

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

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Volume 8  
Issue 5 *May Roundtable: An Annotation of  
"China's Olympic Delusion" by Jeffrey N.  
Wasserstrom*

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Article 3

5-2008

## Beijing's Olympics: Pride, Appearance and Human Rights

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### Recommended Citation

Beal, Thomas (2008) "Beijing's Olympics: Pride, Appearance and Human Rights," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 8: Iss. 5, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol8/iss5/3>



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## Beijing's Olympics: Pride, Appearance and Human Rights

### Abstract

One lazy summer evening in Beijing, about fifteen years ago, my wife and I were strolling down Jianguomenwai, the bustling street adjacent to our flat in the Qijiayuan Diplomatic Compound. The day had been sweltering, and as the sun began to set the sidewalks filled with pedestrians who, like us, had escaped their stuffy apartments to take in a cool, soothing breeze.

### Keywords

Human rights, China, Olympics, Perception

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## **Beijing's Olympics: Pride, Appearance and Human Rights**

by Thomas Beal

One lazy summer evening in Beijing, about fifteen years ago, my wife and I were strolling down Jianguomenwai, the bustling street adjacent to our flat in the Qijiayuan Diplomatic Compound. The day had been sweltering, and as the sun began to set the sidewalks filled with pedestrians who, like us, had escaped their stuffy apartments to take in a cool, soothing breeze.

Just past the Jianguo Hotel we came upon an odd scene: Several dozen people stood transfixed around two men trying to apprehend a strikingly beautiful young woman. One man held her by her arm in a vice-like grip. The elder of the two, whom I took to be her father, wore a watchful, sorrowing expression as he stroked her shoulders and pleaded, “Return home, return home.” The woman cried and half-struggled to break away.

A few seconds passed before my wife nudged me in the arm. I scanned the street corners for a policeman worrying what exactly I would do if I offered the girl help and she were to answer “yes.” But before I could open my mouth, an old woman clad in blue pajamas emerged from the throng. Wagging a menacing finger at the scufflers, she yelled: “What are you doing? Foreigners are watching!” A few moments of awkwardness ensued before the crowd dispersed and the two men and the young woman walked quickly away together.

I thought this incident was worth remembering as we move into the home stretch of the launch of the 2008 Olympic Games: In a culture obsessed with appearances, China’s leaders will try to prevent the outside world from seeing anything that reflects badly on either the government or nation. As Jeffrey Wasserstrom suggests, responding with a mailed fist to unrest in places like Tibet and Xinjiang, blocking access to Internet sites, arresting dissidents, and censoring foreign entertainers—all of these and more possibly egregious acts of control to come are necessarily required by Beijing’s Olympic “script.”

China’s leaders view the Olympic Games as a national ["coming-out party"](#), an historic opportunity to showcase the country’s economic achievements and offer proof that China is worthy of the world’s respect as a global power. And rightly so. Communist Party policies in place since the early 1980s have helped lift an estimated 400 million people out of poverty. Most of the country’s coastal cities are engines for economic growth and prosperity. In recent years, painfully aware it must narrow the widening income gap between the cities and countryside or reap the whirlwind, China’s government has abolished the age-old [agricultural tax](#), ushered in land-lease reform, and implemented a [new national medical insurance scheme](#) intended to make health care more affordable for the rural poor. In 2006, the National People’s Congress made [nine-year compulsory education in rural areas free](#). Such gains—and the political stability they help promote—could be undercut by a global economic slowdown if it dampens China’s economic growth rate below the level needed to create a sufficient number of jobs.

Beijing’s Olympic script must therefore be followed primarily for the way it bestows symbolic approval of Communist Party rule. Playing the part of Olympic host well bolsters the legitimacy of China’s leaders before their own people. In recent weeks, we have seen what happens when

the script is not followed; disruptions such as the one in Tibet are interpreted by many Chinese as an embarrassing sign that their leaders may not be in control. Fierce criticism by the West of Chinese policies and actions add to already high dudgeon. Intense feelings of frustration and injustice— [acted out on the streets in front of French-owned supermarkets](#), for example—make everyone a little nervous, including China’s leadership. Traditionally, the Olympic Games end with a fanfare; the Olympic flame is extinguished, and while the Olympic anthem is played the Olympic flag is lowered, unfurled, and carried out of the arena. But Beijing’s Olympic script ends climactically and symbolically when Party leaders and their families move from Zhongnanhai, the secluded compound sheltering them near the Forbidden City, to a glitzy new complex adjacent to the Olympic Green.

Sticking to the script means China’s crackdown on human rights in the run up to the Olympic Games will likely continue. And during the Games? The script includes building the world’s biggest swimming pool *and* controlling hundreds of thousands of visitors and thousands of journalists, as well as snaring Falun Gong followers, Tibet independence groups, and other pesky activists. The police state will mobilize several hundred thousand members of the security forces, special SWAT teams, [a citizen’s army of more than 600,000 Beijing residents and students](#) (one for every expected foreign visitor and journalist), and a cadre of 100,000 official volunteers, half of whom will also have full-time security duties. Surveillance systems cover phone and Internet and include more than 300,000 cameras on streets, subways, hotels and major venues. Doing whatever it takes requires weathering international outrage, should there be any. In this respect, China also has had plenty of valuable experience. For example, in preparation for their bid to host the 2000 Olympic Games, China’s leaders let nothing stand in their way. Then, as now, they launched a nationwide crackdown on dissidents, accompanied by a systematic “clean up” of Beijing. Hundreds of homeless people, petitioners and migrant workers were forcibly removed from the streets, sentenced to re-education camps and detention centers, and even confined to mental hospitals. Factories were shuttered and electricity cut off to clear the air of smog. The campaign intensified in early 1993 as the International Olympic Committee prepared for an inspection tour of the capital. Preparing for the 2008 Games, Chinese authorities arrested 742 people in 2007 for such offenses as “endangering state security”—twice as many as in 2005 (The official arrest figures for 2007 were announced by a senior Chinese law enforcement official on March 10, 2008.) .

In recent weeks, China has said it will resume human rights talks with the United States and [jumpstart dialogue](#) at higher levels with representatives of the Dalai Lama. The Chinese government is also said to be ready to hire an [international public relations](#) firm in the wake of the Tibet crisis. Some wishful thinkers hold out hope that these are signs China’s leaders might yet “right the ship in the coming months,” as [one wrote](#), with a startling concession, such as the release of political prisoners, aimed at repairing China’s image before the Beijing Olympics. But this hardly jibes with [the conviction and sentencing of civil rights activist Hu Jia](#) in April, and what are likely to be [grotesque show trials](#) held throughout May for the more than 1,200 people arrested in the violence in Lhasa in March.

The more likely scenario is that China’s prideful leaders will continue to act on their obsession with appearance, in mainly harsh but predictable ways, despite backlash in the court of public opinion. They are politicians who must wield unchallenged power or appear weak and incapable.

Pride, concern with appearance, fear of the loss of face, and the “delusion” Wasserstrom alludes to—these are also themes central to Lu Xun’s novella “The True Story of Ah Q,” whose main character Ah Q symbolizes flaws of the Chinese national character, such as saving face by finding spurious moral victory in defeat. In one scene, a demoralized Ah Q slaps himself on the face. But because he is the person doing the slapping, he sees himself as the victor:

But presently he changed defeat into victory. Raising his right hand he slapped his own face hard, twice, so that it tingled with pain. After this slapping his heart felt lighter, for it seemed as if the one who had given the slap was himself, the one slapped some other self, and soon it was as if he had beaten someone else—in spite of the fact that his face was still tingling. He lay down satisfied that he had gained the victory.

*Soon he was asleep.\**

\* Lu Xun Selected Works, trans. Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1985), pp. 111-112.

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