

NOVEMBER 2008

AS CHINA PREPARES to take its place as the world's dominant power, it faces confounding obstacles: its insularity and sheer stupidity in delivering the genuine good news about its own progress.

by James Fallows

Their Own Worst Enemy

AFTER TWO YEARS in China, there are still so many things I can't figure out. Is it really true, as is always rumored but never proved, that the Chinese military runs most of the pirate-DVD business—which would in turn explain why that business is so difficult to control? At what point in Chinese culture did it become mandatory for business and political leaders to dye away every gray hair, so that gatherings of powerful men in their 50s and up are seas of perfect pitch-black heads? How can corporations and government agencies invest huge sums producing annual reports and brochures and advertisements in English, yet manifestly never bother to ask a native English speaker whether they've made some howler-style mistake? (Last year, a museum in Shanghai put on a highly publicized exhibit of photos from the Three Gorges Dam area. In front, elegant banners said in six-foot-high letters THE THREE GEORGES.) Why do Beijing taxi drivers almost never have maps—and almost always have their own crates or buckets filling the trunks of their cars when they pick up baggage-laden passengers at the airport? I could go on.

But here is by far the most important of these mysteries: How can official China possibly do such a clumsy and self-defeating job of presenting itself to the world? China, like any big, complex country, is a mixture of goods and bads. But I have rarely seen a governing and “communications” structure as consistent in hiding the good sides and highlighting the bad.

I come across examples every day, but let me start with a publicly reported event. Early this year, I learned of a tantalizing piece of news about an unpublicized government plan for the Beijing Olympics. In a conversation with someone involved in the preparations, I learned of a brilliant scheme to blunt potential foreign criticism during the Games. The Chinese government had drawn up a list of hotels, work spaces, Internet cafés, and other places where visiting journalists and dignitaries were most likely to use the Internet. At those places, and only there, normal “Great Firewall” restrictions would be removed during the Olympics. The idea, as I pointed out in an article about Chinese controls (“[The Connection Has Been Reset](#),” *March Atlantic*), was to make foreigners happier during their visit—and likelier to tell friends back home that, based on what they'd seen on their own computer screens, China was a much more open place than they had heard. This was subtle influence of the sort that would have made strategists from Sun Tzu onward proud.

The scheme displayed a sophisticated insight into outsiders' mentality and interests. It recognized that foreigners, especially reporters, like being able to poke around unsupervised, try harder to see anything they're told is out-of-bounds, and place extra weight on things they believe they have found without guidance. By saying nothing at all about this plan, the government could let influential visitors “discover” how freely information was flowing in China, with all that that

implied. In exchange, the government would give up absolutely nothing. If visiting dignitaries, athletes, and commentators searched for a “Free Tibet” site or found porn that is usually banned in China, what’s the harm? They had seen worse back at home.

When the Olympics actually started, things did not go exactly according to plan. As soon as journalists began checking in at their Olympic hotels, they began complaining about all the Web sites they couldn’t reach. Chinese officials replied woodenly that this was China, and established Chinese procedures must be obeyed: Were the arrogant foreigners somehow suggesting that they were too good to comply with China’s sovereign laws? Unlike the brilliant advance scheme, all this was reported.

After huddling with officials from the International Olympic Committee, who had been touting China’s commitment to free information flow during the Games, the Chinese government quietly reversed its stance. For a few days, controls seemed to have been lifted for Internet users in many parts of Beijing—in my apartment, far from the main Olympic areas, I could get to usually blocked sites, like any BlogSpot blog, without using a Virtual Private Network (VPN). Eventually the controls came back on for every one except users in the special Olympic areas. By then the Chinese government had turned a potential PR masterstroke into a fiasco. Now what the foreign visitors could tell friends back home was that they knew firsthand that China’s Internet is indeed censored, that its government could casually break its promise of free information flow during the Games, and that foreign complaints could bully it back into line.

From the outside, this blunder might not seem noteworthy or surprising, given the dim image of the Chinese government generally conveyed in the Western press. It might not even be thought of as a blunder—rather, as a sign that the government had, for once, been caught trying to sneak out of its commitments and repress whatever it could. To me it was puzzling because of its sheer stupidity: Did they think none of the 10,000 foreign reporters would notice? Did they think there was *anything* to gain?

The government’s decision was more complicated but even more damaging in another celebrated Olympics case, this one the most blatantly Orwellian: the offer to open three areas for “authorized protests” during the Olympics—followed by the rejection of every single request to hold a demonstration, and the arrest of several people who asked. It’s true that even if China is wide-open in many ways, public demonstrations that might lead to organized political opposition are, in effect, taboo. But why guarantee international criticism by opening the zones in the first place? Who could have thought this was a good idea?

Such self-inflicted damage occurs routinely, without the pressure of the Olympics. Whenever a Chinese official or the state-run Xinhua News Agency puts out a release in English calling the Dalai Lama “a jackal clad in Buddhist monk’s robes” or a man “with a human face and the heart of a beast,” it only builds international sympathy for him and members of his “splittist clique.” A special exhibit about Tibet in Beijing’s Cultural Palace of Minorities this year illustrated the blessings of China’s supervision by showing photos of grinning Tibetans opening refrigerators full of beer, and of new factories including a cement plant in Lhasa. Such basic material improvements are huge parts of the success story modern China has to tell. But the exhibit revealed total naïveté in dealing with the complaints about religious freedom made by the “Dalai clique.” It was as if the government had hired *The Onion* as its image consultant.

Let’s assume for the sake of argument that reporters are viewed with suspicion or loathing by the political or business leaders they cover. That doesn’t keep governments in many countries from

understanding the crass value of cultivating the press. Any one with experience in neighboring South Korea, Taiwan, or Japan knows how skillful their business-governmental establishments are at mounting “charm offensives” to make influential foreigners feel cosseted and part of the team. Official China sometimes launches a successful charm offensive on visiting dignitaries. When it comes to dealing with foreign reporters—who after all will do much to shape the outside world’s view of their country—Chinese spokesmen and spinners barely seem to try. Maybe I’m biased; my application for a journalist visa to China was turned down because of “uncertainty” about what I might be looking for in the country (I have been here on other kinds of visas). But China’s press policy seems similar to, say, Dick Cheney’s (if without the purposeful stiff-arming) and reflects the same view—that scrutiny from the Western press is not really necessary. I’m convinced that usually these are blunders rather than calculated manipulation.

This is inept on China’s part. Why do I consider it puzzling? Because of two additional facts I would not have guessed before coming to China: it’s a better country than its leaders and spokesmen make it seem, and those same leaders look more impressive in their home territory.

Almost everything the outside world thinks is wrong with China is indeed a genuine problem. Perhaps not the most extreme allegations, of large-scale forced organ-harvesting and similar barbarities. But brutal extremes of wealth and poverty? Arbitrary and prolonged detentions for those who rock the boat? Dangerous working conditions? Factories that take shortcuts on health and safety standards? Me-first materialism and an absence of ethics? I’ve met people affected by every problem on the list, and more.

But China’s reality includes more than its defects. Most people are far better off than they were 20 years ago, and they are generally optimistic about what life will hold 20 years from now. This summer’s Pew Global Attitudes Project finding that 86 percent of the Chinese public was satisfied with the country’s overall direction—the highest of all the countries surveyed—was not some enforced or robotic consensus. It rings true with most of what I’ve seen in cities and across most of the country’s provinces and autonomous regions, something I wouldn’t have guessed from afar.

Americans are used to the idea that a country’s problems don’t tell its entire story. When I lived in Japan, I had to reassure fearful travelers to America that not every street corner had a daily drive-by shooting and not every passing stranger would beat them up out of bigotry. When foreigners travel or study in America, they usually put the problems in perspective and come to see the offsetting virtues and strengths. For all the differences between modern China and America, most outsiders go through a similar process here: they see that China is a country with huge problems but also one with great strengths and openness.

It’s authoritarian, sure—and you put yourself at great risk if you cross the government in the several areas it considers sacrosanct, from media control to “national security” in the broadest sense. (The closest I have come to trouble with the law was when I stopped to tie my shoe on Chang’an Boulevard, near Tiananmen Square in Beijing—and obliviously put my foot on what turned out to be a low pedestal around the main flagpole at Xinhua Gate, outside the headquarters of the country’s ruling State Council. Three guards rushed at me and pushed me away to end this sacrilege.) But China is full of conflicting trends and impulses, every generalization about it is both true and false, and it is genuinely diverse in a way the Stalin-esque official line rarely conveys.

One other Olympics example: the opening ceremonies paid homage to China’s harmonious embrace of its minority peoples with a giant national flag carried in by 56 children, each dressed in the native costume of one of China’s recognized minority groups, including Tibetans, Mongolians, and

Uighurs. Contrary to initial assurances from Chinese officials, it turned out that every one of the children was from the country's ethnic majority, Han Chinese. This was reminiscent of Western practices of yesteryear, as when Al Jolson wore blackface or the Swedish actor Warner Oland was cast as Charlie Chan in 1930s films. And it was criticized by the Western sensibilities of today.

Another element of the mystery is the deftness gap. Inside the country, China's national leadership rarely seems as tin-eared as it is when dealing with the outside world. National-level democracy might come to China or it might not—ever. No one can be sure. But from the national level down to villages, where local officials are now elected, the government is by all reports becoming accountable in ways it wasn't before. As farmers have struggled financially, a long-standing agricultural tax has been removed. As migrant workers have become an exploited underclass in big cities, *hukou* (residence-permit) rules have been liberalized so that people can get medical care and send their children to school without having to return to their "official" residence back in the countryside. Whenever necessary, the government turns to repression, but that's usually not the first response.

The system prides itself on learning about problems as they arise and relieving social pressure before it erupts. In this regard it learned a lesson earlier this year, when its reaction to the first big natural disaster of 2008 turned into its own version of Hurricane Katrina. Unusual blizzards in central and southern China paralyzed roads and rail lines, and stranded millions of people traveling home for the Chinese New Year holidays; the central government seemed taken by surprise and was slow to respond. That didn't happen with the next disaster, three months later. When the Sichuan earthquake occurred, Premier Wen Jiabao was on an airplane to the stricken area the same afternoon.

So I return to the puzzle: Why does a society that, like America, impresses most people who spend time here project such a poor image and scare people as much as it attracts them? Why do China's leaders, who survive partly by listening to their own people, develop such tin ears when dealing with the outside world? I don't pretend to have a solution. But here are some possible explanations, and some reasons why the situation matters to people other than the misunderstood Chinese.

There is no politer way to put the main problem than to call it "ignorance." Most Americans are parochial, but (surprise!) most Chinese and their leaders are more so. American politicians may not be good at understanding foreign sensitivities or phrasing their arguments in ways likely to be effective around the world, as foreigners have mentioned once or twice in recent years. But collectively they understand that America is part of an ongoing, centuries-long, worldwide experiment and discussion about political systems and human values, and that making their case well matters.

After the 9/11 attacks, America went through a round of "Why do they hate us?" inquiry. Whether or not that brought the United States closer to understanding its problems in parts of the Islamic world, it did represent a more serious effort to understand how the country was seen than anything I have heard of in China. When the Olympic torch relay this spring was plagued by boos and protests over Tibet in places ranging from France to the United States, the reaction at every level of the Chinese system seemed to be not just insult but genuine shock. Most Chinese people were familiar only with the idea that China has always been a generous elder brother to the (often ungrateful) Tibetans. By all evidence, no one in command anticipated or prepared for this ugly response. The same Pew survey that said most Chinese felt good about their country also found that they thought the rest of the world shared their view. That belief is touching, especially considering

how much of China's history is marked by episodes of its feeling unloved and victimized. Unfortunately, it is also wrong. In many of the countries surveyed, China's popularity and reputation were low and falling. According to a report last year by Joshua Cooper Ramo of Kissinger Associates, most people in China considered their country very "trustworthy." Most people outside China thought the country was not trustworthy at all.

"The underlying problem is that very few people in China really understand how foreign opinion works, what the outside world reacts to and why," Sidney Rittenberg told me. Rittenberg is in a position to judge. He came to China with the U.S. Army in 1945 and spent 35 years here, including 16 in prison for suspected disloyalty to Chairman Mao. "Now very few people understand the importance of foreign opinion to China"—that is, the damage China does to itself by locking up those who apply for demonstration permits, or insisting on "jackal" talk.

During the Chinese Communist Party's rise to power and the civil war against Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists through the 1940s, the coterie around Mao knew how to spin the outside world, because they had to. One important goal was what Mao called "roping the whale": keeping the United States from intervening directly on Chiang's side. The future prime minister and foreign minister Zhou Enlai was especially skilled at handling foreigners. "He laid out battle plans and political strategies, in advance, with remarkable clarity," the muckraker Jack Anderson, who was a cub reporter in China, said of Zhou in his memoirs. "These truths made him so believable that a reporter would be inclined to accept his assurances, too, that the Chinese Communists weren't really Communists but just agrarian reformers."

Of course, most official voices of China now have the opposite effect. Their minor, provable lies—the sky is blue, no one wants to protest—inevitably build mistrust of larger claims that are closer to being true. And those are the claims the government most wants the world to listen to: that the country is moving forward and is less repressive and more open than official actions and explanations (or lack of them) make China seem. Many Chinese who have seen the world are very canny about it, and have just the skills government spokesmen lack—for instance, understanding the root of foreign concerns and addressing them not with special pleading ("This is China...") but on their own terms. Worldly Chinese demonstrate this every day in the businesses, universities, and nongovernmental organizations where they generally work. But the closer Chinese officials are to centers of political power, the less they know what they don't know about the world.

Even as the top leadership tries to expand its international exposure and experience, much of the country's daily reality is determined by mayors and governors and police. "It's like the local sheriff in the old days in South Carolina," said Sidney Rittenberg, who grew up there. "He'd say, 'They can talk and talk in Washington, but I'm the law down here.'" Thus one hypothesis for the embarrassment of the "authorized" protest sites during the Olympics: Hu Jintao's vice president and heir apparent, Xi Jinping, was officially in charge of all preparations for the Games; hobnobbing with the IOC, he would see the pay off to China of allowing some people to protest. But the applications went to the local police, who had no interest in letting troublemakers congregate. A similar mix-up may well have led to the embarrassment over whether to open the Internet during the Olympics, and could also explain many of the other fumbles that get so much more attention than the news the government wants to give.

The Communist Party schools that train the country's leadership are constantly expanding their curricula to meet the needs of the times; but for advancement in party ranks what matters is loyalty, predictability, and party-line conformity. The United States saw just how well a similar approach paid off in worldwide respect and effectiveness when it staffed its Embassy in Baghdad's

Green Zone mainly with people who followed the party line in Washington.

The damage China does to itself by its clumsy public presentation is obvious—though apparently not yet obvious enough to its leadership. For outsiders, the central problem is that a country that will inevitably have increasing and perhaps dominant influence on the world still has surprisingly little idea of how the world sees it. That, in turn, raises the possibility of blunders and unnecessary showdowns, and in general the predicament of a new world power stomping around, Gargantua-like, making onlookers tremble. The world has known this predicament before. It is what the previously established powers have feared about America, starting a hundred years ago and with periodic recurrences since then, most recently starting in March of 2003. Maybe that puts America in a good position to help China take this next step.

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