

**Branding a City through Sport Events News:  
Evidence from Beijing's Two Olympic Games**

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### **Abstract**

Beijing, the first city in the world to have hosted both the summer and winter Olympic Games, branded itself through these two Olympics. This study selected 1599 reports on two Olympics from People's Daily, the largest state-owned newspaper in China. Taking reference to the existing city brand evaluation methods, this paper coded reports into the following 10 categories: politics, economy, ethics, environment, prerequisites, culture, science, education, globalization, and irrelevant reports. Analysis of People's Daily's urban brand building of Beijing during the two Olympic Games indicates that the number of reports on the political topic had the highest percentage during both Olympics. People's Daily branded Beijing as a united city dominated by the government during the 2008 Olympics while describing Beijing as a political center with responsibility during the 2022 Olympics. In addition, this study also compared the narratives of the different themes reported during the 2008 and 2022 Olympics and the Beijing city brand presented under the theme. The number, main topics of coverage, and the proportion of each topic all differed during the two Olympics. Different national leadership, stages of economic development, guiding philosophies of the two Olympic Games, the underlying national conditions, and the characteristics of media in different eras could explain those differences.

*Keywords:* city branding, Beijing, Olympic Games, People's Daily, central media

### **Introduction**

Hosting mega events, which possess unique international media exposure and promotion is regarded as an excellent opportunity for the implementation of city branding (Whitson, & Macintosh, 1996; Milton-Smith, 2002). For host cities, the modern Olympic Games, one of the largest and most significant peacetime events in the world, is seen as a media event, a tourism attraction, a marketing opportunity, a catalyst for urban development and renewal, a local image creator and booster, an inspiration for youth, and a force for peace and international understanding (Toohey & Veal, 2007; Zhou & Ap, 2009). The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics became an important milestone that transformed the economic, political, and cultural dynamics of the games (Dyreson, 2015). The billions of viewers that the medium brought to the spectacle also made the host city aware of the infinite possibilities of branding the city through media (Dyreson, 2015; Wenn, 2015). Mercille (2005) found that media representations could have a strong influence on the international image of the audience to some extent. Li and Kaplanidou (2013) confirmed that event media could affect respondents' destination brand perceptions and followers of Olympic Games media coverage may be likely to have more positive attitudes toward the host destination image than those who do not. Since the successful bid for the Olympic Games in 2001, China has been committed to showcasing China's national image and promoting Beijing's city brand to the world, including and not limited to its fast economic growth, modernization, rich culture, and friendly people (Xu, 2006; Economy & Segal, 2008, Meng & Li, 2011).

After the 2022 Winter Olympics closing ceremony was held on 20 February 2022, Beijing became the first dual Olympic city in the world to have hosted both the Summer and

Winter Olympics. Numerous studies of Beijing city branding have analyzed and compared the specific changes in respondents' perceptions of the city before and after the Olympics in multiple dimensions based on surveys of Beijing residents, non-Beijing Chinese residents, and international respondents (e.g., Zhang & Zhao, 2009; Zhou & Ap, 2009; Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Li & Kaplanidou, 2013; Liu, Broom & Wilson, 2014; Liu, Hautbois & Desbordes, 2017; Xu, Wu & Li, 2022). Even though it has been confirmed that the impact of the Olympic Games on their destination brand perception tends to be moderated by the Olympic media exposure, studies mostly focus on tourism management, audience attitudes, and destination image. There is still a gap in the field of how organizers brand Beijing through the media.

In this paper, we discuss the city's image presented in the People's Daily and the branding strategies adopted by the central media during the period between the success of Beijing's two Olympic bids and the end of the Games. City branding creation in China primarily follows political rather than business channels (Ma et al., 2020). Local government is the core stakeholder in city brand creation. Specific brand content is positioned by government planning. While urban plans such as the Beijing Urban Master Plan (2016-2035) need to be approved by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the State Council. The brand of a Chinese city belongs essentially to the CPC (Fan, 2006). The success of the two Beijing Olympics was also the result of the leadership of the CPC, reflecting the characteristics of the socialist nationhood system. On this basis, analyzing the city branding strategies of the central media led directly by the CPC not only fills in the above gap but also draws conclusions on how China brands its cities. In addition, previous

studies have focused on the city branding of a single Beijing Olympics in 2008 or 2022. This paper attempts to explore the changes in China's foreign publicity strategy by comparing the two Olympic Games with the historical tracing of China's specific national conditions.

## **Literature Review**

### **City Branding: Theory and Methodology**

A growing number of studies have discussed the connotations of city branding, among which city value and identity have become two key words. A successful branding is considered to be able to deliver core urban values that are valid, distinctive, appealing, durable, and communicable (Gertner & Kotler, 2004). The key challenge of city branding is delimiting a city's identity and core values in a manner that is widely acceptable, easily marketable, presentable and open to experience in a daily manner (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2007). Merrilees et al. (2013) consider city branding as a strategy that presents a city with an unforgettable identity and an instrument that can convey the core values of a city with agility. Ahn et al. (2016) believe city branding is becoming a strategic asset in communicating the city value and achieving a competitive position. In other word, city branding needs to synthesize various core values of a city and to transform them into a recognizable and irreplaceable identity.

The focus of city branding research is to create methods or frameworks that can be widely applied to evaluate urban branding. The most influential and widely used methodology developed by Simon Anholt is City Brands Index, which consists of the following six dimensions: (1) presence; (2) place; (3) prerequisites; (4) people; (5) pulse; (6) potential.

The Saffron European City Brand Barometer is also a highly influential method for evaluating city brands (Hildreth 2008). Jeremy Hildreth, the manager of the British Saffron Brand Consultants, brought this model and measured European cities with at least 450000 inhabitants. This ranking uses two comprehensive aspects: City asset strength and City brand strength. The city asset strength mainly evaluates the following seven elements in decreasing order of importance: (1) sightseeing and historical attraction; (2) economic significance of prosperity; (3) cuisine and restaurants; (4) how easy it is to get around on foot and public transport; (5) costs very little to enjoy; (6) has good weather; (7) shopping. City brand strength mainly evaluates respondents' cognition of the city, which is composed of the following four elements: quantity/strength of positive/attractive qualities, pictorially recognized, conversational value and media recognition.

Another framework is the Global Cities Index developed by A.T. Kearney, which provides a comprehensive ranking of the leading global cities from the world (Kearney, 2012). GCI updates every year and seeks to assess the competitiveness of over 150 cities across five dimensions: business activity, human capital, information exchange, cultural experience, and political engagement. To achieve this, the Index considers factors such as the city's market dynamics, education levels, information access, culture and entertainment options, and presence of international civic organizations.

In addition, other researchers have derived individual elements of city branding through evaluation studies of cities. Through a quantitative study of 12 British cities, Hankinson (2001) argues that City councils' city branding is motivated by political objectives rather than the profit objectives. Wang (2019) explores green city branding from the

perceptions of multiple stakeholders with society's growing environmental concern.

### **Beijing and Two Olympic Games**

Beijing is the capital of the People's Republic of China. The Beijing Urban Master Plan (2016-2035), approved by the central government in 2017, positioned Beijing as the political center, cultural center, international communication center, and science and technology innovation center of China (Beijing Municipal Government).

Beijing has a resident population of nearly 22 million. 2021, Beijing's annual gross regional product is 4,026.96 billion yuan (about 557 billion US Dollar), second only to Shanghai among all Chinese cities. Beijing is also a famous historical and cultural city in China, which was the capital of six dynasties in history and has seven world cultural heritage sites, including the Great Wall, the Forbidden City in Beijing, the Peking Man Site in Zhoukoudian, the Summer Palace, the Temple of Heaven, the Thirteen Ming Tombs and the Grand Canal. According to Anholt-Ipsos City Brands Index mentioned above, Beijing ranks in the fourth tier (31-40) in 2020, is mostly recognized for its presence. KEARNEY captures the impact of COVID-19 and the related lockdown measures on cities, resulting in The 2021 Global Cities Report based on the In Global Cities Index (GCI), in which Beijing is ranked 6th in the world.

Beijing is chosen for this study not only because it is the central city of China and the most representative city in China, but also because of its unique experience of being the world's first dual Olympic city. It is increasingly common for cities to attempt to brand themselves. Japan used the 1964 Olympics as the perfect stage to realize its new identity as a peaceful internationalist and Tokyo as a recovered and renewed city (Droubie, 2011; Wilson,

2012). Athens expected that the success of the 2004 Olympics would have a positive impact and thus invite the world to “surprise yourself in Athens Attica” (Kavaratzis, 2007). The Olympic Games are often seen as an effective branding tool by host cities as they make them the center of the international spotlight, increasing tourism and global awareness both before and after the games (Berkowitz et al., 2007) China hosted the Olympics with similar expectations.

The Games of the XXIX Olympiad, the first time China hosted the Games, were successfully bid in 2001 and held in Beijing from August 8 to 24, 2008. Several hundred million watched worldwide on TV as more than 40 world records and over 130 Olympic records were broken (the International Olympic Committee). Having won the bid for the 2022 Olympic Winter Games on 31 July 2015, Beijing became the first city in the world to have hosted both the summer and winter editions of the Olympic Games. Table 1 shows a detailed comparison of the two Olympic Games in terms of branding, mascots, slogans, and the concept of the Games.

### **Central Media in China and City Branding through Media**

In China, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has leadership over the work of the press and public opinion, and all types of media at all levels are under the management of the CPC. After entering the Internet era, media with government approval have the right to collect information and publish news on the Internet, and other media could reprint news from the aforementioned media. Of all the government-approved media outlets with autonomous reporting rights, 18 are directly affiliated with the CPC Central Committee, known as the Central Media, and are considered to be the mouthpiece of the CPC and the



people.

People's Daily, founded in 1948, is the largest state-owned newspaper in China and the most influential and high-profile central media. Now People's Daily also supervises or sponsors nearly 30 other newspapers and magazines. The overseas edition of People's Daily is the most authoritative comprehensive Chinese daily newspaper published in China, and is dedicated to becoming a unique window to introduce China to the world. People's Daily has a long history of authority and has always undertaken the task of guiding public opinion and publicizing the policies and guidelines of the CPC.

Since the 21st century, city branding has received increasing attention, and the role of the media is pivotal to city branding. Avraham (2000) suggests that audiences often learn about a city they have not personally experienced through media news coverage. The city brand shaped by news reports acts on the audience through the media, thus forming the city brand image perceived by the audience. Xu et al.(2021) studied the People's Daily's coverage of Shenzhen and concluded that it carried out the will of the Communist Party of China and played a role in branding the city. City branding is drafted by the local government, but requires final approval from the central government in China.

To explore People's Daily's urban brand building of Beijing, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What was the main city image of Beijing in the central media during the two Olympic Games?

RQ2: What are the differences between the branding of the city of Beijing during these two Olympic Games?

RQ3: What led to the differences of media's reports on these events?

## **Method**

### **Data**

This paper takes the news reports of People's Daily as the object of study. Using "Beijing" and "Olympics" as keywords, we searched the online database of People's Daily for news reports with the above keywords in titles from January 1, 2001, to December 31, 2008, and from January 1, 2015, to December 31, 2022.

By deleting reports with duplicate content and those that were not related to the Beijing city brand after verification, a total of 1599 reports that met the requirements were finally obtained. Among them, 280 reports were during the Beijing 2022 Olympic Games and 1319 reports were during the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games.

### **Coding Scheme**

Existing city brand evaluation methods such as City Brands Index, the Saffron European City Brand Barometer and Global Cities Index evaluate city brands in terms of culture, economy, facilities, politics, education and vitality (Anholt, 2006; Hildreth, 2008; Kearney, 2012). Taking reference of all the frameworks mentioned above, this paper aims to code reports into the following 10 categories (see table 2): (1) politics: includes government governance and policy issuance, domestic political activities, international political engagement and diplomatic activities (e.g., "Some foreign leaders congratulate Beijing on the success of the Olympic Games"); (2) economy: introduces the economic situation of the city, business activities, development of the market and purchasing power of citizens (e.g. "Global sponsors and suppliers are focusing on the huge market of the 2008 Olympic Games"); (3)

ethics: describes initiatives such as volunteer services to improve public etiquette and ethical standards (e.g. “Beijing launched the ‘queuing day’ activities”); (4) environment: introduction to ecological conditions, climate and the efforts made to achieve them (e.g. “Beijing practices green Olympic commitment”); (5) prerequisites: the quality of the city’s amenities and public services (e.g. “Beijing has strengthened fire security during the Olympic Games”); (6) culture: reports on Beijing’s traditional and modern culture, historical heritage such as the Great Wall and Beijing opera (e.g. “The Great Wall ignites the sacred fire of the Beijing Olympics”); (7) science and technology: description of scientific and technological achievements and their application in urban construction (e.g. “Beijing Olympics successfully practiced scientific development”); (8) education: introduces educational opportunities, university status, talent training and so on (e.g. “Investing in training high-quality sports talents”); (9) globalization: describe the degree of internationalization of the city, its global influence and visibility (e.g. “The International Olympic Committee released a report saying that the global audience for the Beijing Winter Olympics exceeded 2 billion”); (10) unrelated reports: reports not related to city branding of Beijing (e.g. “The International Paralympic Committee has provisionally accepted snowmobiles as a competition event for the 2022 Beijing Winter Paralympic Games”).

### **Coding Procedure**

This study uses a single report as a coding unit. Two coders, both native Chinese speakers, independently completed coding all 1599 news reports using the coding scheme. If a single story covered several themes, the coder would record its primary theme. The coding results of 800 reports (over 50% of total sample size) were then extracted from the total

sample for the inter-coder reliability test. The consistency test was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27, and the output Cohen's kappa result was  $0.975 > 0.8$ . The coding results were considered reliable, with strong consistency, and met the requirements.

### Results

Among the 1,319 reports during the 2008 Olympic Games, the largest number of reports shaped Beijing's image from a political perspective. Figure 3 shows all the topics covered during the 2008 Olympic Games and their percentages, except for those not related to Beijing's city branding, the number of topics covered from highest to lowest are politics (n=259, 19.6%), globalization (n=225, 17.1%), ethics (n=144, 10.9%), economy (n=140, 10.6%), prerequisites (n=136, 10.3%), culture (n=99, 7.5%), science and technology (n=49, 3.7%), environment (n=43, 3.3%) and education (n=19, 1.4%).

Figure 4 shows all the topics and their percentages of 280 stories during the 2022 Olympic Games. The largest share remains in the political category. The topics ranked 2-9 were prerequisites (n=49, 17.5%), ethics (n=31, 11.1%), globalization (n=28, 10.0%), environment (n=19, 6.8%), culture (n=16, 5.7%), economy (n=12, 4.3%), education (n=9, 2.9%) and science and technology (n=7, 2.5%).

The differences in branding in relation to the main city images of Beijing during the two Olympic Games will be discussed in the following section.

#### **Politics: The Gradual Accentuation of Ideology**

Beijing was branded as a city dominated by the government and united in hosting the Games during the 2008 Olympics. Coverage of political themes was the first choice for People's Daily to brand Beijing.

People's Daily took a more micro perspective at this stage. In the domestic political sphere, a major entry point for People's Daily was the specific activities of government officials, such as the Beijing mayor's inspection of the Olympic preparations and visits to the construction of venues. Under the leadership of the government, Beijing citizens who fully supported the Olympics and the various sectors that were fully preparing for the Olympics also become the main point of the coverage. The report showed through a hidden framework that the Beijing Olympic Games embodied the advantages of the socialist system. From the bid, preparation to hosting the Olympic Games were carried out under the strong leadership of the CPC and the State Council.

In terms of international politics, People's Daily wrote several articles on national leaders, such as then President Hu Jintao, Vice President Xi Jinping receiving foreign guests and other friendly diplomatic events, and also introduced one by one other national leaders who would attend the opening ceremony of the Games or show their support for the Beijing Olympics. In this way, the political influence of Beijing worldwide is highlighted.

Similar to the 2008 Olympics, coverage of political topics remained the highest of all topics, and the percentage increased significantly from 19.6% in 2008 to 29.3% in 2022. Beijing was branded as a city a political center with responsibility at this stage.

The political theme has the richest content of any coverage. People's Daily took the initiative to set the agenda by linking the preparation for the Winter Olympics with the in-depth study and implementation of General Secretary Xi Jinping's important instructions and the 20th Communist Party of China Congress. The reports will also intentionally highlight Chinese words with socialist characteristics, such as "China Road", "Chinese

Dream” and “Community of Human Destiny”. Propagating socialist ideology became an essential agenda for People’s Daily during the 2022 Olympics.

### **Globalization: A Reduction in Negative Coverage**

During the 2008 Olympic Games phase, the globalization theme was given more emphasis, with a ratio nearly twice that of the 2022 Winter Olympics phase. Specifically, People’s Daily built up the image of Beijing as a popular international city through two main parts.

On the one hand, People’s Daily portrayed Beijing’s image of embracing the world with open arms from its perspective. For example, in preparation for the Olympics, Beijing standardized the English signage in public places. BOCOG organized a number of activities for the world, including the “Olympic Family Tour of Beijing” and the global call for Olympic slogans, songs and torch designs. Through the above-mentioned reports, People’s Daily has created an open and inclusive international brand of Beijing.

On the other hand, People’s Daily portrayed the Beijing Olympics as popular and anticipated in terms of the attitudes of governments and people around the world. The 2008 Olympics were met with protests and boycotts during the torch relay and subsequent events. Although People’s Daily referred to such boycotts, the specific content and details were not immediately reported. Meanwhile, stories such as “Boycott of the Beijing Olympics will hurt the interests of the European and Chinese people”, “British Prime Minister says he will not boycott the Beijing Olympics” weakened the negative impact of the event. People’s Daily responded with statements of other countries. In addition, to highlight Beijing’s international influence, People’s Daily wrote stories about each city where the Olympic torch arrived.

The topic of globalization ranked fourth during the 2022 Olympics, with People's Daily portraying Beijing as a globally recognized host city for the Winter Olympics.

The People's Daily painted a rosy picture of how the world is looking forward to the Beijing Winter Olympics. The 2022 Olympics faced a serious international boycott. At the end of 2021, following the announcement by the United States that it would not send an official delegation to the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and other countries joined the diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics. Faced with news that sparked widespread concern on an international scale, People's Daily chose to avoid it and then launched a special feature "Meet the Beijing Winter Olympics" at the beginning of 2022. People's Daily, was very cautious in choosing the interviewees, including Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr., chairman of the IOC's Beijing Winter Olympics Coordination Commission, John Eliasch, president of the International Ski Federation, Ole Dahlin, president of the International Biathlon Union. With statements from interviewees with close ties to the Winter Olympics or winter sports, People's Daily portrays Beijing as the expected host city for the Winter Olympics with global influence. This paper analyzes this special feature as an indirect response to the diplomatic boycott of the Winter Olympics.

### **Ethics: From Process to Results**

People's Daily devoted a lot of pages to the programme initiated by municipal government to change behaviour of all its residents and to modernize Beijing during 2008 Olympics. For example, the city of Beijing issued the civilized Internet surfing initiative, held the anti-smoking and no-spitting activities, queuing day activities and so on. There were also reports of impolite behaviors of Beijing citizens such as red light jumping, spitting, swearing,

and cab rip-offs. The former had a large number of reports, while only 3 out of 144 reports on ethics explicitly mentioned the problem of citizens' quality to be improved, and showed through some rhetoric that these shortcomings existed only in the past and have been improved now. The narrative logic under this theme is that the quality of Beijing's citizens before 2008 Olympics was inadequate, and many quality-enhancing activities were held for the Olympic Games, thus the quality of Beijing's citizens has now been improved. The paper also finds a concealed framework regarding the motivation for improving the public's ethical standards, which is such actions were intended to present a good image of China to the world, rather than for city building or citizens themselves.

Olympic volunteers were seen as the most appropriate window to show the quality of citizens. The phrase "volunteers' smiles are the best name cards of Beijing" appeared repeatedly in the reports on this topic.

During the 2022 Olympics, People's Daily painted a beautiful picture that the spiritual influence of the Winter Olympics radiated through Beijing and even the whole country. The spirit of the Winter Olympics was repeatedly emphasized. People's Daily pointed out that holding the Olympic Games and serving the people were successfully combined in Beijing. Led by the spirit of the Winter Olympics, the ethical standards and physical quality of Beijing's citizens have been improved. Not only did China achieve the goal of "300 million people on ice and snow" proposed in the process of bidding for the Winter Olympics, but also the masses took the initiative to participate in the process of volunteering.

### **Prerequisites: The Raising of Sustainability Philosophy**

Highlights of coverage during the 2008 Olympics was Beijing's infrastructure construction in full swing. In this section the People's Daily focused not on Beijing's existing



infrastructure or urban operation capacity, but on the progress and developments made by the municipal government for the Beijing Olympics. Specifically, these included the construction of subways and additional buses to build a convenient and smooth transportation network for the Olympics; the renovation of urban villages and public toilets to create a good urban environment and the increase of security and firefighting facilities and forces to ensure absolute safety for the Olympics.

Comparing the coverage during the two Olympic Games, it is easy to see that the focus of the coverage has changed. During the 2008 Olympics, People's Daily highlighted the capacity of urban infrastructure construction, while during 2022, it emphasized the government's planning capacity and the efficiency of infrastructure use.

At the latter stage, People's Daily branded Beijing around the story of the construction of the Winter Olympics venues, highlighting the concept of "Olympic legacy". Specifically, Beijing has embraced the concept of sustainable development by transforming the 2008 Olympic legacy with green technology for the 2022 Winter Olympics. The news reports followed almost every Beijing Winter Olympic venue from preparation to completion of construction. It also highlighted details such as Beijing's reduced one-time investment and expectation of long-term utilization, indicating that the cost of this renovation of the venues is far less than the investment in new venues and large-scale renovations.

The subsequent use of the 2022 Winter Olympics venues was also ambiguous. It has been 10 months since the end of the Winter Olympics, but the People's Daily report did not give a detailed description of the current use of the Beijing Winter Olympics venues. Instead, it described the future use plan from a macro strategic perspective.

**Economy: Rapid Economic Development under the Olympic Effect in 2008**

Economic topics accounted for the fourth largest share of coverage during the 2008 Olympics. The positive economic benefits of the Olympics for Beijing were highlighted. Sponsors, Olympic tickets and tourism were the focus of People's Daily's coverage. Terms such as "huge", "enormous" and "optimistic outlook" were used to describe Beijing's economy and market, while terms such as "internationally renowned" and "giants" were used to describe the sponsors of the Games, highlighting the global influence of Beijing's economy. Although Chinese companies accounted for nearly half of the global partners, sponsors and suppliers of the Beijing Olympics at all levels, this was not reflected in the number of reports accordingly.

People's Daily also described and followed up on the sale of Olympic tickets in detail, reporting on the price of tickets, the total number of tickets and their sale by stages. Economic reports also looked at the positive effects of the Olympics on Beijing's tourism industry, suggesting that world tourism would focus on China and that 2008 would be the year of Olympic tourism. However, the news was all predictive before the opening of the Games. The People's Daily did not follow up with statistics on the final results of ticket sales and tourism development during and after the Games.

### **Culture: A Profound Blend of Traditional and Modern Culture in 2008**

In the process of building the Beijing brand, the People's Daily presented the city's culture through reports on both traditional and modern culture. In terms of modern culture, the "Meet in Beijing-2008" Olympic cultural activities became the focus of coverage. BOCOG not only held Olympic photography exhibitions in many countries, but also held more than 200 cultural activities during the three-month period, covering various art forms

such as opera, drama, dance drama, concerts, comprehensive singing and dancing parties, and cultural exhibitions. The events were held all over Beijing, with over 3 million visitors on site. The coverage of traditional culture focused on Beijing's ancient architecture such as Qianmen and the Great Wall, and traditional food culture such as the capital's cold drinks. There were also several reports interpreting the traditional Chinese elements contained in the Olympic torch and costumes.

Apparently, the People's Daily wanted to portray a city with both traditional cultural characteristics and an open and modern temperament. However, study shows that the tangible, eye-catching local liberal arts and ancient architecture remained the most dominant representative cultural symbols during the Beijing Olympics, and the "top-down" defined, intangible cultural values were not well understood or widely accepted (Zhang&Zhao, 2009).

### **Environment: A Green City with Effective Environmental Management in 2008**

Beijing's rapid economic and social development has also generated serious environmental problems, especially serious air pollution which has a huge impact on public health. Since 2013, Beijing has implemented a five-year clean air action plan (Beijing Municipal Government). In the time frame chosen for the sample reported in this paper, the annual average value of pm2.5 in Beijing was found to be 80.6  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  in 2015, and dropped to 33  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  in 2021 (Beijing Municipal Ecology and Environment Bureau).

The focus of People's Daily's coverage was not on the process and experience of Beijing's air cleaning, but rather dedicated to showing the results. "Green Winter Olympics" became the key word in the coverage of the environmental theme. People's Daily pointed out that sustainability is not only the philosophy of the Winter Olympics, but also the philosophy

of Beijing's development. Almost all of the content of the reports on the green city was written after 2018, that is, after the air pollution control had achieved significant results.

People's Daily seemed to try to brand Beijing as a green city.

In summary, the central media mainly branding Beijing from the aspects of politics, globalization, ethics, economy, prerequisites and culture from 2001 to 2008. During this period, Beijing was shaped into a cosmopolitan city with a well-governed government, a rapidly growing economy, an improved public quality, a strong infrastructure, and a fully integrated culture. From 2015 to 2022, the central media mainly branding Beijing from the aspects of politics, prerequisites, ethics, globalization and environment. People's Daily dedicated to shaping Beijing's ideological and political leadership at home as well as its role as a great power in the world. At the same time, People's Daily has established the brand of Beijing as a well-built city with high quality people, global recognition and a beautiful environment.

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that the image of Beijing portrayed by the People's Daily is not a complete picture of the city from all dimensions, but the result of a strategic approach that highlights certain dimensions.

## **Discussions**

### **The Explanation for the Difference**

People's Daily branded Beijing as a city in the following different ways during two Olympic Games. First, the number of reports differs. The number of reports jointly related to "Beijing" and "Olympics" searched from 2015 to 2022 is only 280, while the number of reports searched from 2001-2008 is 1,319, which is more than 4 times of the former.

Second, the main themes of coverage differ. Although politics was the first major theme for both, the rest of globalization, ethics, and prerequisites, which were common as the main themes of coverage, did not have the same importance during the two Olympic Games. In addition, the environment became the main theme during the 2022 Winter Olympics, while economy and culture became the main themes during the 2008 Olympics.

Third, the proportion of coverage differs. From 2015 to 2022, branding Beijing from a political perspective accounted for nearly one-third of the total coverage, while the rest of the coverage, although major themes, was much smaller in proportion than the political-related coverage. Correspondingly, the coverage from 2001 to 2008 was more evenly divided across main themes, remaining at around 10%.

Finally, the content of the coverage differs. In addition to the specific contents analyzed above, this paper finds that the reports of the central media during the 2008 Olympic Games contained some negative contents, such as reports on the low quality of citizens and the international boycott of the Olympics. While the reports during the 2022 Winter Olympic Games highlighted more positive images and did not report any negative news.

At this point, research questions 1 and 2 have been solved. Research question 3 requires an analysis of the reasons for these differences, which will be integrated below with China's political system, the basic national conditions of the different eras, the differences between the two Olympics, and so on.

China experienced a change of national leadership between the 2008 Olympics and the 2022 Olympics. At this stage, ideological and political work has penetrated all areas and links of national governance. The central media directly reflects this in its content. As a result, the

proportion of political coverage during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics period has increased significantly.

The underlying national conditions of the different eras have also led to these differences. Since 2013, Beijing has officially put air pollution control on the agenda. The latest data shows that in 2022, Beijing has made great achievements in air pollution control, with the annual average PM<sub>2.5</sub> concentration dropping to 30  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ , a 66.5% decrease from 2013 (Beijing Municipal Ecology and Environment Bureau). As a result, environmental news became an important choice for People's Daily to brand Beijing at this stage. In contrast, during the preparation and hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games, according to the Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau, Beijing did not conduct regular monitoring of air quality. Thus, the theme of ecology and the environment was not emphasized in the reports during this period.

China's economy was also at different stages of development during the two Olympic Games. Beijing's economic development had maintained high growth for consecutive years. In 2008 Beijing's GDP grew by 9%, with per capita GDP exceeding US\$9,000 for the first time (Beijing Statistical Bureau). The fast-growing economy has become an important business card for Beijing, and the hosting of the Olympic Games has brought new opportunities for the city's economic development. Using host cities as leverage to create a rich Olympic legacy and drive economic development has become the main thrust of several countries hosting the Olympics. In 1964, the Tokyo Olympics, the first Olympics to be held in Asia, propelled Japan's rapid economic development after World War II and made it an integral part of the world economic system (Droubie, 2011). The organizers of the Los

Angeles Olympics fueled the economic dynamics of the games by television broadcasting funds and showed a culmination in the interrelationship of sport and economy (Seifart,1984; Dyreson, 2015). The urban transformation generated by the 1992 Barcelona Olympics from the successful bid had a profound and positive economic impact. By making the most of the Olympic legacy, the city succeeded in enhancing its attractiveness among European cities (Brunet, 1995, 2017). Although subsequent studies have argued that the specific and long-term impact of the 2008 Olympics on Beijing's economy is controversial (Brunet & Xinwen, 2009; Rose& Spiegel, 2011; Tien, Lo, & Lin, 2011; Huang, 2011; Li, Blake, & Thomas, 2013; Scandizzo, & Pierleoni, 2018), the People's Daily took the Olympic economy as to promote urban industrial development as an important narrative of this period. Thus, during the 2008 Olympic Games phase, coverage around economic themes such as Olympic sponsors, ticket sales, and tourism development became an important way for People's Daily to brand Beijing.

The economic situation in Beijing and even China has gradually changed during the preparation phase for the 2022 Winter Olympics. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, Beijing's economic growth has been affected, with GDP growth falling to a minimum of 1.2% in 2020 (Beijing Statistical Bureau). According to China's regulations on COVID-19 control, gathering activities are not allowed and traffic operations have been affected. As a result, tickets for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics were not on sale to the public, and the impact of the games on tourism was reduced. Therefore, at this stage, People's Daily did not build the image of Beijing from an economic perspective.

Finally, the characteristics of media in different eras have led to these differences. With

the advent of the all-media era, the influence of traditional media has gradually diminished, and the Central Committee of CPC has put forward the requirement of promoting the development of deep media integration. The central media, represented by the People's Daily, has been seeking to transform into new media. Newspapers are no longer the only battlefield for the news and opinion work of People's Daily, and social media platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and Tiktok have become important platforms for content construction by People's Daily. However, the content on these platforms is not updated on the newspaper side simultaneously, so it led to the difference in the number of paper media reports between the two Olympic phases.

### **China's Foreign Publicity Practices and Strategies**

The reasons for the different images of Beijing presented by People's Day during the two Olympic Games mentioned above show that adjusting publicity practices to the national conditions and publicity needs of different periods is the basic approach of People's Daily. The essence of this strategy is to carry out the will of the CPC, from which the publicity strategy of the Communist Party of China can be derived.

In further analysis, the author found that People's Daily carried out the concept of the two Olympics to different degrees in the practice of branding Beijing. The concept of the 2008 Olympics is the People's Olympics, Green Olympics, and High-Tech Olympics. However, the topics with a greater proportion of coverage in the People's Daily during this period are politics, globalization, ethics, economy, and prerequisites. Among them, only the reports related to moralizing citizens under the ethics theme fit with the concept of People's Olympics. In contrast, the concept of "Green, Inclusiveness, Openness and Transparency" of



the 2022 Olympic Games has a stronger presence in the reports of People's Daily at this stage. As can be easily seen from Figure 4, the above topics are the most reported in People's Daily during the 2022 Olympic Games. Therefore, compared with the 2008 Olympics, People's Daily's choice of reporting content during the 2022 Olympics is more in line with its Olympic philosophy, and the strategy of branding Beijing is more obvious. This article argues that the People's Daily has enhanced its overall ability to coordinate reporting topics, which is a further reflection of the strengthened leadership of the CPC. In the practice of foreign publicity, CPC can determine the content of central media coverage according to the needs of publicity.

In terms of the specific effects of branding Beijing, comparing brand perception studies of Beijing based on audience surveys, it can be concluded that there is a gap between the branding of Beijing by the People's Daily and international perceptions. Bodet and Lacassagne (2012) found that British residents tended to associate negative and unattractive terms such as repression and pollution with Beijing rather than positive terms such as joy and solidarity. Based on a quantitative study of U.S. respondents, Li and Kaplanidou (2013) concluded that the 2008 Games had a limited impact on Beijing's city brand while respondents who followed the Olympics through the media tended to have a more positive impression.

Even if the branding of Beijing through the central media did not achieve the desired effect, the current results can still be seen as a stage in the foreign publicity work of People's Daily. In China, the Olympics was deliberately used to increase the confidence and self-esteem of the Chinese people (Liu, Broom & Wilson, 2014). This article argues that the

publicity practice of the People's Daily around the Olympics, such as branding Beijing, is the same as the purpose of holding the Olympics, which is essential to cultivate national pride internally.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The coverage of political themes accounted for the highest proportion in both Olympic phases, which is essentially a manifestation of People's Daily taking political values as its core values. In China, the central media is under the direct leadership of the Communist Party of China, and its value system demands that it should assume the historical responsibility and mission of the era. Therefore, in terms of content construction, the central media represented by the People's Daily need to play the role of the main front of public opinion and deliver the spirit and instructions of the CPC Central Committee to the masses. Its branding of Beijing is not based solely on comprehensive, objective journalism, or on the intentions of the Beijing Municipal Government. In fact, the Beijing municipal government's city plans need to be submitted to the CPC Committee and The State Council for approval. In addition, Beijing, as the capital of China, has an important status as the political center. This also adds to the process of branding People's Daily Beijing with the requirement of publicity around the basic theories and lines of CPC. In this sense, journalism is equivalent to publicity.

In addition, this paper integrates the City Brands Index, The Saffron European City Brand Barometer and the Global Cities Index to produce a coding scheme of seven categories, namely politics, economy, ethics, prerequisites, culture, environment and education. Initially, globalization content, such as diplomacy-related and China's international status, was covered in the politics category. However, during the coding process, it was found that there

were a large number of globalization reports, such as the global transmission of the torch and the attitudes of the general public from other countries towards the two Olympic Games in Beijing that could not be simply classified into the politics category. Therefore, this paper adds globalization as a new category, determines its content as describe the degree of internationalization of the city, its global influence and visibility. Subsequently, the content of stories under the politics category was also standardized as government governance and policy issuance, domestic political activities, international political engagement and diplomatic activities. Second, the coding process also revealed a significant number of reports related to technology. Considering that the three major concepts of the 2008 Beijing Olympics include technology, and that this theme was not covered in the previous categories, this paper added technology as a dimension to evaluate city branding. Although the final study data showed that technology was not the primary dimension, its proportion was still higher than the proportion of the education category, which was already in the original coding scheme. Therefore, it is considered reasonable to add the above categories.

### **Limitations**

The coding results showed that a large proportion of stories were classified as irrelevant during both Olympics. It is considered that the method of collecting data through keyword search headlines is somewhat problematic and needs to be improved. And the fact that the People's Daily has far fewer pages on the 2022 Winter Olympics around Beijing's city branding than during the 2008 Olympics, which is thought to be related to the media characteristics of the new media era. Future studies may try to analyze from a full media perspective and include an investigation of social media content.

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**Table 1***Comparison of the Two Olympic Games Held in Beijing*

	<b>Beijing 2008</b>	<b>Beijing 2022</b>
Date of successful bid	July 1,2001	July 31,2015
Holding time	August 8,2008	February 4,2022
Brand	Figure 1	Figure 2
Slogan	One World One Dream	Together for a Shared Future
Mascot	Fuwa	Bing Dwen Dwen
Concept	People's Olympics, Green Olympics, and High-Tech Olympics	Green, Inclusiveness, Openness and Transparency

**Table 2***Coding Scheme*

Category	Description	Example
1.Politics	includes government governance and policy issuance, domestic political activities, international political engagement and diplomatic activities	“Some foreign leaders congratulate Beijing on the success of the Olympic Games”
2.Economy	introduces the economic situation of the city, business activities, development of the market and purchasing power of citizens	“Global sponsors and suppliers are focusing on the huge market of the 2008 Olympic Games”
3.Ethics	describes initiatives such as volunteer services to improve public etiquette and ethical standards	“Beijing launched the ‘queuing day’ activities”
4.Environment	introduction to ecological conditions, climate and the efforts made to achieve them	“Beijing practices green Olympic commitment”
5.Prerequisites	the quality of the city’s amenities and public services	“Beijing has strengthened fire security during the Olympic Games”
6.Culture	Beijing’s traditional and modern culture, historical heritage such as the Great Wall and Beijing opera	“The Great Wall ignites the sacred fire of the Beijing Olympics”
7.Science and technology	description of scientific and technological achievements and their application in urban construction	“Beijing Olympics successfully practiced scientific development”
8.Education	introduces educational opportunities, university status, talent training and so on	“Investing in training high-quality sports talents”
9.Globalization	describe the degree of internationalization of the city, its global influence and visibility	“The International Olympic Committee released a report saying that the global audience for the Beijing Winter Olympics exceeded 2 billion”

10.Unrelated reports	reports not related to city branding of Beijing	“The International Paralympic Committee has provisionally accepted snowmobiles as a competition event for the 2022 Beijing Winter Paralympic Games”
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**Figure 1**

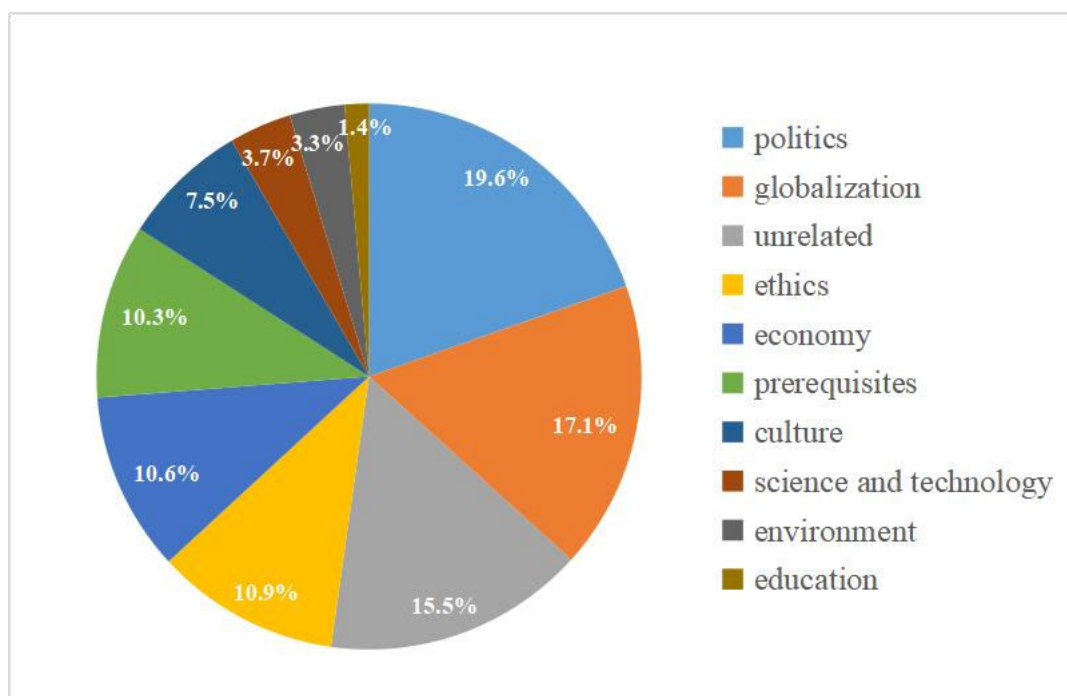
*Brand of Beijing 2008*



**Figure 2**

*Brand of Beijing 2022*



**Figure 3***Coding Results of 2008 Olympic News Coverage*

**Figure 4***Coding Results of 2022 Olympic News Coverage*