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The Olympic Spotlight: The Beijing Games and China as a Future World Leader

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The Olympic Spotlight: The Beijing Games and China as a Future World Leader

Abstract

According to Jeffrey Wasserstrom's article, if the Chinese think they can censor the Olympics, and the political showcasing that will almost certainly accompany them, they are sorely mistaken. I am persuaded by the thrust of this argument. I just hope that as China vies for global leadership and influence, whatever truths the Olympic spotlight reveals about its potential in this regard are more farcical than tragic.

Keywords

Human rights, China, Olympics, Media, Censorship

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The Olympic Spotlight: The Beijing Games and China as a Future World Leader

by Eric A. Heinze

According to Jeffrey Wasserstrom's article, if the Chinese think they can censor the Olympics, and the political showcasing that will almost certainly accompany them, they are sorely mistaken. I am persuaded by the thrust of this argument. I just hope that as China vies for global leadership and influence, whatever truths the Olympic spotlight reveals about its potential in this regard are more farcical than tragic.

The Olympics have frequently been accompanied by dramatic events that are indicative of the state of world affairs. Witness Berlin in 1936, Mexico City in 1968, Munich in 1972, and Moscow in 1980. This summer's Olympic Games in Beijing may likewise reveal some sobering political realities about the world. Namely, is China ready to be a world leader? China's Olympic theme song, "We Are Ready," clearly indicates the political message the Chinese want to send. Yet it remains to be seen whether the Beijing Olympics will portray China as the emerging responsible global power that it aspires to be, or reinforce the caricatures of a repressive and undemocratic state that is intolerant of political dissent.

Recent events are indicative of China's broader political message that it is capable of becoming a responsible world-power. The Chinese government's "less harsh" response to the recent crisis in Tibet is an obvious one. Likewise, its criticism of Sudan's policies in Darfur suggest that the Chinese government no longer wants to be known as the country that enabled a genocidal regime because it filled its coffers with money from buying its oil. Such moves are not surprising given what is at stake, even if the stakes are purely symbolic.

But this desire to avoid bad publicity has led Chinese authorities to pursue policies that may have the exact opposite effect. It seems logical that avoiding bad publicity would entail exercising as much control over the flow of information surrounding Olympic coverage as possible. One might therefore expect efforts to prevent reporters from showing China's pollution problems, human rights abuses, or other problematic social issues. Yet even if China succeeds at controlling media coverage to a certain degree, thus saving face in front of its own people, complete control is impossible. The more China's authorities try to have complete control over media coverage surrounding the Games and the inevitable demonstrations that will accompany it, the less they will convince the rest of the world that China is "ready." Such efforts are already having counter-productive outcomes as stories like that of Chinese human rights advocate Hu Jia, who was recently sentenced to three and a half years in prison for "inciting subversion of state power," begin to make headlines the world over.

In this sense, Wasserstrom is correct that the Chinese are delusional if they think they can fool anyone about their preparedness for global leadership. If the crackdowns on human rights advocates, reporters, and pro-Tibet partisans continue in the run-up to the 2008 Games, then the recent turmoil that accompanied the Olympic torch's trip through London and Paris will be but a dress rehearsal for the international outrage that could ensue. The news story will then no longer be the Olympic events, but rather the accompanying political showcase—in this case, the censorship of the Olympics and the attempt to hide the uglier side of the communist regime. In

this sense, the recent jailing Hu Jia undoubtedly does more harm than good to China's international standing by distracting international audiences from how we are *supposed* to be seeing China.

Thus, if world leadership and international respect and attention are what China wants from the Beijing Olympics, then it cannot avoid subjecting itself to international scrutiny. The 2008 Olympic Games are therefore potentially more consequential than any in history. By shining the Olympic spotlight on this year's hosts, the world community will be able to judge for itself whether China, as a potential world leader, is going to be worth following. In short, if China is *not* "ready," then the Beijing Olympics will tell us this...again, hopefully as farce and not as tragedy.

Eric A. Heinze is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Oklahoma. He is the author of Waging Humanitarian War: The Ethics, Law and Politics of Humanitarian Intervention (forthcoming, SUNY Press) and numerous scholarly articles on various aspects of international human rights and the ethics and law of armed conflict. Dr. Heinze teaches courses on international law and organization, international human rights, and international relations theory.