

By Dr Wendy Low



## Counting down to Beijing Olympics

Living in Beijing, I am inevitably asked about the Olympics during conversations or email exchanges with friends who live in other parts of the world.

There is a definite buzz in the air as people prepare for the big event this summer. Nationalist pride is high, and there are over one million volunteers (out of which only a fraction will be chosen) who have applied to the BOCOG to help out and everywhere you go, you cannot avoid seeing the Beijing Olympics logo or the five Olympic mascots on billboards and advertisements.

The Olympics is not just a sporting event, but also big business. Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of sponsorship for the event have been spent and will be spent. This Olympic Games looks to be one of, if not, THE largest held so far. Beijing is not the only city involved. Games will also be held in Hong Kong, Qingdao, Shanghai, Shenyang, Tianjin and Qinhuangdao. Perhaps they should have called it the China Olympics instead! Even the number of mascots associated with this year's Games is higher than before. There have never been five mascots used in the history of the Olympics. For the uninitiated, the five mascots (affectionately known as Fuwa) are "Beibei", "Jingjing", "Huanhuan", "Yingying" and "Nini" – put them together and you get: "Beijing huan ying ni" (translated from Mandarin: "Beijing welcomes you"). Olympics retail outlets can be found almost anywhere, and this being China, knock-off Olympics products can be found in the usual bargain shopping haunts at Silk Street and Hong Qiao markets, as well as from many street side hawker vendors.

We are all familiar with the impressive structures which have been erected. The most famous (and probably the most often-photographed) ones being the Bird's Nest (for track and field events) and the Water Cube (aquatic events). The Olympic Village

too, is ready (apart from a hiccup of having squat toilets installed instead of the sitting ones that most Westerners are used to – this is currently being fixed ☺).

The hardware has gone up, and the Chinese have been working (almost desperately) to smoothen out the software. Language training, etiquette lessons, pollution control, and the introduction of non-smoking rules in public places are all examples of how they are trying to catch up with the rest of the world as far as service, behaviour and environmental awareness are concerned.

There have been and will be inconveniences, both to expatriates as well as to local Beijingers. Security has been stepped up and foreigners have been asked to carry their passports and permits with them at all times in case of spot checks by the police. Visas are being issued more stringently and lately, there has been some confusion over the visa application process even among visa agents.

Residents in the area around the Olympic Village and venues in Beijing will be issued passes to get in and out of the area. I have even heard that a large marketplace in the vicinity will be shut down for two months to minimise traffic in the area! In addition, entry of cars into the area will be restricted depending on which day you travel and whether your car plate number ends with an odd or even number! This is to try to address the pollution as well as traffic congestion problems. Hence, many foreigners have decided that they do not want to be in the city during this mega-event.

During a briefing a few months ago by a US Embassy official, we were informed that there would be 65 Heads of State attending (number correct as of that time). So, I can imagine the nightmare of navigating the streets of Beijing when these VIPs are zipped from hotels to the Olympic venues... \*shudder\*



The author is a young-at-heart middle-ageing mother of teenage boys, who is fortunate enough to have experienced a semi-nomadic life and looks forward to exploring more of the planet we live on.



Water Cube



Water Cube, interior



BOCOG headquarters



Olympic Village entrance



Main Press Center for the Olympics



The Bird's Nest

We are all aware of the recent protests over Tibet during the Olympic torch relay. It is unfortunate that the world of sports has once again been caught up in politics. The recent earthquake in Sichuan has served as an unwelcome and tragic distraction. But the Chinese government seems to have learned from their previous mistakes, the art of Public Relations. They have been unusually open in allowing the foreign press to cover their rescue efforts. There has been an outpouring of help, both local and foreign, to provide aid to the survivors and even as I write, many fundraisers have been or are being organised to assist the victims. It is indeed heartening to see this unified response.

Much as how a gracious host beautifies his home to celebrate a big event and welcome guests, China has been hard at work making sure that the Olympic athletes and spectators are comfortable and safe during the Summer Olympics. Parks have literally sprung up overnight in areas which used to be occupied by run down shophouses.

As gracious guests, I hope that the Olympics visitors, both athletes and spectators alike, will appreciate the effort and hospitality shown by the Chinese this summer. I believe that this is a turning point for China, as this is their chance to share and show off their culture, and at the same time, learn from the many and varied people who will be visiting this country. ■

*Photo credits: Dr Wendy Low and Ms Lorina Barbalas*