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Go, Teams! Learning The Drill In China

By Maureen Fan
Washington Post Foreign Service
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BEIJING -- When the Summer Olympics open to great fanfare in August, an estimated 500,000 foreign tourists will be here rooting for their home teams. The Chinese will be cheering, too. They've been trained for it.

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In a decision that is highly unusual by Olympic standards, the Chinese government has trained hundreds of thousands of official cheerleaders. Most are former state employees drafted out of retirement. They have been taught when to roar their approval and why not to boo other teams, especially those from onetime enemy countries. They will be assigned to events based partly on the decibel levels desired, organizers say.

Athens and Turin, Italy, host cities in 2004 and 2006, each had small teams of Olympic cheerleaders, controversial for their bikinis and their lack of rhythm, respectively. But [China's](#) effort is different in scope and ambition. The cheerleaders here, numbering more than 210,000 and growing, are a powerful symbol of how this country wants to be perceived by the rest of the world: united, strong and of one voice.

Visitors to Beijing should not expect to see armies of Chinese 20-somethings in communist-red tights. The cheerleaders are more likely to look like a sorority of

grandmothers, wearing matching T-shirts and equipped with props such as flags, handkerchiefs and "cheering sticks," inflatable, oblong plastic balloons that generate

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thunderous applause.

"Higher, higher! Faster, faster! Stronger, stronger!" hundreds of state workers and retirees chanted in deafening unison at a recent practice session, as they slammed the balloons together in neatly choreographed steps.

In some ways, it's a scene straight out of the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, the crusade against intellectuals that used mass songs, "model operas" and "loyalty dances" to rally ordinary citizens and whip up support for the Communist Party. Late last year, a cheering competition was held to improve the "standardization" of the cheering teams and to motivate team members.

According to the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games, training sessions for cheerleaders serve an important purpose.

"The Chinese don't know very much about baseball, archery, handball or water polo. Part of this is an exercise to teach organized cheering that can be used at events they have no experience at," said Jeff Ruffolo, a spokesman for the committee.

"This also goes hand in hand with the etiquette program," Ruffolo added, referring to a citywide campaign to get Beijing residents to stop cutting in line, spitting and booing. "It's to remind people that it's great to have fun but it's also important to be an example to your capital and your nation."

The Beijing Federation of Trade Unions is organizing retirees, government employees, white-collar office workers and even members of the army into a cheering team, the largest being assembled. Across the capital, women's associations and youth groups are also helping recruit participants. Middle schools have been partnered with schools in cities overseas -- Tokyo and Manchester, England, for example -- and students will wear the national colors of whichever country they are assigned to cheer.

To inspire the cheerleaders, team posters will use national colors and calligraphy "to demonstrate the enthusiastic spirit of the people," according to organizers.

China's political culture places a unique emphasis on group performance. It's an emphasis that starts as early as kindergarten, dominates the work lives of state employees and is used to demonstrate collective passion where it might otherwise not exist. To many Olympic visitors, the impulse to script and stage-manage everything might seem odd. But China has long emphasized ceremony and propriety.

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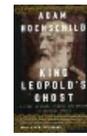
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"Organized cheering groups show the strong ability of the government to call on ordinary people for help," said Beijing sociologist Guan Kai. "In the West, it's unimaginable."

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Officials say training is also instilling the spirit of good sportsmanship in fans. It's a quality that can be lacking at some sporting events. At a soccer match in February at the East Asian Championships in Chongqing, Chinese spectators threw plastic bottles and sticks when Japanese players greeted their supporters. (After the Chinese team lost, fans also hurled rubbish at the Chinese team bus.)

At the Olympics, the Chinese have a new chance to put on a good face before old foes. Organizers plan to make the best of it.

"In our instructions, we especially emphasized this. They should cheer for both sides in order to show that the Chinese are very tolerant," said Yuan Xuzhong, secretary of the organizing committee of the federation's Beijing Workers' Cultural Progress Cheering Team.

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Retirees, not necessarily the rowdiest of sorts, so far seem happy to comply.

"We'll listen to our leaders and follow their instructions," said Li Mei, 50, a retired steel company worker. "We volunteers are organized by the state, so there's no need to worry."

Not everyone here appreciates the stage-managed approach. Some critics say organized cheerleading illustrates China's

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emphasis on presentation over substance, an approach that has hampered its ability, they say, to deal with many Olympic-size problems, such as the traffic that is expected to overwhelm Beijing and the pollution that may make it harder for some athletes to compete.

Other critics have argued that the Communist Party is less interested in embracing Olympic ideals of freedom and openness than in bolstering its own legitimacy before a domestic audience.

"Cheering should be voluntary and not imposed by the state," said Zheng Yefu, a sociologist at Peking University and author of several books about soccer.

Dissident author Wang Lixiong, who, along with his wife, Tibetan essayist Tsering Wooser, has been under house arrest in Beijing since before the riot in Lhasa last month, was struck by the parallels between the cheering sessions and the Cultural Revolution.

"It reminds me of the bound-foot grandmothers who performed 'loyalty dances,' " he said. "Although the contents are different, the root cause and logic are the same."

News researchers Zhang Jie and Liu Songjie contributed to this report.

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