

Beijing in preparation for the 2008 Olympics: A study of newspaper content and themes in the *People's Daily*

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Abstract

This study systematically analyses coverage by the People's Daily of the Olympics in the lead-up to the Beijing 2008 Games, as part of a wider study of perceptions and journalistic practices in China. Using a quantitative approach, the paper focuses on the preparatory phase of the Beijing Olympics in order to identify reporting trends across a range of content categories.

While this study confirms the centrality of Beijing as the dominant site of influence and prestige in the context of the forthcoming Olympics, it also identifies a complementary shift in coverage towards other parts of China, as a conscious means of fostering national unity and promoting traditional culture in the lead-up to the 2008 Games.

Introduction

This study analyses the *People's Daily* and its coverage of the Beijing Olympics, to be hosted in 2008, as part of a wider study of media perceptions and journalistic practices in China. Researchers have studied the Chinese media and journalism culture in China (Lynch, 1999; Zhao, 2000; Huang, Davies & Knight, 2002; Xin, 2006; Lee, He & Huang, 2006; Zhang, 2006; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006); however, studies of the *People's Daily*, especially in relation to contemporary events like the Beijing Olympics, are timely. The time-frame for studying the Olympics has previously been

divided into five phases by McManus (2005): the pre-bid phase, the bidding process phase, the organizing phase, the Olympics competition phase, and the post-Olympics phase. As part of a wider study of media perceptions and journalistic practices, this research focuses on the *People's Daily* and the organizational phase of the Beijing Olympics, during January and June of 2006. This paper examines the themes and content of Beijing Olympic coverage in the *People's Daily* during the lead-up period to the event. Its findings show that, while devoting considerable space to Beijing as the capital and chosen site for the Olympics, the *People's Daily* is more likely to promote the event as an opportunity to present Chinese traditional culture, and to seek to involve different places and different segments of the population.

The *People's Daily* was founded in 1948 in China. According to Lynch (1999), it:

joined Xinhua (news agency) to form 'the twin pillars' of the Party's media, and side by side the two were guided by the Central Committee of the CCP in order to keep the same tone for events concerning the interests of the Party (Lynch, p.160, quoted in Xin, 2006, p.51).

The Xinhua News Agency released the party's instructions and the *People's Daily* published Xinhua's news releases. In Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's influential work (1956), mass media are divided into four models: the authoritarian theory, the libertarian theory, the responsibility theory, and the Soviet Communist theory. From this perspective, the *People's Daily* should conform to the Soviet model. However, ongoing historical changes and the impact of commercialisation world-wide means that Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's work are less applicable than they were fifty years ago. Yet the situation of Chinese media has been a more dynamic one in recent decades. According to Zhao (2000), there were, prior to 1978, three major parts in the Chinese press: party organs (like the *People's Daily*), target papers (like the *Worker's Daily*), and bureaucratic papers (like the *Health News*). Since the introduction of a market economy in 1978, the Chinese media model has also undergone changes. The growth of the market economy facilitated press prosperity and resulted in market-oriented and financially independent newspapers. Zhao (2000) states that, since 1978, the Chinese government began to push newspapers towards the dynamics of market.

Chinese press reform experienced two important phases—commercialisation (1978-1996) and conglomeration (1996-1998). In short, for Huang, Davies and Knight, “current Chinese news media can be divided into two major categories: traditional Party news media... and commercialised news media” (2002, p.1). They contend that party media closely follow the party’s line; at the same time, “commercialised media...have committed themselves to informing and entertaining, and consumers and advertisers have largely replaced the Party state as their new ‘God’” (Zhao, 1998, as cited in Huang, Davies & Knight, 2002, p.16). Even the traditional Party news media have gained financial support from advertisements. Therefore, the Chinese media model now is a mixed one, along with the economy, and more open to international business practice than it had been prior to 1987.

One anticipated change, reflective of the new Chinese media environment, is a shift in emphasis away from the routine reporting of party politicians and official news towards increased human interest stories and business coverage. Coverage of selected months during 2006 confirms both of these trends, even in the *People’s Daily*. At the same time, its attention to sports competitors overshadows the reporting of sporting organizations, suggesting that the bureaucracy associated with the Olympics is not, even in the preparatory phase, overshadowing media interest in individual athletes and their commitment.

Methodology and data collection

Quantitative research methods (content analysis) have been employed to conduct this study. Quantitative research methods are widely used and accepted in the social sciences (Berger, 2000, p.16). This study collected all articles that mention 2008 Olympics in the *People’s Daily* of China in January and June 2006. The study then divided all articles into ten categories as follows: economy/business, social/local, educational/cultural, political, environmental, retrospectives, sports organizations, sports competitors, summary/update, and other. Economy/business involves construction, tourism, sports business, and advertisements mentioning the 2008 Olympics. Some articles are categorized as “educational”, without specifically mentioning the Beijing 2008 Olympics. One such example is a column entitled “Improving the People’s Health and the Olympics” in the *People’s Daily* (14 June

2006). Articles which mention Olympic champions and technical details, and do not refer to the 2008 Olympics are categorized under “other”. Articles which only mention athletes taking illegal drugs and/or the Chinese Olympics anti-drug committee, are categorized under “other” too. Because of the combination of kicker, headline and subheading in the *People’s Daily* articles, these will be cited together in full through this paper. This study omits the articles that only mention a former Olympic champion without mentioning the champion’s previous performance in Olympic competition. Updates are counted as one even if the update includes several stories at once. For example, where there are short news items grouped under a title such as “Beijing Olympics in brief”, all this is counted as one. A photo relating to the Games is also counted as one, while an article with a photo is counted as two.

Data analysis

In the sample, 37 stories are identified for January and 73 stories are identified for June in the *People’s Daily*. Chart One and Chart Two show the number of stories in each category and the percentage that each category occupies in total Olympic coverage for January and June respectively.

Chart One: Newspaper content for Jan 2006

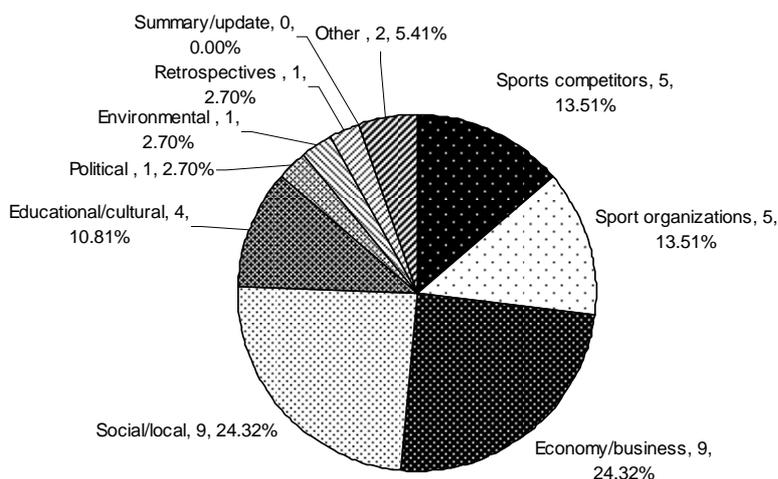
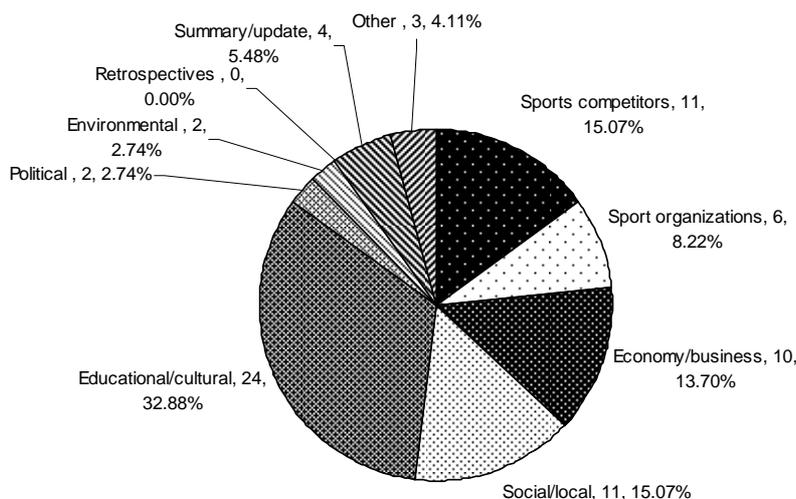


Chart Two: Newspaper content for June 2006



Note: Chart One and Chart Two show the number of stories and the proportion of the stories for each category, e.g. in Chart One, for the sports competitors category in January, 5 indicates that there are 5 stories within the sports competitors category in January; 13.51% indicates that the stories within the sports competitors category take 13.51% of the total Olympic coverage in January 2006 in the *People's Daily*.

According to Charts One and Two, sports competitors, sports organisations, economy/business, social/local and educational/cultural are the main categories. Of these main categories, four - sports organisations, economy/business, social/local and educational/cultural categories - involve Beijing. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, this paper focuses on these four content categories.

Sports organisations

It is obvious that the reporting in the *People's Daily* for January and June 2006 presents a common theme, namely the provision of information about the preparation for the Beijing Olympics and the view that preparations are going well. The *People's Daily* tries to achieve this goal in a number of ways, for instance, by quoting from reports from international Olympics officers on Beijing developments. Under sports organizations, in January and June 2006, the Beijing Organising Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG) is certainly the most prominent focus of Olympic coverage in the *People's Daily*. Most of the reports on BOCOG are

concerned with preparation for the Beijing Olympics. There are seven stories on BOCOG under the sports organisations category in January and June 2006 in the *People's Daily*, which comprise 63.64% of coverage in that category. The proportion of reports about BOCOG under sports organisations increases from 40% in January to 83.33% in June 2006. Of the five stories which appear under sports organisations in January 2006, two stories are devoted to BOCOG, two stories are about the General Administration of Sport of China, and the other is a comment from the President of the International Olympic Committee.

The article "BOCOG wants Olympics medal design in the world wide" (January 12 2006, p.12, 4 pars), reports that BOCOG is calling for medal design for the Beijing Olympics all over the world; there will be three winners, who will each get thirty thousand Chinese dollars (RMB). The article "BOCOG executive committee meeting: Great attention to the preparation for test competition-more than 40 test competitions will be held since August this year-Liuqi presides over the meeting, Zhili Chen attends the meeting" (14 January 2006, p.6) is also four paragraphs in length and reports on the work undertaken by the meeting in organising and arranging the test preparation.

The two articles reporting on the General Administration of Sport of China, present the themes of preparing well for the Beijing Olympics and promoting the development of sporting achievement and contribution. The article "Zhili Chen emphasises in her speech to the General Administration of Sport of China meeting: comprehensively carry out scientific development, promote sport achievement to higher stage", attracts considerable prominence (20 January 2006, p.12, 5 pars). Madame Zhili Chen is State Councilor and First Vice-President of BOCOG. The attendance of Madame Zhili Chen marks the event as a significant one. Madame Chen summarises the situation for the last five years and explains how to improve over the next five years. The meeting considers studying the opportunity of promoting the development of sport in preparation for the 2008 Games. The second article, "The situation of preparation for the 2008 Olympics is serious: The possibility of getting gold medal of favoured items is nearly restricted, trying to improve less favoured

events” (20 January 2006, p.12, 5 pars), reports that the director of the General Administration of Sport of China analyses Chinese strength and that of its opponents in preparation for the Beijing Olympics. The fifth article in this category: “Rogge says: Beijing Olympics will become a milestone to know China and Beijing” (14 January 2006, p.6, 4 pars), quotes favourable comments on the Beijing Olympics by the International Olympic Committee President.

In June 2006, the common theme in reporting on sport organisations is that the preparations for the Beijing Olympics are going well, one which reinforces its January coverage. There are six June stories devoted to sport organisations. Of the six, five stories are about BOCOG. The article headed, “The vice president of the Russian Olympic Committee says: BOCOG’s efficient work makes people feel confident” (3 June 2006, p.3) takes prominent placement. The article reports the view of the Russian Olympic Committee, after assessing the preparatory work of BOCOG, that the Chinese Olympic stadium and sport center will be available before 2007. According to this source, the preparations of BOCOG are better than those for the Athens Olympics where preparation continued until the opening ceremony. The other stories on BOCOG are about its progress, for instance: “BOCOG begins to recruit volunteers” (6 June 2006, p.11); “The president of BOCOG reports to the International Olympic Committee: the preparation for the Beijing Olympics is going well according to the plan” (23 June 2006, p.12); “the security work for the 2008 Olympics test competition is ready” (8 June 2006, p.12); and “Beijing will build Olympic emergency center” (23 June 2006, p.11).

The remaining story under sports organisations is about the city of Qinhuangdao, which is one of the six co-host cities of the Beijing 2008 Games. Qinhuangdao will host the football matches for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad at the Qinhuangdao Olympic Center Stadium (Official website of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, 1 February 2006, par.1). Located at the eastern part of Hebei Province, Qinhuangdao is only 280km away from Beijing. Lying adjacent to the Bohai Sea, it is an ideal domestic summer resort. The article, “The 2008 Olympics is approaching, preparation work in Beijing and other six co-host city is active: Qinhuangdao moves toward Olympics” (2

June 2006, p.12), receives significant prominence. Occupying 13 paragraphs under four subheadings, it is the longest article under the sport organisations category in June 2006. It reports on Qinhuangdao preparations, what has been done and will be done for the Beijing Olympics.

Economy/Business

Chart One and Chart Two show that the proportion of reports on economy/business declines from 24.32% in January to 13.7% in June in the *People's Daily*. The reportage on economy/business presents several themes - building the Olympic stadiums, employment, and sponsored goods. As the host city, Beijing plays a major role in the 2008 Olympics. Eleven new stadiums will be established in Beijing for the 2008 Games (Yan & Wang, 2006); the Olympics' sponsored goods are to be launched in Beijing. In all, there are 12 stories on Beijing, which take 63.16% of economy/business coverage in the *People's Daily* during January and June 2006.

There were nine articles on economy/business in the *People's Daily*, which constitute 24.32% of the total Olympic coverage, in January 2006. Of the nine, four articles involve Beijing. The article, "Beijing Olympics 'nest' appears", reports that the 11 new buildings for the Beijing Olympics in Beijing are under construction and that the building work is progressing well. The news heading, "The Olympics cause will generate an additional one million three hundred and ten thousand jobs for Beijing", points out that the Beijing Olympics will increase jobs, economic growth and it will change the composition of industries in Beijing. The other two stories are about the Olympics sponsored goods ("The annual meeting for the Beijing Olympics sponsored enterprises is called"; "The first Olympics sponsored goods shop outside mainland settles in Macao").

There are ten stories on economy/business in the *People's Daily*, which constitute 13.7% of the total Olympic coverage, in June 2006. Among the ten, eight stories involve Beijing. Four stories report the situation of building the Beijing Olympics stadiums in Beijing. Accompanied by a photo, the article entitled "Implementing the concept of a scientific Olympics: Independence and new ideas for the construction of

the Olympic stadium” (12 June 2006, p.1), reports that the frame of the 2008 Olympic main stadium has now been erected. The special material used in the pillar is a highly technological product and was developed in China. Beijing combines the preparation of Olympics and accelerated national development. It has already invested one hundred million RMB for research on the Olympic building and facilities, and organised more than four hundred experts to provide consultation. The photo “Feverish Olympics construction” (18 June 2006, p.4), and the article “The national swimming center rises” (18 June 2006, p.4) also report on building processes used for the Beijing Olympics stadiums. The other four stories involving Beijing are about the Olympics market, Olympics sponsored goods and donations for the Beijing Olympics stadium.

Social/Local items

In total, twenty stories are identifiable under the social/local category in the *People’s Daily* for January and June 2006. Among the twenty, 18 stories concern people in non-official roles, or not located in Beijing. This shows that the *People’s Daily* is now trying to involve the common people, including those from other places. As a result, the percentage of the stories concerning Beijing under the social/local category drops from 100% in January to 18.18% in June 2006. This change confirms that the *People’s Daily* has begun to cover places outside Beijing in its Olympic reportage. Looking forward to the Beijing Olympics and working for the Beijing Olympics are the themes of the stories under the social/local category in the *People’s Daily* for January and June 2006.

There are nine stories under the social/local category in the *People’s Daily* of January 2006. All the nine stories involve Beijing and involve people other than professionals associated with the Olympics. “The Olympics dream of the new fireman” (18 January 2006, p.10), accompanied by four photos, describes how a new recruit in Beijing tries his best in training and wants to serve the Beijing Olympics. “The construction at an elevation of 249.9 metres” (19 January 2006, p.10), with three photos, depicts construction work on a tall building. No article appeared in the paper on the more sensitive issues of workers or on-site construction issues.

Eleven of the social/local stories are identified in the *People's Daily* for June 2006. It is noteworthy that nine stories, or 81.81% of the total June coverage, do not involve Beijing. Most stories in the social category in the *People's Daily* for June 2006 appear under a regular column, entitled "Me and Olympics-Relating my own story on Olympics". Eight stories of the 11 stories appear in this column. There are no recurring set of stories within the social category for June 2006. Stories under the regular column, entitled "Me and the Olympics-Relating my own story on the Olympics", are about common people's stories concerning the Olympics. For example, "Olympics accompany me around" reports that the author bought many Olympic mascots and always talked about the Olympics on the bus to work. One day, when the author was talking about the Olympics, a lady asked "why don't you go to work by bicycle now that you are so enthusiastic about the Olympics?" The author answered, "are you suggesting I take part in the national fitness programme? OK! I will!"

Education/Culture

A noticeable change in the educational/cultural category in the *People's Daily* is the increased proportion of the stories overall, rising from 10.81% in January to 32.88% in June. In other words, the educational/cultural category in the *People's Daily* becomes the largest in June after registering only as fifth in January. The theme of the stories under educational/culture, in both January and June 2006, is the exhibition of Chinese traditional culture, the promotion of cultural identity and the spreading the Olympic knowledge. The Beijing Olympics mascot Fuwa appears under the educational/cultural category in the *People's Daily* in January and June 2006.

Fuwa serve as official mascots for the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, carrying a message of friendship and peace - and good wishes from China - to children all over the world (Official website of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, 4 February 2008, pars.1, 4, 8-13). Significantly, the Fuwa represent rural symbols and concepts, rather than modern or metropolitan ones. There are in all five Fuwa - Beibei, Jingjing, Huanhuan, Yingying and Nini. Fuwa Beibei symbolises prosperity and harvest, and

carries the blessing of prosperity. Fuwa Jingjing “symbolises the lush forest and the harmonious relationship between man and nature” (Official website of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, 4 February 2008, pars.10). A number of these creations relate directly to China’s hosting of the Olympic Games. Fuwa Huanhuan, for example, symbolises the Olympic Flame and the passion of sport. Yingying, a little antelope, symbolises the vastness of China's landscape. The selection of the Tibetan antelope is meant to reflect Beijing’s commitment to a Green Olympics. Nini, a joyful swallow, represents the green Olympic ring.

Four stories are identifiable under the educational/cultural category in the *People’s Daily* in January 2006, which comprises 10.81% of total Olympic coverage in the *People’s Daily* for that month. Of the four, two stories concern Beijing, which are “Olympics education go onto Beijing campuses”, and the photo “I go with the Olympics”. The photo, “Multicoloured thread embroiders the Fuwa” (9 January 2006, p.11) reports that an embroidery expert is teaching students to embroider the Olympics Fuwa mascot. The comment, “Cultural security” (10 January 2006, p.12), calls for cherishing and preserving China’s own culture. The article indicates that abandoning its own culture will leave China with nothing to bring to global communication, and asks what will the Beijing Olympics then have to show the world? This article raises the issue of cultural identity and promotes awareness of Chinese cultural identity among its readers.

The educational/cultural category in the *People’s Daily* for June 2006 comprises twenty-four stories, which occupies 32.88% of the total Olympic coverage in the *People’s Daily* of June 2006. Of the 24, 19 stories involve Beijing; four stories involve Beijing and other places. The educational/cultural category in the *People’s Daily* for June 2006 contains two recurring sets of stories: reports about the animated cartoon Fuwa (the 2008 Olympics mascot) and the cultural presence of a Chinese province, Guangxi, in Beijing. The subject of Fuwa comprises two articles. The article (7 June 2006, p.12) entitled “The first animated cartoon on the Olympics will come into being- ‘Fuwa’ accompanied you throughout the Olympic hundred years’ history- It will be finished at the end of 2007” gives a brief introduction to the production of

the animated cartoon. The second (23 June 2006, p.14), “An animated cartoon ‘Fuwa wanders Olympics’ is advertising for a well paid script”, reports that the promotional department of the Beijing Committee, Beijing TV station and a company are prepared to pay big money to get excellent script for the animated cartoon, “Fuwa wanders Olympics”.

The second subject concerns the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region which is equivalent to a province. With Southeast Asia in close proximity to the south, and sitting adjacent to Vietnam, the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region on the northern extremity of the Beibu Bay is southwest China’s gateway to the sea. Guangxi embraces 986 rivers and 1500 kilometres of coastline (Chinese Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region government’s official web portal, 1 February 2008, par.1). The Zhuang ethnic group, a minority ethnic group in China with 56 ethnic groups, is the main minority ethnic group residing in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. In total there are 12 ethnic groups living in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (Chinese Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region government’s official web portal, 1 February 2008, par.1). These 12 ethnic groups have their own languages and customs, making Guangxi’s culture colourful and diverse.

The second subject under education/culture category consists of three articles. The first (“‘2006 Beijing-Guangxi cultural vessel’ sails into Beijing: Hui Liangyu and so on attend the opening ceremony”, 10 June 2006, p.2), receives significant prominence. Hui Liangyu, of the Hui minority ethnic group, is vice premier of State Council and Member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee (Chinese Government’s official web portal, 17 Dec 2007, par.1). Because of Mr Hui Liangyu’s national leadership role in China and his minority ethnic group background, Hui Liangyu’s attendance is significant in connecting the Beijing Olympics with different ethnic groups and places, and his attendance guarantees the event great prominence. The article reports that the Guangxi cultural vessel contains performances, an exhibition of fine arts, a tourist introduction, addresses by Guangxi’s cultural celebrities, achievements displayed at the China-Eastern Asia fair, and good luck Olympics. The second article on the Guangxi cultural event claims that

the cultural vessel might become Guangxi's cultural brand. The third story on the Guangxi cultural event is a short news item, which is "The Guangxi cultural vessel expresses good wishes to the Olympics" (15 June 2006, p.12).

The Guangxi cultural event appearing here means that different ethnic groups and different areas are becoming involved in the 2008 Olympics. That is the central goal of the 2008 event - the importance of participation.

Results

The above content analysis of the main four categories between January and June reveals a declining proportion of the stories for the sports organisations, economy/business, and social/local categories and an increased proportion of the stories under educational/culture. The proportion of *People's Daily* reports on sports organisations, economy/business, and social/local categories in June drops 5.29%, 10.62%, 9.25% respectively compared with January. At the same time, the proportion of newspaper coverage on education/culture rises dramatically by 22.07% in June compared with January. While Beijing plays a central role in Olympic coverage under the sports organisations, economy/business, education/culture categories, there are nevertheless significant variations occurring across the main four categories. The percentage of the stories concerning Beijing under the social/local categories in June declines 81.81% compared with January, while Beijing coverage under the sports organisations, economy/business and educational/cultural categories increases in June by 43.33%, 35.56% and 29.17%.

Under sports organisations in January and June 2006, a common theme of the reporting in the *People's Daily* is the provision of information about preparations for the Beijing Olympics and the view that these are going well. As anticipated, BOCOG is certainly a prominent focus of Olympic coverage in the *People's Daily*. However, Qinhuandao, one of the six co-host cities of the Beijing 2008 Games, receives significant prominence in June 2006. Under economy/business for both January and June 2006, the themes of coverage are about preparation and infrastructure - building

the Olympic stadiums, employment, and sponsored goods. In this context, Beijing becomes the prominent focus. In this category, the proportion of stories concerning Beijing increases from 44.44% in January to 80% in June 2006. Under the social/local category, where the themes of the coverage are looking forward to the Beijing Olympics and working for the Beijing Olympics, the pattern is much less evident, with stories on Beijing declining from 100% in January to 18.18% in June 2006. Under education/culture, coverage turns to the exhibition of Chinese traditional culture, the promotion of cultural identity and the spreading of Olympic knowledge. Although stories on Beijing increase from 50% in January to 79.17% in June 2006, the *People's Daily's* reportage on Guangxi's cultural presence in Beijing takes precedence in Olympic coverage during June 2006.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the *People's Daily's* coverage of the Olympic preparations constitutes a blend of journalism and public relations, in so far as its reports indicate the smoothness of preparations and a degree of popular interest. Predictably, its reports tend to downplay environmental issues and human rights stories, in favour of social/local and education/cultural items, while coverage of sporting organisations like BOCOG is less critical than would be expected of Western outlets at such times. These findings tend to confirm the views of scholars like Zhao (1998) that Chinese media have moved beyond their traditional role without seeking to raise potentially embarrassing issues for the government.

An internal political issue associated with the staging of an international event like the Olympic Games is the centralisation of power and influence in the capital city of the host country. In the case of China and 2008, this paper has demonstrated, through content analysis, that Beijing is a significant focus of preliminary coverage. This would be predictable enough if the *People's Daily* were simply a capital city paper (in the manner of the *Sydney Morning Herald* for example), but the paper's national rather than regional status (in the manner of the *Australian* to continue the local example), makes it more vulnerable to domestic criticism, at a time when the gap

between city and country has widened in China and the staging of the Olympics signals a further centralisation of political and economic power.

Within the columns of the *People's Daily*, tensions between modernity and tradition are evident in the paper's emphasis on technology and professionalism on the one hand, and a persistent emphasis on cultural identity through human interest and arts stories on the other. In the context of such a prominent event as the Olympics, the *People's Daily's* coverage of sport (competitors and organizations) is relatively unremarkable by Western standards, rising little above 25% of Olympic reportage across the period under examination. This study, while more limited in scope, confirms the recent analysis of Shoemaker and Cohen (2005) that, of ten countries surveyed, sport was least important in the Chinese media. In this respect, the *People's Daily*, with its emphasis on traditional cultural identity, appears to reflect not simply official reserve but a more widespread national mindset.

At the same time as its column – 'Me and the Olympics – Relating my own story on the Olympics' – seeks to connect the Beijing Olympics with the common people, the paper's cultural coverage of co-host city Qinhuangdao features sites other than Beijing in June. The reporting of the Guangxi cultural event, in particular, constitutes a notable departure from the Beijing-dominated coverage of January and to a lesser extent June, in that it evokes a wider national imaginary in which different ethnic groups are also actively present.

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