
A TIBETAN ACTIVIST'S BEIJING BLOG

By Lhadon Tethong

Lhadon Tethong, the executive director of Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), traveled to Beijing for the one-year countdown to the Beijing Olympics. She and Paul Golding, another Tibet activist, were in Beijing for a week, during which they were placed under round-the-clock surveillance by Chinese authorities, detained and finally deported to Hong Kong. Following are excerpts from the blog Lhadon kept during and after her trip to Beijing: www.beijingwideopen.org.

China has invited the world to visit in August 2008. Exactly one year out, I've traveled to the heart of the nation that has brutally occupied my homeland for over 50 years. Follow this blog, as I share what I see, feel and experience . . . leaving Beijing wide open.

FAKE TIBET IN "RACIST PARK"

August 4, 2007

Beijing's "National Ethnic Minorities Park" is a sickening place. Located directly across from the Olympic Village site, it's a patronizing and offensive display of Chinese cultural imperialism, and only a fool could be taken in by it. It's too bad the mistranslated signs (right) that once pointed the way to "Racist Park" have been replaced by a more politically correct version.

Seeing this twisted place firsthand has only stoked my rage and passion to fight until Tibet is free from China's occupation.

The park showcases what China calls its "56 ethnic minority nationalities" like animals at the zoo. There are different sections dedicated to different "minorities." Brief descriptions of each "species" are accompanied by photographs describing their strange habits and unique customs. If the visitor is lucky, he or she will arrive when the animals are dancing and singing and

can get a close-up look at these weird and wonderful creatures.

Horrified yet?

The park showcases what China calls its "56 ethnic minority nationalities" like animals at the zoo.

Thankfully, there were few other visitors there with us today under the thick and smoggy skies (fittingly—the worst we've seen yet). Most decent guide books do not recommend this trip. Even if one doesn't care so much about the peoples on display, the shabby condition of the buildings and the inauthenticity that oozes from every corner and every structure is enough to scare anyone away.

I could not bring myself to go close to the young Tibetan dance troupe that performed there today. I didn't want to watch or take pictures or look them in the eyes. Although I don't know their individual stories, I can imagine the roads that brought them to this terrible place.

Paul was really shaken up after his visit inside a stone house, where he found a young Tibetan girl in a small room with a photo of Mao on the wall. She was answering questions from several Chinese tourists. Paul took out his camera to record the scene. When the tourists left, Paul asked the girl if he could take her photo. He took several and then she started to sing and dance. Suddenly he felt mortified and wanted her to stop, but he didn't because he felt it was more important to get the footage. So he filmed as long as he could stand it.

It is no coincidence that the Tibetan section of the park is located right by the entrance and is visible from the main street. China has placed the battle for Tibet at the

center of its Olympics-related public relations campaign. This battle has been ongoing for years now, but was intensified in 2000 after a high-level government-sponsored meeting put Tibet-related propaganda at the top of the official agenda.

This is an excerpt from a leaked document: “Tibet-related External Propaganda and Tibetology Work in the New Era,” June 12, 2000:

External publicity on Tibet is an important element of our country’s external propaganda. It is also a very important element of our struggle against the Dalai clique and hostile Western forces. We need to carry out result-oriented and pin-pointed research on the Tibet issue. We also need to carry out diligent external propaganda on Tibet. These efforts are related not only to national and nationalities unity, but also to the open-door reform, progress and stability of our country. Therefore, this is the common responsibility of our propaganda department and cultural institutes.¹

The Chinese authorities believe that if they show enough happy, singing and dancing Tibetans, then the world will accept China’s rule over Tibetans as legitimate. And the Olympics provide them the perfect opportunity to showcase this fraud.

The one highlight of the visit was seeing the bridge right by the “Tibetan” section of the park where my good friends, Han (from SFT) and Liam (from Australia Tibet Council), staged their banner-hanging action in August 2004, on the morning after the Beijing mayor received the Olympic flag at the close of the Athens Games.²

THE BIRD’S NEST

August 4, 2007

There’s been so much hype and excitement about it. I just had to come see the Olympic Stadium (nicknamed the Bird’s Nest) for myself. It’s enormous and obviously meant to inspire awe and reverence in Chinese and foreigners alike, regardless of the cost (which at this point

is estimated at 3.8 billion *yuan*—or \$500 million). Of course, the construction is still going on . . .

The Chinese government’s obsession with audacious mega-projects is nothing new (Three Gorges Dam, Tibet Railway), with each serving different military and economic purposes. There is a common, psychological theme running through all of these projects, including the Bird’s Nest: all of them are meant to communicate China’s technological progress and prowess. However, the architectural scale and engineering sophistication of these projects cannot gloss over the absence of the two most basic rights of China’s people: freedom and democracy. Will freedom and democracy ever come to China? Does economic progress automatically lead to an opening up of restrictive, repressive political systems, as so many academics and China apologists claim? In fact, as China’s economy gets more advanced, the tools of repression and fear also seem to become more sophisticated.

As a Tibetan born and raised in exile, I have come to cherish the freedom I enjoy outside of my own homeland. Freedom is addictive, and once you taste it, you’re hooked; you only want more. There was a time when my grandparents lived in a free Tibet and led free lives. Mine is an unfortunate generation of Tibetans, either wandering in foreign lands or living under oppression in our homeland.

As I write this, 14 Tibetans sitting on the street in Delhi are entering the 27th day of a hunger strike. They hunger for freedom more than they hunger for food. They have vowed to die in the face of oppression rather than resort to violence. My thoughts and prayers are with them.³

And even though the feeling of repression hangs over this place like smog, I also feel strongly that change is at hand, not only for Tibet but also for China. The charade has gone on long enough. As I turned back for one last photograph of the Bird Nest, it suddenly looked almost toy-like.

An old Chinese proverb quotes a scholar who said:

When man fights nature
Nature kills man.

The sky turns black
And empires crumble.

Well, the sky here is nearly black.

“And this is the country that claims to develop Tibet for the better?” I said to myself, as I imagined the vast, blue, blue, blue sky of my homeland Tibet.

OPEN LETTER TO THE IOC

August 5th, 2007

Mr. Jacques Rogge
President, International Olympic Committee

Dear Mr. Rogge,

My name is Lhadon Tethong. I am the Executive Director of Students for a Free Tibet, a worldwide organization of Tibetans and their supporters. I am here in Beijing and would like to meet with you to discuss the ways that the Chinese government is attempting to use the glow of the Olympics to blind the world to its violent oppression and occupation of my homeland.

On July 13, 2001, the day that Beijing was awarded the honor of hosting the 2008 Olympic Games, the then International Olympic Committee Executive Director Francois Carrard said, “Bet on the fact...that the situation will be improved. We are taking the bet that seven years from now we will see many changes.”

You stated yourself in a 2002 BBC interview that the IOC was “convinced that the Olympic Games will improve human rights in China.” But according to a report released by Human Rights Watch last week, “the Chinese government shows no substantive progress in addressing long-standing human rights concerns.”

Not only has the IOC failed to secure improvements in human rights in China but it has abetted suppression of dissent by Chinese authorities. At an IOC meeting in Guatemala last month, Hein Verbruggen, the IOC’s chairman of the 2008 Olympics Coordination Committee, said, “The way in which the Games are being

used as a platform for groups with political and social agendas is regrettable.” Such statements only embolden a notoriously repressive Chinese regime, further endangering those inside China and Tibet who advocate for freedom and human rights at tremendous risk already.

With the Games just a year away, the Chinese government has not only shown no commitment to ceasing its systemic violations of fundamental human rights, it has used the Olympics to promote a false image of progress on a number of fronts where it has in fact regressed. Just last week in eastern Tibet, hundreds of Tibetans were rounded up after a peaceful protest calling for the return of the Dalai Lama. Crackdowns like this are commonplace.

The Chinese government has made Tibet a central theme in its Olympics-related public relations blitz, in an attempt to legitimize its brutal occupation of Tibet, once and for all.

Most disturbing to Tibetans and their supporters worldwide is the way that the Chinese government has made Tibet a central theme in its Olympics-related public relations blitz, in an attempt to legitimize its brutal occupation of Tibet, once and for all. Having traveled around Beijing and seen the Olympics propaganda firsthand, it is obvious to me that China is politicizing these Games, and yet the IOC has remained silent, enabling the Chinese authorities to continue oppression of my homeland while wrapping themselves in Olympic colors.

We demand that the Chinese government not pass the Olympic torch over Tibetan soil, and that the opening and closing ceremonies contain no references to Tibet: its land, its culture or its people. We are calling on the IOC to publicly oppose these propaganda efforts, and use its influence to affect substantive progress on human rights in China and a meaningful resolution to the occupation of Tibet.

Mr. Rogge, you must do something. Without public censure from the IOC in the coming months, the Chinese government will continue to abuse human rights

in Tibet and China, and will only be emboldened to brutally silence peaceful opposition during the Games themselves.

It is in your own interest to take measures now and use your influence while you have it. Otherwise, the IOC will only have itself to blame when the Beijing Games become synonymous with human rights abuses and crackdown on dissent as we are already seeing in the lead up to the one-year countdown.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Lhadon Tethong

Cc: Hein Verbruggen, Chairman, IOC's 2008 Olympics
Coordination Committee
Liu Qi, President, Beijing Organizing Committee
of the Olympic Games

TRYING TO MEET THE IOC PRESIDENT

August 6th, 2007

We just got back from Tiananmen Square, where a massive stage is being built for the one-year countdown on August 8. Senior IOC officials have invited more than 200 National Olympic Committees to Beijing to attend this event, which will start at 7:00 PM and be attended by 10,000 people.

While in the Square, I called Robert Roxborough, the IOC communications coordinator, to ask for a meeting with IOC president Jacques Rogge. Roxborough had just arrived in Beijing and said that he hadn't had a chance to figure out the schedule yet. I explained that I had written an open letter to IOC president Jacques Rogge and wanted to meet with Rogge to discuss how China is using the Olympics to legitimize its rule in Tibet.

Roxborough took my name and numbers and said that he'd call me back. So now I am waiting. And if you read this, Robert—I trust that you will call me back soon.

A SURPRISE VISIT

August 6, 2007

Tonight we decided to pay a surprise visit to IOC president Jacques Rogge. We arrived at his hotel, but missed him by seconds as he breezed in with his bodyguards and walked straight into the elevator. I tried to get him on the phone—with no luck of course. I did manage to speak to Paul Foster (IOC "Head of Protocol Events and Hospitality"), who insisted that I go through Robert Roxborough, the communications coordinator I had originally called from Tiananmen Square, to get an appointment with Rogge. I told him I'd been waiting for Robert to call me back, and said that I would wait in the hotel lobby for a while.

Soon after we talked to the hotel's general manager—whom I approached after we found him peering nervously at us from across the lobby—Robert showed up in the lobby. He's a polite young Scottish guy, who came to deliver the message that Jacques's schedule is too tight to fit in a meeting with me. I told him that this was an opportunity for the IOC to address the issue of human rights one year before the Games, especially as many people are upset with comments made in Guatemala by IOC coordination commissioner Hein Verbruggen.⁴ Robert listened politely as I described the situation in Tibet and expressed our outrage at the fact that China is using the Games to legitimize its rule in Tibet. Finally, I asked him to take a message back to Rogge asking him to reconsider my request for a meeting. I said I would come to the hotel in the morning and wait for an answer. Robert didn't seem too keen on that, but he said he'd let me know tomorrow. So that's where we stand now.

All in all it was another bizarre but productive day in China's pollution-choked capital. It felt good to stand in Tiananmen Square and speak confidently in front of Mao's portrait. In the evening, it was surprising to find so little security at Rogge's hotel. At the end of the long day, it was strangely comforting to return to our hotel and find no fewer than five plain-clothed security agents waiting for us in the lobby.

Let's see what tomorrow brings . . .



Tibet activists protest outside the Chinese Embassy in Washington, DC, in August 2007. In China, it's not so easy. Photo: AFP/Getty Images

A (BRIEF) CLOSE ENCOUNTER

August 6, 2007

After missing IOC president Jacques Rogge by seconds on Monday, I decided to head back to the lobby of his Beijing hotel this morning and wait for him. The video's not the best, but check out our brief encounter . . .

[A YouTube video shows Lhadon approaching Rogge, who ignores her. She is blocked by a man with Rogge. The video can be viewed at <http://beijingwideopen.org/2007/08/06/a-brief-close-encounter/>.]

THOUGHTS AS I RETURN HOME . . .

August 10, 2007

I am on the plane and we've just started our descent. According to the captain we'll be landing in 20 minutes.

I think there's a guy following me on the plane. Or maybe I'm just totally paranoid now. But I'm pretty

convinced . . . is this what happens after just one week in China as a dissenter?

One thing is clear in all this Olympics mess: the Chinese government cares what the world thinks. Knowing this, we must push them to change.

They pulled Kate and me over at Hong Kong immigration. Not Sam. Just us. They said they had a message from the police to stop us so that they could interview us. After much paperwork and copying our passports and typing information into various computers, they let us go. According to the official, who said he wasn't allowed to ask any questions, the police no longer wanted the interview. Yeah, right. They have all the info they think they need now to keep us out. But they can't. It's not that easy.

I've been able to read the blog properly now, as it's not blocked outside of the mainland of the People's Republic of China. And it's been amazing to see all the support we've received from people around the world.

Thank you to each and every one of you. And to all our critics and dissenters. Please, critique away. It's not a problem. That's the beauty of democracy and of truly free and open societies—you can express your opinion and, even if you're against us expressing ours, you won't get locked up!

I know we did this and got off pretty easy. And while I appreciate that some people think I did something brave, I'm not sure I did. Bravery is standing in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square. Bravery is getting on a stage in Tibet and calling for the return of the Dalai Lama. Bravery is going to Beijing to petition to get compensation for your confiscated farmland from the very same government that probably took it in the first place. All this, with no protection. No foreign passport, government or official body that will defend you.

What I did, what we did, it was nothing in comparison. But I hope and I pray that somehow we have made a difference in the battle for human rights and freedom in Tibet and in China. The Olympics spotlight is on the Chinese leadership now, and they want the world to believe they are open and free. But they are not. They demonstrated this by deporting me at the very moment that the one-year countdown to the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games was taking place in Tiananmen Square. Paul and I just wanted to attend. To see it for ourselves and to blog about it like one should be able to in any place that truly enjoys freedom.

Some people have said we got what we deserved. Others have suggested that we got off too lightly and should act more responsibly next time. I think it is the regime in Beijing—unelected, unaccountable and tyrannical—that should act more responsibly. I think our government, governments around the world, corporations doing business in China and the IOC itself, should act more responsibly. They are the ones who have clear and direct influence over Beijing. They are the ones who could make a huge impact by doing just a little in the way of speaking up for and promoting human rights and democracy.

Until this happens, we will keep doing what we have to do—challenging China's control over Tibet and work-

ing to make the occupation too costly to maintain. One thing is clear in all this Olympics mess: the Chinese government cares what the world thinks. If they didn't, they wouldn't spend so much time trying to get us all to like them with slogans like, "One World, One Dream." Knowing this, we must push them to change. And if our direct actions are seen as stunts by a few, I trust the vast majority will see them for what they really are, nonviolent expressions of dissent and protest to bring positive social and political change to people living under brutal oppression.

For Tibetans, Uyghurs, Southern Mongolians, Taiwanese, Falun Gong, Christians, Catholics, farmers, factory workers, lawyers, doctors, journalists and every other person who lives under fear of persecution by the Chinese Communist Party and their goons, I say, we will never give up.

We stand with you.

On behalf of our wonderful members and supporters around the world,

Lhadon Tethong
Executive Director
Students for a Free Tibet

Notes

1. The full article can be accessed on the Web site of Students for a Free Tibet, <http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org/article.php?id=423>.
2. See <http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org/article.php?id=339>.
3. For a record of the hunger strike, see <http://phayul.com/news/specials/0707tychungerstrike/>.
4. Hein Verbruggen stated at the IOC's Congress in Guatemala City on July 5 that the Beijing 2008 Games were "being used as a platform for groups with political and social agendas which is often regrettable. [...] We cannot allow those albeit important agendas to distract us from our primary position, which is of course to ensure that a successful Games is hosted." "Rights Groups Slam Top IOC Official's Stance on Beijing," Agence France Presse, July 13, 2007.