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The Great Convergence?*

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China and America, according to much U.S. Olympic commentary, currently offer a study in contrasts. Not surprisingly, we’ve been hearing repeated references of late to the stark differences between our young land and their old one when it comes to religious freedom and press censorship. And we’ve seen some novel variations on the familiar U.S.-China contrasts theme, like an August 18 Los Angeles Times piece by Mary McNamar that focused on style. Our every-day-can-be-casual-Friday approach, she claimed, clearly differentiated the look of “laid-back,” gum-chewing U.S. competitors, a sockless Matt Lauer, and a shirt-sleeved George W. in sports fan mode from the look of their Chinese counterparts.

There definitely are many basic U.S.-China differences, including not just how our presidents dress and act (it’s tough to imagine the buttoned-down Hu Jintao hanging out with beach volleyball players), but more importantly how they’re chosen. Still, Americans should realize that, to international audiences, recent events could be read as revealing how much, not little, China and the U.S. have in common.

For this is a year when we keep showing up side-by-side in global rankings. Medal counts prove we’re in a league of our own as Olympic sports powers. We’re also neck and neck at the top of the pack in percentage of global manufacturing output (U.S. 17%, China 16%). And we share the top (or bottom) greenhouse gas emissions spot: they’re ahead overall, but on a per capita basis, we’re leading.

Returning to the Games, the Opening inspired many only-in-a-country-like-China comments. These stressed the number of performers (China’s so big), the synchronized movements (China’s so conformist), the echoes of Berlin 1936 (China’s so authoritarian), and the fakery (China’s people accept being lied to).

The PRC is likely the only country that could and would spend so much money on this kind of state-run extravaganza just now, and while there were some disturbingly authoritarian aspects to it. But the spectacle sometimes brought to mind Hollywood—the place where the phrase "and a cast of thousands" was coined. The choreography was sometimes more Busby Berkeley than Leni Riefenstahl. And a friend told me seeing those 2008 drummers made him think of a 2002 Hollywood production, "Drumline," which also featured young men furiously keeping the beat.

It is true that revelations of White children pretending to be Native American ones would have caused more of a flap here than revelations that Han children pretended to be Tibetan and Uighurs on 08/08/08 did there. But a country whose past includes minstrel shows and Charlie Chan movies without ethnically Chinese leads shouldn’t be too smug. When it comes to the lip synching scandal, as McNamar notes in her piece, Chinese efforts to ensure that a song that sounded just so seemed to come out of the mouth of a girl who looked just right resonate disturbingly with our fetish for simulated physical perfection via plastic surgery.

As for populations that accept lies, while it would be foolish to suggest any kind of complete moral equivalency, this is another case of people in glass houses being careful about throwing stones. International audiences remember well our collective gullibility concerning the Bush Administration’s proof-deficient claims concerning Saddam Hussein WMDs and Al Qaeda ties.

One common assertion in U.S. commentary is that the Chinese press is much more controlled than is ours. That’s definitely true. But the view from outside could still be that NBC and its Chinese counterpart have pursued similar agendas.

The coverage has produced what Olympic historian David Wallechinsky aptly calls"parallel" Games. Chinese audiences see more footage of some sports than Americans and vice versa. And different ways of showing medal counts (NBC has focused on total medals, a fairly unilateralist
approach, while CCTV, like much of the rest of the world, has focused on number of gold ones) allows each national group to believe they’re ahead. The networks are on the same page, though, when it comes to two things. Striving to keep the main storyline of the Beijing Games positive, and structuring their programs to play to an intensely patriotic domestic fan base.

The contrast between China’s long past and America’s short one is not even absolute. The People’s Republic, founded in 1949, is less than a century old. It’s a rapidly developing country mounting a big show in a city with striking buildings. This event is meant to convince skeptical outsiders that the country has put a traumatic era behind it and deserves to be treated with respect, not just dismissed as a renegade land that makes cheap, dangerous goods.

Much the same was true of the U.S. after the Civil War. Writing in the Boston Globe (August 26, 2007) last year, historian Stephen Mihm pointed out that in the 1800s to many Europeans it was not China but America that was viewed as a “fast-growing nation [with] a reputation for sacrificing standards to its pursuit of profit.” And one strategy for overcoming this reputation was to put on big shows, like the ambitious, controversial, problem-plagued but ultimately very memorable 1893 Chicago World’s Fair—held in the city that had just invented skyscrapers.

Proving we could pull off that spectacle, back when World’s Fairs generated enormous amounts of attention, helped show Europeans that America was a force to be reckoned with. And convinced some people across the Atlantic they had more in common with us than they’d realized.

A similar realization of commonality could be one useful after-effect of these Games, since big issues like global warming are best approached by people who can focus on what they have in common. It will only have that result, though, if we’re willing to discard the comfortable but often misleading notion that we’ll only see contrasts when gazing across the Pacific.

* This piece is being published simultaneously, under a different title, on the Huffington Post’s Olympic page, which has previously run several pieces that I co-wrote with China Beat editor Kate Merkel-Hess and which continues to feature commentaries by other “China Beatniks” like Susan Brownell and friends of this blog like Monroe Price, co-editor of Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China.