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The sacrificial spirit of the Olympic flame ceremony and 'mutual learning of civilizations': a case study of the Beijing 2008 and 2022 Olympic Games

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The flame ceremony of the Classical Olympic Games was a foundational sacrificial rite, embodying Greek ideals of peace, individual sanctity, and the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty. While the modern Olympic movement inherited this tradition, it currently confronts significant humanistic challenges, as commercialization and politicization appear to erode its core "sacrificial spirit." Drawing on cultural anthropology to define ritual and sacrifice, this paper argues that the concept of "civilizational mutual learning" offers a potential avenue for revitalization. This paper presents the Beijing 2008 and 2022 Olympic Games as a key case study, arguing that the infusion of the Confucian sacrificial spirit provided tangible ethical resources to address these contemporary challenges. Specifically, this paper analyzes how Confucian principles—such as valuing righteousness over profit (yi vs. li) and promoting harmony in diversity (he er bu tong)—may offer a philosophical counterpoint to pervasive commercialism and divisive nationalism. The study concludes that integrating Chinese sacrificial culture into the Olympic ceremony serves not merely as a multicultural gesture, but as a practical demonstration of how an ancient non-Western ethical framework can contribute to reclaiming and enriching the universal humanistic mission of Olympism.

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Introduction

The modern Olympic movement reflects a global ideal of peace and fosters dialogue and exchange between different civilizations. Its value is arguably derived from the harmonious coexistence and common development of diverse cultures. In the 21st century¹, “the more deeply people recognize the multicultural nature of the Olympic movement, the more it can serve as a meeting point for the world’s youth and a link between different cultures (Amelidou, 2013; (MacAloon, 2013; (Milton-Smith, 2002; (Slowikowski, 1991).

The flame ceremony constituted a significant prelude to the ancient Olympic Games. In terms of its cultural connotations, the ceremony functioned as a sacrificial rite dedicated to Zeus and metaphorically connected to the myth of Prometheus stealing fire. It encapsulates the ancient Greeks’ cultural concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty, reflecting a sacrificial spirit intended to express human individuality, the pursuit of personal sanctity, and the preservation of peace among city-states. Throughout the development of the modern Olympic Games, the flame and torch relay ceremonies have been instrumental in cultural dissemination and exchange. However, in the contemporary era of globalization, society faces increasingly complex challenges and the potential for intercultural misunderstandings. In this context, the Olympic flame ceremony may provide an opportunity for reflection and innovation that contributes to the ‘mutual learning of civilizations’ (Besnier and Brownell, 2012).

Existing academic research on the Olympic flame ceremony primarily addresses themes such as the cultural significance of the ceremony, the transnational transmission of the torch, and its associated management mechanisms (MacAloon, 2013). Additionally, some scholars have explored the convergence between the Olympic movement and Eastern and Western cultures. This convergence is not limited to a simple East-West binary. Other ancient civilizations also possessed systems that are consonant with Olympic values. For instance, the ancient Persian tradition of Pahlavani represents a similar system of ritualized competition and heroic spirit, demonstrating the universal and multicultural roots of such values (Ghorbani et al., 2024). One scholar suggested that the modern transformation of traditional Chinese culture could be informed by the Greek civilization’s ‘institution of encouraging and promoting competition and the safeguarding mechanism of fair competition principles’ (Green and Oakley, 2001). From a cultural comparison perspective, it has been argued that the Olympic movement “provides modern people with a model of equal living and a democratic behavioral paradigm,” (Chatzieftathiou et al., 2012), inspiring individuals to appreciate truth, goodness, and beauty, thereby enhancing their individual development (Milton-Smith, 2002). Another scholar posits that ‘outstanding traditional Chinese culture serves as a new cultural driving force for the sustainable development of the Olympic movement’. These scholars primarily analyze the possibility and feasibility of the convergence between Olympic and traditional Chinese culture from a theoretical standpoint. These scholarly perspectives suggest that, across cultures, the ‘sacrificial spirit’ functions as a mechanism for expressing foundational values. Whether in Eastern or Western traditions, it articulates a community’s core ethical commitments and its understanding of the relationship between the individual and the collective. Consequently, how the sacrificial spirit might serve as an entry point for promoting the creative integration of modern Olympic competition, the torch relay, and the ‘mutual learning of civilizations’ emerges as a significant cultural question for consideration in the era of globalization.

To properly analyze the “sacrificial spirit,” its core components—“ritual” and “sacrifice”—are first defined from a theoretical standpoint, particularly through the lens of cultural anthropology.

From this perspective, a ritual is not merely a custom but a structured, symbolic performance. Its primary function is to create social solidarity by reaffirming a community’s core values and distinguishing the sacred from the profane (Durkheim, 2016). Rituals guide participants through transformative social processes, managing transitions and reinforcing social order (Turner et al., 2017). Sacrifice, in this context, is a central form of ritual action, understood as a complex social exchange rather than a simple offering. Through the offering of a valuable item to a divine or ancestral power, participants establish a relationship, communicate social needs, and reaffirm their place within the cosmic and social hierarchy (Mauss, 2016). The “sacrificial spirit,” therefore, can be understood as the shared affective state of reverence and collective purpose generated and transmitted through these ritual actions.

Based on this theoretical foundation, this paper defines the “sacrificial spirit” not as a simple revival of classical rites, nor as an entirely new invention, but as a continuous and adaptable humanistic tradition. The Classical Greek ceremony serves as the foundational archetype, while the modern Olympic ceremony inherits and transforms this spirit for a globalized world. The Confucian sacrificial spirit is introduced here not as an “ultimate solution” to replace the Western tradition, but as a crucial comparative case study. Its purpose is twofold: first, to demonstrate the universality of this spirit across various major civilizations; and second, to suggest that its specific ethical commitments—such as valuing righteousness over profit and harmony in diversity—may offer valuable resources to enrich and potentially address the specific crises facing the modern Olympic movement. While countless other cultural rituals exist, this paper focuses specifically on the Greek and Confucian traditions due to their direct historical and contemporary relevance to the Olympic Games and the case study of Beijing.

This paper aims to build on existing research by discussing the potential connection between the sacrificial spirit of the two Olympic flame ceremonies and the concept of “civilizational mutual learning,” as well as its practical significance, providing historical and theoretical references for post-Olympic cultural studies.

The sacrificial spirit of the Classical Olympic flame ceremony

The Classical Olympic Games were a Panhellenic sacrificial ceremony, but their religious focus evolved significantly over time. The site of Olympia was initially a place of worship for female earth deities, such as Demeter, and later the celestial goddess Hera. Subsequently, a cult was established dedicated to the hero Pelops, whose mythological chariot race became a foundational legend for the games. Only later, as the political and religious landscape of Greece shifted, did the worship of Zeus become the dominant feature of the festival. This evolution reflects a transition from localized nature and hero cults to a more unified, Panhellenic religious identity centered on the king of the gods (Patay-Horváth, 2020).

By its most prominent period, the Olympic festival is widely considered to have become the primary sacrificial ceremony honoring Zeus. According to later myths intended to solidify this connection, Zeus himself commanded the games to celebrate his victory over his father, Kronos. As the cult of Zeus grew from a local power to the pinnacle of the Greek pantheon, the games at Olympia transformed into a major event of considerable religious and political significance. Olympia thus became a permanent sacred site primarily dedicated to Zeus, attracting pilgrims and athletes from across the Greek world.

In the 9th century B.C., the city-state of Sparta waged war against the city-state of Elis in an attempt to seize Olympia.

However, the war became protracted and concluded without a decisive outcome. This led to the establishment of the Sacred Olympic Truce in 884 BC, an agreement signed by the kings of Elis, Sparta, and Pisa. The truce, which mandated the regular holding of athletic games at Olympia, was inscribed on a bronze disc named for Iphitos, the king of Elis (Jones, 1918). During the games, the city-state of Elis would be recognized as a sanctuary of peace, prohibiting any acts of war and allowing participants to travel freely on all roads leading to Olympia (though without carrying weapons). Violators of this peace were deemed traitors to Zeus. Thus, the Olympic athletic competitions were established as a ritualized substitute for warfare. The Classical Olympic Games became a comprehensive sacrificial festival, with sports competitions at its core, alongside various cultural and artistic activities. From 776 B.C. to 393 A.D., the Classical Olympic Games were held 293 times over a span of 1169 years.

Fire held a sacred status in ancient Greek culture. At the opening of the Classical Olympic Games, a sacred flame was ignited on the altar in front of the Temple of Zeus. This ritual was symbolically linked to the myth of Prometheus, the Titan who stole divine fire for humanity and was subsequently punished by Zeus. According to this mythos, Zeus decreed that sacrifices must be made before the flame was lit. The flame itself, believed to be taken from the sun, was consequently regarded as sacred.

The myth of Prometheus is often interpreted as reflecting themes of human welfare and individual existence. Within the development of ancient Greek culture, the fire Prometheus stole evolved symbolically to represent concepts of individuality and personal sanctity. The ancient Greeks incorporated the myth of Prometheus into the Classical Olympic Games, holding a solemn ceremony for the collection and lighting of the sacred flame at the opening of each Olympic festival. Pilgrims from across Greece would gather to worship Zeus, and athletes would compete in the *stadion*, the oldest event of the Games. This race, held over a distance of 192.27 m in the Olympia stadium, concluded at the position of the high priest, where the victor would receive a torch to ignite the sacred flame on the altar. In 776 B.C., Coroebus of Elis won this inaugural documented race and was given the honor of lighting the sacred flame on the altar. This ceremony, however, should be distinguished from the modern torch relay. In antiquity, the lighting of the sacred flame was a localized ritual within Olympia. To announce the upcoming Games and spread the sacred truce, heralds (*spondophoroi*) were sent to the various city-states, but they did not carry a flame. The tradition of a torch relay traveling across territories is a modern invention designed to link the contemporary Games to their ancient precursor. The symbolic power of the flame itself, however, originates directly from the sacrificial rites at Olympia, commemorating the myth of Prometheus stealing fire. "It was an important part of the sacrificial ceremony at the time and remains essential before the opening of both the ancient and modern Olympic Games. It is one of the most cherished memories left to us by the ancient Greeks, a symbol of the world's love for peace, and a prelude to the Olympic Games" (Slowikowski, 1991). This sacred flame ceremony, which was dedicated to the gods and in which fire symbolized truth, goodness, and beauty, functioned to regulate individual behavior according to specific procedures. It reinforced concepts of individual dignity through shared emotion, experience, and collective memory, thereby serving a public pedagogical role. The torch used to carry the sacred flame has thus come to symbolize peace, light, unity, and friendship.

Another sacrificial ceremony that symbolically echoed the myth of Prometheus stealing fire was the torch relay of the Panathenaic Games. In ancient Greece, Athenian magistrates

frequently organized a torch relay as part of the Panathenaic Festival, a religious event in Athens dedicated to Prometheus, Athena (the city's patron goddess), and Hephaestus (the god of craftsmen). This was a team-based event, involving a relay race over a distance of 2500 m, with the finish line at the Acropolis of Athens. The objective of the race was for participants to transport the lit torch swiftly along the course. Athletes set off from eight different directions, passing the burning torch to the finish line, where it was used to ignite offerings to the gods. This event not only expressed the Athenians' devout reverence for these three deities but also reflected their cultural emphasis on physical fitness and free competition.

The Classical Olympic flame ceremony had a distinct performative quality, designed not only to honor deities but also to influence the conduct of individuals. In the Olympic Games, which served both as a religious and athletic stage, there was no inherent divide between gods and humans, as the ancient Greeks believed that the gods of Mount Olympus were created in the image of the most beautiful human forms. This worldview perceived gods as perfected humans and humans as imperfect deities; consequently, it was believed that displaying peak physical form was a way to win divine favor. Appeasing the gods, in this context, was achieved not through acts of servile worship but by emulating divine ideals, offering physical prowess and honorable competition as the highest form of sacrifice. In this sense, it could be said that the reverence of the ancient Greeks was directed not only toward the gods themselves but also toward the ideals of strength, freedom, and individual sanctity. Therefore, the Classical Olympic flame ceremony can be interpreted as symbolizing humanity's pursuit of individual perfection and the sanctity of personal identity.

Drawing upon the mythological, sacrificial, and cultural elements previously discussed, the Classical Olympic flame ceremony can be understood as a human-centered ritual that embodied a spirit rooted in the concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty. This ceremony arguably expressed the ancient Greek pursuit of peace and light as 'truth,' the sanctity of the individual as 'goodness,' and the aesthetic of a robust physique as 'beauty.' This holistic ideal was the cornerstone of the Athenian educational system known as *kalokagathia*.

However, as the Games became increasingly professionalized and commercialized, the Classical Olympic Games arguably began to lose their original sacrificial spirit. In the 6th century B.C., Solon, the chief magistrate of Athens, decreed that Olympic champions would receive a reward of 500 silver coins and other material benefits (Perrin, 1914). Other city-states, such as Sparta and Prytaneion, also granted Olympic victors generous material rewards and political honors. During the Roman Empire, Emperor Augustus enacted laws to further increase athletes' rewards (Edwards, 2000). While these incentives provided great motivation for athletes to compete in the Games, they also contributed to the professionalization of the event. Under the influence of material and political incentives, the religious significance of the Games is thought to have diminished, with the event increasingly resembling a purely athletic competition. Especially after the Peloponnesian War in the 5th century B.C., the Games appear to have lost much of their original sacrificial spirit and were increasingly regarded as a professional sport.

Later Roman writers, such as Lucan, lamented this phenomenon: "You have been forgotten Zeus, no one wishes to offer sacrifices to you anymore. Even if someone occasionally brings you a gift, it is not out of the same devout faith as in the past; they merely follow ancient customs" (Frost, 2022). In tandem with the decline of the Greek city-states, the sacrificial spirit of the Classical Olympic Games likewise diminished.

The inheritance and challenges of the sacrificial spirit in the modern Olympic flame ceremony

Drawing inspiration from archeological discoveries at Olympia in the 1870s, French educator Baron Pierre de Coubertin proposed the revival of the Olympic Games in 1894. He introduced the concept of 'Olympism,' which he viewed as a philosophy blending sport with culture and education. This philosophy aims to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good examples, and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles (De Coubertin, 2000). This foundational concept is reflected in the current Olympic Charter, which defines Olympism as "a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will, and mind" (Damkjaer, 2020).

While modern Olympism does not incorporate the religious elements of the sacrificial spirit characteristic of the Classical Olympics, such as the veneration of gods, it appears to continue the tradition of pursuing truth, goodness, beauty, and human dignity.

Coubertin's vision for the modern Games involved adapting traditions such as the sacrificial spirit and the torch relay from the Classical era. He articulated the significance of this heritage in a notable 1912 speech, stating: "From now on, the torchbearer accepts not only the torch but also the sacred mission of passing on the Olympic flame. Let the Olympic flame be passed from one generation to the next by the hands of the youth, and let the youth of the world always be ready to spread the Olympic flame across the globe" (Coubertin, 1967).

Following this guidance, the modern Olympic Games were designed to be inclusive, with torchbearer teams transcending nationality and race to foster international goodwill. The humanistic spirit championed by the modern Games may be viewed as a continuation of the sacrificial spirit of the Classical Olympics, which emphasized the sanctity of the individual, friendly coexistence, and fair competition. Additionally, the movement incorporated contemporary principles, aiming to promote global peace and friendship.

However, the tradition of the Olympic torch relay was not immediately established at the inception of the modern movement. For the 1920 Antwerp Games, a symbolic flame of peace was lit at the main venue to commemorate the victims of World War I, but it was not sourced from Olympia, nor was a relay conducted. A further development occurred at the 1928 Amsterdam Games, where a flame was ignited in a cauldron atop the Marathon Tower and burned for the duration of the event. Although this was the first time a flame burned throughout the modern Games, it was kindled on-site rather than being relayed from Olympia.

In 1934, at the suggestion of Pierre de Coubertin, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) formally resolved in Athens that henceforth, the Olympic flame must be kindled in Olympia, transported via torch relay, and kept burning continuously at the main venue throughout each Games. This decision established the torch relay as an indispensable ritual of the modern Olympics. The Olympic Charter codifies this tradition, stating: "The Olympic flame is the fire ignited in Olympia with the permission of the IOC. The Olympic torch is lit using the Olympic flame or rekindled from it" (Niehaus, 2023). This provision solidifies the flame's status as a primary symbol of the Olympic spirit, which is said to represent "hope and dreams, light and joy, friendship, peace, equality, and the values advocated by the Olympic spirit, such as perseverance and finding joy in the struggle" (Adair, 2013).

The flame for the modern Olympic Games is typically ignited several months prior to the event at the Temple of Hera in Olympia. The ceremony, which is designed to reflect ancient Greek traditions, involves a chief priestess who recites a hymn to

the sun god and then uses a parabolic mirror to kindle the flame with focused sunlight. Subsequently, the chief priestess transports the flame in a cauldron to an ancient altar, where the torch for the first torchbearer is lit. This formal procedure is the sole method sanctioned for igniting the Olympic flame. This event marks the commencement of the torch relay, which transports the flame to the Olympic host city. The ceremony and relay symbolize the global spread of the Olympic spirit, which embodies ideals of peace, unity, and friendship originating from ancient Greece (Lucas, 1974).

The inaugural torch relay of the modern Olympic era was introduced for the controversial 1936 Berlin Games; the first torch for this event was ignited at Olympia on July 20 of that year. This relay, widely recognized as a significant propaganda tool for Germany's Nazi regime, spanned 3075 km through seven countries over eleven days. It culminated with German athlete Fritz Schilgen lighting the Olympic cauldron at the opening ceremony. Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic movement, was also in attendance at the lighting ceremony.

Since that time, the flame lighting ceremony in Olympia has become an institutionalized ritual preceding each Summer Olympic Games, typically attended by IOC members and other officials. The relay for the 1988 Seoul Olympics, for instance, was described in highly positive terms. After its ignition in Olympia on August 23, the flame was transported via a dedicated aircraft from Athens to Jeju Island. The subsequent 26-day relay covered 15,250 km and was framed as a showcase of traditional Korean culture. Similarly, the relay for the 2000 Sydney Olympics was considered successful, a result attributed to effective public relations and regulated commercialization. This strategy helped cultivate a respected public image for the event, which garnered praise from the IOC and reportedly enhanced national pride in Australia.

The flame ceremony for the Winter Olympics was introduced in 1952, for which the flame was sourced from the former residence of Norwegian skiing pioneer Sondre Norheim. The practice was standardized beginning with the 1964 Winter Games in Innsbruck; since then, the flame for the Winter Games has also been ignited in Olympia, Greece. The torch relay and the lighting of the Olympic cauldron have become an established and central part of the opening ceremony for the modern Games. The flame is intended to symbolize not only the commencement of the Games but also broader ideals such as global peace and sportsmanship, which are presented as transcending national, racial, and religious affiliations. Nations on the relay route often utilize the event as an opportunity to showcase their national culture, while for the athletes selected as torchbearers, participation is typically regarded as a significant personal honor.

In the 21st century, a greater emphasis appears to have been placed on the flame lighting and torch relay ceremonies within the modern Olympic Games. These rituals are often interpreted as reflecting respect for historical traditions and symbolically reinforcing civilizational values such as freedom, equality, and peace. Furthermore, they are presented as representing aspirations toward ideals like truth, goodness, and beauty, in addition to the broader goals of human progress and shared global development. From this perspective, the ceremony may be conceptualized as a symbolic form of collective moral cultivation. The "sacrificial spirit" it is purported to embody is thus viewed as a symbolic force that discourages the negative aspects of human nature while encouraging the positive ones.

The modern Olympic flame ceremony appears to be facing a potential crisis of meaning, risking the erosion of its symbolic, sacrificial character. This issue is closely linked to the overall condition of the modern Olympic Games and the international environment. Although the Olympic Games have undergone

substantial expansion since the end of World War II, they have also encountered various crises stemming from both internal and external conflicts. Specifically, the Olympic Games have arguably evolved into a social arena where various entities compete for honor, power, and profit, which appears to deviate from the movement's foundational ideals. This trend toward commercialization and politicization can be linked to the professionalization of Olympic competition.

Prior to the 1980s, the Olympic movement was officially governed by the principle of amateurism, which idealized participation motivated by honor rather than direct financial payment. However, this official ideal was often at odds with a more complex reality. The assertion that athletes' primary motivation was simply entertainment and honor requires careful scrutiny. Many nations, for instance, supported state-sponsored athletes who trained full-time under the guise of fictitious employment, effectively blurring the line between amateur and professional. Furthermore, significant national honors and material rewards were often bestowed upon medal winners in their home countries, complicating any simple narrative of purely non-material motivation. Therefore, the reforms under IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch, which formally permitted the participation of professional athletes, might be interpreted less as a sudden corruption of a pure ideal and more as an official acknowledgment of a pre-existing reality. This shift formalized the role of professional athletes, who place greater emphasis on financial rewards and success than amateurs and who have increasingly viewed the Olympics as a platform for financial gain. In their pursuit of victory, they may resort to any means necessary, engaging in various forms of unethical conduct and considering such actions to be acceptable (Smart, 2018).

For instance, at the 1984 Olympic Games, Puerto Rican athlete Madeline de Jesus sustained an injury during the long jump competition that prevented her from participating in the 4×400 -m relay heats. Her identical twin sister, Margaret, substituted for her in the heat, and the Puerto Rican team qualified for the finals. Upon discovering this substitution, the head coach withdrew the team from the finals and subsequently resigned from his position. At the 24th Olympic Games in 1988, Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson won the 100-m race in a record-breaking time of 9.79 s, surpassing the previous world record of 9.83 s. However, the IOC later announced that Johnson had tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs, resulting in the annulment of his record and a two-year suspension from competition. The second- and third-place finishers in that race were also later found to have used banned substances, leading the event to be labeled "the dirtiest race" in history.

Another notable case involved former American figure skater Tonya Harding, who conspired to attack a teammate, Nancy Kerrigan, in an attempt to secure a position for the 1994 Olympic Games. Harding was subsequently banned for life. Similarly, American track and field athlete Marion Jones, the first woman to win five medals in the sport at the 2000 Olympics, admitted seven years later to using steroids during those Games, leading to the forfeiture of all her medals. In 2015, a report from the World Anti-Doping Agency revealed systematic doping, indicating that over 1000 Russian athletes had used performance-enhancing drugs between 2011 and 2015, with notable doping levels at the 2012 Summer Olympics.

In another incident perceived as inconsistent with the Olympic spirit, the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Organizing Committee initially selected a logo by designer Kenjiro Sano. However, media reports suggested the logo closely resembled that of the Théâtre de Liège in Belgium, prompting public criticism and claims that the incident was a national embarrassment. Consequently, the committee withdrew the original design and selected a new logo for

the Games. These examples suggest that some participants in the modern Olympic Games may not fully adhere to the principles of Olympism. Motivated by material interests or political agendas, their actions at times appear to cross ethical boundaries.

The professionalization and commercialization of the Olympic Games emerged almost simultaneously. Although the IOC repeatedly affirms that it is a non-governmental, non-profit, and indefinite international organization, hosting such a large-scale competitive sports event requires substantial financial and material resources. From the perspective of the operational model of modern mega-events, it would be highly challenging to organize the Olympics without profitable commercial operations. In 1984, with Los Angeles being the only city willing to host the Games, the IOC entrusted the event to entrepreneur Peter Ueberroth, which inaugurated a new commercial model for the Olympic Games. This shift developed the Games into a major global sports market, in turn generating tensions between commercial interests and the ethical principles of Olympism.

Furthermore, the involvement of political forces may be a significant concern, as it has, to some extent, transformed the Olympic Games into an arena for displaying political power, competing for political prestige, and expressing nationalist sentiments. In this context, the intense focus on national honor can sometimes lead to controversies surrounding fair play and refereeing decisions, a situation that appears contrary to the ideals of justice, fairness, and friendship that the Olympic flame ceremony is intended to promote.

The aforementioned trends of commercialization and politicization may therefore compromise the perceived sanctity of the flame ceremony, making it increasingly difficult to preserve its humanistic and sacrificial spirit. Should this spirit diminish, the modern Olympic flame ceremony risks being reduced to a primarily consumer-oriented and entertainment-focused spectacle. Such a development could represent a significant departure from the Olympic humanistic tradition, potentially undermining the pursuit of self-sanctification and cultural enlightenment—ideals the Olympic movement aims to foster in the global sporting arena.

The sacrificial spirit of the Classical Olympic flame ceremony can be considered crucial to the modern Olympics because, as anthropological theory suggests, sacrificial rituals serve a foundational role in expressing and reinforcing a society's core values and collective identity (Bell, 1997). A sacrificial ceremony involves creating a solemn space, in a specific time and setting, using sensory elements such as music, instruments, and clothing to evoke a heightened sense of guidance and collective identity. Through standardized and formalized rituals, it expresses human desires for remembrance, prayer, and gratitude toward the gods or spirits, establishing symbolic representations that carry meaning or value. Simultaneously, this process facilitates the internalization of the ceremony's spirit, which can strengthen the social identity, group order, and belief systems of participants.

As ritualistic beings, humans arguably interpret and reinforce the value orientations of their civilization through the humanistic spirit embodied in sacrificial ceremonies, which often aim to represent ideals such as truth, goodness, and beauty. This sacrificial spirit arguably arises from a fundamental human pursuit of spiritual transcendence, and its expression may require a ritually distinct and solemn context. Without such a context, the spirit may remain external to the ceremony and might not be effectively internalized into the participants' cultural value systems.

It can be argued that social ills such as falsehood, corruption, and malevolence often stem from inherent conflicts of interest and power struggles within human society. While these negative forces may not be entirely eliminated from the process of civilization, their restraint and transformation are often considered

essential for social cohesion. The Classical Olympic flame ceremony, aimed at truth, goodness, and beauty, functioned as a civilizing measure to curb and transform these negative elements. Therefore, for the modern Olympic flame ceremony to fulfill its symbolic role in promoting humanistic values, it arguably needs to retain the sacrificial qualities of the Classical ceremony, thereby inheriting and continually enriching its sacrificial spirit.

The opportunity for “civilizational mutual learning” in the sacrificial spirit of the modern Olympics

Sports are the first international language. The Olympic movement is understood to possess a significant historical and social mandate, a key component of which is to foster mutual understanding between different nations and cultures, thereby promoting and maintaining world peace. To fulfill this mandate, it is argued that the Olympic Games should cultivate a cultural environment conducive to transcending national and ethnic barriers. Such an environment may enable participants to more readily overcome cultural and psychological obstacles, learn to appreciate and engage with other cultures, and in turn, potentially promote global cultural exchange and integration. This concept aligns with a philosophical perspective articulated in China, which posits that “civilizations become enriched through exchange and become vibrant through mutual learning,” thus framing intercultural dialogue as a crucial component of progress.

The mutual learning of civilizations may be defined as a process through which diverse cultures engage in dialogue, ostensibly to learn from one another and contribute to their mutual development. This mode of interaction is often considered a fundamental component of human societal development. Historically, it is understood that each civilization possesses unique strengths and inherent limitations; mutual learning may offer a mechanism to address these limitations, thereby potentially contributing to the enrichment of human experience and the promotion of global harmony. This process can involve the promotion of such universal values as peace, development, and equity; the enabling of collective action on critical global challenges like climate change and pandemics; and the potential stimulation of economic growth through new opportunities for trade and employment derived from intercultural exchange.

While the flame lighting and torch relay ceremony represent key cultural activities in the modern Olympic Games, effectively leveraging them to foster “mutual learning” between civilizations presents considerable challenges. According to Article 44 of the Olympic Charter, the “Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games must plan a cultural program” to promote harmonious relations, mutual understanding, and friendship among the participants and other attendees of the Games, while also “symbolizing the universality and diversity of human culture” (García, 2001). However, it has been argued that in practice, the modern Olympics tend to showcase the dominance of Western culture, and that significant challenges remain in fostering genuine dialogue and exchange between civilizations.

At the “Sports and Culture Forum” held in Lausanne in 1997, the Culture and Olympic Education Commission emphasized that Olympism should foster tolerance and understanding among diverse cultures. Ousmane Paye, Senegal’s Minister of Youth and Sports, noted during the forum, “One of the dangers facing sports is the tendency to claim that it belongs to a particular culture; for example, this danger is reflected in international sports when only one cultural model is advocated” (Lijuan and Brow, 2007). This reflects a central tension identified by the Olympic anthropologist John J. MacAloon, who suggests that the movement must constantly navigate between its universalist ideals and the reality of cultural diversity. He suggests that for Olympism to be truly

global, it cannot be a single ideology but must function as a “loose, polymorphous, and polythetic family of cultures” that find common ground in the ritual of the Games (MacAloon, 1984).

This perspective suggests that while the modern Olympic Games originated in Europe, their framework should not be confined to Euro-American culture but should rather embrace multiculturalism. The Olympic movement must shift away from its Eurocentric traditions, as only in doing so can it achieve true universality (Donnelly and Peter, 1996). Consequently, there appears to be a growing recognition that upholding the multicultural nature of the Olympic movement is essential for the Games to more effectively facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

Therefore, how the modern Olympic flame lighting and torch relay ceremony can leverage its sacrificial spirit to promote a shared pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty among diverse cultural participants remains a significant question for consideration. As globalization has advanced, the modern Olympic flame ceremony’s transition from the West to the East presents an opportunity for what has been termed “civilizational mutual learning.” Historically, China has often been described as a “nation of propriety.” Chinese civilization values rituals, particularly those related to sacrificial ceremonies. As stated in the Zuo Zhuan: “The great affairs of the state lie in sacrifices and warfare (Wong, 2017).” Sacrificial culture is a core component of Chinese ritual tradition, reflecting the nation’s unique spiritual emphasis on such rites. The sacrificial rite, known as *Ji Li*, is ranked at the top of the “Five Rites” and is intended to express filial piety and gratitude towards “Heaven, Earth, rulers, parents, and teachers,” embodying the Chinese people’s pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty (Ni, 2017).

The sacrificial spirit in Chinese culture is deeply rooted in Confucian ethical philosophy, which is based on benevolence (*ren*) as the essence, rituals (*li*) as the means, wisdom (*zhi*) as the expression, and harmony (*he*) as the guiding principle, all aligned with the principle of “aspiring to the highest wisdom while adhering to the doctrine of the mean.” (Wei-Ming, 1985). In Confucian thought, ghosts and spirits are not tangible entities or objectified beings, but rather functional and relational presences within the human spiritual world. Regarding the relationship between the sacrificer and the spirits, “the body of the living becomes the remnant body of the dead (spirits); the hearts of the dead become united with the hearts of the living, jointly governing the actions of the living” (Smart, 2018). This unity between humans and spirits represents the core of Confucian sacrificial rites, the essence of which is the living’s commitment to narrating the deeds, continuing the ambitions, and inheriting the legacy of the deceased, thereby constituting an important practice for self-improvement and self-fulfillment.

Confucian rituals for worshiping heaven, ancestors, and sages not only convey a profound sense of transcendence but also possess distinct cultural significance. This significance is manifested in several specific ways: the reverence for spirits and the use of ‘divine ways’ for instruction in major sacrificial ceremonies; a harmonious balance between nature and human emotion that integrates both substance and form; a focus on moral education that emphasizes careful conduct and the cultivation of public virtue; the humanistic importance of honoring ancestral achievements and venerating familial virtues; and an ethical order that differentiates social relations while upholding hierarchies based on respect and status (García, 2001).

The preceding discussion suggests that the Confucian sacrificial spirit embodies both religious and secular qualities. It does not reject religion but rather can integrate with it. If the ‘teaching through divine ways’ aspect, which was imposed by successive dynasties, is considered separately, this sacrificial spirit appears complementary to that of the Olympic flame ceremony. The

former emphasizes the noble character of individuals and social harmony, while the latter focuses on individual freedom and the sanctity of personality. They share a common human-centered philosophy, yet are complementary in their respective focus on different dimensions of human life.

At the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the “Lucky Cloud” torch carried the flame from Olympia, symbolizing the concept of civilizational exchange and fusion. As early as October 16, 2006, He Zhenliang, Chairman of the IOC’s Culture and Education Commission and Executive Member of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games, stated that the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, with its anticipated global audience of billions, was of profound significance. He emphasized that the theme should clearly convey the message of “One World, One Dream.” He argued for projecting an image of Chinese culture rooted in peace and friendship, proposing the incorporation of elements such as the Silk Road rather than symbols of conquest to align the ceremony’s narrative with the Olympic spirit (Milton-Smith, 2002).

In the subsequent design of the opening ceremony, the creative team carefully considered the role of the flame-lighting ceremony at the main stadium in promoting civilizational exchange. During the ceremony, the final torchbearer, Chinese gymnast Li Ning, traversed the perimeter of the National Stadium’s roofline while suspended by wires. As he ran, the large screen on his right displayed scenes of the Olympic torch being passed through various countries, accompanied by the opening ceremony theme song, “You and Me”. The song’s composition blended distinctive ‘Chinese symbols’ with an international style to represent a form of “Chinese-style civilization”. The melody was intended to highlight the Beijing Olympics’ emphasis on a human-centered, harmonious development philosophy. The song’s perceived emotional impact was notable; for instance, Sarah Brightman, the ceremony’s lead vocalist, reportedly had a strong emotional reaction upon first hearing it. The flame-lighting ceremony at the Beijing Olympic Games sought to highlight humanity’s pursuit of freedom and light through a sacrificial spirit, while also illustrating the potential for cultural fusion and innovation between Eastern and Western civilizations.

The “Flying” torch of the 2022 Winter Olympics continued the legacy of the “Lucky Cloud” torch from the 2008 Olympics. The lower part of the torch is adorned with cloud patterns, while the upper part features snowflake designs, reflecting the classical Chinese wisdom of “Tao follows nature” and the harmony between heaven and humanity. The design of the “Snowflake Torch Tower” at the opening ceremony also reflected principles of “low-carbon and environmental protection.” This approach may represent a new model for the design of future Olympic flame-lighting ceremonies.

The cauldron for the Winter Olympics featured smokeless and non-toxic ceramic coatings, and its design was inspired by ancient bronze ceremonial vessels (*zun*), which symbolize the respect, sincerity, and solemnity of Chinese sacrificial rituals. This integration of tradition with modern sustainability can be interpreted as reflecting both the cultural heritage and the environmental consciousness of the 2022 Winter Olympics.

Furthermore, the design allows the ‘Lucky Cloud’ and ‘Flying’ torches to interlock when the flame is passed, a feature intended to symbolize exchange and mutual learning between different civilizations. To a certain extent, this design reflects the convergence of traditional Chinese sacrificial concepts with the sacrificial spirit of the Olympics. This symbolic gesture represents the concept of cultural harmony and a shared pursuit of values such as peace and mutual understanding, thereby aligning ancient Chinese rituals with the global spirit of the Olympic Games.

This introduction of Chinese sacrificial culture, however, necessitates an examination of how it might avoid the commercialization it ostensibly seeks to counterbalance. A potential answer may be found within the principles of the Confucian sacrificial spirit. This spirit offers a potential counter-narrative to pervasive commercialism, primarily through its ethical emphasis on righteousness (*yi*) over profit (*li*). Unlike modern consumer logic that seeks external validation through material gain, the Confucian ideal of sacrifice is an introspective process aimed at inner moral cultivation (neisheng) (Wei-Ming, 1985). Its goal is self-fulfillment through adherence to ritual propriety and ethical sincerity, not victory for the sake of a prize. The 2008 and 2022 Games arguably sought to embody this principle by selecting torchbearers from community figures, scientists, and educators—rather than focusing solely on celebrities—and by designing ritual objects such as the *zun*-shaped cauldron to evoke solemnity rather than commercial spectacle. This provides a cultural logic that can be interpreted as resisting commodification by prioritizing intrinsic humanistic worth over extrinsic market value.

Furthermore, this spirit may also serve to challenge the hyper-nationalism that can politicize the Games. The Confucian ideal of harmony in diversity (*he er bu tong*) provides a philosophical framework that values respectful coexistence over confrontational victory. The 2008 Beijing Games’ slogan “One World, One Dream” and the 2022 Games’ final torch lighting, where the flame was placed amidst a snowflake representing all participating nations, can be interpreted not merely as political rhetoric but as expressions of this deep-seated cultural ideal, offering a vision of the Olympics that seeks to transcend zero-sum political competition and foster a sense of a shared human community. This reframes the ceremony from a stage for nationalistic display into a ritual intended to foster global solidarity. The incorporation of a ‘low-carbon’ concept into the Olympic flame ceremony also acted as a significant symbol. It not only aligned with the global trend towards environmental protection but also demonstrated a commitment to the ideal of “ecological civilization,” showcasing a vision where tradition and sustainable innovation can coexist.

The hosting of these two Olympic Games provided a significant opportunity to promote shifts in societal values and contributed distinct Chinese cultural elements to the long-standing humanistic tradition of the Olympics. Beijing, a city deeply rooted in the legacy of Chinese sacrificial culture and renowned for its rich ritual and musical heritage, stood as a fitting location to showcase this fusion. Fourteen years after the first event, the torch from Olympia once again traversed the city, marking a symbolic re-engagement between the Olympic flame and Chinese traditional sacrificial culture.

The torches of the “Lucky Cloud” and “Flying” not only symbolize “shared origins and harmonious integration” but also embody the traditional Chinese concept of “ritual” (*li*). Furthermore, the composition of the torchbearers for both Games was arguably designed to reflect the Olympic pursuit of beauty and dignity inherent in its sacrificial spirit. For instance, the torchbearers at the Winter Olympics, who ranged in age from 14 to 86, represented various sectors of society, including frontline pandemic personnel, aerospace professionals, academicians from the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Chinese Academy of Engineering, and ordinary workers. The diversity of the torchbearers not only highlighted the principle of equality across professions but also emphasized the individuality and dignity of each participant.

The Olympic Games are widely regarded as a valuable platform where Eastern and Western civilizations can engage in dialogue. This role is seen as crucial for fostering harmonious coexistence and joint development among nations with different cultural and social systems, a perspective well-supported in scholarly work (De

Coubertin, 2000). The ethos of the Beijing Winter Olympics appears to have catalyzed increased exchange and interaction between different civilizations. For example, in early 2022, the “4th Chinese Lantern Festival” in Serbia featured displays of colorful lanterns—such as Chinese dragons, traditional lanterns, and Terracotta Warriors—that illuminated the night sky along the Sava River, and some spectators received Winter Olympics mascot dolls as gifts. In Cambodia, a calligraphy and photo exhibition themed around the Beijing Winter Olympics and Chinese New Year attracted local attention, showcasing 238 photos and over 100 calligraphy works. The influence of the Winter Olympics extended far beyond the official venues, inspiring grassroots cultural activities around the world. In numerous communities, the global event was localized as citizens blended Olympic themes with their own cultural traditions, creating unique expressions of friendship and shared enthusiasm. In this way, the Winter Olympics provided a tangible opportunity for people from different backgrounds to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of Chinese civilization on their own terms. This process of mutual learning, enacted at a community level, may contribute to greater intercultural understanding and affinity.

The ethos associated with the Olympic flame can serve as a catalyst for cultural exchange and broader civilizational dialogue. In 2022, China and Greece celebrated the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic relations and the 130th anniversary of the founding of the modern Olympic movement. The cultural exchange between China and Greece is presented as a potential model for the “mutual learning” among world civilizations. On January 1, the academic conference titled “Civilization, Peace, and Friendship—A Spiritual Dialogue Between Chinese and Ancient Greek Civilizations” was held at Beijing Sport University. Scholars at the event explored the extensive exchange, interaction, and innovation between the two civilizations from various perspectives. Interest in ancient Greek civilization has been growing within China’s academic and educational circles, with many students learning Ancient Greek to facilitate a more profound understanding of that civilization. As one scholar remarked, “Over the past century, the two great classical civilizations have developed a civilizational kinship” (Slowikowski, 1991).

On November 25, the “First Temple of Heaven Civilization Dialogue and World Civilization and Olympic Forum” was held in Beijing, with the theme “Olympism and the Common Values of Humanity.” Scholars from China and abroad discussed the significance of the Olympic spirit for the exchange and mutual learning of world civilizations from various viewpoints. After more than a century of development, the Olympic Games have arguably become one of the most influential celebrations of human civilization. The ethos embodied in the Olympic flame ceremony continues to promote ideals such as peace and cooperation, while fostering mutual recognition, understanding, and innovative forms of exchange among different civilizations.

While Eastern and Western civilizations are engaging in substantive dialogue, complex barriers persist. Within Western civilization, a long tradition of intellectual critique questions the foundational assumptions of rationalism, prompting a re-examination of modernity’s core values (Fox, 1986). In this context, “civilizational mutual learning” offers more than just a path for innovation; it provides tangible ethical resources. The Olympic flame ceremony, when interpreted through the lens of a Confucian ethos of collective good, does not merely present a different cultural aesthetic. It offers specific principles: by championing an ethos of righteousness over profit, it challenges the logic of commercialism, and by promoting a worldview of harmony in diversity, it provides a notable alternative to zero-

sum nationalism. Therefore, its contribution can be understood not merely as symbolic, but as a practical demonstration of how an ancient philosophy might contribute to addressing modern challenges, thus serving as a catalyst for more substantive and resilient cultural integration.

Conclusion

Olympic culture is an open system where multiple cultures coexist, “representing a universal human pursuit of values, reflecting humanity’s noble ideals, embodying the collective aspirations for the future of society, and exemplifying the rare presence of truth, goodness, beauty, and fairness in the world” (Kim et al., 2016). This perspective is echoed by He Zhenliang, a former member of the IOC Executive Board and Chairman of the IOC Culture and Olympic Education Commission, who stated: “Looking back on over 100 years of Olympic history, one of the reasons for its success is its inclusivity and respect for diverse cultures. This wise policy not only defines the multicultural nature of the Olympic movement but also enhances its appeal and cohesion. It is no exaggeration to say that multiculturalism is the wealth and strength of the Olympic movement” (Jie, 2020).

This recognition of the Olympic Games as a platform for diverse cultures underscores the significant role of mutual respect and exchange, reinforcing the idea that the Olympic spirit is sustained by inclusivity and the shared human values that transcend cultural boundaries.

The Olympic torch relay ceremony is a crucial means of creating and preserving the multicultural nature of the Games, and it serves as a unique force promoting “civilizational mutual learning.” Historically, the modern Olympic flame ceremony has evolved into one of the most significant ceremonial rituals in global sports. The cultural atmosphere it creates provides a context that encourages a rational consideration of cultural differences, fostering a space for global citizens to recognize and appreciate the distinct cultural expressions of other nations. Such an approach is arguably crucial for the realization of the “civilizational mutual learning” advocated by the Olympic movement.

The torch used in the flame relay is not only the “symbol of the Olympics” and the “embodiment of the Olympic values of excellence, respect, and friendship,” but also a “bridge connecting athletes and people around the world” and a “bond that links all those who believe in Olympism and understand the true essence of sports” (MacAloon, 2013). In this sense, the Olympic flame ceremony serves not only as a symbol of human civilization but also as an embodiment of the collective aspiration for social progress. In a contemporary context where global civilizations face profound challenges and the need for renewal, “humanity must draw upon all the strength handed down from the ancient past to build the future,” and “the Olympic spirit is one of these forces” (Milton-Smith, 2002).

Nevertheless, the integration of the traditional Chinese sacrificial spirit, as demonstrated by the Beijing Games, offers more than just a new opportunity for “civilizational mutual learning.” It provides a tangible case study of how a non-Western ethical framework can actively address the modern Olympic crises of commercialization and politicization. By grounding the ceremony in principles that prioritize inner moral cultivation over material gain and harmonious coexistence over nationalistic rivalry, it suggests a means by which the Olympic movement might reclaim its humanistic core. Utilizing the Olympic flame ceremony in this creative manner does not simply add a multicultural dimension; it aligns with and potentially revitalizes the core mission of Olympism, which seeks ‘to blend sport with culture and education, and to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort,

the educational value of good example, and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles' (De Coubertin, 2000).

In an era of intensifying globalization, characterized by both cultural convergence and conflict, the Olympic torch relay ceremony has the potential to reaffirm and render tangible the sacrificial spirit within individuals. While fostering the appreciation of cultural diversity—an environment wherein diverse cultures are mutually appreciated—the ceremony also reaffirms universal humanistic values and contributes a significant symbol to the collective memory of global civilization. By reinforcing this shared sense of purpose and unity, the Olympic flame ceremony can, to a certain extent, encourage the formation of a global community oriented toward a shared future. Admittedly, as a cultural symbol performed at a global sports festival, the ceremony primarily exerts a "soft power" of cultural enlightenment. Nevertheless, to fundamentally elevate mutual learning among civilizations and mitigate societal conflict requires the "hard power" of political progress, economic development, and military security.

This inquiry's focus on the Beijing Games as a case study for civilizational mutual learning emphasizes a distinct synthesis of Confucian and Olympic ideals to explore potential contributions of traditional Chinese culture to modern global civilization. This specificity invites further comparative research into how other non-Western cultural frameworks might interact with the Olympic ceremony. Furthermore, the analysis is primarily interpretive, centered on the symbolic meaning intended by the organizers. This single-perspective approach is inherently limited because it does not account for audience reception. Future scholarship could build upon this foundation by employing multi-perspective approaches such as audience reception studies to empirically assess how these cultural symbols were perceived by diverse global and local viewers. Such research would help distinguish between the ceremony's intended and received meanings, thereby offering a more polyvocal understanding that incorporates the perspectives of athletes, media, and other key stakeholders.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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Note

1 Based on the author's observations, the specific discussions are as follows:1. John Milton-Smith argues that the Olympic Games represent an opportunity to build a framework of global values, counteracting the negative consequences of globalization such as commercial exploitation, national rivalry, and corruption, by revitalizing the Olympic spirit and emphasizing ethical leadership in the IOC (Milton-Smith J. Ethics, the Olympics and the search for global values[J]. *Journal of business ethics*, 2002, 35: 131-142.).2. Synthia S. Slowikowski explores the Olympic flame ceremony as a symbol of nostalgia and spontaneous communitas, reflecting its cultural and ritual significance in the modern world and its role in the mass media and physical culture (Slowikowski S S. Burning desire: Nostalgia, ritual, and the sport-festival flame ceremony[J]. *Sociology of sport journal*, 1991, 8(3): 239-257.).3. Pinelopi B. Amelidou analyzed the mechanism of the 2004 Athens Olympic flame relay, emphasizing the challenges it faced in cultural, political, and personal aspects, and exploring the tensions between the commercial interests of sponsors and the Olympic spirit(Amelidou P B. The 2004 International Relay: a Greek around the world with the Olympic Flame[M]//*Bearing Light: Flame Relays and the Struggle for the Olympic Movement*. Routledge, 2013: 126-138.).4. John J. MacAloon reviewed the anthropological research on the Olympic flame relay from 1984 to 2008, analyzing the reforms in the International Olympic Committee's management practices, and argued that this research contributes to the development of globalization theory and cultural performance system theory (MacAloon J J. Introduction: the Olympic Flame Relay. Local knowledges of a global ritual form[M]//*Bearing Light: Flame Relays and the Struggle for the Olympic Movement*. Routledge, 2013: 1-20.).

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Author contributions

The first author was responsible for the original conception, design, and drafting of the manuscript in Chinese. The second author contributed substantially to the drafting of the initial manuscript. The corresponding author was responsible for the final review of the manuscript, its translation into English, and handling the submission and all subsequent revisions.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study, as it did not involve human participants or animal subjects.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not required, as this study does not involve any direct interaction with participants.

Additional information

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