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Beijing's Olympic Message: China Will Do What It Wants

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The blazing pageantry of the Beijing Olympics—the most spectacular Olympian celebration in over 70 years—is rightfully being heralded as the symbol of China's arrival as a global power. The bright Olympic spotlight showed the world a Chinese communist regime that is secure in its power, even if not in its legitimacy. While China cared deeply about the impression it made during its time in the international limelight (cared to the tune of \$44 billion) such concern does not extend outside the Olympic venues. Dazzling show and winning gold medal count aside, the Beijing Olympics' message was clear: China is now big and important enough to do what it wants. And anyone who doesn't like it—including Chinese citizens—should tolerate China's ascent in silence.

The Little Dishonesties. Over the course of this summer's Olympic Games, Beijing's carefully constructed façade occasionally slipped, revealing the following subtle yet telling dishonesties:

- The Chinese government was apparently complicit in fiddling with the birthdates for its flawless child gymnasts;
- A troupe of Han Chinese children in colorful ethnic Tibetan, Mongolian, Muslim, and mountain tribal costumes were paraded about as though they were representatives of minority nationalities; and
- The government recruited an uber-cute nine-year-old girl to lip-sync the national anthem while angelic vocals were piped into the stadium. The song was actually sung by a seven-year-old girl,

who, due to a lack of orthodontia, was deemed unsuitable for prime-time television; China literally wanted to put its best face forward.

This kind of silliness could be excused in a poor, self-conscious third-world country. But for a country aspiring to first-world status, such behavior is jarring.

Even for a nation with 5,000 years of culture and history—some of which contained equally vain and gaudy gestures, such as an ancient emperor who had himself interred with 20,000 life-size terra cotta warriors and scholars—the Olympian ceremony's sparkling, laser-studded production, with its vast armies of robotic performers and Godzilla-proportioned props, was excessive.

Chinese movie director Zhang Yimou, the man responsible for the breathtaking production of the Beijing Games' opening and closing ceremonies, noted that China's major advantage in producing such a spectacle was “human performance.” Chinese human performance, Zhang went on to note, is “number two in the world. Number one is North Korea.” Mr. Zhang praised the North Koreans because their mass celebrations in Pyongyang feature “performances in unison to the highest

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degree,”¹ and he marveled that mass numbers of Chinese can follow orders almost as well as North Koreans can.

In light of his experiences creating films in the West, for Zhang, directing Chinese and North Korean performers was a welcome change. Working with Western actors, he mused, “was so troublesome [because] in the middle of rehearsals they take two coffee breaks.” Equally galling to Zhang was that the fact that “there can’t be any discomfort, because of human rights.” He also complained that in the West “they have all kinds [of] organizations and labor union structures. We’re not like that. We work hard; we tolerate bitter exertion.” Due to China’s lack of regard for performers’ rights and well-being, Zhang believes that, “other than North Korea, there’s not one other country in the world that can achieve [such a high quality performance].”²

Disregard for Civilians. If the discomfort and inconvenience had been limited to the soldiers, singers, drummers, and performers in the Olympic’s “Bird’s Nest,” such behavior could have been dismissed as a sign of China’s immaturity. But, according to Chinese officials, at least 14,901 Beijing residents were displaced by construction for the games.³ The Swiss-based Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, however, estimated that

1.5 million were ultimately displaced between 2001 and the beginning of the games.⁴ Moreover, Beijing seems to have thinned its “floating population” (liudong renkou) of migrant workers from China’s interior provinces who came to the capital for work. On a good day, there are 4 million liudong renkou roaming the streets of Beijing.⁵ The sudden drop in floating population numbers raises several questions, not the least of which is: Where did they all go?

In order to clean up Beijing—liudong renkou aside—the government needed 300 million cubic meters of scarce north China fresh water to flush out the polluted canals, rivers, and lakes.⁶ With north China’s annual per capita water usage at 248 cubic meters, the water diverted for the Olympics would have supplied over a million people. As the games wound up, The Sunday Times of London reported that tens of thousands of farmers in north China had been displaced by the man-made drought.⁷ The Straits Times failed to find any farmers in north China who were compensated for their sacrifice.⁸

Human Rights. While Chinese disregard for human rights has been extensively documented, some observers believed that allowing Beijing to host the games would actually increase respect for human rights in China. Yet China’s human rights

1. “Zhang Yimou’s 20,000-Word Interview Reveals Secrets of Opening Ceremony,” Nanfang Zhoumou (Guangzhou), August 14, 2008, at <http://www.nanfangdaily.com.cn/nfzm/200808140101.asp> (August 28, 2008).
2. Deutsche Presse Agentur, “Olympics Opening: Soldiers Wore Nappies For Seven-Hour Stint at Olympic Opening,” August 14, 2008, at <http://www.bangkokpost.com/sportsplus/sportsplus.php?id=129643> (August 28, 2008).
3. Reuters, “Beijing Says 15,000 Relocated for Games Venues,” February 19, 2008, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/sportsNews/idUSPEK36399820080219> (August 29, 2008).
4. COHRE’s report, despite a polemical tone, is impressively footnoted, and on the whole, its conclusions seem well founded. See One World, Whose Dream? Housing Rights Violations and the Beijing Olympic Games, Centre On Housing Rights And Evictions (COHRE), July 2008, at http://www.cohre.org/store/attachments/One_World_Whose_Dream_July08.pdf (August 28, 2008).
5. Citing the 2007 Beijing Statistical Yearbook, the COHRE report says, “In 2006, the population of registered residents in Beijing was 11,976,000 and the total permanent population (including unregistered migrants) was 15,810,000, meaning that migrants may constitute up to 24.3 percent of Beijing residents.”
6. Jamil Anderlini, “Olympics Water Diversion Threatens Millions,” *Financial Times*, February 26, 2008, at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/40b3e66a-e49d-11dc-a495-0000779fd2ac.html> (August 28, 2008). See also Chris Buckley, “Beijing Olympic Water Scheme Drains Parched Farmers,” Reuters, January 22, 2008, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSPEK370490> (August 29, 2008).
7. Michael Sheridan, “Millions Forfeit Water to Olympic Games, Farmers in Baoding Face Ruin from a Man-Made Drought,” *The Sunday Times*, August 24, 2008, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article4597006.ece> (August 28, 2008).
8. Chua Chin Hon, “Parched Hebei’s Olympic Contribution,” *The Straits Times (Singapore)*, July 26, 2008, p. 10.

environment actually became more oppressive in the run-up to the Olympics.

In 2001, as China entered the end game of its bid to host the 2008 Olympics, at least one senior Chinese official, Beijing Vice Mayor Liu Jingmin, said on three separate occasions, “By allowing China to host the games you [apparently meaning Westerners in general] will help the development of human rights.” It was almost as if he were the only Chinese official allowed by the Central Propaganda Department to make such an observation. Liu was careful to note that the Chinese government was not going to be the agent of this change; that role was reserved for the rhetorical “you.”⁹ Liu’s comments may have misled International Olympics Committee chairman Jacques Rogge to think the Chinese government had actually committed to improving human rights. Shortly after Liu’s comments, Rogge told a BBC news interviewer:

I said to the Chinese political leaders, the IOC urges you to improve as much as possible human rights, as soon as possible.... I have said we will be in close contact with Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and the United Nations, and they will report to us and tell us what they feel ... The IOC is a responsible organization, be it in the field of human rights, be it in the field of just logistics and delivering what is necessary to have good games, be it in the field of human rights or any other major issue that would make the games difficult or impossible for young athletes to participate in, then we will act.¹⁰

Seven years ago, the idea that the spotlight of the Olympics would embarrass China into keeping on good behavior was attractive to many commentators—including the author of this piece.¹¹ But at least commentators understood that the Chinese communist regime would have no incentive to restrain its steadily deteriorating human rights behavior without considerable prodding from the international community—particularly the United States.

Yet, if anything, China’s suppression of dissent, speech, assembly, and all forms of written expression has increased since 2001, and it was particularly harsh in the run-up to the Olympics. One website that keeps a running tally of human rights violations listed the following acts of censorship in the days leading up to the games:

- Six separate Internet censorship cases (including one against an official publication);
- Three arrests of elderly petitioners who gave interviews to the foreign press;
- Seven detentions of persons who had applied for permits to protest in specially designated “protest parks” in Beijing;
- Two arrests of democracy activists for “inciting subversion of state power”; and
- Three detentions of Christian “House Church” organizers on uncertain charges.¹²

And those were the highlights from July 2008. Dozens more instances of censorship against the Chinese media and citizenry occurred throughout the build-up to the games.

9. On February 8, 2001, Liu tentatively explored the formula with the speculation that “hosting the Olympic Games will also promote social and economic development of China and the world, so I suppose it’ll also promote the development of human rights of China and the world.” See Agence France Presse, “Falungong should not endanger China’s Olympic bid: China,” February 8, 2001. On April 23, he asserted “By allowing Beijing to host the Games you will help the development of human rights.” See Erskine McCullough, “Beijing 2008 Bid Leader Claims US Lawmakers Misguided,” Agence France Presse, April 23, 2001. Liu repeated his statement verbatim on July 4, 2001, noting that it was “you” who would improve human rights, not the Chinese government. See Phil Chetwynd, “China Holds its Breath as Olympic Prize Draws Closer,” Agence France Presse, July 4, 2001.
10. “IOC President Jacques Rogge talks exclusively to BBC News 24’s Hardtalk,” BBC News 24’s Hardtalk April 24, 2002, at http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2002/04_april/23/iocpresident_hardtalk.shtml (August 28, 2008).
11. See John J. Tkacik, Jr., “Human Rights and Security Issues: Hurdles on China’s Olympic Track to Respectability,” Heritage Foundation Executive Memorandum No. 764, August 10, 2001, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/EM764.cfm>.
12. Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) at <http://cfd-net.org> (August 28, 2008).

Especially galling to many outsiders was China's indulgence of setting aside three public parks far from Olympic venues where petitioners and dissenters could protest government policies without disturbing Olympic visitors. It was one of the few small concessions that hopeful observers pointed to as a sign that the Olympics had, indeed, made a positive impact on China's attitude toward human rights.

Alas, of the 77 applications to protest in the parks, none were approved, and some of the applicants were punished for even taking the trouble to apply.¹³

A Clear Message. Ultimately, the most frightening aspect of China's approach to the Olympics was that the communist country did not care what foreigners thought. The message of the Chinese state to its citizens, to foreign governments and anyone else who cared to pay attention was "China is big and will do what it wants—get used to it!"

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13. Ariana Eunjung, "Cha Protest Application Brings Labor-Camp Threat, Woman Says," *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2008, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/20/AR2008082001095.html> (August 28, 2008).