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In 2001, after two failed bids (1993 and 2000), the International Olympic Committee (IOC) finally awarded Beijing the 2008 summer games. There were different motives behind the decision. First, a change in the international atmosphere allowed a shift from criticising China (over human rights) to a favourable view of its engagement; this also led to it joining the World Trade Organization at the end of 2001. As well as strong governmental commitment and an enthusiastic population (much more so than that of its rivals), Beijing relied on its stunning economic growth at the head of the emerging countries. From this more strategic position, the Olympic Games were able – as happened with Tokyo (1964) and Seoul (1999) – to *formalise* the inclusion of an Asian economic power in the international context.

There were internal IOC motives too, such as the favour of then president Juan Antonio Samaranch, and the awareness that China was rapidly climbing the medal table (from 32 on its debut/return in Los Angeles in 1984 to 100 in 2008) and could be a market and an engine for the Olympic movement. As always, paradoxically, the Olympic Games strengthened both the “international and the national” at once. It spread the values of the Olympics and the opening up to the outside world across China, while at the same time being a supreme celebration of the nation-state, in which China could win pride and international admiration and soothe the trauma of its past “humiliation” at the hands of foreign powers. In the words of then premier, Wen Jiabao (2008), the games were an opportunity to demonstrate that China was “democratic, open, civilised”.

Both the opening and closing ceremonies recapitulated the foundations of Chinese civilisation, but tiptoed around its more recent past, led by the Communist Party. In its “golden moment”, China opted to seduce a global audience of 4.7 billion – the largest in the history of the games – with a narrative and aesthetic discourse more conceived with a foreign audience in mind than a domestic one that does not share the international devotion to the ceremony’s director, the filmmaker, Zhang Yimou.

**Priorities.** The preparations took place in a virtuous decade for the Chinese economy, with annual growth close to 10% and rising tax

receipts allowing powerful investment without subsequent debt. Beyond the spectacular sporting facilities, a significant part of the total \$40bn spent (\$14 billion in investments alone) went on infrastructure: the stand-outs were the new international terminal for the airport and the extension of the subway network – crucial for easing jams and chronic pollution. There were also new light train lines and two ring-roads. Nearly \$3.6 billion was invested in information and communication technology infrastructure. Another priority was to reduce atmospheric pollution, which had moderate and temporary success: polluting factories were closed in the capital and the neighbouring regions; green areas were also opened up and motor vehicle traffic was restricted to reduce emissions.

**Risks and failures.** From the start, the authorities' concern was to avoid large or violent protests in front of a global audience. But in March, a few months before the start of the games, the most serious unrest in the Tibetan community for two decades took place, leading to the deployment of troops and hundreds of detentions, before the Dalai Lama asked for the cessation of violence. Pro-Tibet protests also accompanied the Olympic flame in places such as Paris, San Francisco and London, where it suffered various attacks that enraged Chinese public opinion. The same month, the tense relationship with Taiwan was eased by the arrival of the Kuomintang to power in Taipei, which relieved pressure and allowed discord to be resolved based on creativity and the 1989 agreement that established the Olympic participation of both delegations. Another burning issue on the eve of the games was China's controversial support for Sudan in the context of the Darfur genocide, which led Steven Spielberg to resign as the games' artistic adviser.

As well as the political agenda, the weather complicated the games' staging. In January, the heaviest snowfall for decades affected 100 million people. But the most serious catastrophe was, without doubt, the earthquake in Sichuan in May, which caused 87,150 deaths, left 4.8 million without homes and caused losses worth \$200bn. The catastrophe put the Chinese government in a delicate situation, with questions asked about the quality of the buildings that collapsed (such as schools where, according to official figures, 5,000 pupils died). Even if the issue remains thorny in China today, what is certain is that it then aroused a wave of international solidarity which, for sad reasons, eased the staging of the games.

The feared boycotts did not happen at national level and 204 national Olympic committees, as well as more than a hundred state representatives (80 heads of state) attended the opening ceremony – more than at any other games. It was also the first time a US president had attended a ceremony outside American soil, beginning an era of relative amicability in bilateral relations.

**Benefits.** The Chinese economy's great dynamism prior to the Olympic Games and the outbreak of the international financial crisis just afterwards make it difficult to identify its net yield. It is clear that Beijing's connectivity with the world was strengthened – an aspect in which, despite being the capital, it is behind coastal cities such as Shanghai and Hong Kong. Urban mobility was improved, as was environmental awareness, which has outlasted the games, so that now the authorities are

urged to prevent damage to public health. It also provoked a generalised rise in prices, which has caused the increased diversification of rural migration flows towards other secondary cities. Where the impact was not felt was in tourism, which has not developed to its potential due to the immediate impact of the global financial crisis.

Ultimately, the games were a success in terms of planning and execution, but were not the turning point in political opening up that some predicted. Neither did they cause an advance in the reconciliation of ethnic conflicts: ethnic minorities were portrayed in the ceremonies in a folkloric manner, and in many cases were represented by actors in costume. It was closer to the establishment of a long-term strategy of development and public diplomacy which continued with the Shanghai Expo in 2010 and will go on with the Winter Olympics when they return to Beijing in 2020, when it will become the first city in history to host both games. Though it seems difficult for China to achieve a good result in the winter games medal table, it will serve to continue weaving the network of communications towards the outskirts of the capital, which aspires to be a different kind of metropolis, one that is modern and global.

