

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune
THE GLOBAL EDITION OF THE NEW YORK TIMES

AFTER THE BEIJING GAMES
What We Learned

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Thursday, September 18, 2008

ATLANTA.

The spectacular and successful 2008 Beijing Olympic Games have given the world a lot to think about. It may be still early to fully assess the impact of the event on China and its future, nonetheless, three messages have emerged.

First, it is hard to overlook the capacity and power of the Chinese state.

Under an autocratic, increasingly corporatist and aristocratic party, the People's Republic has shown how much it can spend for a politically important cause, even if it is, after all, just a sporting event that has been thoroughly commercialized in other places all over the world.

The unparalleled \$43 billion price tag is just the known part of the expenses. By comparison, the last Olympic Games held in the U.S., in 1996 in Atlanta, cost only \$2 billion. To ensure air quality and crowd control, a good chunk of the Chinese economy and society was shut down for two months.

During the Games, hundreds of thousands of security forces were deployed. Many were in "volunteer" uniforms scattered among the athletes and spectators to create a ensure and incident-free show. Nearly half-a-million police cameras using the latest facial recognition technology were installed in a suddenly sparsely populated Beijing. As a consequence, there was no disturbance of any kind - even summer rainstorms were diverted by the determined government. The image of an extraordinarily tranquil and dull Chinese society was as impressive as it was unbelievable.

Second, the Chinese state is very rich but remains fundamentally frightened.

In the first half of this year, the Chinese economy grew about 10 percent - and the government's tax revenue grew nearly 31 percent. In addition, Beijing's banks hold the lion's share of people's massive savings - China has world's second highest savings rate (after Singapore). The highly nontransparent and manipulated Chinese stock market provides another major source of income for the state.

Yet the huge resources Beijing has at its disposal - as part of a scheme called fuguo qiangjun (rich state, strong army) - do not seem to relieve the government from its perennial fear of losing control. Stature and vanity are valued so highly that Beijing seems irrationally nervous and insecure.

To comfort the international community, three parks were designated for demonstrators during the Games. But all 77 applications for demonstration were stifled. Two septuagenarian women who stubbornly wanted to protest over housing disputes were simply sentenced to a labor camp for one year (a sentence that was later commuted). This unmistakably showed the incredible distrust of its own people by a deeply insecure regime.

The handful of flashy protests over Tibet were all staged by foreigners who were quickly detained and deported by the police. It is sad and striking to see a government so rich and powerful dreading the slightest loss of control, even at a time when the people were genuinely going along with it for patriotic reasons.

More broadly, the smooth run of the 2008 Olympic Games reflected the triumph of Western ideas, technology and institutions, not so much the greatness of the regime (as its propaganda machine has tried to insist) or some unique Chinese power that will threaten the world (as some critics have said).

The Games were powered by the resources generated from the new, still much-to-be-improved market economy. Western standards ruled throughout the Games. Foreigners designed the impressive venues and none of the technologies, including the mighty Internet and crowd control equipment used during the games, was invented in the China.

A third message from the Beijing Games, therefore, is this: A tenacious one-party government that tightly controls the world's largest population has been massively and successfully exploiting and employing foreign technology, markets and resources. Indeed, this may be creating a viable alternative to the West and a tough competitor for everyone in the world, leading to a new pattern of world politics.

China has risen a great deal, as the Beijing Games have shown. But Beijing remains a top-heavy, utterly insecure dragon caught in the unavoidable and unfamiliar nets of the market economy at home and abroad. The outcome of this ongoing struggle will ultimately determine what political legacy, if any, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games has for China and the world.

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