

***Let there be Games sans 'sanction' China-bashers must realise the country has come a long way from Mao's era; also, if China is not perfect, no society is***

**By JEAN-PIERRE LEHMANN**

THE decision that the 2008 Olympic Games should be held in Beijing was bound to be risky. Given, however, that it was taken, it behoves everyone, the Chinese and the international community, to ensure that the Games succeed and are not marred by untoward incidents and emphatically not by any official 'sanction', such as boycotting the opening ceremony.

China is not perfect. Very far from it. But no society is; and China deserves to be viewed through multiple prisms. First, China has come a remarkably long way - socially, economically, culturally and, yes, politically - in the last three decades since Deng Xiaoping's reforms.

Can anyone at the time of Mao Zedong's death, with the embers of the Cultural Revolution still smouldering, have possibly imagined the standard of living and the freedom that hundreds of millions of Chinese enjoy today? Of course it is not the freedom one enjoys in the West. But China should be viewed in respect to the last couple of hundred years of among the world's most traumatic and violent histories, with the West (and Japan) having played quite malign roles.

There are millions of Chinese tourists travelling around the globe and there is a huge publications and media industry. China doesn't score too badly in some of the major global indices either. For example, in Transparency International's corruption perception index, it ranks 72<sup>nd</sup> out of 179, on a par with the democracies of Brazil, India and Mexico; and in the very important UNDP human development index, China does well in life expectancy, education and gender empowerment.

Remember China has come from being, not too long ago, one of the world's poorest and war-ravaged countries. If current trends are sustained, in another 30 years, China could be a predominantly middle-class society with bourgeois values. This will be unprecedented.

Second, let us look at historical parallels. China is heavily criticised in the West for its violations of labour rights and environmental pollution. There is indeed in these areas an urgent imperative for improvement. But Western or Japanese factory and mine owners a century ago were hardly paragons of human rights and ecological soundness.

No country has succeeded in achieving a socially just and green industrialisation. The number of miners in the UK who died in the pits per day at the time of D.H. Lawrence were about the same as the numbers today in China. This is not meant to condone China's abuses, but surely the criticism should be more circumspect.

Similarly, while China is enjoined, implicitly or explicitly, to embrace 'Western values', this merits further reflection. From the time of its unification in 1870 to becoming a society espousing liberal

principles of human rights, it took Germany some eight decades, with abysmal carnage having occurred during that period.

Indeed it is only at the end of the last century that Europe (as a continent) can be said to have espoused 'European values'. It was after 1975, following the deaths of the dictators Francisco Franco and Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, that Spain and Portugal abandoned fascism and all the associated violations of human rights.

In Eastern Europe it has been far more recent, and far from perfect. For example, while the Roma population in one of the European Union's newest member, Romania, may not evince the same publicity and sympathy as the Tibetans, they are not any better treated.

As to the United States, while it tends to be strident in condemning others on human rights, its own historical and current records hardly merit respect, let alone adulation.

And, finally, perhaps the most egregious case of Western hypocrisy lies in its attacks on Chinese policy in Africa. If Darfur is a reason to boycott the Beijing Olympics, what about Iraq and London in 1912?

I repeat, none of this is meant to condone China's behaviour, but it is certainly intended to caution strongly against over-reaction and threats of spoiling the Beijing Olympics.

It is in everyone's interests, both the Chinese and the rest of the planet, to encourage China to achieve further economic growth, albeit on a more equitable and sustainable basis. A predominantly urban middle-class society tends to be 'better' behaved. The Beijing olympics could, and should, be an important landmark in China's journey to modernity, prosperity and welfare.

It is China's coming-out party. And if the party is spoiled by unwarranted and largely unjustified foreign self-righteousness, there could be a risk that China will turn back inwards and become rigidly totalitarian, and socially repressive. For the global economy and the global community, this would be quite simply catastrophic.

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