



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Owning the Olympics

Price, Monroe, Dayan, Daniel

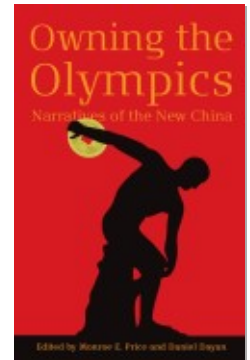
Published by University of Michigan Press

Price, Monroe & Dayan, Daniel.

Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China.

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/6372>

# Introduction

---

*Monroe E. Price*

**I**t was precisely one year before the 2008 Olympic Games would begin, and a deep smog covered Beijing. The day, August 8, 2007, was filled with the symbolism of anticipation. An official ceremony, triggered by the magic moment marked on a special clock, began the grand unveiling, with 10,000 carefully selected people celebrating in Tiananmen Square. This would be the best and the biggest Countdown Ceremony in Olympic history precisely because it could be no other way. Everything about Beijing 2008 had to be spectacular, superlative, outsized. At least such was the hope of China and the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG). Even the smog, reframed as just another barrier for the powers that be to overcome, would be turned into a sign of what Beijing could and would accomplish.

That day and the week surrounding it were a dress rehearsal not only for the Olympics' officials but also for those seeking to seize the occasion to make their own global point. The very day of the countdown ceremony a group of young Canadians and others sought to subvert the official line and gain global press notoriety by rappelling down a portion of the Great Wall to reveal a banner emblazoned with the words "One World, One Dream, Free Tibet." That week, as well, Reporters Without Borders staged a demonstration with participants wearing T-shirts that depicted the Olympic Rings transmogrified into

handcuffs. And Amnesty International (2007), Human Rights Watch, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (2007) all used the count-down moment to issue sober and critical reports on China's shortcomings in the field of human rights.

The staged happenings that week, official and unofficial, serve as a metaphorical preface to this book on narratives and counternarratives. They offered a foretaste of this extraordinary chapter in the history of sport, media events, the evolution of China, and the shaping of global civil society. What occurred then encapsulated the contradictions in the Games, the many and diverse efforts to control how they are understood, and the global interest in their outcome. Rather than one strong unified message, the Beijing Olympics had already become polyphonic, multivoiced, many themed.

In view of this multiplicity of competing voices and themes, it may be worth starting with what, from an Olympics point of view, could be deemed the official story. The chair of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Jacques Rogge, was present at the Tiananmen celebration to give the blessing of the IOC, and he praised the already completed achievements. The physical markers of the Olympics—the great stadia—were almost all standing, built not only on time but ahead of schedule and, thus, strong symbols of China's ability to conceive grandly and execute with efficiency. Another high official, Liu Qi, BOCOG's president, attributed to the people of Beijing a phrase that captured the sense of solidarity that China wished to communicate. Beijingers, he said, had expressed their relationship to the Games with this minor chant: "I participate, I contribute, I enjoy" (Yardley 2007). Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, also conveyed the impression that a nationwide consensus marked this hallmark moment:

Across the country, Chinese people are celebrating the occasion in various ways. In the city square of Urumqi, capital of northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, residents performed roller-skating, martial arts and Taiji under red banners reading "Fitness campaign to welcome the 2008 Olympics." More than two thousand Tibetan natives and tourists gathered on Wednesday morning in Lhasa to mark the countdown. The celebration starts with a domino display by 2,008 middle school students from Lhasa as they dropped to the ground one after another on the plaza before the Potala Palace, forming the pattern of the Olympic rings and the number "2008." "I am honored to be part of the celebration and I hope I can visit Beijing to watch the games next year," said Ouzhu, an 18-year-old Tibetan student. Residents in

Beijing found various ways to express their joy. A resident named Zhao Yue'e in Huanghuamen community around Jingshan in downtown Beijing gathered with friends at the countdown clock in her community. "We are not just waiting for the Games, we are welcoming and expecting it to come," she said. (2007)

With a remarkable lack of irony, the authorities were responding to various kinds of global criticism. While the Olympics had undoubtedly united the residents of Beijing present, these images of Beijing solidarity were in stark contrast to the claims of many, including the Geneva Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, which had in June published an extensive critical study on the impact of the Olympics on the destruction of housing (COHRE 2007). And Xinhua, by invoking joy in Tibet, was taking on the highly controversial issue of China and human rights.

One could feel the tensions generated by the various efforts to fix the meaning of and define these Games through news accounts across the world, a large number of which featured unofficial narratives not sponsored or devised by the IOC or China. The big story in the *New York Times* on Countdown Day dealt with the counternarrative that was the subject of the Geneva study: the human and aesthetic cost involved in the massive patterns of destruction in Beijing (Yardley 2007). Under the headline, "In Beijing, a Little Building Is Defying Olympic Ambitions," Jim Yardley wrote, "The two-story building where Ms. Sun's ancestors opened a bakery in the 1840s—their clientele included the Qing emperor and his court—has been on Beijing's demolition list since Monday. Local officials have notified the Sun family that the building is along the route of the Olympic marathon. Land is needed for a beautification project. A bulldozer is parked outside. Demolition is not new in the surrounding Qianmen area, a historic neighborhood being razed and rebuilt as a shopping district for the Olympics. What is unique is that Ms. Sun is refusing to leave. She is the last holdout on a street once lined with shops. Landscapers have already covered the rest of the block with saplings and a sheet of green grass. Her building is an unsightly stump marring the view."

The *Los Angeles Times* marked the occasion by raising other themes relating to human rights. In an editorial, it concluded that "it is consumers, the international media and cultural colossi such as Steven Spielberg—not preachy foreign governments—who can best further reform in China by speaking out before the Olympic torch arrives. We

wish China peace, prosperity and successful Games—but not a system that jails journalists, silences dissidents and ignores the brutalization of the people who make the products the world enjoys” (2007).

The *Guardian* celebrated with a long essay, of more than 7,000 words, that included the following summary: “As the first Olympics in a communist state since Moscow in 1980, a battle looms over the message of the 2008 games. For the ruling party, it is the ultimate propaganda opportunity to show the government’s success in lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. For Tibetan independence activists, human rights campaigners, supporters of the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement, persecuted peasants and environmentalists, it is a chance to expose the dark side of the planet’s biggest one-party state. But perhaps more than anything, it will show how China’s market reforms, begun 30 years ago, have transformed the country into one of the great centres of globalisation; how movement—from the countryside to the city, and between the homeland and the rest of the world—has changed millions of lives” (Watts 2007).

Other media focused on themes relating to the environment, labor abuses, Tibet, and Darfur. Canadian papers reveled in the story about their young citizens who had been arrested for the Great Wall Tibet event. The group was interrogated for 36 hours and bundled off by plane to Hong Kong and then back to Canada. According to the *Globe and Mail*, at least one participant was unapologetic about “her role in the audacious stunt. ‘As a Canadian who enjoys the rights we have, I feel we have a responsibility to step up and take action on behalf of others who don’t have those rights,’ she said. ‘When I see something wrong, I was taught to do something about it. Well, Tibet has been brutally occupied by China for 50 years, and that’s wrong’” (Mickleburgh 2007).

The German press (Wolf 2007) gave significant coverage to German politicians who struck the human rights theme with respect to China. Martin Zeil, an official with the Free Democratic Party, threatened the possibility of a German boycott of the Olympic Games (two U.S. members of Congress had introduced boycott resolutions that week as well). “We must not stand idly by, but need to build up public pressure instead,” Zeil said. He had been “shaken by the deplorable incidents in China brought to light” in human rights reports. “We cannot say: sport is one thing and politics another.” An article in the Russian press nevertheless suggested that the world is not of one opinion on China and

the Olympics (Kashin 2007). The piece suggested that with a year to go before the Beijing Games, the West was “launching a China-criticism campaign,” apparently concerted, and that not only would pressure on China increase but “the anti-China campaign” should be seen as a warning for Sochi (site for the 2014 Winter Olympics), where propaganda pressure on Moscow “was likely to be even more intense.”

All of this—the world spinning narratives and counternarratives from the phenomenon that was already becoming the Olympics of Beijing—was grist for our editing mill. By summer of 2007, many of the main themes, official and unofficial, surrounding the Olympics were beginning to fall into place. One of our authors, Briar Smith, who taught at Peking University that summer, describes her experience of domestic press coverage, where the Beijing Olympics were frequently tied to an important national historical narrative.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the Olympics were seen literally as a Chinese renaissance, a term used over and over again by Smith’s Chinese students. According to Smith’s observations, limited to be sure, of the reactions of one group of students, the Olympics were intended to suture the painful wounds of colonization and humiliation at the hands of foreign powers. They would heal the wounds of the past partly by forcing the rest of the world to take notice of the strength and power of the PRC. Again and again Smith heard that the Games were a historical mandate, part of the country’s birthright and part of what it was owed for its decades of decay and loss of face in the world. In the national consciousness, a triumphant Olympics will mark the return of the Middle Kingdom’s reputation for acting as a proud host to the rest of the world, as epitomized during the Tang dynasty—a time of great cultural sophistication, complex infrastructure, and technological advancement.

Smith’s students also used the Olympics to develop a new and highly compressed history of modern China. According to this narrative, when China was colonized by Japan, there was no Olympic team. During the civil war and transitory period when the Communists took over, troubled China had a paltry medal count. Taking a nearly 30-year break from the Olympics, a period that included the turbulent era of the Cultural Revolution, allowed Taiwan to get its Olympic team off the ground (inflicting a wound on PRC national pride that has endured ever since). When China reemerged in the 1980s, stronger economically and ideologically, the country immediately stunned the world with its medal count in Los Angeles and has remained in the ascen-

dancy ever since. But the dramatic climax would come now, in 2008, with China (or Beijing) acting as host astride a great economy and increasing world influence.

One of the central themes of this book is that there is an inherent instability about great events that makes them subject to capture in surprising and unanticipated ways. China intended the “One World, One Dream” theme to project a benign, harmony-seeking China emerging as a powerful yet positive global force. Reinforcing the idea of a renaissance or restoration of political place, the Olympics were presented time after time as China’s “coming out party,” its reinvention for world recognition as an economic, political, and social power. China wished to show itself as having a massive population that was united in wanting China to succeed. Internally, the desire was to surmount what China might characterize as the sideshows of quarreling over the means by which the state was making one of the great transitions in world history. If this were to be the century of China, then the Olympics would be a useful point of departure.

But this did not mean that there would not be jockeying to be on the global public agenda or involved in the defining of China. On Countdown Day in August 2007, a representative of the thousand-strong Uighur community who lived in the United States appeared on WNYC in New York in an effort to bring global attention, through the Olympics, to that Muslim ethnic minority who are living on the identity margin of China and seeking greater autonomy. Those concerned with the future of Darfur and China’s related role at the UN and in Sudan were closely calibrating what Olympics-related steps to take, and at what stage to leverage them, in order to affect China’s policy in Sudan. The Falun Gong had somehow fallen out of the mainstream news coverage of China and human rights, but there were undoubtedly strategies in place to reintroduce that narrative as well.

The various actors or authors involved—China, global civil society, corporations, religious organizations, and others—have displayed a variety of techniques for affecting public understanding. Each recognizes the potential of surprise: unanticipated global crises, guerrilla approaches to alter agendas, the locus and efficacy of demonstrations, tactics that will attract press attention. Before the Games, there will be gestures, even grand gestures, dramatically designed to affect global perceptions. It is clear that the Chinese government and its spokespersons have been taking intense lessons in crisis management though the consequences have thus far been mixed. Some Chinese Olympic

officials and IOC officials sought to defuse controversy by arguing that advocacy organizations should not “exploit the Games” to further their own agendas. Others took a cooler approach, growing accustomed to a steady stream of criticism from a wide range of groups in China and around the world. Jiang Xiaoyu, an executive vice president for the Beijing Olympic Committee, said, on Countdown Day, “We are mentally prepared that such voices will become louder in the future.” After the Games, there will be a studied effort to measure the reaction of authorities: how prepared they were; how China and its massive security machinery exercised force; and how the Federations, the IOC, and others exercised control through kindness and offers of assistance.

Of course, there have already been “surprises.” The efforts to link the issue of Darfur to China and the Olympics are one. In the summer of 2007, it was the rise of stories about product defects, from pet foods to toothpaste to lead-tainted toys. These stories would have been significant without the Olympics in the background. But the proximity of the Games, the significance of establishing a positive redefining narrative for China, made each negative story linked and cumulative, creating its own swarm effect. No one knows what other large issues loom, ready to seize the attention of a public that might otherwise remain attuned to the well-rehearsed and established Olympic narrative.

As can be seen from the chapters in this book, one task for those who are seeking to leverage the public power of the Games on behalf of issues they deem important has been to seek a connection between their cause and the Olympics story. In some cases, the linking has not been difficult. As we have seen, the question of urban development and the displacement of populations could be easily tied to the planning of an Olympics-ready Beijing. And, as other chapters in this collection demonstrate in greater detail, global civil society groups were able to link the exploitation of child labor to the manufacture of Olympics-related mementos, mascots, and clothes. Among the questions worth posing here is which groups are most effective (and why) at gaining a public window or platform for their themes.

This project has its intellectual origins in the insights of my coeditor, Daniel Dayan, insights that grew partly from his collaboration with my colleague Elihu Katz. In 1992, Dayan and Katz published *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, which has become one of the canonical texts in the field of communications and society. The present volume takes its cue from *Media Events* in a number of ways. In addition to be-



ing inspired by that earlier book, it also attempts to build on and refine it by using the 2008 Olympics to understand how such events function in a differently mediated world. *Media Events* captured a significant structure of communications in modern society—great political transformations (the coming of Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem), extraordinary global celebrations (the marriage of Charles and Diana), and occasions like the Olympics—to tell the story of a new relationship between audience and subject. Dayan and Katz demonstrated how these events marked a dramatic reformulation of the idea of the public and the function of the media. But 15 years is an eternity in modern broadcasting, and the idea of revisiting this subject through the lens of the 2008 Olympics seemed a useful one. The forces of globalization, the establishment of a stronger global civil society, the technological changes shaping public opinion, and China's increasingly central role in the new geopolitical environment—these and other developments suggested that the 2008 Olympics would be a rich field for study.

Part 1, "Defining Beijing 2008: Whose World, What Dream?" comprises three chapters, each of which was designed to help understand Beijing 2008 as a media event. Jacques deLisle's chapter builds an agenda for the rest of the book by describing how narratives and counternarratives become a challenge both to the organizers and to those who set out to seize the public's attention. His chapter outlines specific ways in which China has attempted to use the Olympics to win greater global acceptance by establishing a general perception of itself as a prosperous, stable, normalized country. DeLisle also weighs the possible modes of countering this agenda.

Alan Tomlinson explores the relationship between Olympic ideals and contemporary capitalism. Examining the bidding rhetoric for Beijing and London against the involvement of sponsors in The Olympic Partner program, he finds a central contradiction in the political economy of the Games. The chapter by Monroe E. Price specifically explores Dayan's theories of the "hijacking" of the Olympics platform as a modification of a general approach to media events and demonstrates how this Dayanesque turn is the source of thinking about narrative and counternarrative. Price then tries to show how global civil society organizations use Dayan's approach in their efforts to seize the Olympics and define them to their advantage.

Part 2 of the book, "Precedents and Perspectives," captures the 2008 Olympics through a somewhat wider lens. Our purpose here was to in-

vite scholars to place these Games in a series of distinct contexts. For example, in his chapter, Nicholas J. Cull looks at the Olympics as an exercise in public diplomacy. He locates Beijing and China's administration of the Games in the government's efforts to engage in public diplomacy (with respect to the Olympics and in other areas) over half a century. Heidi Østbø Haugen allows us to look at the philosophical underpinnings of the Beijing Olympics not through the implementation but rather through the bidding process. She examines the themes of the winning bid as a window on China and the Games award processes as well. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom discusses the long history of dual or binary perspectives on China. Wasserstrom traces this global schizophrenia, defined by those who demonize China on the one hand and those who praise it on the other, to the nineteenth century, if not earlier. And he notes that the current narratives and counternarratives surrounding the 2008 Olympics continue patterns of demonization and romanticization that emerged long before. Complementing this discussion, Sandra Collins's chapter contrasts Beijing 2008 with the shadow history of the voided Tokyo Olympics of 1940 and the legacy of Seoul, portraying them as part of a dual approach that highlights both tradition and modernity. Collins explores a hybrid identity that trades in a celebrated past and a vaunted technological future. The chapter by Briar Smith dissects Beijing's recent decision to relax restrictions on foreign journalists for a set period, noting how this decision relates to Beijing's assurances on human rights to the International Olympic Committee while enabling it to retain a grip on information circulated by its domestic press.

Part 3 is entitled "Theaters of Representation." Here we have asked our contributors to identify and discuss the sites where the authors of the official and unofficial narratives of China are playing out their dramas and seeking to influence opinion. Carolyn Marvin, for example, writes about architecture and public space, or megaspace, as she puts it. She draws on the social theorist Henri Lefebvre's idea that every society produces its characteristic space and uses it to describe the contending forces that have helped to shape the physical environment of the current Olympic drama. Building on their own research on the Olympics in Barcelona, Christopher Kennett and Miquel de Moragas report on the closing ceremony in Athens, describing it as one of the first opportunities in which China was able to develop its themes before a global audience. Lee Humphreys and Christopher J. Finlay show how the promise of a "High Tech Games" establishes an important feature of

the “modernity arc,” as described in Collins’s earlier chapter. Humphreys and Finlay look at how Lenovo, now one of the leading personal computer companies in the world, is using sports sponsorship (of the Olympics especially) to define itself as both an international and a distinctively Chinese company that exemplifies, in particular for those at home, some of the most notable achievements of the state itself. Their chapter also examines how the effort to implement 3G technology to push and expand the uses of mobile telephony (in diffusing information about the Games) has become part of the official High Tech narrative and its opposition.

Hai Ren examines the IOC’s choice of sports to be included or excluded as an index of the failure of the Games to globalize. He uses Wushu (Chinese martial arts) as a case study of the role China could play in altering the Games. Andy Miah, Beatriz García, and Tian Zhihui expand on a theme that has become especially significant as a result of our expanding definitions of the term *journalist* and the large number of reporters and writers who will cover the Olympics. They look at a growing approach of creating legitimated opportunities for “nonaccredited journalists.” Their contention is that “narratives about the Olympics arise largely from the stories filed by the mass of journalists—press and broadcasters—who attend the Games and spew forth accounts of what occurs on and off the competition ground. Who those journalists are, what they do, how they are channeled through the Olympics world—each has implications for what is represented, what the billions around the globe see and read.” The final chapter in this section, by Sonja K. Foss and Barbara J. Walkosz, reviews how the “elite press” in the United States has framed China in the American imagination in the run-up to Beijing 2008. Looking at some of the same indicators as deLisle, Foss and Walkosz identify four “ideological spaces”: definition, equivocation, accumulation, and anticipation.

In our concluding section Christopher J. Finlay looks forward to the London Olympics (2012) and other future settings for the Games. He asks what we are learning, or think we have learned, from Beijing that can be used to understand the major players as they move on to other forums, other audiences, other narratives and counternarratives. Is Beijing the progenitor of a new kind of Olympic internationalism? And Daniel Dayan reflects on the ways in which geopolitical events have radically transformed the context of media events.

There are many areas we would like to have covered more exten-

sively. Our understanding of narrative and counternarrative still comes primarily from the printed press and from broadcasting, and our account is consequently somewhat tilted toward representations in newspapers and published reports. We have been more concerned with efforts outside China's borders to alter the Olympic narrative, paying insufficient attention to the civil society activities within the country. The power of the Internet to mobilize, to seize, to quickly alter agendas, is worthy of separate and substantial focus. We were not able, to the extent we desired, to capture the narratives that will be projected by NBC, the global broadcast licensees, and advertisers. What they say interstitially about China and about the themes highlighted in this book—or, more likely, do *not* say—will probably also be a significant factor in the integrated final impact of the Games. Some of the terms that we use in our analysis—such as, for example, *ambushing*—come from the internecine fighting among advertisers for control of the platform, but it is clear that more attention must be given to understanding ambushes organized by civil society players. And the control of symbols (explored by many of our authors) and intellectual property clearly has become vital to our ability to do so. Surveillance, control, exercise of authority: all these appear in the book, but here, too, these themes will develop far beyond the scope of this particular collection, in the public accounts that will struggle to define the Beijing Olympics for years to come.

Virtually no part of this book focuses on the sports and athletics of the Olympic Games themselves. But, of course, athletics and athletic prowess spin their own narratives of power. It is not for nothing that China seeks to top the medal table and use the symbol of gold as an index of its place in the world. Sports are implicated in narratives of gender, race, and class; the manifestations of sports tell much about a society, and all of that will be on view at the Olympics. But these questions—including the narrative of doping—represent a substantial and different field of scholarship from what is at play in these pages. As BOCOG, China, and others continue to prepare, this book is an experiment in taking a longer view of the “event,” thinking of it as something that stretches over a prolonged period and includes the run-up as well as the occasion itself.

There are many people to thank and acknowledge. The book was one of the first efforts of a new Project (now Center) for Global Communi-

cation Studies (CGCS) at the Annenberg School for Communication, established by the dean, Michael X. Delli Carpini. It became clear that one area for focus by CGCS should be China, and Professor Joseph Turow suggested that one possibility would be to encourage a network of communication and communication-related academics who were interested in the 2008 Olympics. This led, in due course, to a joint effort with the Communication University of China (CUC). The distinguished Dr. Hu Zhengrong, now vice president of CUC, was an energetic coconvener of a one-day conference in China in 2006 that brought together many scholars, some of whom are participating in this book. Several of Dr. Hu's graduate students were instrumental in planning that effort.

At Annenberg, two graduate students, Chris Finlay and Briar Smith, were indispensable. They were creative in terms of the themes of the book; resourceful in considering potential authors; and vigorous, generous, and immensely valuable in terms of actual editing functions. They functioned virtually as coeditors of the book. Libby Morgan became research and editorial coordinator during the midstage of the book's development and has played a strong hands-on role in refining the project and identifying the precise work necessary in the drive toward editorial completion. She maintained contact with authors and was the liaison with the publisher. Our authors were immensely game. They welcomed a time line that would allow the publication of the book in advance of the 2008 Olympics, and cooperation and performance were generally superb.

The Annenberg Foundation, responsible for the endowment for the Center for Global Communication Studies, is also to be recognized for making this research project, and its potential links to communication studies in China, possible. At the University of Michigan we were fortunate to be in the excellent hands of Alison Mackeen, our editor, and to be included in the New Media World series, edited by Professor Turow.

#### NOTE

1. Correspondence with author. Smith's chapter in the book covers other significant themes but not this one.

REFERENCES

- Amnesty International. 2007. One Year Left to Fulfil Human Rights Promises. August.
- Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions. (COHRE). 2007. Fair Play for Housing Rights: Mega Events and Olympic Games and Housing Rights. June 5. Available at <http://www.cohre.org/store/attachments/COHRE%27s%20Olympics%20Report.pdf>.
- Committee to Protect Journalists. 2007. Falling Short: As the 2008 Olympics Approach, China Falters on Press Freedom. August 7. Available at [http://cpj.org/Briefings/2007/Falling\\_Short/China](http://cpj.org/Briefings/2007/Falling_Short/China).
- Kashin, Vasili. 2007. Beijing Olympics under Threat; China Faces Criticism for Human Rights Abuses. Trans. Elena Leonova. *Vedomosti*, August 8. Accessed through Agency WPS.
- Los Angeles Times*. 2007. Beijing Couldn't Care Less about Human Rights, but It Does Care about Its Image. The World Should Speak Up. August 9, pt. A, 20.
- Mickleburgh, Rod. 2007. Cut Off from Canada for 36 Hours; Chinese Authorities Isolate and Interrogate Pro-Tibet Activists before Expelling Them. *Globe and Mail*, August 9, 1.
- Watts, Jonathan. 2007. One Year to Go. *Guardian*, August 9, features sec., 6.
- Wolf, Christian. 2007. China Criticized—Demands to Observe Human Rights Intensify One Year Prior to Opening of Olympic Games. German News Agency ddp through BBC Monitoring, August 8.
- Xinhua. 2007. China Celebrates One Year Countdown to Olympics. General News Service, August 9.
- Yardley, Jim. 2007. In Beijing: A Little Building Is Defying Olympic Ambitions. *New York Times*, August 8, sec. A, 8.

