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Opening extract from

Outstanding Olympics

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After several bids in the past, the Olympic Games comes to the world's most populous country in 2008. The People's Republic of China is home to over 1,300 million people. Beijing, its capital city, will host the third summer Olympics to be held in Asia.

China entered the Olympics in 1984 for the first time since 1932. Pistol shooter Xu Haifeng became **China's first ever gold medallist** at the 1984 Olympics. The country's Olympians have added many golds since, including the women's doubles in tennis. In table tennis, it is no surprise that China has won 16 out of a possible 20 gold medals.

Getting involved

Who wants to be an Olympian? Well, millions appears to be the answer, judging by the response of Chinese people to a reality show, *China Olympic Coxswain Competition*. Designed to pick the coxswains who will compete in the eights events in rowing at the Olympics, **one lucky man and one lucky woman** will be picked out of a reported 10 million applications.

An 80-year-old woman, Shang Suyun, spent over two years **embroidering 2,008 butterflies** on to a 26.7m long piece of cloth as a **gift to the Olympics**. Having never been to school, Suyun had to get someone else to count them all to check.

Over **350,000 Chinese people** have applied to be Olympic Games 2008 volunteers.

Compared to Western diets, **some Chinese dishes are surprising**. To make sure that food doesn't 'upset' foreign visitors, some items are being removed from Beijing restaurants before the games, including **snake, shark's fin and bear's paw**.

And on the food front, according to a report in the UK's *The Times* newspaper, Chinese Olympic officials aren't leaving anything to chance. Food destined **for athletes' plates**, including milk, salad and seasonings, **is to be tested** 24 hours before, on white mice.

An **English language campaign** in Beijing involves teaching 300 English words and phrases to some 48,000 taxi drivers.



Beijing 2008 Olympic stadium being built

The games and events

Eight is a lucky number in China, symbolising prosperity. The opening ceremony will start at **8.08 am on 8 August** (the eighth month of the year), **2008**.

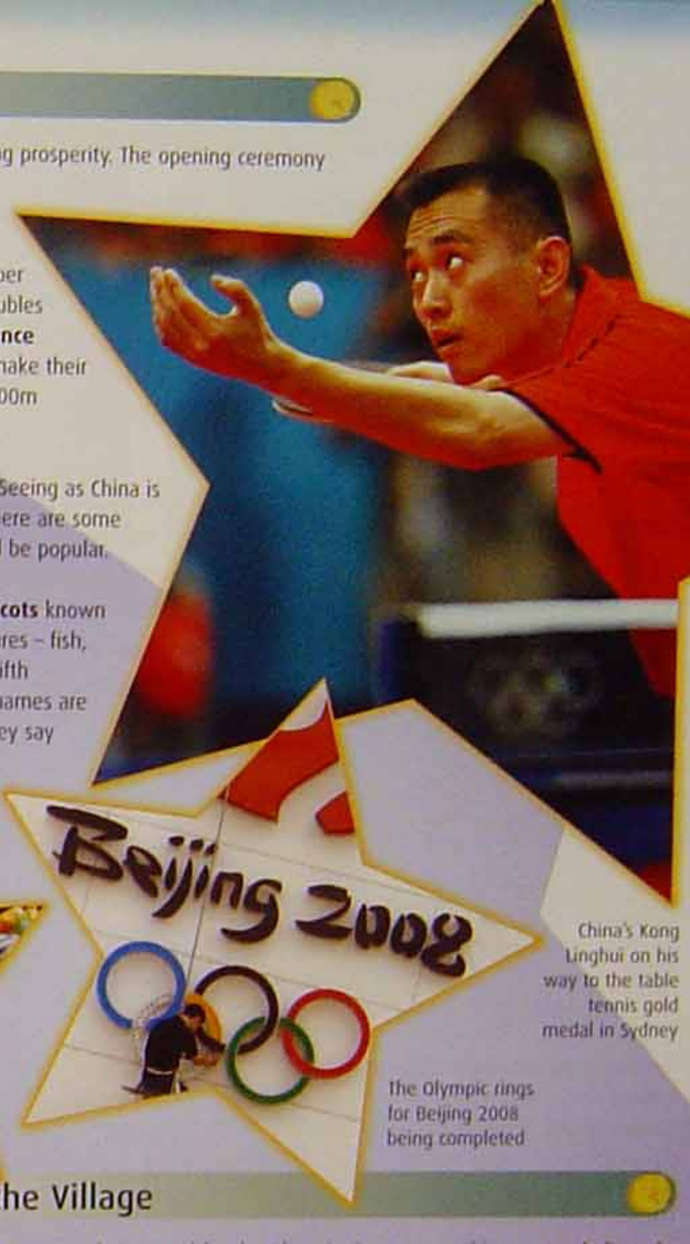
The Beijing games will include a number of new events. Team events replace the doubles in table tennis, while **gruelling long-distance swimming events** over a 10km distance make their debut. Women will also compete in the 3,000m steeplechase for the first time.

BMX cycling will be a medal sport in 2008. Seeing as China is the **world's biggest bicycle maker** and there are some 470 million bicycles in the country, it should be popular.

The Beijing games will have **five mascots** known as *fuwa*. Four signify popular Chinese creatures – fish, panda, swallow and Tibetan antelope. The fifth symbolises the Olympic flame. When their names are said together – **Bei Jing Huan Ying Ni** – they say 'Welcome to Beijing' in Chinese.



Beijing 2008 Olympic mascots



China's Kong Linghui on his way to the table tennis gold medal in Sydney

The Olympic rings for Beijing 2008 being completed

Venues and the Village

There are **31 different venues** being used for the Olympics in Beijing. Many, including the 91,000-seat National Stadium, are clustered around an **area of parkland called the Olympic Green**. The equestrian events will be held in Hong Kong.

Apart from building all the new stadia and facilities, Beijing is **improving its transport system**, which had four train lines and 64 stations. The upgrade will add seven new lines and an **amazing 80 new stations**, and is due to open just before the games.

The Olympic Village will house **16,000 Olympians and officials** during the games in 20 nine-floor buildings and 26 six-floor buildings. The Village will include **swimming pools, tennis and basketball courts, recreation centres and a library**.

China sent a dedicated satellite into space in December 2006 **to provide accurate weather forecasts for the Olympics**. There are plans to launch two further satellites in 2007 dedicated to **beaming radio and television signals** of the Olympic Games all round the world.

Without athletes to compete in all the different events, the Olympics would be nothing. Over the years, there have been some amazing performances from athletes young and old, tall and small.

Great performances

Finland's **Paavo Nurmi** won an astonishing nine gold and three silver medals in middle- and long-distance running (1920–1928). In 1924, he managed to win both the 1,500m and the 5,000m even though the finals were held **within an hour and a half of each other**.



Paavo Nurmi (797) at Amsterdam, 1928



Hossein Rezazadeh from Iran competing at the Sydney Olympics in 2000

At Athens, 2004, heavyweight weightlifter Hossein Rezazadeh **broke the world record** by lifting a staggering 263.5kg on his way to his second gold medal in a row.

American Ed Moses **won the Olympic 400m hurdles** at both the 1976 and 1984 Olympics. He would probably have won in 1980 too, but the USA boycotted the games. For 122 races in a row, over almost ten years, **Moses was never beaten!**



Romanian rower Elisabeta Lipa-Oleniuc just **could not keep away** from the Olympics. She attended six Olympics, winning a medal every time. At the 2004 games, at the age of 39, she won her fifth gold, adding to her two silvers and one bronze and making her **the most decorated Olympic rower ever**.

Young and old

Dimitrios Loundras is the youngest known Olympian (see p. 13) but mystery still surrounds **an unknown French boy**. At the Paris games in 1900, he replaced the cox of the Dutch rowing boat just before the final and won. It is thought he was **under 10 years old**.

Ninety-two years later, Carlos Front was the cox in the Spanish rowing eight at Barcelona. He was just 11 years old.

Platform diver Aileen Riggin from the USA won gold at the 1920 games **at the age of 14**. She weighed just 29kg. She was an Olympic champion for 82 years, dying at the age of 96.

Sweden's Oscar Swahn is the **oldest Olympian**, winning silver at shooting in 1920, at the age of 72 years and 280 days. He is also the oldest gold medallist, winning in 1912 at 64 years old.

During trials for the 1960 Olympics, the Hungarian fencing committee told the six times Olympic gold medallist Aladár Gerevich that he was **too old to compete**. He challenged the sabre team to individual matches and won them all. He was then selected for the Olympics and **won his seventh gold medal**.

Failed but fabulous

At the Athens Olympics in 1896, Stamati Revithi from Greece **tried to enter the marathon** but was not allowed because she was a woman. Undeterred, she **completed the course by herself** the following day.

Canadian Lawrence Lemieux was in second place in the Finn class sailing in 1988 when he **stopped to rescue a yachtsman** from Singapore whose boat had sunk. Lemieux eventually came home in 21st place, but he was **awarded a special IOC medal** for his sportsmanship.

A similar occurrence happened at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. Swedish yachtsmen Stig Lennart Kall and Lars Gunnar Kall stopped to rescue two sailors whose boat had sunk, and thus **missed out on a medal**.

A time limit for wrestling bouts in the Olympics was not set until the 1924 games, so there were some long bouts! The semi-final of the 1912 competition in Stockholm, between Estonian Martin Klein and Finnish Alfred Asikainen, lasted for a whopping 11 hours, 40 minutes. The winner, Klein, was **too exhausted to compete in the final** and had to be content with silver.

At the 1988 games in Seoul, Brazil finished fifth in the basketball competition, but one of their players, Oscar Schmidt, was **the star of the tournament**. He scored a record 55 points in a single game versus Spain, averaged more than 42 points every game and **holds the record career Olympics points total** of 1,093.



Paea Wolfgramm lights a flame with the Olympic torch during its journey through Oceania in 2000

Heavy hitters

Paea Wolfgramm won **Tonga's first ever medal** in 1996 in Atlanta, when he gained a silver in the super heavyweight boxing. Paea weighed a hefty 141kg, and after his win he ignored a phone call from Tonga's king because he was **eating a hamburger**.

American wrestler Chris Taylor won a bronze at the 1972 Munich Olympics. At 187kg he was **the heaviest ever Olympian** at that time, but he died of a heart attack aged just 29.

Taylor's weighty record was eclipsed by **massive Spanish judoka (judo competitor)** Aytami Ruano, who appeared at the 2004 games. Ruano, who lists one of his hobbies as cheese, topped the scales at a huge 198kg – that's **almost eight Olga Korbuts!**