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# IMPROVING HUMAN RIGHTS IN A NEO-COMMUNIST STATE

**By Erping Zhang**

*Differing views on China complicate efforts to take advantage of the 2008 Olympics as an opportunity to highlight human rights issues in China.*

Olympic medalist Carl Lewis once said, “Life is about timing.” Many China observers are hoping that the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games will present an ideal opportunity for promoting human rights and political freedom in China as billions of watchful eyes around the world focus on China during the run-up to the opening and throughout the Games. This wishful thinking could come true if the international community, or part of it, takes a principled stand and uses the opportunity to send a public message. At present, however, foreign attitudes toward China tend to be so divided that it is difficult to develop the kind of nuanced approach that might take most effective advantage of the Games.

The wide variance in attitudes toward China has much to do with China’s rapid economic development, which inspires both awe and intimidation, optimism and disparagement. Encountering the sweeping skyscrapers, glowing neon and vibrant energy of Shanghai or Beijing for the first time, a traveler to these cities is easily lulled into believing these are normal, bustling East Asian urban centers, much like Seoul or Taipei. But the real China is quite different from the economically developed and democratic South Korea, just as it cannot be said to resemble the autocratic and anachronistic North Korea. The traditional Communist economic model is now what Marx would call “contaminated” by capitalist greed, but its Draconian grip on society remains fearsome.

Defining China in terms of its political and economic system has become increasingly difficult, because it has

become a nation that displays different faces at the same time. Economists and Sinologists alike fail to bring clarity to the matter when they use terms as varied as state capitalism, socialism with Chinese or Nazi characteristics, neo-Leninism, socialism with market orientations, or combinations of the above. Although these descriptions appear to capture some aspects of China today, they fail to fully convey a comprehensive sense of what is going on.

Most nations in the world now engage in some form of commerce with China. As a result, a number of governments seem prepared to willfully ignore the fact that China remains ruled by one party, the Communist Party of China (CPC), and that, unlike former Eastern bloc nations, it has never renounced Communist dictatorship. For the United States, its growing trade deficit with China, along with the tremendous US debt now held by Beijing in the form of government bonds, greatly complicates formation of a coherent foreign policy with regard to China. And member nations of the European Union (EU), collectively or individually, are similarly preoccupied with and perplexed by trade and trade deficits with China.

Among China watchers, it is fashionable to be in one of two camps: “China exception” or “China threat.” The first is comprised mostly of left-wing academics, business investors and others who argue that China is no longer the old demonic Communist state. Some even assert that China is as capitalist as the West. The belief in this camp is that economic development will set China free and whatever the regime does along the way is simply part of the bumpy road to a more democratic society, driven by an expanding middle class. This currently prevailing view endorses a policy of appeasement, even in the face of China’s blatant human rights

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violations and a political system that seems no closer to reform than when economic reform was launched three decades ago.

This “China exception” camp tends to look derisively at what they term the knee-jerk mentality of the more pessimistic “bombs and guns” types that dominate the “China threat” camp. Since the end of the Cold War, it has become terribly outré to be anti-Communist, and socialism is now considered an acceptable element.

For the “China threat” camp, an emerging economy of 1.3 billion people that is also one of the world’s principal manufacturers of consumer goods must develop a democratized and open society in order to ensure peace and stability in the region and in the world. China’s close ties with North Korea, Iran, Sudan, Cuba and other authoritarian regimes remains disturbing to the free world, and the prospect of the unimpeded rise of a “Fourth Reich” is central to the “China threat” camp. But its Cold War rhetoric tends to alienate the intellectual community and is certainly unwelcome among investors seeking to profit from China’s cheap labor market.

The concerns of the “China threat” camp are not altogether unfounded. In 2006 China announced a 14.7 percent increase in its military spending, for a total of \$35 billion (although US Department of Defense analysts believed that China’s actual total spending would range from \$70 billion to \$105 billion).<sup>1</sup> Given the lack of serious military rivals in China’s immediate vicinity, the Pentagon and the EU are pondering the reasons for this build-up. In addition, Beijing has spent an estimated \$1 billion on Internet surveillance and censorship directed at its own population in dealing with some 87,000 riots and mass protests officially acknowledged by the Chinese government in 2005.<sup>2</sup> It appears, as some analysts suggest, that China has embraced a form of market economics that is otherwise at odds with the ways of free societies.

So, which camp is right? Both views seem to have their merits, but their primary limitation is that they are rooted in political ideology, either liberal or conservative. The West needs to find a more accurate and pragmatic means of understanding the China of today, or it

will risk feeling its way along, blindfolded and unaware of what may lie ahead. I suggest that a more effective analysis would be to acknowledge China as a state operating under “neo-Communism,” a system that is markedly different from traditional Communism but, at the same time, not as different as many might wish.

### The West needs to find a more accurate and pragmatic means of understanding the China of today.

Not so long ago, China was a typical Stalinist Communist state, modeled after the former Soviet Union. It followed the traditional Communist orthodox doctrine of class struggle between the proletariat and bourgeois classes in which the CPC relied on the working class—the peasants and the workers. Unlike Mao and his cadres, recent leaders such as Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao inherited their power and have never enjoyed the political legitimacy of the early revolutionary figures. As a result, economic growth has, inevitably, become instrumental in allowing the CPC to maintain its grip on power, at least for the time being.

Today, the regime combines coercion with patronage toward business interests, the intellectual elites, the military, the various levels of government bureaucracy and foreign investors in an effort to retain its influence and relevance. In the process, it has abandoned its traditional partner—the 800 million-strong peasant class with more than 150 million of them subsisting on less than \$1 a day, according to World Bank figures.<sup>3</sup> In former times, the CPC monopolized and controlled both material wealth and the means of production. It is now willing to share part of this wealth with a small portion of China’s populace, as a substitute for sharing political power. In the face of the political and economic fallout of the early 1980s, maximizing that wealth obliged the CPC under Deng Xiaoping to liberalize part of China’s planned economy and abandon isolationism in favor of integration with the global economy.

Over the years, the CPC has emphasized “stability above all” and, more recently, “harmonious society,” precisely because China’s dynamic society is neither stable nor harmonious. The CPC has also sought to sustain its

longevity through incorporation of the “Three Represents” theory into China’s Constitution.<sup>4</sup> Since 2005 there has been a concerted *baoxian yundong*, which translates as “a campaign to preserve the advantages of the Communist Party.” More significantly, the CPC bylaws still advocate “worldwide revolution through violence,” as prescribed by Marx. And the ongoing, ruthless crackdowns against outspoken intellectuals and lawyers, Falun Gong practitioners, Tibetans and others demonstrate that Beijing still rules through violence, terror and censorship, much as the old Communist state did.

Most significant, the CPC has now absorbed capitalists into its membership, effectively co-opting the wealthy into the Communist camp; foreign investors and companies engaged in joint ventures with China must allow their Chinese employees to establish CPC branches. Deng Xiaoping took a lesson from the former Eastern bloc in his efforts to bring the People’s Republic of China into the modern age: he signaled left, but actually veered towards the right. His maneuvers were so subtle that he succeeded in saving the CPC where others had failed. To survive, Deng had his Party take off its Mao jacket and put on a Western suit, while maintaining a Communist heart. Thus, a true neo-Communist state was born.

The neo-Communist state is a complex animal. It has taken on the trappings of a free country, while maintaining the collective ambitions of a traditionally Communist state in which individuals are weak and the hand of the state is strong. It can draw upon the military and the government’s bureaucratic machinery to deal with an individual, a group or a nation. It can act quickly and effectively, and it will resort to any means. Most of the world’s free countries tend to be “weak states,” that is, the hand of the state is weak, while its individuals and corporate entities are empowered through the rule of law. A neo-Communist state, however, will always have the resources necessary to overpower even the strongest individuals or corporations.



American actress Mia Farrow lights a symbolic torch for a campaign pressing China to help end human rights abuses in Darfur before the 2008 Olympics. Photo: AFP/Getty Images

As Ethan Gutmann described in his book *Losing the New China*,<sup>5</sup> a number of foreign corporations attempting to enter the Chinese market have been forced to make concessions in the form of technology transfer and political compromise. The world has watched, all too often with indifference, as China has obliged one multinational corporation after another to play by China’s rules. So far, more than 300 foreign information technology companies including Yahoo!, Google, Microsoft and Skype, have signed a “self-disciplinary pledge” to practice self-censorship on the Internet in China. Beijing has also been making a concerted bid for foreign oil companies, offering prices far beyond the means of any private company.

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China’s appearance of world-class economic prowess is not entirely borne out by conditions at home. While

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China's foreign currency reserves total nearly \$1 trillion, its nonperforming loans (NPL) have reached \$911 billion, or about 40 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>6</sup> China is spending 25–30 percent of its annual GDP to bail out its NPLs, while 70 percent of its GDP growth comes from foreign direct investment. Late last year an official audit found that \$900 million had been misappropriated from China's \$37 billion social security fund.<sup>7</sup> With regard to living standards, a recent Asian Development Bank study found that Beijing suffers the highest rate of air pollution of Asia's major cities, with a recorded particulate level of 142 micrograms per cubic meter ( $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ ), compared with the World Health Organization guideline of 20  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ , and measurements of 27  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  in New York City and 22  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  in Paris.<sup>8</sup> China's own official data show that unemployment in 2007 will reach an all-time high, as more than 120 million farmers migrate to cities to compete for jobs with 15 million unemployed urban dwellers, and nearly 5 million university graduates entering the job market next year. The actual situation could be even worse; the Harvard Sinologist John King Fairbank once observed that China is heaven for journalists but hell for statisticians, because most official figures are unreliable.

China is well aware of the checkered nature of its international image and is engaged in a number of "soft power" strategies to more subtly wield its influence. One such effort involves funding 500 Confucius Institutes overseas by the year 2010. Modeled after Germany's Goethe Institute, Confucius Institutes are not intended to promote the teachings of Confucius, but to avidly promote simplified Chinese text in combination with Chinese socialist propaganda. It is worth noting that the government does not fund the propagation of Confucian teachings inside China and, according to a *Financial Times* report, recently banned a private Confucian school, the Meng Mu Tang School in Shanghai.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, with more than 10 million children lacking access to basic education in China, one cannot help but question Beijing's policy of spending millions of dollars to establish Confucius Institutes overseas to educate foreigners.

Earlier this year, Beijing announced that 123 Confucius Institutes had been set up in 49 countries at a speed of

one new school every three days.<sup>10</sup> Among them, the newly launched Confucius Institute for Business at The London School of Economics and Political Science seems most anomalous, given that Confucius valued pure scholarship and despised commercial interests. More than 2,000 "special Chinese instructors" have been dispatched worldwide to assist some of the estimated 30 million people outside China who are now learning Chinese. Jonathan Zimmerman, a historian at New York University, has cautioned that the Confucius Institutes resemble the Mussolini model, under which Fascist Italy financed Italian language schools in America, in the 1930s, for propaganda purposes.<sup>11</sup>

As noted by Xu Lin, head of the Confucius Institute Project in Beijing, "A strong nation comes with a strong language."<sup>12</sup> But the question is, whose language is it that should be strong: that of the Party or of China's own people?

As neo-Communist China increasingly makes its presence felt around the world—economically, politically and culturally—the questions that confront all of us are: How much is China, as an authoritarian state, changing our way of life? And how much are we in Western democratic societies doing to change China into a more open society?

### How much are we in Western democratic societies doing to change China into a more open society?

Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, famously stated, "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part; the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well." Beijing, however, makes no pretense of a fair fight in its reported decision to ban 43 types of individuals and groups from taking part in the 2008 Olympics, including "hostile" foreign media, members of underground churches and Falun Gong practitioners, pro-democracy activists, and other "undesirables" (see accompanying article). Other acts, such as Beijing's support for the genocidal dictatorship of Sudan and the reported harvesting of organs from imprisoned Falun Gong practitioners and others, have led some promi-

ment Westerners, such as American actress Mia Farrow and former Canadian parliamentarian David Kilgour, to call for a boycott of the Beijing Games, just as some countries boycotted the 1936 Olympics in Berlin under Hitler. Others prefer to use the Olympics as an opportunity to impress upon China the need to demonstrate that it is worthy of this international honor by better acknowledging and fulfilling the international human rights norms and conventions to which it is party.

As for the otherwise divergent “China exception” camp and “China threat” camp, both approach the Beijing Olympics with the premise that China must become a more responsible stakeholder in the international community. Although there may be differences of opinion on how best to accomplish this goal, each and every one of us should play our part. The 2008 Olympics provides a golden opportunity that we cannot afford to pass up.

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### Editor’s Notes

1. United States Department of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2006,” <http://www.dod.mil/pubs/pdfs/China%20Report%202006.pdf>.
2. It should be noted that statistics on “mass incidents” in China are complicated by the lack of consistent official terminology and definitions. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China notes that media reports quoting the figure of 87,000 referred to Ministry of Public Security statistics for crimes of “disturbing public order,” as opposed to the “mass incidents” referred to in earlier reports. See “Ministry of Public Security Reports Rise in Public Order Disturbances in 2005,” <http://www.cecc.gov/pages/virtualAcad/index.phpd?showsingl=37602>.
3. “Economic Achievements and Current Challenges,” World Bank in China, [http://www.worldbank.org.cn/English/Overview/overview\\_brief.htm#L1\\_0](http://www.worldbank.org.cn/English/Overview/overview_brief.htm#L1_0).
4. “Three Represents” theory, put forward by former President Jiang Zemin in 2000, states that the CPC represents “the development trends of advanced productive forces, the orientations of an advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people of China.” See <http://www.china.org.cn/english/zhuanti/3represents/68735.htm> and <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/policy/3represents.htm>. “Three Represents” was enshrined as one of the ruling theories of China in the Chinese constitution in 2004.
5. Ethan Gutmann, *Losing the New China: A Story of American Commerce, Desire and Betrayal*, Encounter Books, 2004.
6. Mark Trumbull, “Why US Speaks Softly with China on Trade,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 21, 2006, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0921/p01s02-usec.html?#hns>.
7. David Barboza, “China Social Security Fund Loses \$900 Million in Fraud,” *New York Times*, November 24, 2006, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/11/24/business/pension.php>; “US\$900m Misused from Social Security Fund,” *People’s Daily Online*, November 24, 2006, [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200611/24/eng20061124\\_324716.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200611/24/eng20061124_324716.html).
8. Thomas Fuller, “Asian Conference Focuses on Worsening Air Pollution,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 15, 2006, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/12/15/news/pollute.php>.
9. Geoff Dyer, “Shanghai’s Confucian School Brings Little Harmony,” *Financial Times*, July 29, 2006, <http://search.ft.com/ftArticle?queryText=shanghai+and+confucian&y=0&aje=true&x=0&id=060729001307>. See also, “Authority Bans Shanghai School Vaunting Traditional Chinese Teaching Methods,” *People’s Daily Online*, July 27, 2006.
10. “Language, Culture Popularized Worldwide with More Confucius Institutes,” *People’s Daily Online*, January 2, 2007, [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200701/02/eng20070102\\_337613.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200701/02/eng20070102_337613.html).
11. Jonathan Zimmerman, “Beware China’s Role in U.S. Chinese Classes,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 6, 2006, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0906/p09s02-coop.html>.
12. Language, culture popularized worldwide with more Confucius institutes,” *People’s Daily Online*, op cit.