
TIME TO SPEAK UP ON THE BEIJING OLYMPICS

By Liu Shui

The most basic freedom—of thought and expression—remains elusive to the people of China in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics.

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games have focused the international community's attention on the appalling human rights conditions in China. The past year has brought a sharp increase in cases of Chinese citizens put under house arrest, imprisoned or otherwise suppressed for expressing their views, practicing their religious beliefs or defending their rights. Equality and freedom are the intrinsic components of the Olympic spirit. Although the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is not responsible for monitoring the human rights conditions of a host country, the sustained deterioration of human rights conditions in China should be recognized as detrimental to the spirit of equal participation so valued in the Olympic Games. Obviously, the spirit of athletics cannot be separated from the spirit of liberty.

THE IOC'S MISJUDGMENT OF CHINA'S POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

If the Chinese government were to make sincere, substantial efforts to bring China's human rights conditions more in line with international agreements¹ and with China's own Constitution, no one would object to any consequent enhancement of China's international image; but even more welcome would be the resulting spiritual liberation of the Chinese people. However, it is obvious that the IOC has viewed China from the perspective of Western democracies, resulting in serious misjudgments. Human rights enjoy systemic protections in places such as North America and the European Union, and cases of rights violations are typically judicial matters rather than systemic problems. For that

reason, massive rights violations are rare in Western societies. Likewise, Western governments face systemic restrictions on interference with their countries' judicial systems. In China, however, the judiciary is one of the power bases of the Chinese Communist government, through which it can manipulate laws and even the Constitution. Public monitoring is severely restricted by the government, and China's system can be called "multi-party" only in the most superficial sense. The Communist Party hands down its power from one generation to the next, and without being elected or otherwise legitimized by the majority of China's citizens, the Chinese government has been able to use its monopoly on power to intimidate its citizens and impose a superficially stable and harmonious society that best serves the interests of the authorities rather than the people. For that reason, the Chinese government sees no need for a sincere effort to improve rights consciousness among the people of China.

Perhaps it is the misapprehension that the Chinese government represents the interests of the people that leads Western countries, and the IOC, to believe that they need to cooperate only with the Chinese government regarding the Olympic Games, and do not need to take into account the views of the Chinese majority.² As the Olympics draw near, they have gradually retreated from their firm stand on humanistic principles, and consciously or not, they have taken the side of the Chinese government. China's human rights situation has become a pseudo-issue or an issue that has actually ceased to exist, not only for the Chinese government, but also for Western countries.

The Beijing Olympics was supposed to provide China and the Chinese people with many precious opportunities and improvements in many areas—not only the

construction of grand, luxurious stadiums, but more importantly, improvements to the spirit and the human rights conditions of the Chinese people.³ Did we place too much hope in the IOC? If so, it was based on the enlightened principle, contained in the Olympic Charter, that human rights are part and parcel of the Olympic spirit.

Unfortunately, a kind of ostrich mentality has reasserted itself. The IOC committed a similar error when it chose Berlin to host the Games in 1936 and allowed the Nazi regime to promote fascist ideology to the world. Moscow's hosting of the 1980 Games the year after it invaded Afghanistan, in contravention of international law, brought about the greatest crisis since the Games were reestablished in 1894. The United States and China boycotted the Games, and only 81 of the 147 countries and regions acknowledged by the IOC at that time took part.

By ignoring the political environment and the human rights conditions of the host country, the IOC discards universal human values in a way that harms not only the citizens of the host country, who pay for the Olympics with their tax dollars, but also the spirit of liberty inherent in the Games. In its efforts to cooperate with the governments of host countries, the IOC alienates itself from the people of those countries. What significance do athletic competitions have for people in a country that has no freedom? In a country where people are deprived of freedom of speech, freedom is more important than grand stadiums and gold medals. The IOC should consider exactly what benefit the people of a country will gain from the massive expenditure of their taxpayer dollars.

WESTERN COUNTRIES ACCEPT TRADE IN EXCHANGE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Given the serious restrictions under which people live in China, no one could object to any improvements the Olympics might bring to the political situation through the economic and political influence of contact with Western society. The optimal situation would be for athletes and tourists from all over the world to personally experience the reality of China and to share their

cultures and their sense of freedom with the people of the host country. The Olympic Games are not just for athletic performance or competition, but also to encourage the sharing of profound cultural values. This effect has yet to be seen in China. In 2001, during its bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games, the Chinese government symbolically released several political prisoners. However, once it won its bid, the government redoubled its repression, and since that time, the human rights environment in China has continued to deteriorate, with an upsurge in arrests of journalists, writers, rights defenders and religious believers.

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The weakness of the IOC has made the Chinese government more obdurate and harsh in its suppression, with many writers sentenced to lengthy jail terms over the past year, and many religious believers persecuted. At the beginning of 2007, the Chinese government went so far as to put a renowned AIDS doctor, 80-year-old Gao Yaojie, under house arrest before she visited the United States to accept an award.⁴ It also prevented the release of eight books,⁵ and prevented writers and others from going abroad to attend international conferences or receive awards.⁶ Promises to give foreign journalists more freedom reporting in China in the run-up to the Olympics fell by the wayside when a BBC journalist was blocked in his attempt to report on violent protests against a rise in bus fares in Yongzhou, Hunan Province.⁷ Meanwhile, Sun Lin, a reporter for the US-based Boxun Web site, had his press card seized in March and was arrested and imprisoned at the end of May.⁸ Recent cases of censorship and suppression of journalists are indeed too many to mention here.

There is a classic definition of freedom: "The most basic freedom is speaking one's mind."⁹ Silent masses of China, your lips have been sealed by fear. Dare we believe you will finally be allowed to speak your minds during the Olympic Games next year?

While the Chinese government mobilizes the resources

of the nation to host the Olympic Games with full pomp and fanfare, human rights disasters occur, one after another, demonstrating the strategic “wisdom” of Asian autocracy. Virtually from the moment it won its bid for the Olympics in 2001, the Chinese government has increasingly gained the advantage in its bargaining with the international community, first with the IOC and then with various Western governments, in turn. The placating policies of the IOC and of many Western nations¹⁰ will eventually come back as bitter pills for them to swallow.

So far it’s been a win-win game for the Chinese government, Western countries and the IOC. Many Western countries seem to have been more than willing to sacrifice human rights in China for the sake of the enormous economic benefits they have reaped through Olympics contracts and trade. The IOC has also had its decision widely endorsed with no harm to its own interests. Meanwhile, the voice of international human rights organizations and the “silent majority” of Chinese civil society is barely audible, but their determination in defending freedom has not abated. Freedom must be won through our own effort, even if it means personal sacrifice. With individual cases of human rights violations becoming the norm, the people of China are entitled to say to the international community and Chinese government, “The Beijing Olympics have no value for us.”

Translated by Wei Liu

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Notes

1. For example, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which China signed in 1998.
2. It could be argued that the writer is giving too much credit to the illusions of Western countries rather than to the economic benefits they enjoy by cooperating with the Chinese government.

3. In its Olympic Action Plan, published in March 2002, the Chinese government promised a variety of social improvements tied with the goals of a “people’s Olympics,” a “green Olympics,” a “high-tech Olympics” and so on. See “Beijing Olympic Action Plan,” <http://en.beijing2008.com/59/80/column211718059.shtml>.
4. See “Gao Yaojie Holed Up in Henan,” posted on February 4, 2007, by Jonathan Ansfield on the China Digital Times Web site, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2007/02/gao_yaojie_holed_up_in_henan_gao_yaojie.php.
5. For details of the book ban, see, “China Book Ban Controversy Underscores Public Opposition to Government Censorship,” China Media Project, Journalism and Media Studies Center, The University of Hong Kong, January 22, 2007, <http://cmp.hku.hk/look/article.tp?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=1&NrIssue=1&NrSection=100&NrArticle=770>.
6. For example, many writers were prevented from attending two separate overseas conferences in late 2006 and early 2007. See “A Movement for Chinese Cultural Freedom,” and “Hong Kong Literary Conference Also Hit by Official Interference,” *China Rights Forum*, No. 1, 2007, http://hrichina.org/public/PDFs/CRF.1.2007/CRF-2007-1_Movement.pdf and http://hrichina.org/public/PDFs/CRF.1.2007/CRF-2007-1_Conference.pdf. Dr. Jiang Yanyong was also prevented from going to the United States to receive the Heinz R. Pagels Human Rights of Scientists Award from the New York Academy of Sciences. See http://chinadigitaltimes.net/test_tag.php?id=+jiang+yanyong.
7. James Reynolds, “Reporting Protests in Rural China,” BBC News, March 16, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6458565.stm>.
8. “Journalist with News Website Boxun Arrested,” Reporters Without Borders, May 31, 2007, <http://www.protectionline.org/Sun-Lin-Arrest.html>.
9. The precise reference is unknown, but in 1937, US Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Cardozo wrote, “Freedom of thought . . . is the matrix, the indispensable condition, of nearly every other form of freedom.” See US Supreme Court, *Palko v. State of Connecticut*, 302 US 319 (1937), <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=302&invol=319>.
10. The author originally included international human rights organizations among the placators, but since this article was published, a growing number of rights groups have come out with statements and reports condemning China’s human rights situation in the run-up to the Olympics.