

The China Syndrome

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Awarding the Olympic Games to the most populous country in the world will open up one fifth of mankind to Olympism. We believe that China will change by opening the country to the scrutiny of the world through the 25,000 media who will attend the Games. The Olympic Games are a force for good. They are a catalyst for change, not a panacea for all ills.

[IOC President Jacques Rogge]

As the opening of the Olympic Games on 8 August approaches, world attention is on China, and this attention is persistently on issues other than sport. Human rights abuses and environmental concerns are top of the list. But it is not only human rights groups, politicians and celebrities who are speaking out. Some religious leaders too are calling for boycotts, such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa, and quite independently, a group of US Jewish leaders over concerns about Tibet, arms sales to Iran, Syria and Hamas, and China's commercial relationship with Sudan. All of this begs the question: should Christians be more active on these moral issues?

Let us begin by making a few assertions:

- Sport can never be separated from politics or moral issues. Every human endeavour takes place within the moral universe in which we live.
- Uncoordinated randomly applied boycotts are invariably unsuccessful and often only result in temporary change if at all.
- There is a tension between celebrating the Olympic movement as a force for good in the world, and the desire to use the Olympics as a platform for raising moral issues.
- Every country hosting the Olympics uses it as a vehicle to promote a good image of their country, and wants the world to see it in the best possible light.
- Human rights abuses, environmental destruction, questionable foreign policy decisions and dubious international trade relationships occur in every country.

Background to the 2008 Beijing Olympics

In order to win the bid to host the summer Olympics by the Olympic International Committee (IOC), and prior to the IOC vote, China and the other candidate countries had first to satisfy a number of technical assessment criteria. It was finally announced in July 2001 that China had won the 2008 games. But the decision was always going to be controversial, and even prior to the announcement, questions were being raised questioning China's suitability to host the games in view of its record on human rights. For example, the European parliament resolved to invite:

the International Olympic Committee to establish guidelines to include respect for human rights and democratic principles to be applied as a general rule to host countries of Olympic Games, and ... [i]nvites the International Olympic Committee to reconsider Beijing's candidacy when the authorities of the PRC have made a fundamental change in their policy on human rights, and the promotion of democracy and the rule of law ...

While concern for human rights may not be an explicit criterion in the host city selection process, it is however embodied in the Olympic Charter. The Fundamental Principles of Olympism include:

2. The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.

5. Any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic movement.'

Rightly or wrongly, the Olympic games have often been used as a stage for political issues, such as at Berlin (1936), Munich (1972), Moscow (1980) and Los Angeles (1984). The success or failure to manage these challenges has depended largely on the wisdom and diplomacy skills of the IOC President.

The current IOC President Jacques Rogge has attempted to hold in balance the competing interests when he stated in a media release of 23 March:

NGOs [i.e non-government organisations] and Human Rights' activists want to leverage the Games and ask the IOC to act along by their side. The IOC is undoubtedly respectful of Human Rights. The IOC respects NGOs and activist groups and their causes, and speaks regularly with them - but we are neither a political nor an activist organisation.

As I stated last weekend, the events in Tibet are a matter of great concern to the IOC. The IOC has already expressed the hope that this conflict should be resolved peacefully as soon as possible. Violence for whatever reason is contrary to the Olympic values and spirit.

The IOC will continue to respect Human Rights. The IOC will work tirelessly with China for the welfare of the athletes and the success of the Olympic Games.

What accusations are made against China?

- 1. Death penalty.** In China there are reportedly 68 crimes that are punishable by death. At a time when most countries (135) have abolished the death penalty either in law or in practice, China continues to sentence people to death, for relatively minor crimes and usually without a fair trial. In 2006 according to state figures, 1,010 people were executed (Amnesty International estimates the figure is closer to 8,000) compared to the combined figure of 1,591 executions in the rest of the world.
- 2. Detention without trial.** People who are considered to have committed an offence can be held in disciplinary detention for up to 4 years under a scheme called 'Re-education through labour' (RTL). They are not charged or tried, have no access to legal advice and no right of appeal. This contravenes the right to a fair trial in the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which China is a signatory. According to Amnesty International, people who are jailed because of their religious beliefs or political views are at much greater risk of ill-treatment or even torture.
- 3. Censorship.** Tight restrictions on the domestic media have resulted in sackings, imprisonment and even death to journalists who attempt to investigate sensitive stories. 'Complete media freedom' has been promised in the lead up to the Olympics but the new regulations will expire soon after the paralympics. The internet is also closely monitored, including blocking of websites, chat rooms and blogs.

4. **Labour conditions.** Repressive labour practices sometimes amounting to slave labour, unsafe working conditions and low wages have been reported. Many rural workers migrate to cities in search of work, but are denied many basic rights including health and education for their children and are regarded as second class citizens, with a growing gap between rich and poor.
5. **Falun Gong.** Members of this banned spiritual movement report from overseas that many of their number have been imprisoned and that 2,000 deaths in custody are the result of enforced organ harvesting. Independent verification of these reports has been difficult.
6. **Tibet.** The issue of Tibet is highly contentious and there are a number of competing views about the rule and history of Tibet. Pro-Tibet activists claim that Tibet was invaded by China in 1950 and since then many Tibetans have been killed, imprisoned or tortured. Most recently dozens of people are reported to have been killed in unrest in the capital Lhasa in March; and the spiritual and political leader of Tibet, the Dalai Lama, has lived in exile in northern India.
7. **Africa.** China has a commercial relationship with Sudan which includes the sale of arms, which some believe are being used to commit serious human rights abuses in the 5 year long conflict in Darfur, in which over 200,000 people have been killed. Similarly, a recent arms shipment bound for the Mugabe government in Zimbabwe was intercepted by South African dockworkers. Chinese government officials say the contract was signed last year and is unrelated to the recent developments in Zimbabwe.
8. **Oil.** In an effort to corner oil supplies, the Chinese government has courted several developing nations for their deposits, which is no different to what Western-backed corporations also seek to do. However the charge is also made that such Chinese government-backed deals do not follow through on promises made to local people, effectively cheating such nations out of natural resources.

It is important to note that China has made advances in a number of areas, for example a Chinese Workplace Ombudsman has been established, and reforms have been introduced which mean all death sentences will be reviewed by the Supreme People's Court. However the lack of transparency about these and other measures makes it difficult to assess how much real progress is being made.

Toward a response

How might Christians respond to the complexity of China? Here are some points to consider:

1. Access to objective information about what is happening in China is difficult. To the extent that we are able, there is a need to differentiate settled State policies, more restricted regional policies, isolated incidents, and complete fictions.
2. We need to acknowledge how little we in the West understand the complexity of China's vast political history, values and culture. Chinese culture tends to place a much greater value on the rights of the collective over that of the individual. The finality of an individual's 'human rights' in such a context, is not necessarily obvious. (We will return to this point below.)

3. We need to distinguish between China and the government of China. The Chinese are a nation of global ‘neighbours’ to be loved, without necessarily condoning some of the practices of its government.
4. At the same time, we cannot easily imagine what is involved in keeping order in a nation as populous as China. Perhaps some of the freedoms and luxuries Australians enjoy result from having one-fifth hundredth the population. Some Chinese government policies may be driven by fear of such vast numbers of people.
5. There certainly are blemishes in the Western (and Australian) historical record; but these should not force Westerners to stay silent about difficult issues. Freedom of speech includes a freedom to disagree with a neighbour (and such disagreements are more likely to be received if expressed humbly and respectfully).
6. Yet on the other hand, China’s economic growth over the last two decades, and the West’s increasing economic dependence on China, has muted dialogue about human rights concerns. If the promise of economic prosperity has made Western leaders negligent in raising the issues before now, then perhaps the Olympics is the wrong time to begin the discussion.
7. No nation appreciates embarrassment, and the Chinese are hardly unusual in wanting to save face. People in Sydney will understand this: at the time we hoped to welcome the world, we would not have appreciated having our noses rubbed in the failures of our State to care for indigenous people, mentally ill people and prisoners. The ‘goodwill’ of an Olympics might set the scene for future discussions after the athletes have gone home.
8. The application of an Olympic boycott can too easily be seen as a heavy-handed act of self-righteous moralism. Such boycotts may be needed as a last resort, but in this instance, it is hard to see how a boycott will help to create lasting and deep changes to Chinese polity. It may indeed only succeed in creating resentment and animosity toward Western ideas.

Of course some of these suggestions are not really within the reach of the average person. Without underestimating the diplomacy challenges, the Australian Government is well placed to have ongoing discussions with China about human rights in view of our trade relationship and regional interests, and being led by a Mandarin-speaking Prime Minister. If the Olympic spotlight moves Christians and others to care for the oppressed in China, then perhaps the best response is to politely press Australian leaders to continue the dialogue long after the games.

A new revolution, in Christ?

But nothing we have suggested so far suggests how the Lordship of Jesus Christ might make a difference in China.

We have suggested that the fear of mass disorder in China drives heavy-handed policies favouring the collective over individuals. This ‘China syndrome’ is not limited to the Chinese. That kind of polity is a natural and normal way for any group of humans to arrange itself. In European history, Thomas Hobbes suggested that humanity is so nasty and brutish that we must willingly trade away our rights to a strong ruler, who will stop us hurting each other. If the Chinese have done something like that, it is not so odd. But

in contrast, what causes a Western nation to protect individuals and to subject its leaders and its people to a rule of law? It is easy to argue that we are what we are due to the influence of the Lord Jesus over several centuries.

That is, the ongoing message of his rule has set strong cultural limits upon the power given to leaders. Crowds have learnt to respect each other's individuality, because all are equally 'in God's image'. The practice of free speech, free assembly and freedom of conscience have grown from the call upon each person ultimately to reckon with God. The West now tries to forget its origins alongside the Christian gospel; but the knowledge of Christ's Lordship has had an inestimable effect upon good Western government.

Therefore the humble work of Chinese churches, their preachers, and the daily ripple-effect of those who follow Jesus, will all contribute to changing China. Chinese Christians are citizens of heaven who pledge ultimate allegiance to Jesus Christ, not to an earthly nation or structure. They are then freed to speak the truth in love, and to bring injustice into the light. But paradoxically, this knowledge and proclamation will strengthen their civil society rather than weakening it. Over time, the leaders of such a people can relax—while also learning the proper limits of their power.

In these respects, 'freedom of religion' is not just one of many human rights to be protected in China. It promises to become the spring from which a new and better China can take shape.

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Sources/Further Reading:

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