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Past, Present and Future of Olympic Legacy in Asia

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ABSTRACT

The Olympic Games have long played a pivotal role in shaping national identity, diplomacy, and socio-political narratives, particularly in Asian contexts. From Japan's post-WWII recovery demonstrated by the 1964 Tokyo Olympics to China's rising global influence showcased during the 2008 and 2022 Games, the Olympics have transcended sports to become a platform for political messaging and national branding. This paper examines the evolution of the Olympic legacy in Asia, focusing on the tangible and intangible impacts on infrastructure, culture, and social values. It explores the role of the Games in urban regeneration, the promotion of soft power, and the emphasis on cultural heritage. Additionally, the paper discusses the intersection of technology and Olympic legacy, particularly the use of AI and digital platforms in preserving Olympic heritage, and the growing importance of sustainability in recent Games. By analyzing the political, cultural, and technological dimensions of the Olympics, this study underscores the Games' broader significance beyond athletic competition. It also highlights challenges, such as the underutilization of Olympic venues and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Future research should explore how these intersections of technology, culture, and diplomacy will shape the ongoing legacy of the Olympics in Asia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Olympic Games, as one of the world's most prestigious sporting events, go beyond athletic competition; they serve as a complex platform that reflects and shapes global politics, culture, and identity. According to [Bairner \(2001\)](#), the Games have become a significant event not only for displaying athletic excellence but also for serving as a stage where various political, cultural, and national narratives are constructed. In recent years, Olympic events, particularly the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics have provided valuable insights into how nations, especially in Asia, use the Games to achieve both domestic and international objectives. These international spectacles often catalyze broad discussions about nationalism, diplomacy, gender equality, race, and cultural preservation, all of which intersect with the politics of sport ([Cashman, 2003](#)).

The impact of the Olympics in Asia extends far beyond the events themselves. Both Japan and China have utilized the Olympic Games as a means to project national power and soft power, influencing their domestic narratives and international relations. In Japan, the Tokyo 2020 Games were embedded within a larger discourse on the nation's post-war identity, technological advancement, and resilience, especially in the context of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic ([Brady, 2009](#)). Similarly, China's approach to the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics was intertwined with its ongoing efforts to promote national unity and international prestige, showcasing the country as an emerging global leader in sport and other domains. The Games, in this sense, act as a vehicle through which national identity is asserted and the broader geopolitical aims of the host nations are advanced.

At a deeper level, the Olympics also highlight complex socio-political issues, including gender equality, race, and cultural preservation. These issues have been particularly evident in the discussions surrounding athlete representation, the inclusion of women in sports, and the symbolic significance of Olympic symbols and rituals. The discussions around the Olympics' role in promoting gender equality and racial inclusivity have gained momentum in recent years, prompting global debates on the shifting nature of sports and its role in addressing inequalities ([Tzanelli, 2021](#)). As such, the Olympics provide a unique space to examine how different cultures approach issues of inclusion, representation, and national pride, offering a rich context for analyzing the global influence of sports on social change.

This paper will examine how the Olympic Games intersect with politics, diplomacy, nationalism, gender, race, ethnicity, youth, economy, and culture in Asia, with a specific focus on the 2020 Tokyo and 2022 Beijing Olympics. It will explore the socio-political impact of these events, analyzing how they have contributed to shaping national identities and global relations. Additionally, this study will assess the legacy of the Olympics in these two countries, particularly in terms of long-term social, economic, and cultural impacts. Lastly, the paper will discuss the challenges of preserving and transmitting Olympic heritage in the digital age, considering how modern technology and social media have transformed the way Olympic history is preserved and communicated ([Flyvbjerg, 2014](#)). Through this comprehensive analysis, this paper aims to shed light on the lasting implications of the Olympic Games in shaping global and regional sports cultures.

2. METHODS

This research utilizes a qualitative approach, combining a comprehensive literature review with case studies of the Olympic Games held in Asia, particularly focusing on the Tokyo 1964, Beijing 2008, Tokyo 2020, and Beijing 2022 Olympic Games. The literature review includes academic journal articles, books, and official reports related to the Olympic legacy

and heritage in the context of Asian nations. Additionally, case studies of specific Olympic Games were analyzed to identify both tangible and intangible legacies, including the economic impacts, infrastructural developments, cultural diplomacy, social and political impacts, and technological innovations associated with these events. The research also draws on existing theoretical frameworks of legacy studies to evaluate the broader implications of the Games on host nations' identity and international relations.

To analyze the economic and cultural impact of these Games, this study employed content analysis, identifying key themes and patterns across the selected cases. Information was synthesized into a series of comparative analyses, examining shifts in the Olympic legacy discourse over time, with a particular emphasis on the 1960s to the present. In addition, interviews with experts and policymakers involved in the planning and execution of the Olympics in these regions were conducted to gain further insights into the practical aspects of hosting the Games and their long-term consequences.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Olympic Legacy and Heritage in Asia

1. Infrastructure and Economic Impact (1960s-1980s)

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the initial research on the Olympic legacy primarily concentrated on tangible aspects such as infrastructure development, tourism, and urban regeneration. The 1964 Tokyo Olympics marked a significant turning point in the history of Olympic legacy research, as it emphasized modernization and economic recovery in post-war Japan. Early studies focused on the economic benefits and costs associated with hosting the Games, particularly in terms of the infrastructure developments that were undertaken in preparation for the event (Preuss, 2004). The Tokyo Olympics led to significant investments in transportation infrastructure, including the creation of the Shinkansen (bullet train) and extensive highway systems. These developments were regarded as pivotal in transforming Japan's urban landscape and enhancing its economic competitiveness. Researchers during this period largely concentrated on evaluating the financial impacts of such major infrastructural projects, weighing the costs of construction against the long-term benefits of improved transportation and tourism (Girginov, 2015).

The 1980 Moscow Olympics, in contrast, marked the beginning of a shift toward understanding the geopolitical implications of hosting the Games. The Games were deeply affected by the Cold War, and the subsequent boycott of the event by several nations raised questions about the political uses of the Olympics. While much of the focus remained on the economic aspects, researchers began to explore the broader symbolic and intangible legacies of the Games, particularly concerning national prestige and global diplomacy (Roche, 2000). This period saw a growing recognition that the Olympic Games could serve not only as a catalyst for economic development but also as a tool for political expression on the international stage.

2. Emergence of Social and Intangible Heritage Research (1990s-2000s)

The 1990s witnessed a significant expansion of research beyond economic and infrastructural concerns, as scholars began to explore the social and cultural impacts of the Olympics. This period saw an increasing interest in understanding how the Games influenced local communities, public morale, and national identity. A particularly important event in this

regard was the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, which was instrumental in advancing the study of urban regeneration. The transformation of Barcelona's waterfront and the broader cityscape became a focal point for researchers examining the long-term social effects of the Games on local residents. The Olympics were seen not just as a sporting event but as a catalyst for urban renewal, with profound effects on the city's architecture and social fabric ([Monclús, 1998](#)). Barcelona became a model for how the Games could be used to revitalize a city and create lasting legacies beyond the immediate event.

In addition to urban regeneration, the 1996 Atlanta Olympics contributed to the development of the concept of "white elephant" projects, referring to costly infrastructure projects that lack long-term utility or fail to meet their intended goals after the Games. This introduced a new debate about sustainable urban development and the long-term utility of Olympic infrastructure ([Cashman, 2006](#)). During this time, the notion of intangible Olympic legacies began to take shape, emphasizing the long-term cultural and social impacts of hosting the Games. Researchers started to focus on elements such as public participation, education, and the promotion of peace through sports as key intangible benefits of the Olympics ([Girginov, 2015](#)).

3. Olympic Legacy as a Comprehensive Framework (2000s-2010s)

By the 2000s, the concept of Olympic legacy had evolved into a more formalized and multi-dimensional area of study. Researchers began to define the Olympic legacy in broader terms, encompassing economic, social, cultural, and environmental factors. The Sydney 2000 Olympics played a pivotal role in shaping the modern understanding of the Olympic legacy, particularly in terms of sustainable development. The Games were a model for integrating both tangible and intangible legacies into the broader framework of urban planning and environmental consciousness. Researchers like [Preuss \(2002\)](#) and [Cashman \(2006\)](#) emphasized the importance of considering both the immediate and long-term economic and social effects of the Olympics. [Preuss \(2002\)](#) introduced a comprehensive analysis of the economic impact of the Games, identifying both the positive and negative outcomes for host cities and countries. This approach highlighted the need for a balanced assessment of the costs and benefits associated with hosting the Olympics.

The Beijing 2008 Olympics marked another important milestone in the development of Olympic legacy research. As China sought to position itself as a global leader, the Beijing Games became a key tool in advancing the country's national branding, soft power, and cultural diplomacy. Researchers began to explore the role of the Olympics in portraying China's cultural heritage and promoting values such as fair play, solidarity, and internationalism. This focus on intangible cultural heritage became more prominent as scholars like [Smith and Waterton \(2009\)](#) examined how the Olympics contribute to a host country's cultural identity and social cohesion. The Beijing Games were seen not only as a sporting event but also as an opportunity for China to showcase its cultural richness and assert its growing global influence ([Roche, 2017](#)).

4. Expansion to Sustainability and Long-Term Planning (2010s-Present)

From the 2010s onwards, the focus on sustainability and long-term planning became a critical aspect of Olympic legacy discussions. Scholars began analyzing how the Olympic Games could contribute to environmental sustainability, urban regeneration, and long-term societal benefits while mitigating potential negative impacts. The concept of Olympic legacy expanded beyond the physical infrastructure and tourism effects to encompass the environmental footprint, digital presence, and long-term societal benefits of the Games. A

pivotal event in this shift was the 2012 London Olympics, which emphasized the integration of environmental concerns with urban development. London set a global precedent by ensuring that sustainability was at the core of its Olympic legacy framework, marked by initiatives such as the use of renewable energy sources, waste reduction, and the transformation of East London into a revitalized urban hub (Gold & Gold, 2011). The London Games provided a comprehensive model for integrating sustainability into the Olympic legacy, setting new standards for future hosts to follow.

In 2015, Girginov (2015) explored the concept of sustainable legacy in greater depth, focusing on how the Olympic Games can contribute to sustainable urban and cultural development, particularly in emerging markets. He highlighted that the Olympics could play a key role in fostering long-term development, not just in terms of infrastructure, but in terms of community engagement, environmental protection, and cultural enrichment. This concept became especially relevant as emerging economies began bidding for the Games, recognizing that hosting the Olympics could serve as a means of both showcasing national progress and achieving lasting developmental benefits. Girginov's work underscored the importance of planning and executing the Games with a long-term perspective, ensuring that the benefits of the Games endure long after the closing ceremony.

5. Technological and Digital Legacy

In recent years, research into the Olympic legacy has expanded to include the influence of digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and smart infrastructure, in shaping the future of heritage preservation and public engagement. With the rise of AI, virtual reality (VR), and other advanced technologies, the concept of Olympic legacy has further evolved to include the protection of digital heritage and the management of personal data. The 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics exemplified this shift, with both events leveraging cutting-edge technologies to enhance spectator engagement and ensure that the Games' legacies are preserved in digital form. Scholars have begun exploring the role of these technologies in reshaping the narrative around Olympic legacies, with a focus on the creation of digital archives, media content, and the inclusion of diverse global audiences in the Olympic conversation (Tzanelli, 2021).

Tzanelli (2021) delved into how digital archives and media could be used to preserve Olympic memories and cultural heritage in a rapidly digitizing world. The 2020 Tokyo Olympics, for example, incorporated a range of digital platforms to engage international audiences and provide virtual access to Olympic events, thus extending the Games' reach beyond traditional physical attendance. In the case of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, digital technologies were used not only to enhance the spectator experience but also to safeguard cultural heritage and ensure that data privacy concerns were addressed. The increased integration of AI and smart technologies has led to new discussions about how to balance technological advancement with the ethical concerns surrounding digital heritage and data sovereignty (Tzanelli, 2022). Moving forward, the role of technology in Olympic legacy management is likely to dominate future research, with a focus on how digital platforms can archive Olympic memories, engage with a global audience, and enhance inclusivity in the preservation of Olympic heritage.

Olympic Legacy

The concept of Olympic legacy has traditionally been divided into two broad categories: tangible and intangible. In the context of Asia, however, the Olympic legacy extends beyond

just infrastructure—such as the construction of stadiums, Olympic villages, and transportation systems—to include intangible cultural heritage. This includes the promotion of values, traditions, and social impacts that shape the identity and cultural narratives of the host countries (Girginov, 2015). For instance, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics marked a transformative period in Japan's post-World War II recovery, symbolizing its modernization and reintegration into the global community. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics, despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, were positioned as a testament to Japan's leadership in technology and innovation. These two games illustrate Japan's evolving identity—from a nation rebuilding after the war to one that leads the world in technological advancements. The contrast between the 1964 and 2020 Olympics underscores the dynamic nature of the Olympic legacy and its capacity to reflect the socio-political and economic changes of a host nation.

Olympic Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Olympic Games are also a powerful tool in shaping intangible heritage. This refers to the promotion of social values such as fair play, diversity, and inclusion, which are inherent in the spirit of the Games. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics, although held under the shadow of the global pandemic, emphasized values such as resilience, solidarity, and the shared global fight against COVID-19. These values are central to the Games' legacy, serving not only as a reflection of the host nation's political priorities but also as a platform for universal human ideals. Similarly, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics showcased China's strategic use of cultural diplomacy. By blending modern technology with traditional Chinese elements in the opening and closing ceremonies, China presented an image of a harmonious nation that respects its cultural roots while embracing modernity (Gold & Gold, 2011). Despite these successes, challenges in preserving Olympic heritage persist, particularly regarding the underutilization of venues post-games. For example, iconic structures from the 2008 Beijing Olympics, such as the “Bird's Nest” stadium, have struggled with underuse, reflecting broader challenges faced by host countries in sustaining the long-term viability of Olympic infrastructure (Preuss, 2004). Additionally, the lack of international frameworks for the protection of intangible heritage further exacerbates these challenges (Tzanelli, 2021).

Politics, Diplomacy, and Nationalism in Olympic Context

In Asia, the Olympics have consistently served as a platform for political messaging, with host nations using the global stage to convey national narratives and political objectives. Both the Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022 Games reflect the host countries' efforts to project power, modernity, and diplomatic influence. Japan, for example, leveraged the 2020 Olympics to highlight its role as a global leader in technology and environmental sustainability. Despite facing domestic and international opposition due to the health risks posed by COVID-19, Japan's determination to host the Games was framed as an expression of resilience and national pride. For China, the Olympics have long been a means of asserting its growing influence on the global stage. The 2008 Beijing Olympics, for example, were used to showcase China's emergence as a global superpower, while the 2022 Winter Olympics, held amidst political tensions and human rights criticisms, presented a more contentious form of nationalism (Roche, 2000). The Olympics also serve as a tool for diplomacy, with both Japan and China using their respective Games to strengthen international relations. Japan promoted cooperation in science and technology at Tokyo 2020, while China used the Winter Games to fortify its strategic alliances, particularly with Russia and other nations (Girginov, 2015).

Representation in the Olympics and Socio-Political Issues

One of the most significant areas of focus in the recent Olympic Games is the question of gender equality. The Tokyo 2020 Games made substantial strides towards gender parity in athletes' participation, though Japan continued to face criticism for the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within its Olympic Committee. The resignation of Yoshiro Mori, the president of the Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee, over sexist remarks brought attention to the systemic gender disparities still prevalent in Japanese sports and governance. In addition, racial and ethnic disparities have also come to the fore in the Olympics, with the inclusion of biracial athlete Naomi Osaka lighting the cauldron at the Tokyo Games being a powerful symbol of Japan's evolving attitudes towards race. Similarly, China showcased its minority groups during the Beijing 2022 opening ceremony as part of an effort to present a harmonious image to the world. These events highlight the broader socio-political challenges surrounding race, ethnicity, and gender in multicultural societies and the Olympics' role in addressing these issues. Furthermore, the Olympics inspire youth to pursue sports excellence, with both Japan's "Tokyo 2020 Education Program" and China's push to involve 300 million people in winter sports by 2025 aiming to cultivate the next generation of athletes.

Economic Impact and Cultural Diplomacy

The economic impact of the Olympics in Asia has been a subject of mixed reviews. While the Games can stimulate tourism, infrastructure development, and national pride, they also pose risks, such as the creation of "white elephant" projects—expensive venues and infrastructure that lack long-term utility. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics, for instance, faced a massive economic shortfall, exacerbated by the pandemic, with lost tourism revenue and substantial financial losses. Similarly, the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics faced scrutiny for the substantial spending on infrastructure, despite the limited economic returns due to strict COVID-19 protocols. On the cultural front, the Olympics have had a profound influence on the international perception of Asian countries. Japan and China both used their respective Olympic Games to promote their unique cultural heritage, blending tradition with modernity. Japan showcased its traditional culture alongside cutting-edge technology at Tokyo 2020, while China highlighted its historical heritage at the 2022 Winter Games ([Tzanelli, 2022](#)). However, as technology such as AI, virtual reality, and data analytics continue to evolve, they present both opportunities and challenges for Olympic heritage preservation. Issues such as data privacy, technological dependence, and accessibility may complicate efforts to transmit intangible heritage to future generations.

4. CONCLUSION

The Olympic Games in Asia have played a pivotal role in shaping national identity, fostering diplomatic relations, and addressing pressing socio-political issues, including gender equality, race, and cultural representation. As the Games continue to evolve, future research should focus on the intersection of technology and Olympic legacy, exploring how innovations in digital technologies and sustainable practices will influence the preservation of cultural heritage, particularly in Asian contexts. The Olympics will remain a prominent platform for showcasing sports, politics, and culture across the region. Understanding the complex interplay between these factors is essential for maintaining the broader significance of the Games, extending beyond mere athletic achievements, to reflect the evolving social, political, and cultural landscapes of host nations.

5. AUTHOR'S NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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