CHAPTER 2

Mobilizing the OC in the Twenty-First Century

This chapter explains the CCP’s shift in attitudes and strategy towards the OC by highlighting two important periods of its relationship with them—namely the OC reaction to the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests and the 2008 Olympic Torch Relay rallies. Driven by a need to reclaim hearts and minds following the events of June 4, 1989, the Chinese authorities focused upon a strategy that engaged with the OC through ethnographic, cultural, and economic appeal. The CCP has continually developed these methods to incorporate patriotic and nationalistic sentiment, culminating in a set of programmes that stimulates support for the CCP regime itself.

By strengthening and managing relationships with a growing overseas population of students and new migrants from the PRC over three decades, the CCP has effectively recruited a friendly pro-Beijing force to facilitate China’s rise throughout the world, to support its objectives, and to challenge any threats. The scope of such qiaowu efforts indicates the extent of the CCP’s influence over the OC community, and also reveals a darker side to this relationship.

2.1 Capitalizing on the Olympic Spirit

The CCP recognized the Olympic movement as a potent source of national pride for the OC everywhere and sought to use it for drawing them together by the millions.¹ PRC officials described the successful bid for the 2008 Summer Games as the “joint efforts made by the OC throughout the world” and a “tremendous spiritual force pushing the Chinese people forward” for China’s


unity, prosperity, and rejuvenation. Giving the OC an opportunity for joint input into its affairs and development through the Olympics was another way of getting them to identify with China—and they were extremely positive in their response. 330,000 OC from around the world gave more than 900 million yuan towards the effort. Beijing welcomed proposals for the construction of sports venues, with the ‘Watercube’ swimming complex representing the foremost symbol of the collective OC contribution. Tickets were allocated to OC communities around the world, including those from Taiwan. Furthermore, Beijing specifically extended invitations to OC of foreign citizenship to participate as volunteers in Beijing, under a special effort to recruit support from abroad. With such a feeling of ‘ownership’, many of those who identified themselves as ‘Chinese’ considered any negative comments or behaviour about the Olympics as a direct attack not only to China, but as a personal insult as well.

This surge of pro-China sentiment (both domestic and external) was evident in the months prior to August 2008. Fostering these emotions was a key means to strengthening CCP authority within China, where indignation, frustration, and anger resulted following foreign protests against the Olympic Torch relay, racist comments aired on Cable News Network (CNN), and a perception that riots in Tibet were being misreported by the Western media. Demonstrators alleged that the French retail chain Carrefour was supporting the Dalai Lama, and held large-scale protests near its various outlets, the French Embassy, and the Beijing French school. These rallies served to legitimize the CCP position on dissidents (such as cracking down on Muslim cells in Xinjiang and jailing human rights activist Hu Jia (胡佳) under the premise of national integrity) without raising criticism.

However, after a couple of days of heated protest, the government issued a front page editorial in the People’s Daily urging citizens to cherish patriotism but to express it in a “rational” way. It cited the need to maintain focus on economic development by converting “full-hearted patriotic zeal into