

OPEN FORUM

Why I will carry the Olympic torch

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I am in training for the Olympics - not for any of the breathtaking feats that world-class athletes will perform this August in Beijing. As a sedentary 55-year-old, I am training to run a block or two without stumbling if someone tries to knock me down and to hang onto a torch-like object if people try to wrest it away from me.

The special event I am preparing myself for is the Olympic torch relay Wednesday in San Francisco, the only site in North America where the Olympic torch will pass on its world journey to promote peace and understanding through excellence and friendly competition.

Many will scoff at this Olympic ideal and I understand why. As a longtime advocate of social justice, I'm familiar with the long list of failings attributed to the People's Republic of China from the days of its founding in 1949, including the simmering tensions in Tibet - especially because I just spent five months in Shanghai as a Fulbright scholar conducting research on the mass exodus that took place at the time of the Communist revolution.

As an American of Chinese descent, I grew up hearing constant critiques of the terrible Communist dictatorship. And because I am an open lesbian, my stay in China felt tenuous because, unlike America, which has anti-gay laws, China doesn't even recognize that we exist. Any of these might be reason enough to run as far from the Olympics as my middle-aged body can carry me.

But my time in China gave me another perspective. I observed firsthand the wide-ranging diversity and openness of viewpoints and cultural expression that now exists among China's 1.4 billion people. I met with hundreds of Chinese for my research and was struck by how outspoken and opinionated they are and, yes, even critical of their government.

Many of my conversations were with elderly survivors of civil war and revolution who have endured immense human suffering, from deprivation and humiliation to torture and death. Almost every one of them had family members or friends who had committed suicide before or during the Cultural Revolution that ended three decades ago. Yet, nearly all told me that they believe China is changing for the better and they are hopeful that Chinese society will continue to become more open.

I've seen this evolution myself, from my first visit to China in 1972, to the time that I attended the International Women's Conference in 1995 as a journalist, reporting on the 30,000 women activists who converged in Beijing. Only 13 years ago, there was just one program, a telephone hot line, for victims of



domestic abuse in all of China. But feminist activists within China used the conference to create many new initiatives for women and girls, such as programs to end female infanticide and sex-selective abortions, to help rural girls get the same schooling that boys do - and to address the issue of family violence. More recently, the Special Olympics were held last fall in Shanghai, along with a national education campaign about people with disabilities. This year's Olympics has the potential to foster similar change in China on an even grander scale.

Such change might be led by some of the eager young adults I met who are looking for work at grassroots organizations in China, not for high-paying multinational corporations. Some told me about a left-wing progressive movement that is growing in China. Others explained how activists and bloggers in China are constantly finding creative ways to get their messages out.

Up until I left China just before the uprisings in Tibet, the Chinese government was heavily promoting the Olympic spirit and teaching Olympic values of friendship, understanding and fair play in the schools. China is not a democracy, but its people - whether Han Chinese, Tibetans, Uighers or its other many minorities - are becoming more vocal because of its increasing openness to the world.

Unfortunately, the calls to boycott the Olympics and to label everything about China as evil can only serve to isolate China and the United States from each other. China is not a monolith, and blanket condemnations of China and its people are as simplistic as blaming all Americans for the U.S. human-rights violations at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Such rhetoric, however, is driving many Chinese bloggers into a nationalistic response.

Attitudes such as these hark back to the Cold War days, when the United States and China were completely shut off from each other. A recent survey conducted by the Committee of 100 on American and Chinese attitudes found that both countries have significant fears about the other and believe that news coverage about their country is distorted by the other. It is worth remembering that during the Cold War, fear and ignorance of the "evil enemy other" was used to suppress internal political dissent, in the United States with the McCarthy Red scares and in China, through several of Mao's "anti" campaigns.

Someday China will join the United States as a world superpower - but the American and Chinese people do not have to retreat back to those Cold War corners. The world will be safer if China, the United States and other countries can address human rights and other critical issues in the community of nations and peoples, not in isolation.

There is another vision: that a peaceful and better world is possible through friendly engagement and mutual understanding, not violent confrontation and polarization. It's an Olympic message, a possible dream that our global civilization and everyone who is a part of it can aspire to - and for which I am proud to carry a torch.

Helen Zia is the author of "Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001). She is board co-chair of the Women's Media Center and a member of the Committee of 100, a national organization of Chinese American leaders.

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