

## ESSAYS ON TIBET

# China, Tibet and the Torch

### Protesters lack the facts of history in railing against the Olympic host

By Ivy Lee  
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As I settled into the bus seat for our trip to San Francisco, the only North American stop of the Olympic torch in its round-the-world relay, excitement and anticipated pleasure seeped through to warm my body chilled by the early morning wind. Five hundred strong, mostly Chinese Americans, were departing in a convoy of buses from the parking lot of the Target on Broadway in Sacramento. We were to be joined by hundreds more from Davis and thousands more who had taken up their places by Justin Herman Plaza in San Francisco. At long last, I thought, the American public will witness the strength of the enthusiasm and support in Sacramento's Chinese American community after weeks of relentless coverage of opposition to the Olympic torch relay, the talk of boycotting the opening ceremonies of the Olympics, and the Games themselves.

On our way to San Francisco, I wistfully yearned for simpler days, days that probably never were, when politics were not mixed with athletics to form the combustible fuel that might consume supporters and protesters alike. The leader of our group cautioned us against having any verbal clashes, not to mention physical conflicts, with protesters; safety was to be our top priority.

As we got off the bus near Pier 39, flags were unfurled, the large orange and the smaller white Olympic flags, the large red flag of China and the red-white-and-blue of the United States. I

swelled with pride of being Chinese American, with the Olympics being held in my country of origin and with the Olympic torch to arrive momentarily in my country by adoption.

Then apprehension swept over me as I saw that the orange Olympic flags blended into the red Chinese flags overwhelming the more sedate and fewer U.S. red-white-and-blues to form a sinuous, wavering red sea against a bright, blue sky. I became concerned that the media and the public would again mistake our ethnic pride for Chinese nationalism.

Surely, becoming American should not exact the cruel price of our giving up the richness of Chinese culture, the wisdom of the old Chinese ways, nor should the emergence of a new identity lead to the total renunciation of the old one. But still I worried, for even in calmer times, when anti-China hysteria is not running high, Chinese Americans are treated as perpetual foreigners, model minorities one day who become potential spies for China the next.

#### It shouldn't be so complex

A white sedan with fluttering Tibetan flags inched by, the riders taunting our group shouting slogans. The car disappeared under a sea of flags as some Davis and Sacramento supporters rushed to confront the protesters with cries of "Liar, Liar!"

Almost immediately, cops appeared with sirens blaring. As the cops ordered the Chinese supporters back onto the curb, I turned over the scene in my mind, briefly despairing how such a complex issue as Tibetan independence could ever be disentangled when emotions run high with conclusions reached before any rational dialogue had taken place.

For the Chinese supporters, it is a matter of secession, Tibet having been part of China for centuries. And for the protesters, it is a case of political repression, Tibetans having lost their freedom of self-determination and religion.

The protesters are, strictly speaking, not liars. They are ignorant of the issue they have made into a crusade, and even of the location of Tibet, as a San Francisco television reporter found out. The reporter approached several protesters at an independence rally for Tibet the day before the torch relay and asked them to point to Tibet on a large map. None of the protesters could correctly locate Tibet. As each pointed to a location on the map, the TV reporter would say, “Wrong.”

This piece of news should set off an alarm that Tibet is mythical as it exists in the Western mind.

The real Tibet, rather than Tibet as Shangri-La, from which the current Dalai Lama fled, was a feudal theocracy, where he served as both king and religious leader, in which church equaled state, and peasants were chattel owned by the monks and nobles.

For this ignorance, the U.S. media bears a lot of responsibility. It has abdicated its primary role to inform, its bias showing through a negative narrative that endlessly parrots the sound bites of the protesters and the Dalai Lama, and in the process amplifying them without much research or analysis.

### Skewed views

The most recent round of negative coverage was precipitated by the March 14 riots in Tibet. For weeks, the media assumed China’s guilt and accused it of massive human rights violations without much credible evidence. True, China did herself no favor by shutting out the foreign media when events in Lhasa got out of hand.

But there were videos from tourists who witnessed the outbreak of the riots, videos that testified to the violence unleashed by Tibetans

against Han and also Hui Chinese, some of whom were burned alive in their shops in fires set by the rioters. Yet the media shed no tears for the Chinese victims, while the United States and the western world cautioned China to be “measured” in her response.

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Another credible source, James Miles, a correspondent for the Economist, who was present at the outbreak of the unrest in Lhasa, not only described what he saw but also analyzed the economic component behind these riots. Would the U.S. government have done differently to restore calm and the rule of the law under similar circumstances? My meandering thoughts were called back to the here and

now as our group leader suggested that we show our brotherly and sisterly affection toward the protesters by proclaiming at the top of our lungs, “Welcome to the Olympics, We love China, We love Tibet, and We love America.”

I have in the past harshly criticized China for many of her policies, her human rights record, her tight control of the press, her re-education “camps,” the death penalty and other issues. But then I also have grave reservations about some of our own government’s actions, such as condoning torture. True, China is not perfect, but neither is the United States; the former is definitely not the monstrous tyrant the media portrays it to be. And in spite of having serious issues with both countries, China and the United States have a special place in my heart.

### An unworkable demand

After a seemingly endless wait, our group got word that the torch relay had been shortened. So we moved en-masse to Pier 29, and then to Pier 24. On our way, I stopped momentarily in front of a peaceable hippie-looking type holding up a small sign that said:

“SF loves China, but China should talk to the Dalai Lama.” But I walked on; the issue was too complicated to be broached in the heat of a demonstration and counterdemonstration.

The assumption that China refuses to and has never talked to the Dalai Lama has no basis in truth. It was at the invitation of Deng Xiaoping in 1979 that rapprochement between China and the Dalai Lama began with his brother, Gyalo Thondup, as his representative. Over the years, the contacts were suspended, then resumed until as recently as 2006. These talks were not widely covered or known in the U.S. press.

Why? I was asked that question again a little later by a reporter. The Dalai Lama’s demand is for autonomy for “Greater Tibet” while China is ready to grant autonomy for the Tibet Autonomous Region.

In China, a multiethnic society with 56 ethnic groups including the Han, much internal migration takes place. As the Han and other ethnic groups have made their way into Tibet over the years, so have Tibetans migrated into other provinces, settled and intermixed with other Chinese.

Of the Dalai Lama’s demand, an editorial from The Hindu, an Indian newspaper, said, “the 2.6 million Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region, (which) constitutes one-eighth of China’s territory, form only 40 percent of the total population of Tibetans in China. The Chinese government makes the perfectly reasonable point that acceptance of the demand for ‘Greater Tibet’ or ‘one administrative entity’ for all 6.5 million ethnic Tibetans means breaking up Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, doing ethnic re-engineering, if not ‘cleansing’, and causing enormous disruption and damage to China’s society and political system. This demand too is ruled out, as any comparable demand to break up States in India would be.”

So China and the Dalai Lama have reached an impasse. In fairness, if the international community were to pressure the

Chinese government to resume the talks, it should also exert equal pressure on the Dalai Lama to give up his demand for a Greater Tibet, which is a non-starter as far as China and the Chinese people are concerned.

### Promise turns to disappointment

An anticlimactic pall fell over us around 2:30 p.m. as we retraced our steps to where we got off the buses, sorely disappointed at a last-minute change in the route of the Olympic torch.

My trip to support the torch relay ended with a riot of thoughts fleeing across my mind, my emotions ranging wildly through a sense of relief, insult, then slowly settling to one of deep sadness.

San Francisco, which had the high privilege and distinct honor of hosting the Olympic flame, shrank from its gallant duty to protect it, enacting a sordid charade by sneaking it out the back door. If I feel insulted, what would be the reaction of the 1.3 billion Chinese as they watched TV coverage of this event?

They were looking forward to welcoming the world into their homes, proud of the strides they have made since China opened its door. Hundreds of millions are eagerly learning English to tell the foreign visitors of the progress they and their country have made, tackling the environmental and other problems with a “can-do” attitude to provide the best setting for the world athletes to compete in.

Would this be seen as a re-enactment of the national humiliations inflicted by foreign powers in the past century and a half, turning the Chinese people and their government inward, closing the door once again? The voice of the protesters had trumped the voice of the supporters, loudly drowning it in a chorus surely to raise the tensions between the United States and China.

Sadly, I see the fragile bridge Chinese Americans had attempted to build between their country of origin and their country of adoption for tolerance, understanding and better relations,

collapsing under the weight of the ignorance of the person on the street, the bias of the media coverage, the eagerness of politicians to condemn without supporting facts, and the powerlessness of Chinese Americans in the onslaught of such attacks.

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