi's government has already effectively declared it a success. A [dozen other Chinese cities](#) are already angling for the 2036 Summer Olympics.

“The world looks forward to China,” Mr. Xi said in an New Year's address, “and China is ready.”