

Darcy C. Plymire  
Appalachian State University

## ***Good Communists and Bad Communists: Sino-American Relations and U.S. News Coverage of Sport in the People's Republic of China, 1984 and 1993***

In 1993 Beijing made a strong bid to host the Olympic Games in 2000. Both houses of the United States Congress voted to oppose that bid, arguing that the People's Republic of China (PRC) was a totalitarian state that routinely denied its citizens their basic human rights and did not deserve to host the games. Coverage of the events in American newspapers supported the congressional censure. In contrast, when the PRC sent a team to the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles the American press celebrated the Chinese appearance as a sign that the PRC was opening up, and they contrasted the Chinese to the supposedly less progressive and more oppressive Soviets.

In this paper, I examine how press coverage of these two events reflected the political relationship between the US and the PRC. My primary sources are newspaper reports from 1984 and 1993.

International sport is a site where global politics are symbolically contested and newspaper coverage of the events was an important vehicle for conveying American foreign policy to a mass audience. Here I analyze the content of newspaper articles from 1984 and 1993 in relation to the political history of Sino-American relations since 1949. I read the news not as a transparent representation of the reality of Sino-American relations but as a site for the construction and representation of political relations. In both 1984 and 1993, press coverage reflected common understandings of the political relationship between the PRC and the US. The change in attitude toward the Chinese was less a response to real changes within the PRC than to changing understandings of Sino-American relations.

Though the congressional censure in 1993 was couched in the rhetoric of human rights, human rights were an issue in the PRC during the 1980s as well. However, in the 1980s the US saw the PRC as a necessary, if not always desirable, ally against the Soviet Union. In 1984, the Chinese were constructed as "good communists" because they refused to honor the Soviet boycott of the Los Angeles Olympics, and because the PRC acted as a counter weight to Soviet power. In 1993, the Chinese were recast as "bad communists" because they challenged American military, economic, and political interests in an era when the Soviet Union was no longer a threat. This paper adds to our understanding in three areas: Olympic sport as an arena for international politics, news media and the dissemination of political messages, and Sino-American relations in the post-Cold War era.