

Public pressure on Olympic hurdler Liu Xiang highlights rise of Chinese nationalism

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The Chinese government came under sharp pressure when 110-metre hurdler Liu Xiang withdrew from the Olympic competition on August 18 due to injury. His failure to participate caused uproar among a layer of the new middle classes in China that has been whipped into a patriotic frenzy by the regime over the Beijing Olympics.

The 25-year-old Liu, who won the gold medal in the 2004 Athens Olympics, has been promoted as a national hero for years. Beijing has held him up as a symbol of China's rise as a sporting power, of its ability to shake off its reputation as the "sick man of Asia". At the turn of the twentieth century, racist ideologues used the fact that impoverished China sent few athletes to the early Olympics to justify their reactionary claims that the Chinese were an inferior race—the "sick men of Asia".

Liu's win four years ago was the first by a Chinese—or Asian—athlete in a sprint event. He declared in Athens: "My victory has proved that athletes with a yellow skin can run as fast as those with black and white skins." In 2008, with China already well ahead in the gold medal tally, his victory in Beijing's "Bird's Nest" stadium was set to be the climax of China's Olympic glory, proving that the Chinese race was just as fit as others.

While it invested heavily in ensuring that all its Olympic athletes succeeded, Beijing made a special effort to achieve a victory in the 110-metre hurdles. Liu reportedly accounted for 10 percent of the total sporting science budget for the Chinese Olympic team. Five kinematics experts worked full-time to monitor his training and technique, and to closely examine those of his rivals.

Thus huge expectations of success for Liu was created by the Chinese regime as a metaphor for China's emergence as a major power in the sporting, as well as other, arenas. As a result, more than 90,000 fans packed the stadium, while millions more watched the hurdles event around the country. Liu's last minute withdrawal triggered an immediate shockwave.

Although his official web site had already reported an inflamed Achilles tendon, Liu nevertheless turned up for the race. He quickly realised, however, that he could not withstand the pain and left the track. According to various opinion polls, most of the audience reacted with understandable sympathy. More than 50 million hits were recorded to the *Sohu* web site's "support Liu Xiang" counter.

However, among a small but significant layer, disappointment and anger quickly found expression in vicious denunciations of the athlete for betraying their expectations and the country. On one of the biggest Internet forums, *Baidu*, fans condemned Liu as "a dog" and "a fake". One declared: "China's 100-year Olympic dream is destroyed." Another suggested the athlete should go to the Paralympics. Similar comments appeared on other web sites, bemoaning the fact that the "sick man of Asia has appeared again" or calling for a boycott of any sporting goods promoted by Liu.

Realising the potential for the situation to quickly get out of hand, the top Chinese leadership stepped in to try to defuse it. The Chinese Internet

police apparently rapidly deleted the offensive messages. The official *People's Daily* published a comment declaring: "Perhaps a nation of 1.3 billion should not place the burden of its aspirations on a boy's shoulder".

Vice President Xi Jinping, the likely heir of President Hu Jintao, issued a statement on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership backing Liu. "Everyone will understand why Liu Xiang had to abandon the competition due to injury, and we hope he will cast aside the mental burden and settle his mind to overcoming his injury," Xi said, urging the athlete to "lift your fighting spirit and seek to win greater honour for the motherland."

Liu and the head coach of China's track and field team were compelled to give apologetic and tearful press conferences, to explain why he had to pull out and to promise future victories for the "motherland" after his recovery.

Chinese nationalism

China is far from alone in exploiting the Olympics to promote patriotic fervour. Like previous Games, the Beijing Olympics has been accompanied by obscene displays of nationalism and outright chauvinism around the world. Enormous public pressure is placed on athletes, even at the expense of their health and other aspects of their lives, as one-sided TV coverage feverishly urges them to boost "our" medal tally.

The vicious treatment of Liu, however, points to the changing character of Chinese nationalism and reveals a virulent jingoistic strain that has been consciously nurtured by the CCP. The regime spent \$US43 billion on hosting the Games in order to showcase China's rise as a major economic power and promote Chinese patriotism at home.

Although nationalism has always been a central component of Maoism, the CCP regime previously emphasised its claims to be socialist, stressing its support for anti-imperialist struggles throughout the "Third World". Following its open turn to the capitalist market in 1978, and especially after the brutal suppression of protests by workers and students in 1989, the CCP has increasingly relied on naked Chinese nationalism to fill the ideological vacuum.

After laying off tens of millions of workers from state enterprises in the late 1990s, the regime dropped its false "proletarian" label and opened up the party to the private business elite. Its promotion of nationalism is part of a desperate attempt to create a new social prop, under conditions where the old social basis for Maoism among the peasantry has effectively been destroyed by deepening poverty in the countryside and the massive migration of the rural poor into the cities, to become super-exploited cheap labour.

The social forces that are most attracted to Chinese nationalism today are those who have benefited from the "market reforms", particularly

entrepreneurs, well-off professionals and other layers of the country's growing middle class. The private sector in China now accounts for two-thirds of industrial output, employing 200 million workers. Insofar as the state still controls several dozen major firms and banks, these form the collective assets of the rising Chinese bourgeoisie as a whole.

Liu Xiang himself became a celebrity among this new elite. A young man from a humble working class family in Shanghai, his "success" at the Athens Olympics earned him millions of dollars in sponsorship contracts from Coca Cola and Nike. In the past, his father, a factory driver and his mother, a laid-off industrial worker, might have been hailed by the CCP as "model workers"—but not today. Now it is the successful, wealthy Liu who is promoted as a symbol of the new China.

Beijing's "patriotic education" has always stressed the past colonial plunder of China by the Western powers and Japan. But China is no longer a semi-colonial country of marginal importance to the world economy and the thrust of Chinese nationalism has shifted accordingly. The CCP regime no longer even pretends to oppose the predatory practices of the major imperialist powers, but is determined that China should join their ranks. References to past humiliations only fuel the sentiment that China now has to be accorded its rightful place in the world.

According to a study by the US-based consultancy firm Global Insight for the *Financial Times* released this month, China will overtake the US as the world's largest manufacturer in 2009, ending more than 100 years of American dominance. The study estimated that China will account for 17 percent of global manufacturing value-added output, while the US will contribute 16 percent—due to a faster-than-expected economic decline. Although Chinese manufacturing is still more of an assembly line and technologically far behind the US, the sheer scale of its expansion is enormous. By 2015, the global value-added manufacturing will be almost doubled to \$15.8 trillion from 2007 (\$8.8 trillion). China is expected to account for more than 41 percent of this projected growth.

It is widely understood among the new capitalist elite that China's economic rise is bringing it into conflict with the established powers. On August 9, the US-based *Newsweek* pointed out that the richest people in China were among the most anti-Western, even though many had received a Western education. "Even as they sip cappuccino at Starbucks or show off their new Buicks [made by GM], the last thing most want is to make over their homeland in the West's image. They're after something far more ambitious: a China that lives up to their sense of national greatness."

The *Newsweek* cited a Hong Kong-based academic who pointed out that a significant portion of the newly wealthy believed that using military force to promote China's national interests was acceptable. Indeed, the Chinese military is the most fervent proponent of patriotism, which it uses to justify continued double-digit increases in defence spending.

While many topics are banned from public discussion, a number of online forums allow middle-class youth and professionals to actively debate geopolitical strategy, ranging from how to out-maneuvre US strategic plans to encircle China to whether China should launch a war against Vietnam over the control of sea lanes and energy resources in the South China Sea.

More extreme elements, referred to as the "angry youth", have called for China to nuke Tokyo as revenge for the Japanese invasion of China in the 1930s and 1940s. This layer of mainly middle class youth played a major role in the violent anti-Japanese protests that erupted in 2005, and it has become a significant factor hindering the improvement of Sino-Japanese relations in recent years.

These debates often become part of "public opinion", pushing the regime to take a tougher stance in defence of "national interests". Citing the importance of the "Olympic spirit", Beijing officially called for a truce in the current Russia-Georgia conflict. But the official *Global Times*, for instance, posted online comments hailing Moscow's "iron-fist" in

crushing Georgia and standing up to the US and NATO. Some "angry youth" called for the formation of a formal Russo-Chinese military alliance to counter the US and its allies. Others denounced Georgia and its American backers for choosing the opening day of the Beijing Olympics to attack South Ossetia, claiming the decision was a deliberate slap in the face to China.

The same seething resentment towards China's rivals—not just the US and Japan—was witnessed during the Olympic torch relay when Beijing mobilised layers of Chinese abroad to counter pro-Tibetan protests. The contempt of these pro-Beijing supporters towards the Tibetan people, and their indifference to the conditions of poverty and discrimination that exist in Tibet, reveals their class hostility towards the oppressed masses as a whole. Some Chinese youth reportedly went so far as to assault people who expressed sympathy for the Tibetans.

Far from being a force for "democratisation", the new middle classes support the CCP's police-state regime to enforce the brutal capitalist exploitation of the working class. The *Financial Times* wrote on August 3: "Members of this class grumble about corruption but on the whole they have fared quite well from China's economic boom of the past decade. They know that if democracy were introduced tomorrow they would be outvoted and they have little interest in changing the system."

The issue is not just that the relatively small middle classes will be outvoted by the vast majority—the working class and rural poor—but that making democratic concessions to the masses will encourage them to raise more far-reaching demands for social equality. Such demands require nothing less than the revolutionary overthrow of the CCP regime and the capitalist elite that it has spawned—who are very conscious of the ever-present threat to their wealth and privileges.

The promotion of sporting celebrities like Liu Xiang is bound up with Beijing's drive to divert attention from the country's deepening social divide by cultivating the illusion of national unity. Olympic gold medals, however, cannot provide affordable healthcare, housing and recreational facilities for hundreds of millions of people, not to mention eradicating the widespread malnutrition among impoverished rural children. Sooner or later, the working class, along with the urban and rural poor, will come into direct and open conflict with the CCP regime and the right-wing chauvinist layers that it is nurturing.



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