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"Instant Karma": How Globalization Contests China's Abuses

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"Instant Karma": How Globalization Contests China's Abuses

Abstract

China's rise from impoverished backwater to prospective superpower has been accompanied by the repression of tens of millions of its own people, at the hands of a nationalist, developmentalist government. Under contemporary conditions of globalization, suppression of civil liberties, domination of ethnic minorities, and unholy alliances with resource-rich dictatorships are no longer plausible requisites of this model—if they ever were. The broadening and deepening of economic globalization towards a more sustainable complex of political influence involves "soft power," including international reputation and norms. Thus, China's Olympian reach for true hegemony provides the best chance for human rights advocates to weave a transnational "invisible handcuff" that will restrain the worst excesses of China's rulers, and build a base for the long-term empowerment of China's civil society.

Keywords

Human rights, China, Olympics

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"Instant Karma": How Globalization Contests China's Abuses

by Alison Brysk

China's rise from impoverished backwater to prospective superpower has been accompanied by the repression of tens of millions of its own people, at the hands of a nationalist, developmentalist government. Under contemporary conditions of globalization, suppression of civil liberties, domination of ethnic minorities, and unholy alliances with resource-rich dictatorships are no longer plausible requisites of this model—[if they ever were](#). The broadening and deepening of economic globalization towards a more sustainable complex of political influence involves "[soft power](#)," including international reputation and norms. Thus, China's Olympian reach for true hegemony provides the best chance for human rights advocates to weave a transnational "[invisible handcuff](#)" that will restrain the worst excesses of China's rulers, and build a base for the long-term empowerment of China's civil society.

One marker of China's shifting political environment is the difference between the response to the 1989 Tiananmen protests and the current unrest in Tibet. In 1989, China turned tanks on thousands of peaceful protestors in the heart of its capital city in full view of the world, cut communication links, and followed with a massive manhunt, detentions, and executions. Twenty years ago, China easily defied brief and tepid international sanctions. Today, China has exercised Chiapas-style preemptive caution in responding to less visible and more violent threats—but one reflecting widespread international support. All the major world leaders debate boycotts of the Olympic opening ceremonies, and ongoing consumer-based economic sanctions are a real possibility. Despite some nationalist backlash, world-wide pressures over Darfur boomerang back to inspire Chinese intellectuals [to petition for peace in Tibet](#). China's leaders carefully defend their response as necessary for sovereignty, "[not a question of human rights](#)." China has clearly moved from the denial to bargaining stages of Risse, Ropp, and Sikink's "[spiral model](#)" of human rights reform.

International cultural and diplomatic ties are often seen as marginal to the pursuit of national interest and world power. But because sustainable power depends on recognition and reciprocity, nations seek legitimacy, membership, and influence—just as interest-driven firms seek good public relations, consumer confidence, and branding. From the Nazis' reach for recognition at the Munich 1936 Olympics to Japan's increase in foreign aid as it sought U.N. Security Council membership, states value international prestige as a long-term investment. But that logic opens them to new forms of leverage, as Argentina discovered when hosting the 1978 World Cup which shined a spotlight on its disappearance of political opponents, bringing increased media coverage, transnational contact with activists, and eventually increased international pressure by the U.S. and OAS human rights machinery. Raising the reputational cost of quashing protesters in Lhasa or selling weapons to Khartoum forces China's political elite to shift their calculus of political dominance, even before it wins hearts and minds.

China's long march to global influence may intensify abuse in the short run—but it has the potential to open new pathways for progress in the long run. Economic globalization creates new incentives for prison labor, sweatshop exploitation, trafficking in persons, and even organs, and pillage of resources

from unsavory regimes. But meanwhile, informational and cultural exchange, along with increasing involvement in international institutions, may pull China ineluctably towards greater conformity with global norms of civil liberties and religious freedom. With continued pressure over time, illiberal global powers will be hobbled—if not halted—by their own contradictions. What defenders of human rights can learn from the Dalai Lama is how to speed up the karma a little, by turning around the soft power of globalization—while the whole world is watching.

Alison Brysk is Professor of Political Science and International Studies at the University of California, Irvine. Winner of the 2007-2008 Distinguished Mid-Career Research Award, she has authored or edited six books on international human rights. Professor Brysk has researched and lectured in a dozen countries, and in 2007 held the Fulbright Distinguished Visiting Chair in Global Governance at Canada's University of Waterloo/Centre for International Governance Innovation. Brysk is active in promoting human rights through campus, professional, international, and advocacy organizations and networks. Please visit her website: <http://www.alisonbrysk.org>.