

World Games light up Kaohsiung

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Fireworks at the newly inaugurated 40,000-seat main stadium for the 2009 World Games.

PHOTO: CNA

Intermittent rain showers beforehand and a boycott by the Chinese team failed to dampen the enthusiasm of the crowd last night as the Eighth World Games got off to a spectacular start at the main stadium in Kaohsiung City.

The Games mark the first time Taiwan has hosted a multi-nation, multi-sport event.

Dazzling lights filled the air above the stadium as the 40,000-strong crowd was wowed by a mesmerizing visual display featuring hundreds of colorfully dressed dancers and performances from a star-studded line-up of singers during the two-and-a-half-hour opening ceremony.

The evening's proceedings got underway at 7:30pm with a symbolic handover taking place between children from Taiwan and the 2005 host, the German city of Duisburg, before a countdown led into the first of three main performances.

The first performance was themed around nature, featured dancing water droplets, giant eagle kites and dances from Tao and Amis Aborigines. The second section showcased Taiwanese culture, then brought raucous cheers from the audience as the eight generals ba jia zhang entered the stadium on scooters before breaking into a funky dance.



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Taiwanese students hold China's national flag at the opening ceremony of the World Games.
PHOTO: REUTERS

This was followed by a Pi-li puppet display, before the third and final section, entitled "Energetic Kaohsiung," focused on aspects of modern life in the host city.

Then it was time for the athletes to enter the stadium in alphabetical order, led by the Austrian contingent. But in its absence, the Chinese team was represented by what appeared to be a games staffer holding the Chinese national flag.



A group of activists show support for Tibet at a protest outside the main stadium of the 2009 World Games.
PHOTO: LIN CHENG-KUNG, TAIPEI TIMES

The 72-member Chinese team stayed away from the ceremony after President Ma Ying-jeou announced he would attend in his capacity as head of state.

According to local media reports, the Chinese delegation did not attend the opening ceremony to avoid giving the impression that Beijing authorities recognize Ma's status as president or Taiwan's status as a sovereign state. A spokesman for the games said Chinese athletes would compete in the events.

Asked about her views on the reports, Kaohsiung Mayor Chen Chu said that she would respect the Chinese delegation's decision.

The biggest cheer of the night was reserved for the 300-strong Taiwan team, who entered last.

Speaking shortly after the teams' entrance, Chen, welcomed the athletes, before handing the

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floor to Ma to declare the games officially open.

Then it was time for the stadium to sway as vocal performances by British tenor Russell Watson, Kiwi songstress Hayley Westenra, local diva Tiger Huang and Shin whipped the crowd into a frenzy ahead of the grand finale, a spectacular six-minute firework display that rounded off the festivities.

The Games will run for 10 days through July 26, featuring more than 4,000 athletes taking part in 31 sports not included in the Olympic Games.

These include the likes of squash, rugby sevens and an assortment of martial arts, as well as more obscure events such as fistball, tchoukball, boules and korfball.

While the Olympics attract international interest because of its star athletes, the World Games events tend to have audiences with more specialized interests, but the Kaohsiung Organizing Committee is hoping that despite this, through cable sports channels such as ESPN, Kaohsiung will gain global visibility.

International sports events have proved to be a sure-fire method of promoting their host cities, and keen to use the opportunities to boost tourism in Kaohsiung, the city government has initiated a series of incentive packages involving local hotels, restaurants and cultural establishments to make the most of the festivities.

Prizes in a series of lotteries to be drawn at the end of the games include an apartment, a car and a variety of cash prizes.

In Taipei, commenting on the non-attendance of Chinese athletes at the opening ceremony, Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Legislator Wu Yu-sheng said that to the best of his knowledge, China's decision was the result of a brainstorming session between the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee and Chinese authorities.

"The two sides discussed the issue frankly and sincerely before reaching that decision," Wu said, adding that he fully supported the arrangement.

"It's a wise, goodwill decision that will contribute to harmony and the development of relations between our two sides," he said.

KMT Legislator Huang Chih-hsiung, a former Olympic medalist, meanwhile, dismissed the need to be concerned about the political implications behind the delegation's absence.

□ ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY FLORA WANG AND CNA

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