

BY WILLIAM P. ALFORD AND TIMOTHY P. SHRIVER

For disabled, China has risen to the challenge

THESE ARE not the happiest of times in the US-China relationship.

Stories of tainted foods and dangerous products have been news for weeks. Controversies continue over exchange rates, labor conditions, outsourcing, and intellectual property infringement. And long-standing issues regarding human rights, the environment, and foreign policy remain prominent.

The media in China are far from reserved in articulating Chinese concerns about the relationship. While they acknowledge problems surrounding sub-standard products (from which Chinese citizens suffer more than we do), they also express anxiety regarding the United States. Some Chinese observers suggest that enmeshed in legitimate US concerns is a desire of today's superpower to check the rise of a China that might otherwise be the world's next dominant power.

Nor does this picture look likely to change in the year before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Foreign media and human rights groups understandably see this as providing an unparalleled opportunity to scrutinize China. At the same time, the Chinese authorities are determined to present the most positive picture they can of their nation and its accomplishments - even if, in so doing, their actions have the unintended effect of heightening, rather than abating, foreign concerns.

These tensions have largely obscured an increasingly powerful, if little noticed, form of interaction that holds much promise for the future of Sino-American relations. In recent years, China and a number of nongovernmental organizations have found ways to work together to advance shared goals in areas such as education, healthcare, and disability. Without glossing over the many challenges that persist, this cooperation and the learning it has spawned is building a basis for a different type of bilateral engagement.

One such example is the work that Chinese and Americans (and a host of others) have been conducting over the last several years, under the auspices of the Special Olympics, to improve the quality of life of Chinese citizens with intellectual disabilities. Since it first became involved in China in the mid-1990s, Special Olympics has enlisted hundreds of thousands of individuals with intellectual disabilities in athletic and other programs situated in locales, urban and rural, rich and poor, throughout China - along the way involving comparably large numbers of their fellow citizens as coaches, volunteers, and supporters.

This initial phase of the Special Olympics work in China will culminate in early October as more than 7,500 athletes with intellectual disabilities from more than 160 countries gather in Shanghai for the Special Olympics World Summer Games. But there is far more to this work than an olympiad. China's first national medical and legal centers devoted to intellectual disability have been launched, while a Sino-American team of social scientists has done unprecedented research on popular attitudes toward the intellectually disabled. New curricular materials focused on diversity, tolerance, and integration have been developed, and a national campaign is underway to raise public consciousness. And, at a more human level, family support networks are being nurtured, and every participant in the Shanghai Games will receive free head-to-toe health examinations and whatever medical, dental, optical, nutritional, and other assistance they need.

These undertakings would not have been possible without the efforts of many thousands of Chinese and other volunteers - which itself represents an enormously important development. When Special Olympics first embarked on its work in the PRC, many observers (including a number of old China-hands) counseled that we would find little interest in the disabled and even less in volunteerism. Happily, our experience suggests otherwise, as Chinese citizens have thrown themselves into the endeavor with a spirit and imagination similar to that we have found in the United States and elsewhere. Over the long term, this energy displayed in promoting the dignity of society's most vulnerable individuals is a powerful tool in building common ground.

The problems of product safety and political economy remain. But so, too, do the inroads volunteerism has made and the outlets that it is creating. We would be naive to think that these joint efforts at building civil society have fully addressed the challenges that confront Chinese with intellectual disabilities (or their American brethren), let alone ameliorated the many tensions that mark the US-China relationship. That said, it would be no less naive to allow those tensions to cause us to overlook what has already been accomplished and what may yet be accomplished when citizens join hands in common endeavor.

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