

PACIFIC PERSPECTIVES

WHAT CHINA AND THE WORLD

MUST DO NOW ON THE OLYMPICS

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BY TOM PLATE

Los Angeles – Absolutely no one in the Western media is showing any sympathy at all for China in the current roiling mess over Tibet and the Olympic Games. But somebody has to do it, if only to try to achieve some balance and maturity of perspective. So we might as well make the effort here and now.

On Tibet itself: Westerners in general – and this includes the President of France – have no sense that Chinese people regard this Himalayan territory as much of an integral part of China as Texas is of the United States. Go ahead and poll not only the Chinese on the vast mainland but the Chinese in Hong Kong and indeed even in Taiwan, and what you will get is an overwhelming consensus that Tibet is part of China. You will get this consensus not just from the man on the street but from distinguished and accomplished professionals, professors and even journalists.

The mediocre American actor and Tibet activist Richard Gere can say and do what he wants – America is a free country in the sense that people here can say almost any silly thing they feel like saying. The movie director Steven Spielberg can withdraw his participation as a Summer Olympics advisor over Beijing's alleged diplomatic shortages regarding Darfur, precisely because Spielberg can do pretty much anything he wishes to in this town. But if the justly acclaimed director of the magnificent 1993 movie "Schindler's List" is confusing cotemporary China with Nazi Germany, his skills of historical comparison scarcely measure up to his cinematic genius.

On the Summer Games themselves: China put in an aggressive and stylish bid years ago, and nailed the right to host the Games against very formidable competitors. They won the bidding fair and square. They competed against the best. They have been investing literally billions in not only building some of the finest sporting venues ever seen but in upgrading the infrastructure of Beijing. They have earned the opportunity to show the world their best side.

And the athletes from around the world who have been training for years to compete in the Games deserve the chance to show their stuff without constant interruptions from protestors around the world. Richard Gere, Steven Spielberg and the protestors in Tibet (who may or may not have been egged on by outside influences) in my view have demonstrated disgraceful, disrespectful and ill-conceived timing.

China's leaders are not stupid but they can be stubborn. They are well aware of many of their failures, on the mainland as well as in Tibet; surely the most obvious is deficiencies in income distribution. But at the same time, China is vastly proud – and rightly so – of

its extraordinary accomplishments since the death of Mao. They include (by the overwhelming consensus of virtually every known economist and historian) lifting more people out of poverty more quickly than any regime in the recorded history of mankind. That record also includes a flowering of arts and sciences not seen since previous Chinese dynasties spanning the course of China's five thousand years.

None of this is to deny that China has handled the fallout from the Tibet protests and the spillover on its Olympics public image with all the tender care of a bulldozer running through a war-orphan settlement. This government generally practices the fine art of public relations as if there were no public to which it has to relate. On the contrary – dear comrades in Beijing – all the world now is a global village, every step is watched and often digitally transmitted by innocent little digital recording devices. In this world there is no longer any place to hide.

Dear People's Republic of China government: You have been advised for years to conduct civil discussions about increased autonomy with the Dalai Lama. This old guy is far from your worst enemy. All he and his team have been asking for is more or less the same deal that you gave Hong Kong. And the HK deal (one-county, two-systems, in the formulation of your very own Deng Xiaoping) is working – rather brilliantly, in fact.

What you had better do now is get off your high communist-party horse and ask His Holiness the Dalai Lama to visit with a high Chinese official to discuss new autonomy for Tibet. For that discussion, I would nominate no less than the country's number-two, Wen Jiabao. China's premier almost consistently demonstrates, in public at least, a deft, diplomatic and nuanced touch. This is what has been missing from China's approach to this problem and what it most desperately needs.

Beijing is very un-fond of negotiating under a gun, but this is where the enemies of China and its own ineptitude have put it: facing the bombastic barrel of international public-opinion. It is not too late to save the Games and repair its international image. But first, Premier Wen and President Hu Jintao have to get their own fiery mainland xenophobic hotheads under control, if they want to get this crisis resolved. If they can, then the rest of the world needs to pipe down through the summer and let the Games begin, gracefully.

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