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Disarming the Swordsmen: Post-Olympic Reflections from Beijing

BY KING-KOK CHEUNG

What were my thoughts as I watched the opening ceremony on August 8, 2008? What are my hopes for China? asked Russell Leong, my dear friend and Tai Chi teacher at UCLA. One reason he urged me to comment on the Olympics was that I, with my family, have been living in Beijing since August 2007. Besides the professional reasons for my French American spouse Gerard (a conference interpreter contracted to work during the Olympics) and myself (Director of the University of California Study Center at Peking University) being here, we also want to strengthen our eleven-year-old son's command of Chinese. More than that, I should like American-born Antony to learn to appreciate different cultures and to develop a multinational identity.

Pre-Olympic Rumblings

Many people abroad believe that the Chinese were all galvanized by the government into wholeheartedly endorsing the Olympics and, by extension, the official host. But the sense of anticipation widely shared by ordinary folks—from grizzled grandparents to the battalions of student volunteers—was, as far as I could tell, quite independent of their stance toward the current regime. As in the United States, where many citizens do not even bother to vote, the majority of people in China are quite apolitical these days. State censorship has meant that many citizens are less than fully informed of the disturbing events in Tibet, Xinjiang, let alone Darfur. But most do feel a strong sense of national identity, probably forged by feelings of national affront in the past and of pride in present progress.

Furthermore, because the government has been quite prompt in coming to the rescue during natural catastrophes, most notably following the Sichuan earthquake when the national effort was widely televised, one discerns an imminent national allegiance not only among the 90% Han majority but also among some of the more integrated minorities. I have been somewhat ambivalent about the surge of nationalism in different parts of the world, including the United States and China, during the last decade. While I encourage my students to take pride in their origins and cultures, I find myself leery of the belligerent, supercilious, and discriminatory effect of excessive nationalism—the attitude that one's country is morally, culturally, economically, or militarily superior.

But the Olympic euphoria awash China ahead of the Games far exceeded the government's attempt to gain legitimacy. I too had been wishing the country all the best in hosting the Olympics even before I set foot in Beijing. Born and raised in Hong Kong in the years after World War II and the 1949 Communist Revolution, I was spared all the suffering of my parents and older siblings, and my peers in mainland China. But I am conscious of the vicissitudes of its recent history. Even though the country is currently enjoying a relatively prosperous period, it had gone through more than a century of foreign domination, intermemec civil war, and political turmoil such as the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the...
Tiananmen incident. Within months preceding the Olympics, several major troubles struck. In addition to the earthquake in May that took the lives of over 80,000 and rendered many more maimed and homeless, and the blizzards in Southern China around the Spring Festival in February, which stranded trains and destroyed major crops, there were the skirmishes and crackdown in Tibet (plus other regions) during March, which prompted protests during the torch relays in London, Paris, and San Francisco. When I was "pumping gas" (to borrow the Chinese cheer jiagou) for China before and during the Games, I wasn't so much rallying behind the regime as behind the common people, who could now "stand up" and "lift their heads" in an international arena. After so much historical and seismic rumbles, the country deserves some halcyon days.

I agree with Chinese American journalist Helen Zia that using the Olympics as a forum to protest against Chinese policies not only made the government more chary of foreign influence—including international media coverage—but also alienated many ordinary citizens, who felt that the West was once more trying to bully and humiliate the Chinese people. Chinese students I know who used to be critical of their country's politics suddenly displayed unwonted nationalist sentiments after the Olympic torch protests. Many older Chinese I have met feel rightly that the country has come a long way in opening up to the outside world and lifting millions out of poverty, that the West is often too keen to report negative stories about China while ignoring the impressive progress. One professor emailed me to ask why American journalists are so intent on finding fault with the Chinese government. He said that to him the Chinese today seem much freer compared to three decades ago, that scholars are now at liberty to write and publish whatever they want. But another colleague disclosed that although scholars are now allowed to express themselves openly, those with unorthodox views are unlikely to get funding for their research.

The Chinese I have come across, from academics to cabdrivers, are indeed quite outspoken and frank, especially in chastising corrupt officials. Be that as it may, I emailed back the professor saying that Americans are often critical of their own government as well, especially during the current administration, and that dissonant voices and contesting perspectives are precisely what I have been missing from the Chinese press. One doctoral student at Peking University who has been helping us with our temperamental computers at the office wryly characterizes the motto for The People's Daily (the official newspaper) as "all's well with China, but chaos prevails in the rest of the world." He used to get his news from the New York Times on-line, but after what he perceived to be its tendentious coverage of the Tibet uprising he now tunes in to radio Hong Kong via his cell phone for his news and to practice Cantonese. Given a population that is becoming increasingly affluent, bi/trilingual, and technologically sophisticated, the government will face mounting challenges in controlling the spread of information.

Disarming the Swordsmen

The government certainly had gone all out in promoting the Olympics and giving China a facelift before the Games. New stadiums and hotels were built all over the country, trees and flowers were planted all over Beijing, private cars were allowed to be driven only on alternate days in the city, polluting industries and construction projects were halted, trashcans for regular trash and recycled material were installed in tandem overnight, smoking in public areas was banned, spitting and littering forbidden. Public spitting used to be so prevalent in our neighborhood that Antony and I could always amuse ourselves by monitoring the often impressive trajectories of the emissions—dubbed feijian or flying swords by my relatives in Hong Kong. A week before the Games, right on cue, all the swordsmen were disarmed.

Many of the official mandates have left a positive legacy. There is in general much greater environmental consciousness and courtesy. People are now using recycled bags for shopping and are lining up for buses, subway trains, and toilets. But there were also excesses and sacrifices. In the hutong
(alleyway) next to our apartment complex, vendors of fruit, vegetables, tea-boiled eggs, sugared chestnut, roasted corn, noodles, pancakes, or steamed buns were suddenly forbidden to display or sell anything (till October) and were even sent packing back to their native villages. Vendors who depend on their small profits for their livelihood still continue to sell on the sly, but there would be a mad rush to hide their stuff whenever there is a police inspection. Some of them were rounded up for the smallest infraction. A dumpling vendor, an avuncular figure for Antony, was arrested for putting a charcoal stove outside his eatery; he was confined and separated from his family for five days to be "educated."

So what went through my mind as I watched the opening ceremony? I was dazzled by the technical and artistic innovations; the spectacular choreography; the contrast of muscular with supple physical movements; the discipline, amazing synchronization, and sheer number of the performers; the sumptuous costumes, resplendent lightning effects, and cascades of prismatic fireworks; the gathering of the many nationalities and luminaries in the Bird's Nest Stadium. As a Chinese American I was pumped up by the exhilarating spectacle.

Where Were the Women Warriors?

Mesmerized though I was, I also felt some misgivings. The drummers, the type-block mowers, the Confucian scholars, the black callisthenic painters, the white Taichi masters, the blue oarsmen, the acrobats moving around the illuminated sphere or constructing the human Bird's Nest below, the terracotta warriors, the PLA soldiers carrying or saluting the Chinese flag, the guqin (seven-string zither) player, the adult Chinese singer, the adult pianist, the gymnast lighting the Olympic cauldron, the bearer of the Chinese flag during the parade of the nations—not to mention most of the Chinese dignitaries—were all male.

There were, to be sure, also many women: the dancers dressed in red Tang-era clothing and as white doves, other female troops accompanying various performances, the guzheng players, the ribbon dancer, the girl lip-synching the "Ode to the Motherland," the table tennis champion representing athletes during the Olympic oath, and the young women in long stylish qipao holding the signs of the delegations or in short tennis skirts forming an unbreakable outer ring. But with few exceptions they appeared to be chosen largely on the basis of their physical beauty. The ode, for example, was sung not by the nine-year-old girl in the red dress but by a seven-year-old girl (from Antony's school) whose image was deemed not "flawless" enough for the occasion. Judging from the number of female Olympians, China does have plenty of strong women. Yet the opening ceremony reinforced the enlightened Miltonic binary:

For contemplation he and valour form'd,
For softness she and sweet attractive grace.
(Paradise Lost, Book iv)

The stressing of manpower was no mere happenstance. In the coed Taichi classes I have attended in Beijing, the instructors always pay much greater attention to the male students regardless of their aptitude. Sexual harassment, not yet legislated against, is also common. A typical example of gender hierarchy occurred in April at a history symposium held at a famous university in Tianjin. Among the twenty-nine presenters there were only two women—a scholar from Russia and myself, hardly a historian. Nevertheless, over 80% of the history majors at that university are female. The asymmetry reminded me of the time when I joined the UCLA English department over two decades ago. There is now much better gender balance in American academia, but the top echelons in other sectors remain predominantly male. My feminist tic aside, I mulled over the other implications of the display of masculine prowess during the opening ceremony. Would China, in its rise to being a formidable economic and military power, follow the way of the United States in its sense of entitlement and supremacy? Would the government pursue its own policies regardless of UN recommendations?
Elision of the Last Century

Gerard, who used to be a political scientist specializing on contemporary China, was surprised that the opening ceremony, which purported to show the panorama of Chinese civilization, completely ignored the last 100 years: the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911, the Long March, the "Liberation" of 1949, the Cultural Revolution, etc. The reasons are perhaps not hard to find. These events were not all glamorous, nor so glorious in retrospect. Many Chinese want to forget those turbulent periods, fraught with civil wars, political purges, and ideological wrangles. Alluding to Mao would have seemed amiss: the Great Helmsman has undergone critical scrutiny both within and outside China. But what about the socialist equality that was the raison d'être of the Communist Revolution? Although the People's Republic is still ruled by the Party, the dream of social and economic equality, like that of the Great Society envisioned by Kennedy and Johnson in the 60s, seems very much a thing of the past. The gap between the rich and the poor is growing wider every day. Gone also is the iron rice bowl that guaranteed security after retirement. According to the World Bank, both the United States and China are now among the most unequal societies as measured by Gini coefficients of inequality, at a level considerably higher than that of India or Indonesia.

Minority Dissidence

I also discern certain parallels between being a racial minority in the United States and being an ethnic minority in China. In both instances violent suppression of the past has been replaced by apparent acceptance, "assimilation," even promotion of folk culture, multiculturalism, and various kinds of "affirmative action." However, there is still deep structural inequality and widespread stereotyping. Beijingers often characterize people from Xinjiang, for instance, as dangerous crooks and knife-wielding swashbucklers, but gloss over the dilution of religion and culture through Han resettlement, the economic exploitation of local resources, and other policies that have induced alienation and fueled resentment and rebellion. Notwithstanding the preponderance of black Olympians during the march of the US athletes, racism is still deeply ingrained in much of American society, and is being unleashed by the upcoming presidential elections. Similarly, despite the spotlighting of happy Chinese children (of mostly Han descent) wearing 56 ethnic costumes in the opening ceremony, ethnic discontent continues to simmer in several regions of the country.

Harmony

My hopes for China are thus not so different from my hopes for the United States. Both countries must find a way to address internal grievances such as racial, ethnic, gender, and economic inequality; both must try to understand and entertain seriously the perspectives of the rest of the world. Winning the hearts of the people nationally and internationally poses greater challenges than vying for Olympic medals. The harmony that was so prominently and painstakingly assembled as the ideograph during the opening ceremony can be achieved only after conflicting perspectives are aired, recognized, and reconciled.

To give our son a thorough Chinese experience Gerard and I have put Antony in a local school—the Primary School Attached to Peking University. He is now speaking putonghua like a native speaker and reading martial novels by Jin Yong (Louis Cha) in the original, which he finds no less addictive than the Artemis Fowl or the Harry Potter series. But he does miss his friends: the numerous play dates and sleepovers he enjoyed in Los Angeles are no longer possible in Beijing because most of his Chinese classmates have to take additional English and math classes after school and on weekends.

In August our regular family policy of rooting for the underdog changed somewhat. Antony is as much a fan of Kobe Bryant as of Yao Ming. During the U.S. v. China Basketball game, his shouts of "Go, Kobe!" alternated with "Yao Ming, Jiayou!" During the ping pong matches, both he (an aficionado
of the sport) and his mom were equally behind the three female and the
three male virtuosos from China, whose names, faces, and even biographies
have been imprinted on our minds during our time in Beijing. Gerard still
sided with the underdogs, thereby contributing to family discord, though
even he was unable to contain his thrill on the day Guénot (a Greco-Roman
wrestler) won the first gold medal for France—a contest he was actually
watching and covering as an interpreter.

During the summer holiday Antony had to compose an essay (in Chinese)
about the Olympics. He writes that for him the Olympic spirit means that
people should root for athletes of all nationalities, and not just for their
compatriots. He himself cheered for Chinese, US, Canadian, Hong Kong,
Taiwanese, Indian, Thai, and Jamaican athletes during the Games, but
refused to "pump" for French Olympians because Dad had made him take
an intensive French workshop with Chinese college students during the
vacation. Asian parents are not alone in being martinet.

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