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# The role of sports mega-events in China's unique soft power strategy

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This article investigates the contribution of states' soft power strategies to the process of East Asia's increasing global economic and political significance. We identify hosting sports mega-events as key to such strategies and thereby seek to add to both the literature on regional 'soft power' and acquiring it through sport. Using East Asia as the focus, we concentrate on China's leveraging of the Beijing 2008 and 2022 Olympics for soft power gains. We show that China's propaganda system is also part of their soft power strategy, which tends to focus primarily on domestic soft power. Our findings indicate that China cares about its national image abroad but places greater emphasis on attaining domestic soft power. Knowing that China's understanding of 'soft power' is distinctly different from the 'West' allows greater insight into their approach to regional and international soft power acquisition.

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## Introduction

A great deal has been written about the use of sport and sports mega-events (SMEs) by states in an attempt to acquire international prestige and ‘soft power’ (Grix and Houlihan 2014; Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018). State investment in sports mega-events has spread rapidly with all BRICS countries having hosted between 2008 and 2022, with India still to host their first first-order sports mega-events. These large-scale investments seek to stimulate ‘soft power’ that can sit alongside, or work separate to, ‘hard power’ efforts. ‘Soft power’, first coined by Joseph Nye, is understood as ‘the ability to attract others and to make them want what you want’ (Nye 2008, 94). The emphasis on attempting to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of foreign publics is an alternative to the use of ‘hard power’ (military and economic coercion) when states attempt to change opinions abroad and embellish their national image. There are a variety of soft power resources that come in the form of universities, language institutes, NGOs, key sporting organizations (cf. the International Olympic Committee) and bombastic global sports mega-events. These are considered common elements in a nation’s ‘soft power package,’ (Jeong and Grix 2023), which is a collection of soft power tactics that countries accumulate to satisfy *domestic* citizens and increase *regional* and *international* power positions and capabilities.

The hosting of sports mega-events (SMEs) and the perceived belief in their benefits for the host-nation has increased in popularity across all political spectrums and across a number of regime types globally, be it in democracies, authoritarian or autocratic states (cf. Olympics in London, 2012 and Beijing, 2008; FIFA World Cup in Qatar, 2022). This growth in the range of states wishing to host SMEs is matched by the rising popularity of the concept of ‘soft power’ in order to explain the host’s motives. The concept has taken off among academics, politicians, think tanks, and the media, but it still offers only a broad-brush depiction of the rationale behind hosting SMEs. Increasingly, it appears self-explanatory that any state should seek to host a SME to grow their soft power. The danger of these explanations is that they mask the *regime type* involved (that is, the type of governance a state has) and they fail to recognize the array of *different* hosting strategies and rationales. While it is undoubtedly true that the vast majority of sports event hosts wish to make themselves visible on the international stage or enhance their image, the argument that SMEs are tantamount to creating soft power overlays a number of more nuanced and differential uses of sport for political and economic gain.

For this reason, we put forward in this paper what we consider a ‘unique’ soft power strategy using sports mega-events. In doing so we contribute to the literature, first, by showing that China’s ‘soft power’ strategy differs greatly from that outlined by Nye back in 1990. Second, we adopt a ‘tripartite’ approach to ‘soft power’ analysis along the axis of *domestic*, *regional* and *international* lines. This is based on the observation that the soft power *emphasis* of a particular state depends on its own stage of development and rationale. For example, China, may attempt to hit all three of these target audiences. While regional and international may be considered ‘external’ soft power, they differ for the actors that pursue them. A regional power, such as Brazil, South Korea or Japan, will seek to uphold its regional status in addition to attempting to move towards global status. Equally, as we discuss below, the external showcasing of a sports mega-event may serve to bolster *domestic* politics and national identity building, as was the case in Russia (2014; 2018; cf. Grix and Kramareva 2017). While a number of works exist on either China’s domestic or international use of ‘soft power’ (Shambaugh 2015; Gill and Huang 2020), we believe that studying *all* three levels offers a more holistic account of China’s ‘soft power’ strategy.

The paper is set out as follows, first, we focus on the extant literature analyzing East Asia and soft power. This is followed by a discussion of the literature on China’s attempts in gaining soft power through its culture and sport. After a brief introduction of our methodological approach, we turn to two empirical case studies: China’s rationale for hosting the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

**Soft power in East Asia and China.** Regional legitimacy has always been the biggest challenge for the leading East Asian nations of China, Japan and South Korea. With all three states vying for primacy, competition in both the hard and soft power arenas is fierce. Many leaders in East Asia have expressed the importance of soft power, for example, China’s past President Hu Jintao stated at the Central Foreign Affairs Leadership Group meeting back in 2006 that, ‘The increase in our nation’s international status and influence will have to be demonstrated in hard power such as the economy, science and technology and defense, as well as in soft power such as culture’ (Ma 2007). Both China’s economic competitiveness (Lee 2011) and their cultural heritage (Nakano and Zhu 2020) are understood as China’s key soft power sources. According to Tanzim (2021, 461), for China, everything except the military is considered as soft power. Elsewhere, in 1998, the South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung, who once called himself the ‘President of Culture,’ lifted ‘the ban of cultural products imported from Japan’ (Ro 2020) and introduced the Basic Law for Culture Industry Promotion in 1999, allocating \$148.5 million to this (ibid.). It was a way for South Korea’s government to explicitly focus and develop part of the nation’s soft power (Glosserman 2020). Japan initially led the race in East Asia, having concentrated their efforts to project soft power globally, ‘replacing the hard power that the country had and then lost, first in World War II (their offensive military) and later with the stagnation of its economic might in the 1990s’ (Christensen 2011).

East Asian nations continue to vie for soft power today but seek different outcomes. South Korea and Japan tend to look for regional and international soft power leverage, while not totally ignoring domestic soft power leverage. South Korea uses their pop culture, also known as ‘Hallyu’ (K-Pop, K-Drama, films, food, and more), and technological advanced products to attract global and regional attention, where it is now considered as mainstream globally (Grix et al. 2021). Japan is also known for its pop culture with anime, video game consoles (Nintendo and Playstation), and wider technological innovations being globally ubiquitous since the late 1980s (Christensen 2011). China has recently turned to the tactic of economic diplomacy (aid) to continents like Africa (Mirza et al. 2020), health diplomacy (during COVID-19) (Rudolf 2022), and other ways to attain international soft power. Regionally, soft power leverage is difficult and not well accepted amongst East Asian nations due to historical issues complicating the soft power competition (Chang and Kim 2016). With China as the new leading nation in the region, China’s hard power tactics (in terms of Nye’s definition of economy and military) overshadow other attempts at soft power leverage in East Asia, ‘partly because of the relative shift in hard power in China’s favor.’ (DeLisle 2020, 180). However, as much as global image and soft power are important to China, there is nothing more important than leveraging domestic soft power. Former leader Hu Jintao ‘propounded that cultural soft power has two main purposes; one is to enhance national cohesion and creativity and meet the demands of people’s spiritual life; the other is to strengthen China’s competitiveness in the contest for comprehensive national power

within the international arena' (Li 2008, 296). In this sense, China's focus on domestic soft power is similar to Russia's (Kramareva and Grix 2018).

Interestingly the China's concept of 'soft power' does not appear to be the same as Nye's definition. According to Li Nan (Senior Researcher at Institute of American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences),

The definition of soft power that China uses is totally different from Joseph Nye's and the western countries' definition. From the western viewpoint of power, a demonstration of this is when a stronger nation has influence over a weaker one; in Chinese we call this *quán lì*, which translates to power. But in China, the nation uses the word *ruǎn shí lì*, where *shí lì* means compatibility and it is not power based. Therefore, the word *ruǎn shí lì* means soft compatibility. The soft power concept in China is not to influence other nations. China is only trying to increase Chinese domestic politics and not interfering with the affairs of other nations. China is trying to re-educate the society with Confucianism and Marxism. Once China is confident with their domestic culture, then China could try sharing these values abroad, such as using the Confucius Institutions, which fits to the ideology of *shí lì* (compatibility).

(Interview with first author, November 2019).

This extensive explanation shows that China's definition of soft power, or in this case 'soft compatibility,' is different from western democratic nations and that China prioritizes the enhancement of domestic soft power. While China still cares about its image abroad (international and regional), it focuses on leveraging domestic political legitimacy, making sure that it does not interfere with other nation's affairs—a way for China to show it respects another country's sovereignty (Pan 2010). Another key thing the interviewee touches upon is the use of the Confucius Institute that is known to be one of China's sources of soft power. The institute was founded in 2004, and there are 525 institutes with over nine million enrolled students in 146 countries (Edwards 2021). The institute was used for spreading Chinese culture and language abroad, similar to France's Alliance Française or Germany's Goethe Institute. The interviewee claims that the Confucius Institutes were used as a platform to present and promote domestic and newly cultivated Chinese culture abroad. However, there have, in recent years, been a number of concerns raised over these state-funded institutes, with suggestions that they were being used for propaganda purposes (see Jakhar 2019; Wintour 2023).

Irrespective of the differences in definition of 'soft power', the notion of using sport for a variety of reasons, from domestic legitimacy to international outreach, is clear from the scale of China's investment in sporting spectacles.

**Sports and soft power in China.** As China's global positioning and regional power increases, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) understands that image matters. In 2007, former president, Hu Jintao, 'stressed the need to enhance Chinese culture as the country's soft power in his keynote speech to the 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC)' (China Daily 2007). Even during the 16<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee, Hu Jintao stated, 'culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength' and that China must 'enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and

interests' (ibid.). This was the Chinese government's way of expressing that it wanted to raise China's soft power whilst bolstering domestic politics. Once Xi Jinping became the newly appointed leader in 2013, he declared that the national goal was to 'build our country (China) into a socialist cultural superpower' (Shambaugh 2015, 99). Incorporated within the notion of cultural superpower is the role of sport and its contribution to China's soft power strategy.

Many countries, irrespective of their ruling ideology, have invested in elite sport for political purposes (Grix 2016). Liu (2020, 1827) offers the example of the Cold War era, where 'This database furnishes indispensable bibliographic information for the purpose of conducting bibliometric analysis, encompassing authorship details, titles, sources, citation counts, abstracts, keywords, affiliations, document classifications, and referenced citations. Sports competition especially the Olympic Games became another battlefield used by the two Blocs led by the USA and the Soviet Union respectively to show the superiority of their ideology and development models.' Even after the Cold War, the 'global sports arms race' for winning medals continues apace, motivating national sports organizations and governments globally to increase expenditure on elite sport (De Bosscher et al. 2015; Grix and Carmichael 2012; Liu 2020). China is well known for its success at the Olympics and possesses a 'state-sponsored high performance sport system with continuous heavy government funding and has not been absent from the top 3 in the Olympic medal table in the Summer Olympic Games ever since 2000' (Liu 2020, 1828). China has also been open about its ambitions of acquiring soft power through elite sport success (Liu et al. 2017). In fact, in China, the government reviewed and renewed a 10-year guideline entitled Olympic Glory-seeking Plan (Ao Yun Zheng Guangji Hua) to aid and guide elite sport development (Liu 2020, 1830). This indicates that for China, 'elite sport is about medal success, and winning at the Olympics is synonymous with winning honor and prestige for the motherland' (ibid.). It is likely that China will soon no longer carry the epitaph of an 'emerging' state (as in the acronym 'BRICS'). Its inexorable rise to power over a decade since the 2008 Beijing Olympics has taken China from one-time pariah state to a leading world power, feted by a number of heads of state, from the US, UK to France and Germany. It is clear that sports have been a major part of China's increasing world influence, ranging from their high rankings on the Olympic medal tables to the hosting of strategic major sports events. The election of the 'sports-mad' President, Xi Jinping, in 2013, arguably added yet more impetus to using sport as a vehicle through which to put China on the world stage, kick-start their own nascent sports industry and develop their expertise in the most widely played sport globally, namely football (cf. Peng et al. 2019).

It is claimed that there are 3.5 billion football fans around the world (Euronews 2022), which leaves football as the most popular sport in the world (Wood 2022). Understanding the amount of attention and coverage football commands globally 'China recently and belatedly has sought to acquire international recognition in sport and participate in global development by linking soft power, national status, and football' (Connell 2017, 5). About a decade ago, Xi Jinping expressed his three major dreams, to qualify for the World Cup, to host a World Cup, and to win the World Cup (Tanniyom 2022). China believes they can do this by first attempting to make their professional football league attractive. The Chinese Super League spent approximately \$336 million in the 2016 January-February transfer window, ranking at the top just above the English Premier League (\$253 million) (Huang 2016). Of the transfers, Argentinian striker, Carlos Teves, joined Shanghai Shenhua for approximately \$681,819 a month and became the world's highest paid player

at the time (Tanniyom 2022). Even societal policies for football were implemented in China. There were aims to make ‘at least 20,000 football training centers, 70,000 more pitches, 10,000 more coaches, and 20,000 schools specialising in football, and a goal of 50 million Chinese playing football regularly by 2020’ (Connell, 2017, 10). This was the first time a specific sport was being added to Chinese schools, where the challenge was to ‘overcome parent’s concerns about their usually single child being injured and pressures to focus on academic achievement’ (ibid.). There were also policies that required professional teams to establish youth academies. Here, Real Madrid and Guangzhou Evergrande jointly established an academy, while Barcelona jointly worked with Hainan (ibid.). Connell (ibid.) claimed that this work was to generate international soft power which was complemented and supported by national soft power. Also, many Chinese corporations invested heavily into owning European teams where there were 20 Chinese-owned clubs during mid-2017 (Wall 2021). Many of these corporations believed that having ownership of foreign teams will allow Chinese youth to be trained in European clubs (Liu 2016). There has, in recent years, been a reduction in Chinese spending on foreign football – both in terms of ownership of foreign clubs (Eckner 2021), and expensive transfers of foreign players, as Xi Jinping reorients focus to domestic concerns—however this does not indicate an abandonment of football as a potential vehicle for soft power. Rather, the high levels of investment did not correlate with high operating efficiency in terms of the growth of CSL clubs (Fan et al. 2023), and so a policy more focused on fostering domestic sporting growth has been adopted. This approach to sporting development aligns with Chinese plans for economic development. In the new five-year plan, ‘Xi Jinping’s leadership called for investment to return to China and for the focus to be placed on the domestic market’ (ibid.); this, alongside a focus on domestic soft power, aids the strengthening of the Communist Party’s legitimacy with Chinese citizens. Before turning to our empirical case studies, we briefly introduce the methodology used in this research.

### Methodology

This study focuses on China’s prioritization of domestic soft power through the hosting of sports mega-events; the stance we take is, necessarily, *western-centric* viewpoint. While the rationale behind hosting such events also includes the leveraging of regional and international interests, we are interested in how the Beijing Olympics, 2008 and the Winter Olympics, 2022 were employed to legitimize the Chinese Communist Party and bolster a sense of national identity. We do so by drawing on two major sporting events that also contribute to an understanding of China’s broader ‘soft power strategy’.

Data is derived from secondary data, government documents, media analysis, and 7 semi-structured interviews (for Beijing 2008), that were carried out in November 2019. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to allow the researchers to explore subjective viewpoints (Oplatka 2018) as well as to bring together in-depth responses that looked upon China’s rationale for hosting sports mega-events. Interview participants were recruited using the snowball sampling technique, asking initial interviewees for contact in their network (Sadler et al. 2010). Using a questionnaire for the interviews, responses were manually codified. Furthermore, all responses were recorded or received via e-mail, professionally transcribed, and sent back to the interviewees to be checked and agreed. Interviewees came from the professions of news media (1), academic scholars (5), and an interviewee who preferred to remain anonymous (1). All interviews undertaken by the first author in November, 2019. Interviewees for the 2022 Games were unavailable since the Games

were only available to those who lived in mainland China (International Olympic Committee 2022) at the time of the event and given the nation’s stringent lockdown policy due to COVID-19 (Tan 2022). Media analysis is now understood as a key part of modern academic writing, given the seismic and fast-pace of change in global politics. It also allows views from abroad on policies in other countries which is important in studies on attempts to use sport to alter such views of hosts. The selection criteria of media sources is based on serious journalism from internationally respected media organisations (the BBC; Reuters) and internationally respected newspapers (The Guardian; The Economist).

Since the research deals with subjective responses and a structural explanation of social phenomena, the study positions aligns itself with a constructivist approach in International Relations (Leheny 2014). Therefore, this study broadly lies within an interpretivist worldview (Grix 2010).

### China’s use of sports mega-events for leveraging soft power.

China originally bid for the Summer Olympic Games in 1993, losing out to Australia, as Sydney was chosen to host the 2000 Games (Hong and Zhouxiang 2012). After skipping a bid for the 2004 Olympics, China bid again in 2001 where they were selected to host the 2008 Olympic Games (ibid.). According to Fan et al. (2012, 31) ‘hosting the Olympic Games was an important part of the strategy to make China a sporting superpower, as well as a political and economic power, that could compete on equal terms with the US in the West and Japan and South Korea in the East.’ The following section interrogates both the 2008 Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics and seeks to explain China’s rationale for hosting sports mega-events as part of their soft power strategy. The key focus is on the *domestic* reasons for hosting, but we cannot understand this without recourse to both the *regional* and *international* rationale to have a more holistic understanding of the wider strategy, as advocated by the ‘tripartite’ lens developed by Grix et al. (2021).

### China’s domestic rationale for hosting the Beijing 2008 Olympics.

Part of the rationale behind hosting the 2008 Olympics was to showcase the ascendancy of China’s growing strength and economy to the Chinese public. Ashley Xue (Associate senior editor in CCTV; Television Broadcasting of the 2008 Olympic Games by Beijing Olympic Broadcasting (BOB) Company) states,

In many western nations, there were a number of misunderstandings about China, whether it be about the living standards of the nation, its economy, or Beijing not being seen as an international city. China wanted to host the 2008 Olympics with the ambition to show domestically that the nation is no longer labeled as a poor country. Also, the government wanted to build a national image and be able to project China’s inclusive society abroad.

(Interview with first Author, November 2019)

This response appears to support the notion that the hosting of sports mega-events will generally bring with it a feel-good factor among local citizens (Cornelissen 2010; Grix et al. 2021). China’s economy was on an ascending trend since 2008 even during the financial crisis (Womack 2017), allowing the Chinese government to use the 2008 Games as a stage to display that China is no longer a country of poverty. Also, The Beijing Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games (BOCOG 2008a, 34) stated that a campaign of ‘civility improvement’ will be launched citywide, involving communities, various business sectors, and citizens.’ This was going to be shown by enforcing ‘...in society

as a whole, the basic moral norms of patriotism and law abidance, courtesy, honesty, unity and friendliness, industry, thrift, self-improvement, dedication to one's work, and [service to the public]' (ibid., 35). As a secular nation, the Chinese government wanted to show how inclusive the nation is by stating they will 'comprehensively implement the Party's ethnic and religious policies and Beijing Municipality's Regulations on Ensuring the Rights and Benefits of Ethnic Minorities, enhance the awareness of ethnic solidarity among the entire populace, mobilize the initiative of all 32 ethnic groups for participating in the Olympic Games, and turn the Beijing Olympic Games into a holiday for all ethnic peoples in China' (ibid., 31-32). A similar account was given by Wang Jiajia (Associate Professor of Wuhan University China Institute of Boundary and Ocean Studies) where he states,

The success of hosting the 2008 Beijing Olympics has enhanced national cohesion in China, with 94.6 percent of Chinese citizens who were in favor of Beijing's bid for the 2008 Games. It awakened the national spirit, and this would contribute to the nation's image to the world.

(Interview with first author, November 2019).

The participant provided a similar figure that the Chinese government openly presented, using a Gallup opinion poll, that 94.9 percent of Chinese citizens in China supported the Beijing Games bid (Pan 2001). The poll was used not only to legitimize the hosting of the Games, to raise (national) spirits and to legitimize the ruling Chinese Communist Party, but also '...to help brand national and government images of the host country' (Chen 2012, 731).

According to Li Nan (Senior Researcher at Institute of American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences),

China's situation (especially economically) was ascending at the time with an annual growth of 14 percent. Moreover, the Communist Party of China wanted to show domestic citizens that China, a socialist society, can co-exist with western democratic ones. The government wanted to show the domestic citizens that China is being fully invited to be a part of the international society.

(Interview with first author, November 2019).

It would appear that Law (2010, 361) is correct in arguing that 'China's bid to host the Beijing Games was driven by both domestic economic and sociopolitical demands.' It was a way for the Communist Party to consolidate their power and political legitimacy over society and its citizens.

**Regional/domestic rationale.** It is fair to say that China has won the competition for regional power in East Asia. The Beijing 2008 Olympics was often referred to as China's 'coming out party' (Grix et al. 2019), however, it was more of a message of what the nation has become. In East Asia, there has been fierce competition to host sports mega-events, given the global attention they attract. According to Sun He Yun (Associate Professor, Communication University of China, School of International Studies),

China understood the importance of preparing well for hosting sports mega-events, after witnessing how well it has impacted Japan in 1964 and South Korea in 1988. Even the FIFA World Cup they co-hosted did well for both nations. In 2008, China showcased their economic development well and raised its prestige by hosting the Olympics. The Chinese government raised the confidence of the Chinese citizens by bringing the Olympics to Beijing.

(Interview with first author, November 2019).

The interviewee expresses how Japan and South Korea were a benchmark to China's decision to host the 2008 Games and showcase itself within the region. China wanted to join not only the international and regional club of Olympic hosts but also wanted to show their multifaceted capabilities, which has parallels with the hosting of the 2002 World Cup, 'since managing the tournament successfully is the minimum requirement to express reliability, capability, efficiency and other benchmarks of a modernized state towards the watching world, both Japan and South Korea were eager to present themselves as capable, well-organized, in-charge and well-mannered.' (Manzenreiter 2010, 22). Also, it is worth noting that the interviewee also stated that the Chinese government contributed to raising Chinese citizens' confidence. This dual strategy of domestic political legitimacy and external showcasing proved relatively successful (Zhao 2015).

A further regional rationale behind China's hosting of the Olympics was to send out a message to other East Asian nations that their status is ascending and enroute to becoming a contender as the regional leader. According to an interviewee, who preferred to remain anonymous,

China's status was on the rise due to its economic growth and the Olympics was a message to neighboring countries that China will be the leading power in the East Asian region. China wanted to improve their image. On the other hand, Beijing 2008 was the (Chinese) government's message to the citizens that China is rising and will soon be able to compete against the US and western democracies.

(Interview with first author, November 2019)

Hosting the Olympic games initially changed China's image and reputation although it was short-lived (Nye 2012). However, as discussed earlier, even though China was able to improve their image through hosting the Olympic Games, historical differences complicate how well soft power is accepted in the region. This leaves nations to rely more on hard power (mostly economic) and for China to prioritize domestic soft power or 'domestic public diplomacy.' In Chinese, there are two words that relate to public diplomacy (*gōnggòng wàijiāo*), coming from the Western lexicon (Zhao 2015). The first is 'external propaganda' (*duiwài xuānchuán*) where it is a way of raising awareness of Chinese achievements to build a new image of China for overseas audiences (ibid.). The other term related to public diplomacy is 'people-to-people diplomacy' (*mínjiān wàijiāo*) which pertains to the importance of people in foreign affairs (ibid.).

**International/domestic rationale.** By hosting the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China wanted to showcase their country, traditional cultural heritage, and Beijing's capability of becoming an international city, thus making China part of the international community. According to BOCOG (2008b, 11-12), their Action Plan states,

We shall popularize the Olympic spirit; carry forward the best of the culture of the Chinese nation; display the style and features of Beijing—a famous historical and cultural city—and the best spiritual features of its residents; deepen the understanding, trust, and friendship among the people of all countries; highlight [the sense of] "putting people in first place" and taking athletes as the focus; strive to build a natural and human environment compatible with the Olympic Games; provide excellent service; abide by the Olympic tenets; take the holding of the Olympic Games as the main line [of work]; organize rich and varied cultural

and educational activities; enrich the people's spiritual and cultural lives; promote the all-around development of young people and children; take widespread participation by the people as the basis; energize the flourishing and development of culture and sports; and enhance the cohesive force and sense of pride in the Chinese nation.

The Action Plan clearly states that the priorities are to promote every aspect of China, a sentiment that would appear to fit with Grix and Brannagan (2016) claim that nations host sports mega-events to showcase their culture and cultural assets. In similar vein, Hong (Vice Dean at School of Cultural Industries Management, Communication University of China) describes China's strategy as having two strands—international and domestic,

Hosting the Beijing Olympics was not only a great opportunity to showcase China's economic growth while also labeling Beijing as a choice for tourists, it was also a chance for Chinese citizens to experience this for themselves. Politically, hosting the 2008 Olympics was a way of opening up the country to help the country's diplomacy.

(Interview with first author, November 2019)

China spent the princely sum of \$42 billion to host the games (Rabinovitch 2008), showcase their economic development and make their citizens proud. In order to make Beijing an international destination, BOCOG tried to make good use of tourist attractions in Beijing and stated that China conduct 'work in accordance to international and modern standards, increase the overall openness of Beijing, and display to the world China's new image of reform and openness' (BOCOG 2008b, 14). Ultimately, by attracting international attention and people to their country, China believed that their diplomatic status would change internationally. It was also claimed by McDonnell (2022) that even 'in order to secure the 2008 Games, certain changes were announced to show that China had moved on and was a worthy host' since 'up until then (China's first bid), journalists were required permission from a local government, to travel anywhere in the country.' China was adapting and appeared relatively progressive in order to host a sports mega-events. The government acquired the Games not only to showcase the state's economic achievements—the 'external propaganda' (duìwài xuānchuán) - but also to raise sentiments of patriotism and confidence in the country's economic growth. Whether things have changed for the long-term in China's political stance will be discussed in the next section that touches on China's ambitions for hosting the 2022 Winter Olympics.

**Rationale behind hosting the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics.** In 2015 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded Beijing the hosting rights to the 2022 Winter Olympics, the first city ever to host both the Summer and Winter Olympics. In the end, it came down to a competition between China's Beijing and Kazakhstan's Almaty, after four European countries that had originally bid dropped out of the race due to the 'escalating costs of staging the Olympics, prompting the IOC to introduce a raft of reforms to cut costs and attract more bidders in the future' (Linden 2015).

The political context in which China hosted the 2022 Winter Olympics could not have been more different to 2008. Arguably, the Beijing Olympics opened the doors to the UK assiduously courting the Chinese for many years, culminating in Xi Jinping receiving the 'red carpet' treatment on a visit to the UK in 2015 (Ansari 2015). At that time China was seen as the answer to the

UK's economic problems and the hope was for a massive increase in direct investment.

Although the political context had changed between 2008 and 2022, China's penchant of prioritizing domestic soft power while showcasing 'external propaganda' (duìwài xuānchuán) using sport mega-events did not. As discussed, 'soft power' is a 'Western' concept and China's (and Russia's) understanding of it is naturally informed by their communist socialization and heritage (see Wilson 2015). Instead of using sports events to 'attract' foreign publics (as Nye would have it), China appears more interested in bolstering regime support, national identity, and a type of statecraft that is in contrast to the dominant 'Western' paradigm. China's—and the Communist Party's—key motive for hosting Beijing 2022 would appear to be in order to show their ascending power domestically, regionally (within East Asia), and internationally (toward superpower status). Given the timing of the Games—at the tail end of the global Covid-19 pandemic—one of the key reasons for hosting was no longer possible. On January 17<sup>th</sup> the final 2022 Beijing spectator policy was announced (IOC 2022). The document stated that only a domestic audience would be allowed, and these would be selected in groups to attend (Ibid.). This effectively led to 'sport without spectators' (Grix et al. 2020), or in this case, a select few, and therefore lacked the 'spillover effect' of inbound international tourists. The following discusses the rationale behind China's hosting of the 2022 Winter Olympics, including the relatively ineffective international boycott of the Games.

**China's domestic rationale behind hosting the 2022 Winter Olympics.** Given the changes to the global political context within which the Games were hosted—touched on above, the fact that no foreign tourists were allowed to attend due to Covid-19 and that Xi Jinping had embarked on a campaign of tightening his Communist Party's grip on power, China's key focus of the Winter Olympics was on a domestic audience. Wilson (2015, 287) makes the convincing argument that China's response to soft power generation is to 'construct a national identity that maintains the current regime and contests Western dominance in the prevailing international order'. That is, a global, normally outward facing sporting event, is actually used to underpin the incumbent regime's legitimacy. Hence, China's understanding of Nye's 'soft power' concept is very different, especially given that the original notion includes an adherence to international ('western') norms and institutions that China does not subscribe to (Rennie 2022). Instead, it appears that China has simultaneously tightened the control over society through the tentacles of the Communist Party while appealing to a sense of national pride generated via a multitude of sports events, including the Winter Olympics. According to Wing-Chung's study (2020), nationalism among Chinese youths has risen post-Covid, despite the harsh Communist Party handling of the Covid outbreak in 2020. Other commentators concur with this sentiment (Kuo 2020), suggesting that China's response to international criticism of its actions in Hong Kong and the alleged human rights abuses with the Uyghur people has manifested itself in an aggressive foreign policy that has, interestingly, fed into the growing national pride sparked by hosting sports events. Just as the Beijing Olympics could be construed as part of a nation building strategy that combines positive nationalism domestically with a higher profile externally (Grix et al. 2019), so too has the Winter Olympics followed a similar path. National pride and patriotism are the glue that hold together non-democratically elected regimes, as all policy – including foreign policy – is undertaken with the best interests of citizens in mind.

**Regional/domestic rationale.** There is little doubt that East Asia has seen an explosion of hosting sport mega-events. The 2022 Winter Olympics is the third East Asian Olympic event within 4 years after the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympics and the Tokyo 2020(1) summer Olympics. This proliferation of major sporting events signifies both the international, regional *and* domestic importance attached to such global media attractions. China's image abroad since the Beijing Olympics showed some signs of improvement in the West, but *not* among its Asian neighbors (especially, Vietnam, Indonesia and Japan; see Silver 2017), as regional rivalries continue and the scramble to host global sporting events continues. Regionalism is often overlooked as a driver for dominance, yet a number of countries in the key regions of the world have all used sport or sporting events to attempt to assert influence. Take the Middle East, for example, where Qatar and Saudi Arabia are pursuing state-led sports strategies of investment and hosting (see Brannagan and Reiche 2022); the recent FIFA World Cup hosted by Qatar has clearly put this tiny state on the international map and made it a key player in the region; Brazil re-established its leading role in south America through the double host status of both the FIFA World Cup (2014) and the summer Olympics (2016). East Asia has now hosted *all* of the major sports mega-events that exist and attention seems to be focusing on the next tier down, including the first Rugby World Cup in the region in Japan (2019). China's regional primacy is undisputed – onlookers, especially the US, had hoped that Chinese ambitions would stop with the region and near-neighbors. However, as touched on below, part of the root of the worsening Sino-US relations are to be found precisely in the shift from a regional to a global actor (see Sullivan and Brands 2020). Strong domestic support, growing patriotism and a strong sense of progress appear to be ingredients in China's inexorable rise from a regional actor to a global superpower (Sullivan and Brands 2020)

**International/domestic rationale.** China is neither a democratic nor an 'emerging' state, and its desire for hosting the Games was instead to highlight its economic and political ascendance – the same ascendance that forms the root of Sino-US tensions mentioned above. The Presidency of Donald Trump saw a rapid deterioration in Sino-US relations, with the relationship between the two states reaching its lowest point since the *détente* of the 1970s. This was undoubtedly exacerbated by the bombastic and combative style of the former President, but the continuation of tensions under President Biden show that opposition to China is not a partisan issue and is borne out of bigger concerns. In recent years, there have been a number of 'flashpoints' for the increase in Sino-US tensions, maritime claims in the South China Sea, US support for Taiwan, Chinese support for the nuclear armed North Korea, accusations of human rights violations, and, of course, the origin of Covid-19. Yet, overshadowing—and perhaps inciting—these incidents, is one factor, the growth in power of China, and the threat that poses to the US-led status-quo. The deterioration in relations and the revelations around the Chinese treatment of the Uyghurs population was behind a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics initiated by the US with a number of other democratic countries, such as the UK, Canada, and Australia, joining in. What could have been an *internationally* damaging campaign for China turned out to be a rather tepid affair, given that the boycott consisted of no government officials attending the Games, yet all athletes from the respective countries still competing (Guzman 2021). The trigger for the boycott was due to China's 'human rights abuses and atrocities in Xinjiang against the province's (Uyghur) Muslim population' (BBC 2022), their actions on restricting the freedom of Hong Kong residents and the crackdown on anti-government protests, and the Communist Party treatment of Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai (ibid.). According to a report,

'she was not heard from for nearly three weeks after her allegations of sexual assault against Zhang Gaoli, a former vice-premier of China' (ibid.). However, unlike most countries, China and its Communist Party need the games for similar reasons as the Russians needed the hosting of Sochi 2014—to boost their own legitimacy domestically. Therefore, the 2022 Games could be understood first and foremost as a platform to generate sentiments of national pride among citizens, but also to remind others of their regional leadership and global aspirations.

**Concluding remarks.** It is evident that sports, and specifically sports mega-events, are central to China's soft power strategy, its 'external propaganda' (*duiwai xuanchuan*), and its purpose is primarily for regime legitimacy. In this paper we have posited the notion that China's state-led soft power strategy using sports mega-events is 'unique', that is, it does not follow Joseph Nye's understanding of the concept, but rather the emphasis is much more on *domestic* soft power. Further, by adopting a 'tripartite' approach to 'soft power' analysis along the axis of *domestic*, *regional* and *international* lines, we offer a more holistic understanding of how China's use of sport plays out at all three levels, thereby contributing to the extant literature on this topic.

China's definition of soft power differs both from the original concept and many other states' use of it. China's emphasis, as we have sought to show, is on domestic soft power (to bolster regime legitimacy) and propaganda internationally and regionally, something that has not changed from the 2008 Games to the 2022 Games. With the 2022 Games contested almost entirely behind closed doors, open only to certain groups of Chinese citizens, its external reach was highly limited, not dissimilar to Japan's hosting of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. However, given China sought domestic soft power too, the loss of a 'spillover effect' was not as bad for China as it had been for Japan in 2021.

China (and incidentally, Russia) is among the strongest 'emerging states' that have used a state-led, two-pronged approach to sport with external and domestic soft power strategies, the latter to generally shore up political legitimacy at home. Domestic soft power is important in authoritarian states to ensure the political legitimacy of the ruling party; in a democratic state it is highly likely, for example, that the political party that bids for an event will not be in power when the event takes place up to seven years later. In an authoritarian state this is not usually a concern. China has used SMEs to "showcase" their state and their growing strength, but also to indicate their alternative modernity and development to both a domestic audience and international actors (Black and Westhuizen 2004). Such a dual soft power strategy attempts to mobilize an event domestically as well as internationally, but non-democratic states use these opportunities to shore up political legitimacy by securing domestic and political loyalty, for example, by ensuring key political allies and their regions benefit (Mueller and Pickles 2015).<sup>1</sup>

Currently, China's economy is closest to rivaling the US. The US still holds the lead with a GDP of \$23 trillion and China with \$17 trillion (Wisevoter 2023). However, China's \$900 billion "One Belt, One Road" project, is a massive infrastructural investment that is likely to go some way in improving both the country's economic fortunes and make it more attractive, increasing its stocks of soft power.<sup>2</sup> If this is the case, then China's domestic soft power is likely to benefit, which in turn will ensure that the political legitimacy of China's leading party remains high.

#### Data availability

The data generated from interviews during this study are included in the manuscript. Raw materials cannot be provided to the

reviewers due to the nature of the data, which were obtained through recordings.

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## Author contributions

Equal contributions were made to the research, writing, and editing of the paper.

## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Ethical approval

(a) Approved by Manchester Metropolitan University online ethics application system: EthOS. (b) We confirm that all research was performed in accordance to the Declaration of Helsinki following closely with informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality. (c) Approval Number: 1225. (d) Date of Approval: 9 April 2019. (e) Scope of Approval: (1) Data Collection and Privacy: approved methods for data handling, storage, privacy protection, and confidentiality. (2) Informed Consent Process: the approved methods for obtaining and documenting informed consent from participants.

## Informed consent

\* Informed consent was obtained at the interview location. (a) Written consent was obtained from the interview participant through the signing of a consent form during the face-to-face interviews, which were conducted between 13 November 2019 to 21 November 2019. (b) Scope of the consent: participation of interview, data usage, and consent to publish. (c) The study did not involve vulnerable individuals. (d) The study did not involve payment or incentivization. (e) The study did not involve non-interventional research. All participants were fully informed of their right to anonymity, the purpose of the research, how their data would be utilized, and any potential risks associated with their participation, as outlined in the consent form they signed.

## Additional information

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