

## REPORTING THE OLYMPIC YEAR

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Thank you for giving me this opportunity to talk a little about what it is like to work as a journalist in China as a successor to the man to whom this lecture is dedicated. When George Morrison was a correspondent for my newspaper, *The Times*, China was a country on the cusp of wrenching change. Today, we are undergoing a different kind of transformation. In this last year, to use what has become a time-honoured cliché, China was getting all dressed up for its "coming-out party". I will argue that, as part of this process, the Communist Party had to choose what face it would present to the world, as well as to its own people. I will discuss how it assessed whether the Games presented an opportunity to change—not change along the lines of South Korea's leap towards democracy after the Seoul Olympics, but some small shift—and how the nature of its Communist rulers dictated its behaviour and its reactions to events. I will look at its calculation that modest tactical concessions over policy—towards the Dalai Lama or Darfur—must take second place to strategic choices made by the Party rulers to retain tight control, be it of the Internet or of their temporary protest parks: how they judged that ultimately the West would lose interest in the debate; how they reasoned that, despite what they called the "white noise" (*zayin*) surrounding human rights issues, the international community would, in the end, be dazzled and distracted by the façade of Beijing's shiny new buildings. The "wow" factor would win out.

### **Concessions: to bow or not to bow**

Chinese rulers ceased to demand the kowtow from their subjects after the last imperial dynasty was overthrown in 1911., but the idea and the metaphor of the kowtow, or *ke tou* (literally, "to knock one's head") lingers, exactly a century after the last child-emperor began his brief and tragic reign in 1908.

Many have observed that head dipping has seldom been as important as it was in the year of the Beijing Olympics. Indeed, there has been an awful lot of tactical genuflecting—as opposed to strategic abasement—over the last 12 months, not only in unspoken demands by Chinese authorities of visitors coming from afar but even performed by the leadership itself. The gesture is a metaphorical one in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but Chinese and foreigners alike see it as a potential means to try to get what they want, or at least to avoid what they don't.

This brings me to the first supplicant to the imperial court who refused to perform the kowtow. The person concerned was my distant ancestor, one Earl Macartney, sent by the British throne on an ambassadorial and trade mission to the court of the Qianlong emperor. Lord George Macartney arrived in the Chinese capital in 1793 to seek trade concessions, but to kowtow was a genuflection too far in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for a minor aristocrat on a major mission representing his Britannic Majesty George III. Macartney declined to prostrate himself before the Chinese ruler. After protracted negotiations, a compromise was reached whereby the first non-tribute envoy to meet an emperor would go down on one knee, the same obeisance he would make to his own monarch. The compromise made little difference to the success of a venture aimed at prising open China's doors to foreign trade: the court had decided even before the British plenipotentiary set foot on Chinese soil that Macartney was to be sent home with due honour and etiquette, face intact but, ultimately, empty-handed.

It may seem a stretch to talk of the importance of the kowtow when it comes to Communist Party leaders who have just invested unknown billions to make China only the third country to succeed in a spacewalk, not to mention the sums spent to ensure the success of the Olympics, but that currying of favour began many years before a volcano of fireworks erupted to light up the Beijing sky to mark the opening of the Games on 8 August. The origin lay at least seven years earlier when the International Olympic Committee awarded the games to China. For Beijing this was the fulfilment of a dream first enunciated a century earlier. The triumph did not come without conditions, however.

China made a string of promises during the process of securing the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympiad, not the least being the claim that giving the games to Beijing would help China to improve its human rights record. Wang Wei, then secretary-general of the Beijing Olympic Bid Committee, said that China was committed to change. "We are confident that the games coming to China not only promote our economy but also enhance all social conditions, including education, health and human rights", he declared. Moreover, he said, "We will give the media complete freedom to report when they come to China".

Thus, in the process of preparing for the Games, Beijing began to make concessions. Detailed plans were drafted for how best to reduce the suffocating pollution that hangs over the capital for much of the year. Decades-old rules restraining the foreign media from reporting freely across China were to be lifted. Previously, regulations had stipulated that journalists required permission to travel anywhere outside the city in which they were based—and that they must apply at least 10 days in advance. In addition, no one in China was allowed to be interviewed without the permission of the authorities—theoretically, that even included foreigners.

By the early 2000s these rules were honoured more in the breach than the observance, but on 1 December 2006 the Foreign Ministry announced that the constraints would be suspended from 1 January 2007 until 17 October 2008—last

Friday. And, literally at the final minute, the Foreign Ministry called a midnight news conference on that, as the freedoms expired, to announce that they would become permanent. This may be the one tangible legacy of the games—at least in the short-term.

There was much speculation: was this to be the dawn of a new era? Would the Olympics force the Communist Party to introduce unwelcome changes—and then to honour them?

It was going to be difficult but not excessively painful for the Party and municipal authorities to clean the Beijing air and to improve health care. Building the spectacular venues on time was never going to be an issue in a country where the government had access to unlimited numbers of migrant workers eager to earn a living. Government by decree would, despite occasional doubts, make all that quite certain. Media freedoms, open access to information and greater respect for human rights, however, are more delicate areas where the government prides itself on its control. To make concessions and then to maintain them in a way expected by the international community required a very different approach.

Initially, the authorities must have been surprised at what happened when the restrictions on journalists were lifted early this year. Nothing—at least nothing that they would regard as “bad”. State media reported with delighted pride when the freedoms went into effect in January, even describing how the foreign media had rushed to seize the opportunity. The Reuters news agency had reported on New Year’s Day from Hohhot in Inner Mongolia without restrictions, the government’s Xinhua News Agency said. Yes, there were hiccoughs along the way. *The Economist* correspondent found himself detained by officials when he toured one of the AIDS villages in central Henan Province, but a call to the Foreign Ministry soon sorted that out. The village chief shook hands, apologised and let him continue his interviews. There were other similar cases.

Only the status of Tibet, of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, was a little unclear. At first journalists such as Richard Spencer of the *Daily Telegraph* were able to travel there freely, but then others discovered that it was still out of bounds. Tibet was a grey area. Was special permission needed? Was it simply excluded from the new freedoms? Did it depend on whether the journalist got caught or was too brazen in his reporting?

These may seem minor issues, but they were issues that nonetheless raised doubts about the commitments China had made. The façade that China was showing to the world was that of a nascent superpower in control and relaxed, with preparations ahead of schedule. By early 2008, all the indications seemed to herald a show of sporting might and Communist efficiency. Would this be a combination to give the Party the confidence to let some air into the system? Just maybe, this huge event, a moment in history for which China had yearned for a century, could usher in real change.

However, a minor incident, one barely worth a paragraph in any newspaper, changed the view of any Western observers who harboured such expectations. On 6 August, almost a year to the day before the Games were due to open, police detained a group of foreign journalists. They were at a news conference organized by Reporters Without Borders outside the headquarters of the Beijing Olympic Organising Committee (BOCOG) in the heart of the capital. It could have been seen as a slightly manufactured incident—a few foreigners covering a few other foreigners on a Beijing street getting themselves into trouble—but the police response was revelatory. They prevented journalists from leaving and interrogated some for several hours, accusing them of taking part in an illegal demonstration.

I had wondered if I had been too hasty in assuming that, far from paving the way for a relaxation of state control, the risk was always that China would revert to the strict control that I remembered from the 1980s. Then, State Security thought nothing of arming themselves with photographic evidence of something as trivial as affairs between Chinese and foreigners. I believe I had not, however. After this little incident, I was sure my instincts were right. There was going to be no such nonsense at the Olympics. Here was a signal of the nostalgia of the security apparatus, and indeed of the Party, for those days that pre-dated market reforms and the Internet. Nothing would be allowed to go wrong. The air would be clean and critical voices would be silenced, come what may. Perfection, or at least compliance and quiescence, was to be the order of the day.

Now, the leadership is not naïve. They reckoned that they would run into difficulties, but they must have also calculated that they had the means at their disposal to rise to all challenges.

One of the earliest challenges was Darfur. China had watched film star Mia Farrow mount a campaign against its close relations with the government of Sudan, one of its biggest oil suppliers, but Beijing seemed unmoved by the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, where Sudan stands accused of supporting ethnic cleansing. It appeared for several months as if international criticism of China's cosy ties there could tarnish the Games. When the Hollywood director Steven Spielberg withdrew as an artistic adviser to the Opening Ceremony, the shock reverberated throughout the highest echelons of the Party.

They had contingency plans, however.

It is interesting to review how the Party responded to situations in which it was not taken by surprise and those for which it was not fully prepared. It was to encounter both before the Olympic year was out.

The previous May, Beijing had appointed veteran diplomat and Africa expert Liu Guijin as its special envoy to the continent, with a particular remit for Darfur. It was clear that Beijing was aware of talk that the Olympics could earn the sobriquet, the "Genocide Games". Ambassador Liu's task was to prevent that. He made several trips to Sudan and, soon after Mr Spielberg's highly publicised withdrawal, he held a surprisingly candid news conference in Beijing to address

China's policies in the region. Within weeks it became clear that Beijing was indeed exerting some influence on Sudan to accept UN peacekeepers. China presented its initiatives as evidence of its mature participation in the international community, but it was also a sign of Beijing's willingness to bend with the wind to maintain its international reputation, with the Games fast approaching. I would argue that this should be seen, at the very least, as a little dip of the head by China. After all, this is a country that holds non-interference as the cornerstone of its foreign policy.

Beijing perhaps compromised its principles, but it worked. Criticism began to give way to cautious plaudits. They had got it right, and with barely a kowtow. It was a pity that the Hollywood heavyweight had pulled out, but the standing of the Games appeared to have weathered the squall.

The real challenge was yet to come. When it did, Beijing really did appear to have been caught off-guard.

The trouble began on a sunny Monday morning in Lhasa. On 10 March, between 300 and 400 monks from Drepung monastery, once the largest in the world, marched towards the Tibetan capital in the biggest such demonstration in years. It should not have surprised the authorities. After all, this was the anniversary of the 1959 uprising against Chinese rule when the Dalai Lama had fled into exile.

The monks were finally herded back to their quarters in the still hours of the night, but the protests spread to other monasteries around Lhasa. Then, on Friday, 14 March, the discontent erupted into violence.

The next 24 hours in the ancient city changed the face of the Olympics. By the time the paramilitary People's Armed Police finally began to restore order about a day later, some 22 people were dead. Most were Han Chinese, killed in a rampage of burning, looting and beating by mobs of Tibetans.

Many questions linger. Why did the security forces wait so long—at least a day—to deploy? What triggered the rage among these—mainly youthful—Tibetans? Were Tibetans shot in the ensuing crackdown? If so, how many?

Tibet has always been an extremely difficult story to cover with accuracy. Rumours, misinformation and exaggerated tales proliferate on all sides. Fortunately, *The Economist* correspondent, James Miles, was in Lhasa. His presence in itself is an extraordinary testimony to the confidence, or ignorance, of the authorities as to the true feelings of the Tibetan populace. He was in the city all week. He was not asked to leave. Once the riots began, his minders disappeared, making contact only to ensure he was safe. His eyewitness account is of historic importance—although it may satisfy neither the Chinese authorities or the Tibetans in exile. He saw brutal violence by Tibetans against Han and against Hui Muslims. He also saw soldiers patrolling the streets of the Old City, automatic rifles cocked as they cleared the streets of rioters. He heard gunfire.

We may never know the full truth of those violent hours. Rather than dwelling on the detail, I want to focus more on the impact of these events on the Olympics.

Suffice to say: China saw that a few maroon-robed monks had shattered the slogan of the Games: "One World, One Dream". For Beijing, however, this was not a moment to genuflect to Western opinion, which at once concluded that China was to blame.

Journalists were prevented from travelling to any Tibetan-populated regions. "For their safety", they were told. What had happened to those new freedoms implemented the previous January? A show of openness when the Foreign Ministry escorted a small group to Lhasa backfired when monks in the Jokhang Temple in the centre of the Old City sobbed and shouted of their despair and persecution in front of the cameras. After that, Tibet was definitively closed.

This made any attempt to get at the facts extremely challenging. As a reporter, the sense of impotence one feels in such a situation is overwhelming. Yet information trickles out. One of the greatest difficulties is how to speak to those on the ground without endangering your sources—it may sound obvious, but I am always astonished at how ordinary Chinese underestimate the power of the State Security Bureau and how many convince themselves that they can operate beneath its radar.

Apart from finding strong sources within Tibetan areas, another hurdle is how to judge the statements coming out from pro-Tibet groups. The goal of many of these sources is to portray China as the evil tyrant. The goal of China is to give out as little as possible while presenting itself as the aggrieved party.

Getting to the truth is a task scarcely less arduous than in the days when George Morrison travelled around China over a century ago. Unlike the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the government then was enfeebled. The authorities were unlikely to wreak retribution on his sources. But then, as now, information was still at a premium. History has shown that he, like many reporters before and since, was not immune from being duped by a persuasive tale when it comes to Chinese politics, and, just as today, he had to find compelling angles to win over his editors to give him space in the paper. The Tibet mystique certainly helped me when it came to pitching pieces to *The Times* this year.

The issue of Tibet swiftly captured a world audience. The international imagination was fired by the idea of defenceless, deeply Buddhist Tibetans confronting the might of the People's Liberation Army, the brave individual pitched against a harsh and monolithic state.

The Olympic torch was due to begin its journey around the world within days. It is not known whether the Chinese leadership ever considered calling the whole thing off, but it seems unlikely. Such a move would have marked an admission of defeat for a relay that the leaders hoped would spark an outpouring of international enthusiasm as well as a wave of domestic pride for China in general and the Olympics in particular.

It really wasn't clear that there would be trouble until what cynics called the "Coke truncheon" (it was sponsored by Coca Cola) had passed from Beijing to Almaty—and just how much trouble. On a damp and grey 6 April in London, the extent of China's public relations disaster was immediately evident. Everyone wanted to know the identity of the "boys in blue". These were tall, stony-faced, buff young men in sky-blue tracksuits who pressed around each runner in the relay to protect the "sacred" flame from attack by pro-Tibetan protesters. The controversy was already so fierce that Prime Minister Gordon Brown avoided even touching the torch.

In fact, the identity of these young men had never been a secret. The formation of the Sacred Flame Protection Unit had been announced with some fanfare more than a year earlier, when glory rather than controversy had been expected to follow the torch. They were the cream of the crop of students from the paramilitary People's Armed Police Academy in Beijing. That, however, was when China could count on international goodwill, and few people asked, or even cared, who the torch guardians were.

Now, in London, in April 2008, their presence seemed to underscore the Olympic organisers' failure to grasp how swiftly the image of China could be transformed. It was impossible to insulate the Games from international realities or domestic strife. Sebastian Coe, Britain's top Olympic official and a former gold medal winner, described the young men as "thugs". The world saw them as representative of the authoritarian government that had selected them.

Most Chinese saw the "boys in blue" as courageous (and in one case sexy) protectors of the sacred flame. They watched with incomprehension the mass protests in London, Paris and San Francisco. Who could dispute the need for flame guards when Chinese paralympian Jin Jing had to protect the torch with her body from the grabbing hands of a Tibetan protester on the streets of Paris?

Here, I think, we come to one of the fundamental challenges that China faced in the Olympic year. How was Beijing to manage its reputation before both an international and a domestic audience? After all, it really depended on from where you were watching—whether from inside or from outside China. However, the torch relay was to define the Olympic year and to divide China from much of the rest of the world.

The stark contrast in views served to swell a stream of anti-Western sentiment in China that had appeared very shortly after the Tibet riots. A crucial question is whether these feelings were manipulated by the state or were a spontaneous outburst of nationalism. I believe it was more the latter than the former. Whichever one, the rancour mocked the slogan of the Games: "One World, One Dream". Some people joked a better motto would be: "One World, One Nightmare".

I wonder how George Morrison would have viewed this confrontation that was to be demonstrated in the treatment of the foreign journalist corps in Beijing? Let me

now explain this. I have always felt quite strongly that the reporter should be just that: one who observes and reports the news. It is a great disappointment when the reporter becomes the news. Sadly, this is just what happened in March and April in China. Many Chinese began to see international journalists as representing—even manipulating—the foreign opinion that had overnight become so critical of China. After all, that's how things work in China. However, our editors judged that the public wanted to read news of Chinese police in remote corners opening fire on restive Tibetans—crowds who were pelting the police with stones and rocks. In my view, the editors were correct, and China was wrong to blame the messenger instead of analyzing the message.

Since George Morrison, too, was a *Times* correspondent, let me mention one of the odder experiences of his successor in 2008. On a quiet Friday in late March, a Chinese friend called me in great amusement. On his early trawl around the Internet, he had discovered that I had become the most hated person in China, topping a hit list on the popular Web site Sina.com. Almost before I had finished my morning coffee, many thousands of Chinese web surfers had hurled invective at me. The tirade was the culmination of an outburst of anger over an article that had the temerity to mention the 1936 Berlin Olympics in the same breath as the upcoming Beijing Olympics of 2008. Chinese believed that I was responsible, and had been calling my office for a couple of days already to shout at me—and even to issue death threats.

In fact, the source of the brouhaha was a 21 March commentary by *The Times* columnist Simon Barnes, or rather, a question, apparently planted, at the Tuesday Foreign Ministry briefing which referred to Barnes' opinion piece in which he had said that China, like Nazi Germany, was using the games for its own self-aggrandisement. It drew a furious answer from the spokesman. For anyone who thinks the question was spontaneous, I should point out that the spokesman appeared already to be intimately familiar with the article—quite a coincidence, since *The Times* isn't exactly breakfast reading, even in the Foreign Ministry's news department.

It stirred nationwide fury. However, *The Times* was merely among the first to be the target of nationalist venom. Heading the list of hate figures was CNN. A website calling itself "Anti-CNN.com" sprang up, championing the slogan "A complete record of Western media reports vilifying China". A new phrase swept into the Chinese language "Don't be too CNN"—meaning "Don't ignore the truth". The death threats aimed against three journalists invited on that brief Foreign Ministry trip to Lhasa were so menacing that two even left the country for a few days for their own safety. The mobile phone numbers of every journalist who went found their way mysteriously onto a nationalist website. The British Embassy took up my case and that of a colleague with the Foreign Ministry, as a matter of formal consular concern.

What does this elucidate? Technology that had not been dreamt of in Mao's day is now freely available. Internet and mobile phones have given millions access to a

breadth of information they would never have imagined a decade ago. Web surfers can communicate with ease from one end of China to the other—and can mobilise, both opinion and people. That has its advantages and disadvantages for the Party. The Party must be credited with harnessing this same technology with the same gusto as do the people it governs. It can call on a small army of Internet enthusiasts, who, for five cents a time, will post comments in line with government propaganda to spark or to guide debate. Keeping control of that debate is not easy; the cyberpolice must be constantly on their toes. To date they have succeeded in shutting off Internet storms that have threatened to rage out of control. I have already mentioned the attacks on foreign media; another example is four years ago, when “angry youth” protested against what they saw as Japanese nationalism. These protests were abruptly halted when it looked as though they might get out of hand. However, increasing numbers of tech-savvy young people can find ways around the Internet roadblocks if they choose to. It will be fascinating in years to come to see if they try to exercise further this technological prowess.

Even Chinese journalists were not immune to attack. A columnist in the *Southern Weekend* (Nanfang Zhoumo), arguably China’s most outspoken newspaper, ran an editorial titled “A Different Kind of Thinking on Tibet” in which he raised questions about Chinese policy and recommended a less emotional response to the articles of foreign reporters who, he argued, were entitled to their views. He made a crucial link between Tibet and the Olympics. “For the good of the nation and to support the Olympics”, he wrote, Beijing should seek a dialogue with the Dalai Lama’s representatives. Such was the backlash that his newspaper pulled him out to Hong Kong and instructed him to stop writing for a few weeks.

Sides had been taken, battlelines drawn.

Beijing had been puzzled by the ripples spread by Spielberg’s stand on Darfur. There was, however, real shock at the international outrage over the crackdown Tibet. It was hardly the first time Tibetans had rioted in the streets; indeed, I was there in 1987 when similar riots erupted. However, the scale of the March protests as they spread into neighbouring provinces was surely unprecedented. A leadership unused to turning on a sixpence fell back on furious rhetoric linking the unrest to manipulation by the “Dalai Lama clique”. It was always careful never to blame the Dalai Lama himself—thus leaving the door open to contacts with the exiled monk.

Once they had got their act together, they settled on a twin-track policy that would shape the rest of the year: gestures, almost concessions, to try to win back international opinion as we have seen with Darfur, and a harsh reassertion of security controls to avert ugly scenes during the Games themselves. The latter was called the “Peaceful Olympics Action Plan” (*Ping’an Aoyun Xingdong*).

Talk of a boycott of the Olympics Opening Ceremony by some world leaders—put about mainly by human rights groups—triggered real anxiety in Beijing that the

Games would descend into farce similar to that seen in Moscow in 1980. There was genuine popular animosity against France. Reports that President Nicolas Sarkozy had yet to make up his mind about attending the opening ceremony combined with the scenes of the torch relay in Paris to provoke rage. I chanced to fly into Shanghai on the same flight as Jin Jing on her return from Europe. She was greeted with bouquets of flowers and a VIP welcome party. Such a reception would have been most unlikely but for her newly granted status as national heroine, China's "wheelchair angel".

Soon Netizens were agitating for a national boycott of the French-owned supermarket chain Carrefour in retaliation. Such was the fervour of anti-French feeling that Jin Jing spoke publicly of a need for cooler heads to prevail. The nationalists at once turned their wrath on her. The woman for whom many had turned out to block shoppers from reaching the shelves of the French store found herself branded by those same demonstrators as a "traitor" and "unpatriotic". The mood had turned thoroughly nasty.

President Sarkozy sent several envoys in rapid succession to repair relations. Beijing, for its part, agreed to talks with representatives of the Dalai Lama. It was a clever move. The government may have lost a little face in front of its people—indeed many questioned how their leaders could excoriate the Dalai Lama one moment and meet his envoys the next. But this concession served the purpose of demonstrating to the rest of the world China's readiness to meet with delegates of a man it reviled. In the event, two envoys who spearheaded six rounds of talks between 2002 and 2007 travelled to Shenzhen in early May for meetings that lasted barely a day. As in earlier rounds, these talks yielded little more than agreement to meet again.

Then fate interceded.

On 12 May a devastating earthquake struck the western province of Sichuan. As sympathy and aid poured in from around the world for the victims, it was Gerhard Heiberg, a member of the International Olympic Committee executive board, who put into words what many were thinking. He said: "I'm sorry to say it, but this has turned things around". Emotions still ran high. In remote villages where barely a building had been left unscathed, survivors looked askance at foreign journalists. "Are you French?" I was asked. The next question was "Do you work for CNN?" Only when I had answered no, would some farmer whose home lay in ruins behind him speak of his agony.

Several of the elements that defined China in the Olympics year then coalesced around this disaster in which some 90,000 people lost their lives. The authorities at first let go of the reins, particularly of the media. This was their concession, by default in fact, since Chinese journalists had raced beyond the control of the propaganda organs from day one. However, the authorities soon saw the advantage to be gained, and allowed journalists, including the international media, to cover the story with few constraints for about two weeks.

This tragedy also provided an outlet for the nationalism that had welled up at the height of the Tibet controversy. Young and old from across the country converged on the stricken region in a surge of patriotic volunteerism. Convoys of cars festooned with banners in support of the survivors and fluttering with Chinese flags clogged roads leading to the towns around the epicentre. Many of the young men and women pointedly wore T-shirts that read "I Love China". In one hospital, I interviewed a young man who was a student from Chengdu who wore a "One China" T-shirt with a map of the country, to make the point on just who governs Tibet. When he spoke, he made the same point, clearly suspicious of me for my possible bias, as a foreign journalist. I was surprised that, as dozens of injured lay in tents outside the hospital awaiting triage, the first response of a boy barely out of his teens to a foreign journalist was both so antagonistic and so nationalistic.

The international mood had turned, however. Here was a chance for the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, to cement that shift. I do believe that he may have wondered if he could nurture the more favourable coverage of China for the longer term.

It was one in the morning on 24 May, and I was due to leave for home that day when my telephone rang. I was still awake, gripped by the television coverage. Every night I would sit in my hotel room and channel surf between Sichuan Television and Chengdu Television. On Sichuan TV were uplifting and moving stories of heroic rescue efforts, of soldiers carrying children to safety, of teachers who had given their lives trying to save their pupils. On Chengdu TV was tragedy and suspense: teams digging for hours through rubble at the faintest sign of life, tales of those trapped whose bodies could not hold out long enough for the concrete slabs to be lifted. These competing channels were fascinating. In the end, of course, Sichuan TV, its message clearly approved by the propaganda authorities, carried the day.

However, back to that phone call. It was an invitation from the Foreign Ministry to cover UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and an unidentified Chinese leader who would be visiting the town of Yingxiu, close to the epicentre of the earthquake. The only way to get there was by military helicopter. The trip was, I believe, a first; the navigator on my helicopter was so stunned to be flying a group of foreigners that he asked for the autographs of the dozen reporters on his flight.

The white helicopter of Premier Wen Jiabao landed soon after we had arrived, and he made his way directly to the corner of a military and refugee camp where the small group of foreign media had been corralled. He began his impromptu briefing by stressing that he was there to answer the questions of foreign reporters. I wondered if his media advisers had counselled him that, after so much access for the domestic press, he should brave their less predictable and much vilified foreign counterparts for what was unlikely to be anything but a win-win encounter, and so it proved. The chosen few reporters and the premier exchanged questions and answers with little sign of the antagonism that can shade his ultra-formal news conferences.

I did wonder if this could mark, finally, a new era of openness in the way China's leaders handle the foreign media. Too naïve on my part—gone are the days when there was only a handful of international reporters and they could mingle with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Reuters correspondent David Chipp, who unfortunately died last month, loved to tell me how he once trod on Mao's toe in confusion at the Old Airport. In the days before 1989 when journalists were invited to sip sugary orange juice in the Great Hall of the People to mark National Day and to chat with State Council and Party leaders, I once found myself making conversation with an ignored and awkward Vice Premier Li Peng while others crowded around bigger celebrities as Zhao Ziyang. In an ideal world, China could have continued its openness to the foreign media to ensure it enjoyed better international coverage, but this would have meant a real opening and, when forced to choose, the authorities repeatedly fell back on the old and familiar ways. I believe that the moment with Wen Jiabao may have been the media high for the year; after that, the system reverted to type.

The reassertion of control was gradual, but it began almost at once. While journalists ran from rubble-strewn villages to refugee camps and clambered beside young soldiers from the People's Liberation Army to mountain villages, the Party's grip was tightening. Within a very few days, the net had come down around the dust and rubble of the shoddily built "*doufuzha*"—or beancurd—schools. Police patrolled. Parents were too afraid to talk. This was a more familiar environment. It was to be the environment for the Olympics.

It is perfectly possible that the leadership was caught quite unawares, almost trapped by its own naïveté about the outside world, by the Tibet events and by the torch crisis. Let us not forget that no member of the current Standing Committee of the Politburo has ever studied abroad or spent any lengthy period of time overseas. They always knew a few extreme human rights activists would try to tarnish China's image, but they had not expected the French president to hold out the possibility of a boycott.

At some point as the torch made its tortuous and tortured journey around the world, a decision was clearly taken as to what aspects of China's image could be saved. The Communist Party leaders gave up on its international reputation, knowing the Games could be assured of success among their own people—who were already so eager to be hosts to a sporting triumph. International criticism of the introduction of restrictions on visas was ignored. The cost to the economy because businessmen and buyers were barred was seen as the price of Olympic success; ditto, the inevitable fall in the number of tourists. Better to have fewer visitors and less business than to open the doors to activists who could stage embarrassing demonstrations—although there were still a surprising number who slipped through the net.

The visa restrictions, the removal of all migrant workers, the erection of Potemkin walls and huge hoardings to hide unsightly corners, the demolition of homes in the way of Olympic construction were all part of a policy to ensure a picture-perfect

Games. There seemed to be a single overarching principle: "*Bu neng chu shi*"—or "let nothing untoward occur". It was a phrase to be heard everywhere in Beijing. The measures adopted ranged from positioning an armoured personnel carrier and anti-aircraft guns around the Olympic Green to pasting up posters across town on the "Eight Don't Asks" to avoid embarrassing foreign guests. So, no questions on age, religion, income or marital status. It even involved evicting me from my home in murky circumstances that seemed to stem from a desire by my local policeman to push out potential troublemakers—namely, foreigners.

That phrase—" *bu neng chu shi*"—was also the signal for the security apparatus to move into top gear. With the tighter visa rules, many foreigners were forced to leave China. Migrant workers lacking temporary residence permits for Beijing had to go back to the farm. Routine checks were carried out on foreign residents—and on all those without a *hukou* or household registration in the capital. Countless neighbourhood volunteers donned red armbands to identify them as minders of local security.

China had made a number of concessions to ensure the success of the Games, but when it came to security they raised the spectre of Al Qaeda attacks, of plots by Muslim Uighurs in far western Xinjiang to kidnap athletes and foreign journalists. Here there would be no "kowtowing" to Western liberal ideas.

I think we are all familiar with the campaigns against spitting, the publicity drive to instil "civilised" behaviour, the eight-teeth smiles—*bachu weixiao*—mandated for the medal hostesses, and indeed the smiles that wreathed the faces of a million-plus volunteers. Some of this involved smiles to order. There were the flashing signs on Tiananmen Square that read: "The police remind you to smile". Most Chinese were more than happy to do so, however. This was not because they had fallen for a government line on the importance of the Olympics but because, at least in cities and naturally enough in Beijing, Chinese were hugely proud and thrilled to play host to an event that would bring international visitors from so many nations to take part in the one gathering that truly is a world occasion.

There were still a couple of nods to be made to human rights—at very little cost. China had tried to keep the Internet blocked, but the furore that this engendered just as the Games were starting forced it to remove a couple of bricks from the Great Firewall and to allow access to a few controversial Websites such as Reporters Without Borders and Amnesty International. Tibet sites, among many others, remained unavailable. They announced the establishment of three "Protest Parks"—all far from any major Olympic venue—as well as complex rules governing applications to protest. Of course, no protest won the necessary police approval. This was hardly unexpected, but it was a blow to me, since *The Times* office is in the Sacred Kitchen buildings of Ritan Park (the Park of the Altar of the Sun), one of those chosen three. I could have watched the protests from my office, but in the event nothing ever disturbed the peace of my days there.

There were 77 applications to protest, of which 74 were withdrawn after their complaints were resolved through consultation, two needed revision and one was rejected. Instead of being given permission to protest, at least four applicants were sentenced to re-education through labour, an administrative rather than a judicial punishment. No explanation was given. Twelve-month sentences imposed on two grandmothers, one 77 and one 74, one half-blind and one lame, were finally rescinded only after officials seemed to recognise that two old women living in concrete cubicles without electricity posed little threat to the 74-million-member Communist Party. Wu Dianyuan and Wang Xiuying had been protesting for seven years against their eviction from their homes. They even planned to set off fireworks outside Zhongnanhai—the centre of government in Beijing—to draw attention to their grievance. Their penalty, delivered even as the Games drew to a close, was telling testimony to the utter intolerance of the authorities for contrary voices.

If that was one conclusion drawn from the 2008 Games, let me finish by suggesting a few others.

China's international reputation was blemished. People remember the prowess and the twin golds of Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt, and the triumphant eight golds of US swimmer Michael Phelps. There was the hoard of medals—mostly golds—won by the awesome Chinese athletes, and there was the enthusiasm and goodwill of the charming volunteers. There was also Party chief Hu Jintao, who later praised and enshrined for the future China's intense training system which had produced such sporting success. Many, though, will also retain an image of an uptight, risk-averse state that left nothing to chance, barring innocent businessmen, blocking Internet sites and relaying the torch through cities from Lhasa to Urumqi in siege-like conditions—and who can forget the Opening Ceremony spectacle of the little girl who lip-synched to the voice of a child whom the Party had deemed not cute enough? There were also the televised fireworks that were in fact generated by computer.

For some Beijing residents, these were the “no fun” Olympics, as bars were closed and café tables removed from pavements—trivial, maybe, but evidence of the Party's determination to exert control in every corner.

We could debate whether the Party was ever in danger of losing control of events, but two things seem clear to me. It was fortuitous for the rulers that latent nationalism came to the fore after the events in Tibet and the earthquake in Sichuan. The Party feels that it was dealt a difficult hand but played it well. Secondly, though, China lost an opportunity to shape a new international image.

I had intended to conclude by saying that it might be many years before another such chance comes China's way but, with the world watching for its response to the financial crisis, that opportunity may in fact come round very soon.