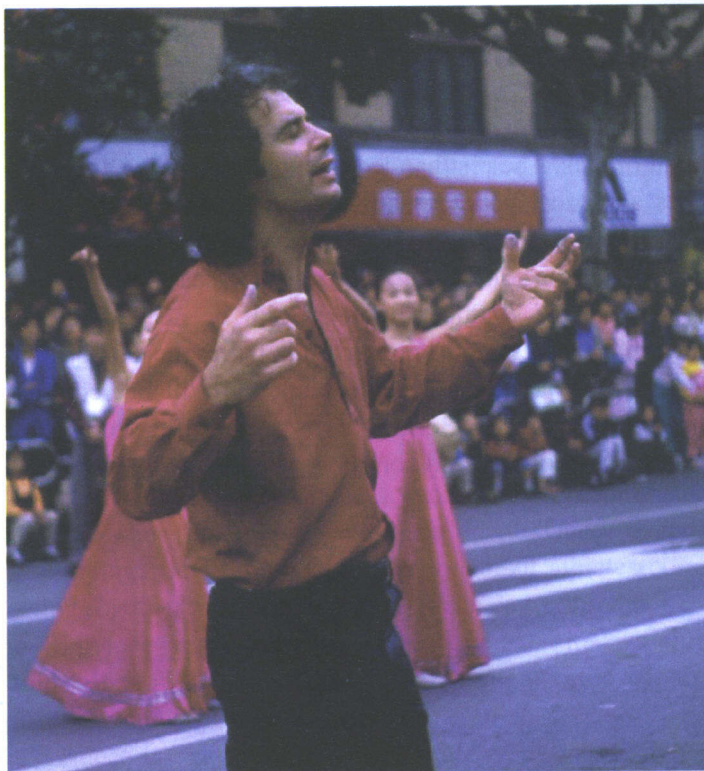


A TORCH BEARER'S JOURNEY

by Amy Hu

“Chairman George” Sapounidis carried the flame through Montreal during the Athens Olympics. Now the Greek Canadian is shortlisted for carrying it through the streets of Beijing.



It's one of those “only in Canada” stories, like the Lebanese immigrant in Calgary who buys a Chinese restaurant and does good business at selling tabouli with a side of spring rolls. It makes perfect sense. Except in this case, wherein a Greek Canadian is vying to become a torch bearer at the Beijing Olympics, the international implications are much more dramatic.

George Sapounidis was doubly touched to carry the Olympic torch through the streets of Montreal's Greektown, with family and friends cheering him on, in the lead up to the 2004 Olympics. The Olympics were held in Athens that year, the place of his ancestry. “I felt officially part of the Olympic movement and it consummated my desire as a Greek who is Canadian to be part of history,” Mr. Sapounidis said. “We Greeks are fully, fully aware of our heritage and the part the Olympics play in that heritage. And so I am now fortunate enough to be part of that honoured and noble history.”

However, Mr. Sapounidis — who is a mild mannered statistician for the federal government by vocation and a

folk singing star in China by choice - is trying to carry the torch one step further, from the 2004 Athens Olympics to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Known as Chairman George, he sings in Mandarin to the delight and obvious appreciation of millions of Chinese.

He calls it an “international chase,” chasing the torch from office towers in the nation’s capital to the ancient ruins of Athens to the crowded streets of Beijing: “Chasing the unity of Mankind.” But the chase didn’t start without a few obstacles; Mr. Sapounidis was invited to a one-day competition with thousands of other Beijing residents. (He lives in Canada but is also considered a resident of Beijing). He made that first cut, becoming one of just 20 competitors to make it to the second round. That round saw Chairman George employ his oratory skills to impress the judges. His 10-minute videotaped responses to why he should be considered a torch bearer, what his connection to China is, and what his plans are when the Games begin, was a hit with the judges. It can be seen on Youtube in all its Mandarin splendor. But he still hasn’t won the right to join 20,000 other official torch bearers, not yet at least. Eight of the final 10 competitors were recently approved. George is one of two still waiting to find out.

“I used to be quite nervous about getting accepted, but I’m not so serious about it anymore,” he said. “But there is something in running four or five city blocks with the torch through the streets of Beijing - a place that I love so much - three days before the opening ceremonies, it would mean everything to me.”

Not only has Mr. Sapounidis traveled far in pursuit of his dream, but he’s come a long way. He stutters occasionally, still lives with his parents as a 40 something, falls in and out of love more than he would care to admit, but puts a positive spin on almost everything he does. Few have met this lanky, somewhat quirky performer and not felt there is hope for humanity.

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Check our website at www.asianetwork.ca for an update on Chairman George’s nomination status.

