“One World, One Dream”: The Beijing Olympics

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Of all the visible symbols of China’s rise to global prominence, perhaps the most compelling was the Opening of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing. The Beijing Olympics served as a showcase, a globally televised “coming out party” for a reinvented, reinvigorated China. As was suitable for such a signature event, the Games featured breathtaking pageantry, spectacular venues, and abundant human drama – all well-amplified by cascading crescendos of media hype. But what did the Games reveal about the nature and character of the “new” China, and-equally importantly-what did they seek to conceal from view?

When the 2008 Games were first awarded to Beijing back in 2001, the spotlight of global media publicity shone brightly on the no-longer-sleeping Chinese Giant. At the same time, hopes were raised that China’s quest for international respectability would push the country toward greater political liberalization and respect for human rights.

Although the long-term gravitational pull of globalization continued to nudge China slowly and fitfully in the direction of greater openness, transparency and human rights awareness, the Chinese government’s immediate concern with maintaining social order and political stability during the prolonged run-up to the 2008 Olympics led not to accelerated liberalization, but rather to a visible tightening of state censorship, surveillance and repression. There was no small irony in this: for while the Olympics had been widely expected to help open China up, they served instead to close down China even more tightly.

Ever since the 1989 Tiananmen debacle, the Chinese Communist Party’s near-obsessive concern with maintaining “unity and stability” has trumped all other political considerations. Although Chinese authorities promised long in advance of the 2008 Olympics that certain restrictions limiting freedom of the press would be lifted in the run-up to the Games, in fact there was a significant tightening of media controls. Early in 2007, for example, China’s State Council announced a list of 20 topics that could not be openly discussed in the mass media. Banned subjects included the 1957 anti-rightist campaign, the Cultural Revolution, the 1937 “Rape of Nanjing,” judicial corruption– and media freedom, to name just a few. According to the organization Reporters without Borders, in the twelve months prior to the opening of the Beijing Olympics, more than 50 Chinese journalists and Internet bloggers were detained by police for reporting on forbidden subjects.

Of particular concern to the government was the growing advocacy role played by the mass media in investigating and exposing such things as corruption, social unrest, and natural catastrophes. Media coverage of such “negative” news events has long been suppressed in China because of its purported detrimental impact on popular morale. But now, in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, investigative reporting was especially worrisome. With the whole world watching closely, the last thing Chinese leaders wanted was for adverse media publicity to rain on their parade, casting a pall over their long-awaited coming-out party.

During the run-up to the August 2008 Olympics, the ranks of Beijing’s aggrieved petitioners had swelled dramatically as a result of a spreading wave of coerced evictions and corrupt housing relocation programs. Between 2002 and 2008, as many as 1.4 million residents of central Beijing were subject to mandatory relocation to make room for new Olympic venues, transportation facilities, high-rise office and apartment complexes, and urban beautification projects. According to numerous sources, a substantial minority of these dislocated residents were never supplied with either the upgraded housing or the full financial compensation that had been promised to them-or both. With

increasing numbers of petitioners angrily protesting their forced eviction and fraudulent relocation, Beijing’s “black jails” soon became overcrowded. When a British television news team tried to film one of these extra-legal detention centers, their camera was confiscated and they were roughed up by plainclothes police.

As Olympic venue construction neared completion, tens of thousands of rural migrant workers, hired to build and beautify the “New Beijing,” were forcibly repatriated to the countryside. Identity checks were instituted by security personnel at thousands of housing complexes throughout the city, designed to find and expel temporary workers whose labor contracts had expired.

In August 2007– exactly one year before the start of the Beijing Olympics– a group of distinguished Chinese human rights activists defied the government’s repeated warnings and publicly expressed their dismay over the deterioration of personal freedoms and civil liberties.

“We find no consolation or comfort,” they wrote, “in the rise of grandiose sports facilities, or a temporarily beautified Beijing city, or the prospect of Chinese athletes winning medals. We know too well how these glories are built on the ruins of the lives of ordinary people, on the forced removal of urban migrants, and on the sufferings of victims of brutal land grabbing, forced eviction, exploitation of labor, and arbitrary detention.”

In the face of increased political repression, scattered bands of Chinese bloggers, displaced urban dwellers, migrant workers, environmental activists and assorted other civil society forces also began to protest the high price in civil liberties that Beijingers were paying for the “privilege” of hosting the 2008 Olympics.

While domestic criticism of China’s Olympic selection was a relatively new phenomenon, international criticism was not. As early as 2001, shortly after the Games were awarded to Beijing, the media group Reporters Without Borders established a dedicated website critical of Beijing’s winning Olympic bid. At the same time, the Falun Gong mounted a global media blitz in support of an Olympic boycott. Although most international human rights organizations (including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International) stopped short of endorsing a boycott movement, the approach of the 2008 Olympics saw growing, albeit sporadic, support for such a movement. The key issue contributing to the boycott movement’s added momentum in 2007 and 2008 was a growing wave of international criticism of China’s economic and military assistance to such oppressive “pariah states” as Myanmar, Sudan and Zimbabwe.

In the final run-up to the August 2008 Games, a number of high-profile politicians and international celebrities expressed sympathy for the boycott movement. Britain’s Prince Charles and the Vice President of the European Parliament were joined by nine Nobel Peace Prize Winners and 119 U.S. lawmakers, among others, in endorsing the boycott, linking their action to China’s continuing support for repressive military regimes in Myanmar and Sudan.

Perhaps the most tense moments in the run-up to the Olympics involved the attempt by pro-Tibetan independence groups in Paris, London, and San Francisco to disrupt the Olympic torch relay. Expressing their anger at the Chinese government’s forcible suppression of Tibetan street demonstrations in March of 2008, pro-Tibetan demonstrators physically confronted torch-bearing Chinese relay runners in several European and North American cities. In Paris, they knocked over the wheelchair of a disabled female torch-bearer. Back in China, the reaction to such televised disturbances was immediate and overwhelmingly nationalistic. Overnight, the Chinese Internet came alive with pro-Chinese, anti-Tibetan and anti-French invective. In Beijing, taxicabs sported hand-painted signs urging patriotic citizens to boycott the French retail giant, Carrefour.

Notwithstanding China’s lack of progress on political liberalization, the great majority of Chinese citizens were clearly in the grip of “Olympic fever.” Aside from scattered protests by alienated dissidents, rights activists and petitioners, Chinese pride and patriotism were the order of the day. After 150 years of humiliation at the hands of foreign imperialists, China was reclaiming its rightful place among the nations of the world; and the Chinese people were not about to tolerate anyone trying to rain on their parade.

The disruption of the Olympic torch relay, and the angry Chinese reaction to it, further polarized international opinion

on the proposed boycott. In Washington, President Bush was forced to defend his decision to attend the Beijing Olympics. When asked if he would use the Olympics as a platform for publicly lecturing Chinese leaders about human rights, he demurred. “I am not going to … use the Olympics” he said, “as an opportunity to express my opinions to the Chinese people in a public way, because I do it all the time with President Hu [privately].”

A number of other prominent Western political leaders-including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy-decided to express their concern with Chinese policies in Darfur, Myanmar and Tibet in a mild and indirect fashion — not by joining an organized boycott, but by opting not to attend the Opening Ceremony.

As the list of prominent Olympic nay-sayers grew longer in the months preceding the opening of the Beijing Games, China’s response to foreign criticism began to soften. In place of the defiant displays of self-righteous indignation that marked the government’s initial response to Western criticism, Chinese leaders began to quietly backpedal on the issues of Sudan and Myanmar. Fearing an international bandwagon effect, the chairman of the Beijing Host Committee declared that the Chinese government had made “unremitting efforts to resolve the Darfur question.” In a similar vein, the Foreign Ministry announced that Chinese policy in Myanmar was one of promoting a “democratic process of reconciliation and peace.”

Proponents of the boycott movement were unmoved by such signs of Chinese softening. And in the spring and early summer of 2008 international human rights groups applied mounting pressure on key corporate sponsors of the Beijing Games-such as Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, General Electric and Johnson & Johnson-to terminate their participation in the Games. But the major sponsors were already locked into expensive, long-term commercial advertising campaigns; consequently, not a single important corporation pulled out. Nor did any sitting head of state, country or national Olympic committee pull out. Even Taiwan participated, under the neutral banner, “Chinese, Taipei.”

Against this background of bubbling political controversy, the Beijing Olympics commenced, without incident, at precisely 8 minutes and 8 seconds past 8:00 am on the 8th day of the 8th month of 2008-a highly auspicious calendrical conjunction, according to traditional Chinese superstition, which places high value on multiple 8s. (In Hong Kong, a Chinese company reportedly pays $300,000 annually just to reserve the telephone number 8888-8888).

Auspicious timing or not, the Beijing Olympics were marked by spectacular pageantry, stunning displays of patriotic pride, over-the-top media hype, and some simply splendid athletic competition. As for Beijing itself, the city looked-dare I say it?-exquisite, all dressed up in its gleaming new Olympic finery. The venues were breathtaking: who could forget the dazzling design of the Bird’s Nest, or the exquisite pastel luminosity of the Water Cube? And while attendance at many individual events was surprisingly sparse, the spirit of the Games was overwhelmingly festive and exuberant. Was it worth the $43 billion dollar price tag? I think most Chinese would say unequivocally, yes. It was their coming out party, their moment in the sun, and they clearly relished it. Even the weather cooperated. Notwithstanding many dire warnings of an environmental debacle, after two days of thick haze Beijing’s skies magically cleared, as alternating periods of bright sunshine and heavy rain kept airborne pollutants to tolerable levels; and for the first time in memory Beijing’s pollution index actually dropped below that of Los Angeles–by a substantial margin. Even the traffic proved manageable, thanks to mandatory odd/even-day driving restrictions. It hardly mattered that the clean air was only temporary, a product of forced industrial closures and last-minute cloud seeding by the People’s Liberation Army. The Games were a visual delight, filled with color, pageantry and human drama.

When it was all over, and notwithstanding Michael Phelps’s record-setting 8 gold medals in swimming, the host Chinese garnered an astonishing 51 gold medals, far more than any other country. The United States finished second with 36 gold medals. One memorable moment was a televised close-up of Chinese President Hu Jintao, filmed during the Closing Ceremony. On stage, British rock guitarist Jimmy Page and pop diva Leona Lewis were belting out a sanitized version of Led Zeppelin’s raunchy 1969 hit song, “Whole Lotta Love.” Meanwhile, up in the VIP box, Hu Jintao was biting his lip and grimacing uncomfortably. Talk about “culture shock,” and the “clash of civilizations”!

Alongside the glitz and glamour, there were, perhaps inevitably, a number of Olympic foul-ups, foibles and faux pas. In the government’s desire to achieve a flawless display of Chinese progress, prowess and perfection, some troubling contretemps were on display: one young girl lost her moment of immortality when a censorious Politburo member decided that she wasn’t pretty enough to appear on-stage to sing her designated number at the Opening Ceremony. A more attractive substitute was found, and the song was lip-synched.

Meanwhile, travelers to Beijing from the provinces often found their access to public transport (and to the Olympic venues themselves) blocked by overly zealous security personnel; consequently, tens of thousands of ticket-holders never made it to the Games, a fact which helped account for the embarrassingly sparse attendance at a number of athletic events. In many cases, whole caravans of colorfully attired office workers and school children were bused in at the last minute to fill half-empty arenas.

Of greater concern was the fact that throughout the Olympic festivities there were recurrent, visible incidents of police overreaction. At least a dozen political activists were arrested after they displayed concern for human rights in Tibet; and sixteen foreign journalists were roughed up during the Games while attempting to cover demonstrations of various sorts. Numerous international websites were locally blocked for the duration of the Olympics; and in Beijing, intrusive security measures at several four- and five-star hotels included clandestine scanning of guests’ computer hard drives.

More disturbing still, dozens of law-abiding Chinese citizens were subjected to extreme police harassment when they applied for permits to hold peaceful demonstrations at three officially-designated free-speech locations in Beijing. After the government publicly announced the new permit system, a total of 77 applications were submitted to the Beijing municipal police. However, all but a small handful of the applications were quickly withdrawn under duress, as the police began interrogating the applicants about their political attitudes and the political activities of their friends, family members, and colleagues. The remaining applications were categorically rejected. Indeed, not a single police permit was issued during the Olympics. And at least five applicants, including two women in their late 70s, were arrested and sentenced to extra-judicial “labor re-education” simply for applying for the permits.

Most troubling of all was the curtain of total media silence that was drawn during the Olympics over an emerging crisis involving contaminated Chinese milk products. Because of the government’s overriding concern with managing its image, information about widespread melamine poisoning among Chinese children was systematically suppressed throughout the summer of 2008. As a result, tens of thousands of children were poisoned before the alarm was finally sounded after the Games’ conclusion, in mid-September.

Such was the double-edged nature of Beijing’s Olympic experience that while all was harmonious and celebratory on the outside, disturbing residues of deeply-engrained authoritarian insecurity, anxiety and overreaction were clearly evident just beneath the surface. In this respect, and notwithstanding Beijing’s glamorous multi-billion dollar Olympic makeover, Chinese political reality remained largely unchanged. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*

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