

## **Human Rights in China: 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics**

**By Allison Welch**

China's human rights record has been the subject of intense scrutiny. Therefore, when China was chosen to host the 2008 Summer Olympics, the decision was predictably controversial. There were calls for boycotts of the opening ceremony by many international actors, such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and an assortment of political figures. Institutions such as the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom argued that boycotting the games would bring critical attention to China's troubled human rights record, which would ultimately provoke Beijing to alter its controversial policies. Others argued that boycotting the games would only serve to intensify China's human rights abuses by unifying the Chinese government in the face of international hostility. This paper examines the human rights climate leading up to the Olympic Games, the Chinese government's reaction to protests and boycotts, and the outcome of the controversy.

### **Pre-Games Human Rights Concerns**

Perhaps the most common accusations against China regarding its human rights record concern its occupation of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. After decades of dismissing Tibetan declarations of independence, Chinese troops invaded and seized control of the region in 1950. Although the Chinese government asserts that the human rights situation in Tibet has greatly improved in recent years, many Tibetan groups and non-governmental organizations insist that it remains intolerable, with blatant and persistent violations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) continuing to occur. Without recourse, the Tibetans are denied the right to self-determination, freedom of speech, assembly, movement, and expression. Attempts at protest are quickly extinguished by the Chinese police, typically with excessive force. Tibetans also have claimed that their heritage has been endangered by governmental incentives for settlers of Han Chinese origin to relocate to Tibet. All of these issues gave rise to pro-Tibet protests and demonstrations leading up to the 2008 Olympics.

Chinese control over the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is the subject of similar criticism. Although the territory is claimed and controlled by Chinese forces, the Uyghurs have been asserting their independence for decades, and they have often been met with harsh punishment from Beijing. Much of the aggression between Han Chinese forces and Uyghur nationalists is said to be ethnically or religiously based, which compounds the self-determination issue. Uyghur separatists have resorted to violence in the name of independence since the 1960s. In response, the United Nations and the United States have joined China in labeling the Uyghurs' East Turkestan Islamic Movement a terrorist organization. As the 2008 Summer Olympics approached, separatist groups seized upon the increased international attention, staging protests, riots, and demonstrations, both internationally and within China.

In addition to China's domestic policy, its foreign policy was also the subject of intense debate in the years preceding the Olympics, particularly in relation to Sudanese Darfur. A United Nations arms embargo prohibits foreign nations from militarily assisting either side of the conflict, but widespread reports implicated China in providing small arms, armored trucks, fighter jets, and pilot training to the Sudanese government. Critics believe this trade is linked to the strong economic ties

between China and Sudan. China buys most of Sudan's oil exports. China also has supported other authoritarian regimes with poor human rights records, notably Myanmar. In defiance of international calls for sanctions, China has provided approximately \$1 billion in foreign investment to Myanmar, supporting its highly repressive military junta. In the years leading up to the 2008 Summer Olympics, such controversial foreign relations were criticized by human rights organizations.

In its original bid to host the Olympic Games, Beijing promised to provide foreign journalists with complete freedom to report from within China. However, as the Games approached, journalists attempting to cover anti-Olympics protests were detained and deported. Chinese human rights activists residing in Beijing were arrested or removed from the capital for the duration of the Games, including internationally famous activists such as Hu Jia. Coverage of negative events taking place in Tibet or Xinjiang was prohibited. Despite Chinese promises to allow free and unregulated Internet access to foreign reporters, websites such as Amnesty International remained blocked. Although China agreed to issue protest permits and maintain designated protest zones throughout the capital, no protest applications were approved. Several applicants went missing or were detained. Other applications were withdrawn, rejected, suspended, or vetoed. When groups arrived at protest sites without permits, they were arrested.

Soon after winning the bid to host the Olympic Games, Beijing began the process of demolishing and relocating homes to make room for the planned Olympic Village. By some estimates, over 300,000 people were forcibly relocated for the purposes of Olympic construction. Many of these residents applied for the aforementioned protest permits that were ultimately denied. Without any official recourse, one man named Baoguan Wang even burned himself to death while being evicted from his home. Although the Chinese government provided relocation assistance to its displaced citizens, most experienced a decline in their living conditions.

### **Protests and Boycotts**

As the 2008 Summer Olympics approached, it became evident that Beijing would not fulfill all the promises of reform it had made to the International Olympic Committee. In response, many prominent figures called for a boycott of the opening ceremony—or, in some extreme cases, of the entire Olympic Games. French President Nicolas Sarkozy joined several other officials from the European Union in exploring the possibility of not attending the opening ceremony unless there was an end to violence in Tibet, an openness to dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama, and the release of political prisoners. Steven Spielberg, who was initially hired as an artistic adviser to the Olympics, stepped down from his position in February 2008. His resignation statement specifically condemned China's indirect military presence in Sudanese Darfur and their refusal to pressure Khartoum to end the conflict. Calls for boycotts were echoed by organizations such as the International Campaign for Tibet, Reporters Without Borders, and Students for a Free Tibet.

Despite its status as a symbol of international unity, the Olympic torch encountered anti-Chinese protests as it traversed the world on its way to Beijing. During the initial torch lighting ceremony in Athens, two members of Reporters Without Borders rushed the stadium field, waving black flags. For the torch, this marked the beginning of a tumultuous journey. In San Francisco, London, and Paris, police officers created a "human shield" around the torch to protect it from thousands of protesters. Despite this, the torch was momentarily extinguished by protesters in both

London and Paris. The planned route through Pakistan was altered due to fear of militant interference. Protests surrounding the torch's journey were also reported in Kazakhstan, Turkey, Argentina, India, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam.

### **Aftermath**

Ultimately, the call for boycotts went largely unanswered. Despite persistent criticism, influential politicians (including the United States President George W. Bush) decided to attend the Games. Many politicians who had planned to boycott the Games did not. Nine of twenty-seven European Union leaders attended the opening ceremonies, including the heads of Slovakia, Cyprus, and the Netherlands. Others adhered to the boycott for the duration of the opening ceremonies, but attended other celebrations and sporting events throughout the duration of the Olympics. Human rights activists who had hoped for a politically effective boycott were, for the most part, disappointed.

Some scholars have argued that the controversy and calls for boycotts served to unite the Chinese people. According to several studies, most Chinese citizens believe that the international media is biased in favor of the Tibetan cause. Furthermore, the Chinese government's indignation over the international dispute may have helped to unite the people of China and justify a continuation of Chinese policy. Long before Beijing's selection for the 2008 Olympic Games, human rights groups, national governments, and other foreign critics had voiced their disapproval of human rights violations taking place in China. Despite constant calls for China to comply with human rights legislation, Beijing has not issued a significant response. Although calls for boycotts and protests might have resonated with an already sympathetic population, their potential for lasting change in China has proven to be very limited.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Aaronson, Susan Ariel. 2007. "On Righting Trade: Human Rights, Trade, and the 2008 Elections." *World Policy Journal* 24 (4): 19-28.

Annotation: The article analyzes the implications surrounding United States President George W. Bush's decision to attend the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. According to the author, Bush's attendance raises questions about when and how the United States government should link its trade policies and human rights objectives to China. The author details how the Chinese government has implemented repressive measures, such as jailing human rights activists, denying religious freedom, and undermining the labor rights of its citizens. The author appears to believe that President Bush's acceptance of the Chinese invitation was highly inappropriate under the political circumstances.

Alter, Jonathan. 2008. "Boycott Opening Ceremonies." *Newsweek*, April 21

Annotation: In this article, the author provides his opinion on calls to boycott the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. The article includes a brief reflection on China's human rights record,

particularly its controversial relationship with Sudan. The author argues that, as a rising international power, China should have a moral obligation to humanitarian leadership. He feels that China's relationship with Sudan in light of the Darfur conflict demonstrates irresponsible global leadership. Furthermore, he believes this issue can and should be addressed by boycotting the Olympic Games. The author also discusses how a boycott might affect Chinese nationalism, potentially causing Chinese citizens to question their government's human rights policies.

Black, David R. and Shona Bezanson. 2004. "The Olympic Games, Human Rights, and Democratisation: Lessons from Seoul and Implications for Beijing." *Third World Quarterly* 25 (7): 1245-1261.

Annotation: In this article, the authors speculate on potential political messages for the impending 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. They discuss how the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988 ushered in a new era of political strategy, bringing new attention to South Korea's democratization and "western-style liberalization." In comparing the two Olympic Games, the authors discuss the potential for addressing China's contemporary human rights situation. The tone of the article is optimistic, implying that the Olympics can serve as a helpful catalyst for illuminating international differences.

Black, David R. and Janis Van Der Westhuizen. 2004. "The Allure of Global Games for 'Semi-Peripheral' Polities and Spaces: A Research Agenda." *Third World Quarterly* 25 (7): 1195-1214.

Annotation: This article provides a general overview of what it means to host global games. At first, the authors examine the various implications of hosting events such as the Olympics. On one hand, events like the Olympics provide hosting nations with a unique opportunity to showcase their culture, history, and national pride. They can be ideal for the purpose of increasing national unity. On the other hand, events like the Olympics are also phenomenal "marketing opportunities" in a more economic sense. The authors question the system by which host cities are chosen, raising questions about inherent inequality, development, and political liberalization. Essentially, they argue that the countries that could most benefit from the economic and social perks of the Olympics are the ones least likely to have a chance to host.

Chepesiuk, Ron. 2002. "Built Environment: Beijing Goes for the Olympic Green." *Environmental Health Perspectives* 110 (9): A512.

Annotation: In contrast to Beijing's critics, the author of this article praises the Chinese government for its progress on environmental issues prior to the 2008 Olympic Games. The author cites several reliable sources addressing the environmental conditions in China, illustrating how Chinese population growth has contributed to severe environmental problems. He goes on to argue that China has made exemplary progress in addressing those issues prior to the 2008 Olympic Games. He implies that the Olympics served as a catalyst to accelerate Beijing's environmental consciousness. Although it is short, this article provides a refreshing contrast to more critical accounts of China's preparation for the Olympics.

Dittmer, Lowell. 2001. "Chinese Human Rights and American Foreign Policy: A Realist Approach." *The Review of Politics* 63 (3): 421-459.

Annotation: The author of this article provides valuable background information concerning the United States' position on Chinese human rights. Particularly after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, the United States has had some difficulty addressing China's human rights record. The author argues that the United States has been trying to approach an idealist issue through realist means, which has ultimately been detrimental. For example, the Clinton Administration's attempts to use trade policy to rebuke China's human rights policies were not successful. However, the author notes that idealist measures have been similarly ineffective. For example, sanctions by international organizations have not had a significant effect. This has interesting implications when it comes to various political leaders' boycott of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

Economy, Elizabeth C. and Adam Segal. 2008. "China's Olympic Nightmare: What the Games Mean for Beijing's Future." *Foreign Affairs* July/August.

Annotation: In this article, Elizabeth Economy and Adam Segal address some of Beijing's inconsistencies when planning for the 2008 Olympic Games. They discuss how China was eager to use the Games to illustrate its political and cultural strengths, and how this was evident in the spectacular displays it produced. However, they focus upon China's failure to address some critical shortcomings. The Olympic torch relay was used as an example. Intended to put a spotlight on the Games, the 2008 relay generated mass protests in response to Chinese policies on Tibet, Xinjiang and the Uighurs, Sudan, the environment, trade, journalistic freedom, and a host of other issues. The authors note that China attempted to quell the protests within their own borders, but it was difficult to quiet the dissatisfied international community. They argue that by neglecting to respond to their adversaries, China acted irresponsibly as an Olympic host. The article is a good general overview of the criticism surrounding the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

Gallagher, Mary. 2005. "China in 2004: Stability above All." *Asian Survey* 45 (1): 21-32.

Annotation: In this article, several of the challenges facing China in 2004 are discussed. The author illuminates numerous struggles that China faced throughout the year, particularly as these issues relate to its social stability. Economic and political challenges seem to have replaced the SARS fears of the previous year, but the author argues that they are no less significant. The Chinese government has instituted stricter policies surrounding both its economy and its political hold on its constituents, but its restrictions on free dissent have caused feelings of social unease throughout the country and the rest of the international community. Highly critical in tone, this article condemns the Chinese government for its restrictive policies and argues that the government must adopt a more compassionate development model.

Glaser, Bonnie. 2004. "U.S.-China Relations: A Familiar Pattern: Cooperation with a Dash of Friction." *Comparative Connections* 6 (1).

Annotation: In this article, Bonnie Glaser examines a meeting between United States and Chinese diplomats. The agenda for this meeting was diverse, covering a myriad of bilateral security and political issues. Relations with North Korea, Iraq, Libya, Iran, and Taiwan were discussed. One topic of particular importance was the United States' decision to file a case against China with the World Trade Organization condemning the Chinese human rights record. This highly politicized move marked the first time the United States took action against China for its human rights policies. As the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games approached, the criticism addressed at this meeting paved the way for additional protests. With extensive emphasis on economic details of bilateral security issues, this article provides a unique background perspective.

———. 2008. "U.S.-China Relations: Bilateral Stability, but Challenges on China's Borders." *Comparative Connections* 10 (1).

Annotation: This article addresses several problems within China that have caught international attention. For example, the author describes protests that have taken place within the past several years in Tibet, and how those protests have spilled over into neighboring Chinese provinces with Tibetan populations. The current status of China's presence in Taiwan is also examined. In contrast, the author illustrates some instances of government responsiveness to the needs of the Chinese people, such as its handling of extreme winter weather in the beginning of 2008. A sizable portion of the article discusses China's status as a "go-between" for North Korea and the international community. Although some of these issues appear to be domestic in nature, the author argues that they are highly politicized throughout the international community. The United States' position is noted on each issue.

———. 2008. "U.S.-China Relations: Chock-full of Dialogue: SED, Human Rights, and Security." *Comparative Connections* 10 (2).

Annotation: This article is a general overview of the U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED) of 2006. These biannual meetings provide officials from the United States and China with the opportunity to discuss critical shared issues pertaining to trade. The 2006 meeting marked the fourth round of talks. Several topics were addressed, including managing financial and macroeconomic cycles, developing human capital, the benefits of trade and open markets, enhancing investment, and advancing joint opportunities for cooperation in energy and the environment. The authors note that the tone of the fourth round was exceptionally cooperative. It is relevant to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games in the context of some long-term environmental agreements. As the 2008 Games approached, these agreements were referenced as counterarguments to environmental protesters, as they illustrate the United States' awareness and acceptance of China's environmental situation. Primarily, however, this piece provides a detailed account of trade issues concerning both the United States and China.

Goldstein, Evan R. "Boycott Beijing?" 2008. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54 (33): B4.

Annotation: This article consists of quotations concerning public calls for boycotts of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. In the introduction, the author gives a brief overview of some of the human rights abuses taking place throughout Chinese territory, particularly the crackdowns on anti-government groups in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. The author includes quotations from George Washington University political science professor Henry Farrell, "New Yorker" staff writer George Packer, and "Financial Times" China bureau chief Richard McGregor, among others. The quotes represent a broad spectrum of opinions on the topic of a boycott, providing a variety of valuable viewpoints.

Gvosdev, Nikolas. 2008. "Diplomatic Games." *American Conservative* 7 (8): 4.

Annotation: The article provides a brief overview of relations between the United States and China leading up to the 2008 Olympic Games. The author reviews the various politicians and activists that have called upon President George W. Bush to boycott the opening ceremonies in Beijing, including Senator Hillary Clinton and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. He also mentions several European leaders who have already made the decision to boycott the Games. The author cites anti-Tibetan Chinese policy as the primary reason for the boycotts.

Jin, Shi. 2008. "On the Illegality of Politicalizing Beijing Olympics in the Realm of International Human Rights Law." *Chinese Journal of International Law* 7 (3): 771.

Annotation: This article was written as a response to calls to boycott the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The author, Shi Jin, is a self-described Chinese national defending China's human rights record. In particular, the author states that the international media portrayed Beijing's involvement in Sudanese Darfur unfairly. The author alleges that many of these accusations were outright fabricated, such as the claim that China was intentionally fueling the Sudanese genocide, and insists that China has been behaving in a legal and humane manner. Furthermore, the author questions whether it is fair to use issues of international law as political propaganda in the context of the Olympic Games. The author asserts that the Games should be more apolitical in nature, focused upon athletic prowess instead of interstate conflict.

Jones, Quincy. 2008. "Change Through Participation." *Billboard*, July 19.

Annotation: Quincy Jones is a self-described "culture and art consultant" for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. In this article, he reflects on his personal decision to attend and participate in the Olympic Games, despite the international controversy. He argues that he decided to participate in the Games despite China's role in Sudan. He discusses his opportunity to meet with an unnamed Chinese official, who assured him that his humanitarian concerns would be addressed. He also mentions the Chinese government's

rapid response to a recent earthquake in Sichuan Province. He seems to question whether the calls for boycotting the Games are from informed individuals who have “done their homework.”

MacLeod, Calum. 2009. “Beijing Games Leave a Two-Sided Legacy.” *USA Today* (April 16): 2C.

Annotation: This article provides a brief overview of the human rights situation in China, a year after Beijing hosted the 2008 Olympic Games. The author interviewed a number of Chinese citizens concerning their opinion of the Games’ legacy. Several Chinese respondents indicated that they appreciated the Games, specifically citing its legacies of national unity and cultural strength. Some added that the environmental situation in the country has greatly improved. However, other respondents, including a spokesperson for Amnesty International, stated that the Chinese human rights situation has remained grim. Providing only a brief analysis, this article is an accessible overview of the human rights situation in China a year after the Olympics.

Mullman, Jeremy, Claude Brodesser-Akner, and Alice Z. Cuneo. 2008. “Sponsors Feel Some Heat as Torch Protests Mount.” *Advertising Age* 79 (15): 3-73.

Annotation: The article reports on the reactions of advertisers for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing in response to human rights issues in China. The author states that marketers are facing increasing pressure to be clear about human rights issues and to be able to take a stand on various issues. A survey reveals that a majority of American respondents do not believe that Olympic sponsors should be boycotted.

“Olympic Flame Out.” 2008. *Nation* (April 17).

Annotation: The author discusses the political underpinnings of the Olympic Games. The author notes that the relay of the Olympic torch was devised for the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a symbol of Nazi superiority and suggests that China hopes to use the 2008 Olympics in Beijing for national promotion. The author comments that some world leaders may boycott the opening ceremonies of the Olympics to protest Chinese policies, and suggests that multinational companies would be a more effective target for boycotts.

“Only 9 of 27 EU leaders present at Olympic opening ceremony.” 2008. *Tibetan Review* 43 (9): 31-32.

Annotation: The article was written after the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. The author reports that nine of the twenty-seven leaders of the European Union member states were present at the opening ceremony. The author states that the failure of other European Union leaders to join the event was an expression of disapproval by their governments over the human rights conflict between China and Tibet. Among the heads of state present at the ceremony were the presidents of Slovakia, Cyprus, and the Netherlands.

Peruzzi, Marc. 2008. “Let the Games Begin Without Us.” *Outside*, June.

Annotation: The author reflects on the 2008 Olympic Games being held in Beijing. He believes that China should not have been chosen as the venue for the Olympics in light of its human rights violations, and he questions why the decision was originally made. He goes on to urge political figures, athletes, and spectators alike to voice their objections to China's suppressive actions. He argues that viewers should boycott the broadcasting of the Olympics to demonstrate their disapproval of China's anti-Tibetan policies.

Stolberg, Sheryl Gay. 2008. "Bush to Attend Opening of Beijing Games." *New York Times* (July 4).

Annotation: This article was written shortly after the White House announced that President George W. Bush would attend the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games in Beijing. The author seeks to explore some of the virulent criticism surrounding this controversial decision. She briefly explains the international political symbolism surrounding attendance at the Olympic Games. Human rights advocates had hoped that President Bush would join European leaders in boycotting the games after China's crackdown on anti-government Tibetan groups. The author also touches upon China's unique relationship with Sudan and the resulting disapproval growing in the international community. There is little attention in the article afforded to the reasoning behind the White House's decision.

Wachman, Alan M. 2001. "Does the Diplomacy of Shame Promote Human Rights in China?" *Third World Quarterly* 22 (2): 257-281.

Annotation: This article is an overview of the international response to China's human rights record. The author discusses how human rights groups, nations, and other foreign critics have continually voiced their disapproval concerning human rights violations taking place in China. He discusses how these parties have attempted to force China to comply with "international norms," without any significant response from Beijing. According to the author, these attempts have actually assisted China in cultivating a certain national pride. In essence, he suggests that the Chinese government's indignation has served to unite the people of China and thus permit human rights abuses to continue. He concludes by stating that the commonly used "diplomacy of shame" approach is ultimately counterproductive. This piece is very relevant to discussions pertaining to China's international presence, particularly its role as an Olympic Games host in 2008.

Young, Christopher. 2008. "Olympic Boycotts: Always Tricky." *Dissent* 55 (3): 67-72.

Annotation: In this article, the author examines the history of boycotts at the Olympic Games in response to calls for boycotts against the 2008 Games in Beijing. He discusses the events which led to the proposed (but unsuccessful) boycott of the 1936 Olympics held in Nazi-controlled Germany. The author also examines the United States' non-participation in the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games, as well as Russia's retaliatory boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. This article provides interesting background information, putting the 2008 Olympic boycotts into historical focus.

Zakaria, Fareed. 2008. "Don't Feed China's Nationalism." *Newsweek*, April 21.

Annotation: Fareed Zakaria is a prominent reporter for CNN. In this article, he offers his views on China's relationship with Tibet and the potential effect of a 2008 Olympic Games boycott. He provides some background concerning China's attitude toward Tibet and the Dalai Lama, noting some contrasts between other dictatorships. In particular, he points out that the majority of Chinese citizens reportedly have little sympathy for the Tibetan cause. He argues that these circumstances would make it difficult for a boycott to have a significant impact on the Tibetan issue. Although a boycott may have had an impact on an already sympathetic population, he feels that a boycott under these circumstances would only make the Tibetan situation worse. He continues to stress that negotiations between the two sides would be more helpful than a boycott by world leaders and spectators; however, he notes that this is an unlikely possibility in the near future.