

WBF ZONE 6 REPORT

(from a report by WBF Vice President and Zone 6 representative Patrick Choy to the WBF Executive Council on October 16, in conjunction with the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the WBF)

THE PAST

Early Years

In the mid fifties, a group of Rubber Bridge players came together and organized a series of inter-port tournaments in Manila, Hong Kong and Bangkok. To enhance membership participation, our forerunners not only established national Bridge organizations in their own countries, but also inaugurated the Far East Bridge Federation (FEBF) which became the zonal management center for promoting Bridge and presiding over regional championship events. Since then the FEBF has increased the number of NBOs substantially. In 1966, FEBF represented by its zonal champion, Thailand, made its first appearance in the Bermuda Bowl. In 1969, FEBF surprised the world when its representative, a combined Chinese Taipei (then Nationalist China)-Thai team, relegated a powerful American team to the sidelines en route to meeting Italy in the final of the Bermuda Bowl. With the zone rapidly expanding to include Pacific, West Asian and the Middle Eastern NBOs, the seventies were regarded as the golden era of the FEBF. In 1980 those new FEBF NBOs in West Asia and the Middle East were granted their own zone (BFAME: WBF Zone 4). This WBF "re-zoning" by subtraction actually helped FEBF by allowing it to concentrate its resources and expand its influence in the East Asia region; China's entry was of the greatest significance.

China

In 1979 a group of Hong Kong Bridge administrators and top players visited Shanghai and Beijing on a Bridge mission. During play in a friendly tournament it was suggested that the host country consider forming a government-sanctioned national Bridge association. Only months later (1980) the Chinese Contract Bridge Association (CCBA) was established under the Ministry of Sports; Deng Xiao Ping, the paramount leader became Honorary President of CCBA. In the same year WBF President Jaime Ortiz-Patiño visited China for the first time while, on a separate front, teams from Shanghai and Beijing came to Hong Kong to play in the Hong Kong Inter-City Tournament – the first international exposure for China. In 1981, CCBA inaugurated its first international tournament in Shanghai which was well attended by world-class players from USA, Europe and Asia. Later in the same year, the Hong Kong Inter-City Tournament caught worldwide attention when Chinese players from the Mainland and Taiwan met for the very first time. 1982 was

a landmark year: CCBA became an official member of the WBF and FEBF, confirming China's interest in competing in FEBF and WBF Championships.

The Chinese Leader's vision

As avid Bridge players, many Chinese leaders have the vision of developing Bridge in their country. The most enlightening must be the remark made by Vice Premier Li Tieying during his meeting with WBF President, Bobby Wolff in 1993: "There are no less than 400 million card players in China and I wish to convert 30% of them (i.e. 120 million) to become Bridge players." Mr Li has embraced his vision with actions: today Bridge is being taught at high schools, universities and community centers. Even though the current Bridge population is still short of Mr Li's target, the latest estimate of 24 million players is an impressive figure.

THE PRESENT

Since the Nineties

In 1991, FEBF changed its name to Pacific Asia Bridge Federation (PABF) to accurately reflect the geographical parameters of the Zone (i.e. the Pacific side of Asia) standing apart from the South Pacific Zone (Zone 7); Japan hosted the World Teams Championships in Yokohama and staged an exceptional tournament that demonstrated the expertise and spirit of cooperation characteristic of the member NBOs of the new zone. Under the PABF banner, Bridge in Zone 6 continued its fast track growth in both Bridge population and standard of play. During the past 14 years, three full-scale World Championships and several Youth Championships were held in Zone 6, with universally positive feedback from participating nations. Today Zone 6 teams are consistent medal winners in international competition; a Chinese Pair currently holds the World Open Pairs title.

A caveat: unlike the club-centered Bridge environment of Zone 1 and Zone 2, Bridge activities in Zone 6 are largely staged at community centers, schools, universities and social clubs not formally affiliated with their NBOs; only nationally registered players are included in the totals reported to WBF, which creates the impression that the game is not as popular as it really is.

Different types of NBOs

NBOs under PABF can be classified into four categories:

A. The small Bridge clubs

The NBO itself is the biggest Bridge club of the country; Bridge activities are essentially enjoyed only by relatively affluent members. With their influence the

NBO may well be a member of the National Sport Federation. Unfortunately, due to the lack of popular acceptance of Bridge (principally a difficult sport to appreciate by the masses), commercial sponsorships of any significance are hard to come by. Among the 12 PABF NBOs Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, China Macau, Korea and Mongolia are good Category A examples.

B. The small but well-developed NBOs

Here we have Hong Kong and Singapore, both with no more than 500 registered players; yet Bridge is a relatively popular sport in both. Their major tournaments, Hong Kong's Inter-City and Singapore's Pesta Sukan, are heavily sponsored by the government and by business enterprises while attracting hundreds of international Bridge players. What is most pleasing is that, aided by government funding at the high school and university levels, Bridge is being taught to students who in turn organize Bridge clubs and run well-attended inter-school competitions. Bridge is also a popular game in community centers.

C. Large Bridge clubs

Japan and Chinese Taipei are somewhat similar to the major European NBOs, featuring a large Bridge population that includes a significant percentage of experts and professionals. Both NBOs have the technical expertise, resources and sponsorship to host annual first-class cash-prize tournaments – the NEC Bridge Festival and Yeh Brothers Cup – and attract many of the world's leading players.

D. Large and well developed Bridge nations

The Bridge scene in both China and Indonesia stands on its own. In addition to all the characteristics of the major European NBOs, Bridge in these countries is classified as a major sport (like table tennis in China and badminton in Indonesia) and is supported by substantial government subsidies. Commercial sponsorships are also surprisingly readily available. Both NBOs have been successfully promoting Bridge at the grass root level by teaching the game and organizing games/tournament in schools, colleges and above all, community centers. State leaders, ministerial-rank officials and top executives of major corporations are keen players who for decades acted as ambassadors for the game of Bridge. China and Indonesia, with a combined population of 1.6 billion, occupy 25% of the world's population; yet their per-capita Bridge population is no more than 2%. With the resources that the governments and commerce are willing to contribute, China and Indonesia represent the highest growth potential for WBF.

IMSA and WMSG

Three years ago WBF President José Damiani took the initiative for unifying other mind sports associations - i.e. Chess, Go and Draughts, Chinese Chess – and was instrumental in creating the International Mind Sports Association (IMSA). For the past two years, Zone 6 and China have joined José in conceptualizing and bringing to fruition ambitious plans for the first World Mind Sport Games (WMSG) in the Olympic city of Beijing in 2008. The WMSG attracted the attention of 326 reporters from 109 foreign and domestic media agencies to cover the event; more than 2000 news stories were published. The official website received more than 600,000 hits daily. All the domestic commercial websites published special pages heralding the WMSG. Hundreds of millions of "netizens" and TV viewers were glued to a steady flow of live telecasts. The extensive publicity has propelled the sport of Bridge to new heights, opening the way for Bridge and the other mind sports to become full Olympic events through the organization of a Mind Sport Olympics.

THE FUTURE

Zone 6 the storm shelter

During the recent World Economic Forum, top economists, CEOs of Fortune 500, and State leaders shared the common view that in the immediate future Europe and America will fare poorly in the economic recession while Asia will be the least affected. China, with its strong foreign reserve of over US\$2 trillion and the successful implementation of plans to stimulate internal demand, will retain the momentum of high GDP growth. We can logically predict that in Zone 1 and Zone 2, governmental and commercial sponsorship for Bridge will be cut back. Furthermore, to make WBF tournaments more attractive to Bridge players with reduced spending power, WBF may have to substantially lower tournament entry fees. Leveraging on the storm shelter position of Zone 6 to host WBF Championships in the near future is also a viable solution that relies on the amiable relationship between WBF leaders and their counterparts in this zone.