

2008 Summer Olympic Games

Beijing 2008:

A brilliantly colored window to understanding

By Ivy Lee

Special to *The Bee* • August 17, 2008 • Story appeared in the CALIFORNIA FORUM section

The coming-out party is over.

Sitting in front of the TV, I forgot for the moment the cacophony arising from various quarters to condemn China for the "broken" promises it made to win its Olympic bid in 2001. Forgotten momentarily was the media coverage that revolved for weeks around Beijing's smoggy skies. China does have a problem with environmental degradation. Whether seven years of hard work could reverse the pollution accumulated in its headlong rush to industrialize is questionable. But China has the hubris to promise, and judged it must be on those terms.

So the media flooded the public with images of the murky soup Beijing calls sky, while the fact the Chinese government has planted thousands of trees and permanently closed or relocated many polluting factories was mentioned as an afterthought. Doubt greeted China's efforts to seed the clouds in the hope that rain would clear the air. The impact of such media coverage was abundantly illustrated in the four U.S. cyclists who sported masks when deplaning in Beijing, apparently unwilling to chance a sniff of the poisonous mix even indoors.

A few days before the cyclists landed, the Climate Group, a tax-exempt organization in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, issued a little-noticed press release to report that

China "has a strong and comprehensive low-carbon policy framework in place." The country "is overtaking more developed economies in ... creating green-collar jobs and leading development of critical low-carbon technologies.

The issue of China's human rights abuses also faded in the glare of the Opening



Ceremonies, although 10 days before the Beijing Olympics were to begin, the U.S. House of Representatives passed HR 1370. The resolution calls on China to end human rights abuses and to ensure the Games are so conducted as to honor "the Olympic traditions of freedom and openness."

Organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch claimed that awarding the Olympics to China did not bring about a more open, freer society, as promised, but resulted in more repression in the lead-up to the Games.

It is true China is still a repressive authoritarian regime. But if a decent living standard and freedom from want are the most fundamental of human rights, then the government has lifted millions more out of poverty since 2001. Consequently, a recent Pew Global Attitude Research poll found that 86 percent of the Chinese are satisfied with the country's direction as opposed to 48 percent in 2002, 82 percent said the economy is good while only 52 percent thought so in 2002.

Since 2005 the Chinese government has also started subsidizing all the fees children from the country-side must pay to attend school: fees on books and dormitory and on tuition beyond grade school level. By raising the country's educational level and living standards, China has set itself on an irreversible course of change, leading, many hope, to broadening freedoms. Which brings me back to my bedazzled state, as credits for the opening ceremonies rolled on the TY screen. While disappointing human rights activists, journalists and Western governments alike in the pre-Games period, China exceeded expectations in the show it put on for the Opening Ceremonies, a show as spectacular in its execution as it was earnest in the message it wished to convey.

The message runs through a replay of 5,000 years of Chinese contributions to civilization, artfully presented in a seamless blending of high and low technology and a bewitching swirl of motion, color and form.

It underlies the unfolding of the virtual scroll, the Confucian scholars waging bamboo scrolls to chant adages such as "within the four seas, all are brothers" and the depiction of the evolutionary versions of the character "harmony" on the virtual scroll. Harmony means being one with nature, as seen in the Tai Chi exercise. Like a dove, it brings peace to the children of the global village. The message is driven home that China, valuing harmony, extends it to the world in brotherhood and peace.



To the Western sophisticate, the message may be either corny or the cynical manipulation of a repressive regime out to stifle dissent. To me the character possesses an ancient magic from my childhood days, in which I learned that peace is achievable primarily through harmony.

During the show, my eyes welled up momentarily when the children, wearing costumes of the 56 ethnic groups that make up China, walked in, holding horizontally a Chinese flag. Seldom do we recall China's multiethnic nature, with, besides the majority Han and the Tibetans and Uighurs, 53 other ethnic groups coexisting under one nation.

Toward its minorities China has a comparatively liberal policy. As an example, its one-child policy applies to the dominant Han only, not to the minorities. Unless intermarriage

is forbidden, the minorities' access to higher education in Han universities blocked, and mobility denied with the Hans and other minorities restricted to certain geographic areas, a degree of ethnic homogenization will gradually occur. Regrettable as it may be to many, it is, however, not cultural genocide.

I was puzzled when the flag-bearing Yao Ming strode in beside a little boy named Lin Hao in the Parade of Nations. Then I learned that during the Sichuan earthquake in May, little Lin managing to free himself from the rubble and returned twice to rescue other victims before he searched for his family. When asked why he would return on his own, he replied it was his responsibility to look after the safety of his classmates. Therefore, little Lin walked tall and proud, unfazed by 90,000 cheering spectators, for has he not faced more daunting challenges and made the right decision? Such, I hope, represents the face and future of China.

As the show concluded, I was sufficiently under the sway of the medium and the message to believe for one moment, as one world, we could indeed reach for the same dream of harmony. Thus steeled against comments on China's "gold medal culture" and proud of all Olympic athletes' single-minded pursuit of gold, I shouted to my darkened TV screen, "Let the Games begin!"

###

Ivy Lee, a Chinese American, is a retired sociology professor at California State University, Sacramento.