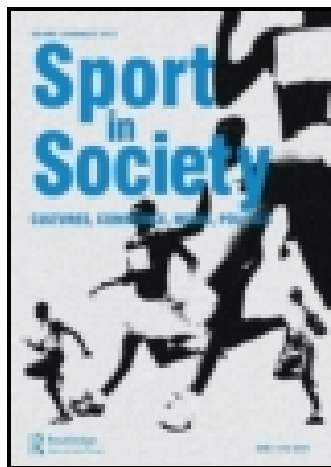


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## BOOK REVIEW

**Encoding the Olympics: the Beijing Olympic Games and the communication impact worldwide**, edited by L. Qing and G. Richeri, New York, Routledge, 2012, 479 pp., \$199.50 (hardback) / \$41.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780415674997 / 0415674999

### **Encoding or Decoding the Olympics? In search of Buddha's Insight for the future Olympic Movement**

*Encoding the Olympics*, edited by two international renowned scholars Professor Luo Qing (from China) and Professor Giuseppe Richeri (from Switzerland), is a pioneering comparative study commissioned by the International Olympic Committee. This book assembles a uniquely representative international team of media experts to provide a comprehensive review of the global impact of media and cultural communications associated with the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. It analyses global media responses to a mega-sport event on a scale never before attempted. With 479 pages it is one of the largest collective studies of Olympic Games research ever attempted (certainly with regard to media scholarship). With international cooperation and contribution from 13 distinguished research teams worldwide, the editors provide a ground-breaking, panoramic, cross-cultural perspective on media responses to the leading sports event of the modern world. The representative team commissioned to undertake the various studies collated in the book included media commentators and political analysts, sport and media journalists, Sinologist and observers of the Asian Pacific Rim, academics in Olympic Studies and media and communication academics, scholars of the cultural and sociological studies of sport, and, festival and events managers. Reflective of the primary Olympic-scholarship, the contributors were sourced from 12 countries (including China, Greece, France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Spain, Australia, the USA, the UK, Brazil and Japan).

Qing and Richeri's collection covers three phases of the Olympic Games: (1) Torch relay, (2) opening ceremony and closing ceremony and (3) competition period. With 25 chapters/themes in total, apart from Introduction section with two articles written by the two main editors concerning the overview of this research project (i.e. West meets East; Attitudes towards China before and after the Beijing Olympics), the book is divided into four major sections (with a specific theme for each part). Part 1 is titled 'Another Long March of the Symbolic Holy Flame – Comparative Analysis on the Media Coverage of the Torch Relay 2008'. This section includes nine expert articles (Chapters 3–11) on 2008 Torch Relay and its related media coverage in Greece, France, Switzerland and Italy, Germany, Spain, Australia, Brazil and Japan. Part 2, 'Representing the Opening Ceremony', comprises only two articles (Chapters 12 and 13) which focus on 'The Construction of a Media Reality in Reporting the Beijing Olympic Torch Relay: The Case of the Beijing Evening News'. The second article is a comparative analysis concerning 'Representing the Opening Ceremony: Comparative

Content Analysis from USA, Brazil, UK and China'. Part 3, 'Understanding the Multi-Dimensions of Mediated Olympics', entails nine articles (Chapters 14–22) covering diverse critical analysis on national understandings and interpretations of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. Part 4, 'Closing Perspectives', presents the book's final three chapters; the most profound of which is Chapter 23, 'A case study of CCTV news 30 (China)'. The conclusion of this chapter is that Chinese television's Olympic-related reports took myriad factors into account in their agenda-setting, but ultimately endeavoured to craft a narrative concomitant to their outwardly portray an 'acceptable' political and social ideology. While the constructed media perspectives focused mainly on the sports themselves, they gradually shifted towards the humanistic connotations of the Olympic spirit. Olympic reporting and news content changed from monotony to diversity, and showcased not merely the country's glories, but rather matched nationalistic pride with a combination of athletes' personal expressions. Chapter 24 then proposed a provocative question concerning modern media role. The final chapter (epilogue) deals with the main editor's (Luo Qing) personal reflections on the book and wider project to sustain media critiques of the Olympic Games.

Reviewing such a lengthy collective work is difficult. However, there are two key ways this text might best be approached. One of which is for readers to potentially understand the book in terms of its international comparative coverage. Readers could, possible, go through Qing and Richeri's work 'nation by nation' and examine each respective country's media coverage systematically. Such an approach might also make it easier for readers to make a general comparison from different cultural perspectives. The other approach, which I believe attests to the book's strength, is to examine the important and valuable dynamic qualitative insights offered through 12 different scholars' discussions. As the main editor (Luo Qing) acknowledges, it seems that it is difficult to summarize the findings from 13 research groups worldwide (lasting nearly 2 years) around the international communication impact of Beijing Olympics to reach any sort of unilateral conclusion. As such, it is more productive and beneficial to view the chapters as facilitating in open discussion and interpretation (or more appropriately, an intercultural communication) of the Beijing Olympic Games. All 12 scholars included are specialists with different research interests and background in humanities and social sciences, and, as such, offer warranted and much needed academic criticism on intercultural communication, the Olympic movement and the Chinese international communication strategy as the host country.

Some time ago, renowned German Professor Hans Lenk (2012) forewarned that future Olympic Games will increasingly be faced with difficult 'telecratic' problems – not only in mass media and commercial respects. Mindful of Lenk's proclamations, and the new media's potential problems for the modern Olympic Movement, it remains timely to sharpen and extend our academic critiques of the Olympic movement, and the commercial, political and public information needs therein that will, rather frequently, conflict with the athlete's rights. While it will not be easy to find a compromising strategy which simultaneously covers the public's need for information and the athlete's rights, Lenk suggests that we have to develop a kind of protection programme for the athlete to secure athletes' rights against the managers and constraints of the public media, including their manipulative and alienating effects. With this in mind, Qing and Richeri's text also encourages us to examine the ways in which new media might enhance the impact and visibility of the Olympic contests all over the world, but, at the same time, preserve human dignity and a diversity of human values. While the Olympic Movement cannot bring about world peace as a direct consequence as was alleged sometimes, it can certainly serve an *indirect* mission in getting the peoples to understand and respect each

other in a benevolent way using the Olympics as a symbol of a more peaceful and better world and of an ideal unity of mankind. As Qing and Richeri's book attests, media stakeholders have a direct and powerful role to play in this process.

*Encoding the Olympics* certainly provides a unique, encyclopaedic study that will serve as a versatile resource at several levels – as a textbook or source reference for academic institutions, media public relations agencies that facilitate the work of inter-cultural exchange organizations and international communication departments of multi-national enterprises and international NGOs. While it is probably one of the best works for senior media researchers and experts to consult as a good source of reference concerning the modern Olympic Movement media coverage, it might be difficult for beginners to start with in order to fully understand each case study's methodology and each nation/expert's analysis without basic knowledge on 'media event' research, especially among different cultural contexts. Questions might also arise from the particular selection of specific countries. Can those chosen countries and contributors truly represent the voice of the global views of new media for the 2008 Olympic Games? Of course, there are also other 'missing incidents' during the torch relay around the world which were not dealt with, for example media coverage for the missing torch relay incident in Taiwan. Moreover, the 2008 ceremonies may have been an opportunity to celebrate these universal values and the contribution of Eastern philosophy to Olympism and the world of international sport. However, through the comparative content analysis from the USA, Brazil, the UK and China (Chapter 13), one learns that Olympic protocol has been overshadowed by the spectacular cultural performances of the host, which is reflected in the relative lack of attention generally paid to Olympism and sport values by the broadcasters – a missed opportunity for intercultural understanding through the shared values of sport, promoted as part of the Olympic movement.

Following the main editor's final personal wish (Chapter 25), this collective study project urges us to develop common interest to create a cross-cultural approach between east and west in the contemporary communication context, to explore an effective method to decode the relationship between media and the construction of social value, especially from the perspective of the image of a nation in the globalized and new media communication context. In sum, if we all agree that the Olympic ideal is to promote cosmopolitanism, emphasizing the role of the sporting spirit and mutual understanding in triumphing over hostilities and conflicts, overcoming the limits of borders, race and culture (see Chapter 20), it is also important for us to search a few more practical approaches to guide new media (apart from business and entertainment purpose). One emphasis in this regard might be more sustained promotion of cross-cultural understanding, and enhancing the educative role/mission of the media so that more people will enjoy not just watching sports through new media, but also enjoy the range of experiences that come with sport participation. Beyond just providing excellent physical and moral contests worth watching, promoting the epitome of corporeal achievement and maximizing opportunities for intercultural exchange, Qing and Richeri's work essentially reminds us that new media (through websites and onto digital platforms and mobile devices with interactive possibilities) can play a more dynamic role in our individual and collective human experiences.

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