

Boycott not the right solution in Beijing

by Mark Zeigler

During a recent trip to China, I visited a sports school in Beijing where specially selected children, some as young as 5 or 6, live and train away from their families.

At the end of each dormitory hallway is a large board with room numbers and colored flags next to them - the results of weekly checks for cleanliness, a teacher informed me.

"This must be a pretty messy room," I joked, pointing to a room number with three red flags next to it.

"No," the teacher said, "that's a very clean room."

Turns out, the color red is a symbol of happiness, prosperity and good luck in China, and that goes back decades, even centuries, before the communists took over and "Red China" emerged. I tried to explain the dire meaning of a red flag in Western culture; the teacher looked back at me, completely befuddled.

"Red is bad?" she asked.

So what does that have to do with Tibet, Darfur, human rights, the 2008 Olympics and the crescendoing murmurs of a five-ringed boycott this summer?

Nothing, and everything.

The Olympics are about gathering the world's athletes and determining which 4-foot-8 rhythmic gymnast can twirl a ribbon most gracefully, or which 300-pound behemoth can hurl a javelin the farthest. But they're also about tearing down cultural barriers, about initiating communication, about broadening horizons, about altering perceptions.

About choking parochialism with that ribbon. About piercing age-old stereotypes with that javelin.

It is about biting into grilled jellyfish, swallowing hard and trying to muster a smile at your host as it slides

down your throat. It is about learning that Chinese see red and see unfettered joy, or at least a clean dorm room, not tanks rolling through Tiananmen Square or Tibet.

Boycott the Olympics? Turn innocent athletes and their lifelong dreams into political pawns?

Haven't we been there, done that?

Didn't we learn our lesson in 1980?

But there was bloodshed in the disputed Chinese province of Tibet two weeks ago, and the b-word was echoing through halls of power before the gunshots finished echoing off the Himalayas. France's foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, was the first to broach the subject, suggesting if a full-fledged boycott wasn't appropriate then perhaps one during Opening Ceremonies was.

Then the European Union discussed it. Then a dozen members of the U.S. Congress signed a letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi requesting a hearing on a nonbinding boycott resolution.

"We should not permit the totalitarian government in China," it said, "to use the Olympics to cover its own evil as did Adolf Hitler in 1936."

To which International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge said: "The Olympic Games are a catalyst for change, not a panacea for all ills. Awarding the Olympic Games to the most populous country in the world will open up one-fifth of mankind to Olympism."

He's right, by the way. The idea is that you nudge the boulder more by inviting the world to China than by staying home.

It's a boulder that is already moving. Parachute into downtown Beijing, and you'd have no idea you're in a communist country - at least not in the way a generation of Americans who lived through the Cold War have come to define one.

People wear nice clothes. They shop in nice malls (nicer, in fact, than most anything in the States). They work in modern glass skyscrapers. They ride to work in a subway with flat-screen TVs and electronic readouts

telling you on which side the doors will open.

They are friendly, generous, courteous, proud, humble people.

And they are genuinely interested in learning about the West and its definition of freedom, just as they are interested in showing you the quirks of their culture.

I also noticed something else, at a recent news conference with Jiang Xiaoyu, an executive vice president with the Beijing organizing committee, to discuss the route of the torch relay.

The questioning quickly turned to Tibet, and to the dreaded b-word. The warmth in his voice suddenly vanished, his words becoming more biting and defensive, and he began to spew communist rhetoric. Up went the Great Wall.

For a chilling few seconds, the boulder stopped moving.

"Even at the highest levels, there is dialogue going on that wouldn't be happening if the Olympics were not here," says Steve Roush, the chief liaison between the U.S. Olympic Committee and the Beijing organizers. "It's evolutionary, not revolutionary in this country. You have to remember, they're centuries old.

"But they're committed, I really believe that. You see the new leadership coming in. You see some of the new ideas. They're changing. They're opening up. I'm on the side that it's a good thing that the Olympics come to China."

Or as Gregory Clark, a China expert from Australia's Department of External Affairs, recently told the Japan Times newspaper: "You judge a nation by the direction in which it is traveling, not by the road bumps. And China is clearly moving in a direction of very considerable promise to us all."

Just not fast enough for some.

Meanwhile, a kid living away from his family at the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, Calif., spends hour after lonesome hour at the archery range, judging the wind speed and direction, tinkering with the knobs on his bow, trying to land an arrow on a grapefruit-size target 230 feet away, over and over and over again,

toiling in anonymity for a fleeting moment of fame that arrives once every four years in a distant land.

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