This chapter looks at the practice of Chinese public diplomacy by studying two examples of event public diplomacy: the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games; and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. Organizing these events offered China great opportunities for public diplomacy, as they attracted the attention of large numbers of people from all over the world, provided a venue for extensive international exchange, and enabled China to present itself and its ideals both internationally and domestically. Indeed, these case studies show that Chinese leaders were well aware of the vast array of opportunities that hosting the two events offered and that they seized them with both hands.

The Beijing Olympic Games and Shanghai World Expo were about more than sports or presenting nations. They were about China's rise and integration into the global community, China's political system and policies, and about the role of the domestic and foreign media in projecting a new image of China to the world. For both events, China developed extensive and sophisticated public diplomacy strategies, which included a broad engagement of domestic audiences and overseas Chinese communities. The Chinese government also had to strengthen its defensive public diplomacy capabilities, as various domestic and international crises in the run-up to the Olympic Games brought China into disrepute. Standing in the spotlight, China had to address the issues that were tarnishing its image, such as Sudan, the environment, and working conditions for foreign reporters.

The case studies show that China's political system and culture have an enormous impact on the way in which the events were used as a tool for public diplomacy and as an opportunity to propel the development of the cities of Beijing and Shanghai. The Chinese government's control over the domestic media and social actors ensured sufficient domestic publicity and enabled the organizing committees to implement wide-scale programs to people on China's internationalization and integration into the world community.

The public diplomacy experiences of both events have led to at least temporary innovations in China's public diplomacy system: an expansion of instruments and actors; strengthening of the coordination system of public diplomacy resources and actors; the cultivation and training of a pool of talented people who master policies, know business, and are good at communication; and the enrichment of public diplomacy theory, which should form
the basis of a public diplomacy system with Chinese characteristics.¹ Some of these gains and lessons learned, however, will likely be lost again over the course of time.

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games

Hosting the Olympic Games is a big economic and public diplomacy opportunity for any country. For a country like China, however, which felt that it was slowly reclaiming its own place under the sun, it was much more. It marked China’s renaissance. The Chinese government hoped that the Olympics would “open a new chapter as a modern, advanced nation, just as the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 closed the book on wartime Japan.”² At the international level, China wanted to showcase the accomplishments of 30 years of opening up and reform, as well as its goodwill and capabilities to the world. The government also wanted to capitalize on the widespread interest in China’s ancient culture.³ At the domestic—national—level, the Olympic Games were expected to boost prestige and to contribute to national unity. At the local—municipal—level, the Games would guarantee funds to improve infrastructure and environment in the three hosting cities: Beijing; Tianjin; and Shenyang.

According to the rhetoric of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and host countries’ officials, there is no place for politics in the Olympic Games. In reality, of course, the Olympic Games are as much a political as a sporting event. China’s leaders understood this better than anyone else, as (Olympic) sports and politics have long been linked in China. Xu Guoqi, author of Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895–2008, observes that sports in China have always served “as an agent of social change and legitimacy, as well as a source of international recognition, prestige and an engine of nation-building.”⁴ This will also be illustrated in this case study. When China embraced Western sports at the beginning of the twentieth century, he writes, “they were motivated more by the project of building an image of strength and accomplishment