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Torching the Relay

May 4, 2008 in [China Annals](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [3 comments](#)

By Geremie R. Barmé

[The following remarks were written in response to a series of questions from writers at [Woroni](#), the paper produced by students at The Australian National University. They were drafted on April 28 and revised on May 3, 2008. I would add that I was travelling in China during the Australian leg of the Olympic Torch Relay. My thanks to Tom Swann of [Woroni](#) for inviting me to respond to his questions, and to Jeffrey Wasserstrom for suggesting that [China Beat](#) post this material.—GRB]

Q: In general, the article will be asking: why was there such a powerful expression of Chinese nationalism in the Australian national capital, Canberra? We are guided by our personal observations that much of the protesting was overtly political and often antagonistic, which we think was not fully brought out in the media coverage.

Geremie R. Barmé: Chinese demonstrators in Canberra would claim that they were giving voice to righteous patriotic (rather than the more negative “nationalistic”) sentiment in the face of deliberate distortions of the real situation in Tibetan China resulting from the “Western media” demonization of the People’s Republic of China, and the way the media had handled the March disturbances in Lhasa and elsewhere in what, for want of a better expression, I would call Tibetan China (that is the areas including the TAR, Qinghai, parts of Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan with large ethnic Tibetan populations). In the days leading up to the Canberra leg of the Olympic torch relay, Chinese organizers (both official and non-official) made the case to their fellows that Canberra is a city with a small population and that if patriotic Chinese did not turn up in numbers then protesters—“Tibet splittists” (to use the Chinese jargon), adherents of Falun Gong and a rag-bag of “anti-Chinese elements”—would make a big showing of “anti-Chinese” fervor in front of the national and international media. Only a large vocally patriotic Chinese presence could counter this.

Furthermore, the demonstrators who made themselves so noisily felt and heard in Canberra had been inflamed by the disruptions of the relay in London, Paris, and San Francisco. They were also outraged by talk of a boycott of the Beijing Olympics opening on August 8 this year. These boisterous—and also very physical demonstrations—had been reported in the Chinese media and blogosphere with a level of emotional intensity bordering on the hysterical. Accounts in the official Chinese media were also highly colorful and employed the histrionic style of high-Maoist China (that is, the liberal use of morally laden terms of vituperation and condemnation—something I have written about in the chapter “Totalitarian Nostalgia” in my book *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, Columbia University Press, 1999). During this process, the Olympic torch, something that should by all rights be regarded as a global symbol that belongs to the world community, increasingly became in the minds of many people a symbol of China and China alone. Indeed, the torch, or “sacred flame” (*shenghuo*) as it is referred to in Chinese (and for that matter Japanese, in which it is called *seika*), became a quasi-sacerdotal symbol of super-national Chinese identity. (I would refer readers to the recent biting comments made during a recent visit to Australia by the Beijing-based artist Ai Weiwei’s on what I would call the “hijacking of the sacred” by Beijing propagandists and those in their thrall. See [his comments](#) as quoted in *The Australian* on April 30, 2008.)

As we have witnessed in recent weeks, the issue of the Olympic Torch Relay has now become one of Chinese global pride, integrity, and national unity. The official Chinese media has also encouraged a kind of by-proxy witch-hunt to determine which among the foreign countries of “the West” (an ill-defined category to say the least), their media, politicians, and public figures are, to use expressions first coined in the US media in 2005, “Panda huggers” (*xiongmao pai*, pro-China), “dragon slayers” (*tulong pai*, anti-China) or “Panda hedgers” (*xiongmao qiqiang pai*, undecided). Such terminology

militates against subtlety of argument, nuance, shades of difference, or complexity on “both sides.” I would also note that the “unified caliber” (*tongyi koujing*) of Beijing-authored attacks on the “Western media” constitute a deliberate decision by the highest power in the land to use this opportunity to mount an all-out offensive on reporting on China by the independent media worldwide. I would speculate that this is a strategic decision made with the short-term tactical aim of neutralizing international media reports on China before and during the Olympic period—a time during which China has undertaken to allow unprecedented access of the international media to the country. The long-term ramifications of this decision will be profound.

Q: Are you able to provide any information about how it was reported, and viewed, in China? More generally, how is the torch relay being reported?

GB: Over all, the relay in Canberra was reported as being a celebration of China and a resounding success. Large crowds waving flags of the People’s Republic of China and toting various slogans were shown on TV news. Naturally, within Australia there were many proud participants—and I think of Gill Hicks (who walks on prosthetic legs after having lost hers in the July 7 London bombings) and Ian Thorpe. However, as I remarked above, it is noteworthy that the torch relay has now been constructed as more a reflection of China’s global presence than merely being an activity supported by, and crucially involving, the international community.

Chinese commentators have also noted that since the “Western” (Euramerican and Australian) media is basically run by prurient sensationalism and commercial concerns, it is hardly surprising that the story of protests surrounding the Olympic relay has concentrated on shrill protests and the activities of what are invariably referred to as a “small handful” of “Tibetan splittists” and other “anti-Chinese elements.” More broadly, the Chinese state and semi-independent media have spoken darkly of the existence of an “international conspiracy” against China, one that covertly reflects irrational fears of China’s rise as an economic and political superpower. According to this logic, the contretemps surrounding the Beijing Olympics is merely the latest platform for the conspirators. Many Chinese writing on the net, or who I have encountered since March (I was in Beijing during the original Lhasa disturbances, and have travelled to a number of cities in China since then on a second trip—for reasons unrelated to these issues) also point out that they feel that China is not given due credit for the extraordinary changes that have swept the nation in recent decades that have seen the mass alleviation of poverty and the rapid modernization of the largest nation on earth. However, while conspiracy theories make for good copy, they don’t help us understand the situation, or the long-term causes of the present rhetorical extremes both in China and elsewhere. Indeed, I would hasten to point out that media paranoia and hysteria is hardly something limited to China, and it would appear that many commentators and opinion-makers internationally have joined in the fray with enthusiasm.

The early reports of the London and Paris melees in the Chinese media moved from avoiding mention of the disruptions to propagating the righteous outrage of the international Chinese community (much of which consists of mainland Chinese students living and studying overseas), and the heroic spirit of martyrdom evinced by Jin Jing, the handicapped torch-bearer who was lunged at during the Paris relay (she quickly fell from grace when she had the temerity to oppose a mainland Chinese boycott of the French-owned Carrefour chain—critics widely attacked her: “not only doesn’t she have a leg, she doesn’t even have a brain!” has been a commonly heard tagline). The Chinese media treated these early protests as the disruptive activities of “a small minority” (*yi xiaocuo*) worthy of nothing more than contempt. It should be noted that after the spontaneous protests in China itself against Carrefour in mid April, the authorities began to calm things down by calling on people to engage in “rational patriotism” that did not impinge on the economic weal of the nation. This is a common tactic that we have seen deployed any number of times (see, for example, my 2005 article “[Mirrors of History](#),” reposted on May 2 by danwei.org). For their part, the owners of Carrefour were quick to claim their pro-China, pro-Olympics stance and express outrage and disgust at the events in Paris.

Q: What does the Olympics mean to the Chinese people? (Many of the protesters, and people in the media, talked in terms of one-world spirit and so on).

GB: Put simply, one could argue that the 2008 Beijing Olympics have been turned into a celebration of the People's Republic of China's emergence as a major global force. Years of propaganda, educational hype, and commercial spruiking by the Chinese party-state, the commercial media and international corporations who want to make a buck (or two, or millions) have added to the crescendo of hope, pride and national hubris bound up in a heady embrace during this the Olympic year [*ed. note: "spruik" is of Australian origin and means to promote in public*]. Extraordinary investment has gone into the physical sites of the games as well as into the redevelopment (and further despoliation) of Beijing. Voices of discord, disagreement, or doubt have never enjoyed any airtime. Those deprived of their homes or livelihoods as a result of the grand plan for the Olympics are generally mute, and "Olympic doubters" are in a minority. Those who might have concerns have no way of knowing how widely held their disquiet may be. China is not a pluralistic society, its media is guided, and its public opinion manufactured (again, this is a topic about which I have written at length elsewhere). So-called "public sentiment" (*gongzhong yulun*) is, I would argue, the result of long years of careful engineering. What is particularly unsettling for the uninformed observer is that those who mouth with unanimity views supported by the party-state are relatively complicit in their unreflective cooptation. I observed in my 1999 book *In the Red* mentioned earlier:

"As the children of the Cultural Revolution and the Reform era come into power and money they are finding a new sense of self-importance and worth. They are resentful of the real and imagined slights that they and their nation have suffered in the past, and their desire for strength and revenge is increasingly reflected in contemporary Chinese culture. Unofficial culture has reached or is reaching an uncomfortable accommodation with the economic if not always the political realities of contemporary China. As its practitioners negotiate a relationship with both the state in all of its complex manifestations and capital (often, but not always, the same thing) national pride and achievement act as a glue that further seals the pact. The patriotic consensus, aptly manipulated by diverse Party organs, acts as a crucial element in the coherence of the otherwise increasingly fragmented Chinese world." [From the chapter "To Screw Foreigners is Patriotic" which, when first published as an article in July 1995, bore the subtitle "China's Avant-garde Nationalists." See also the same book for the appendix entitled "Screw You, Too."]

Q: How is the issue of Tibet viewed within China? Or other geo-political issues with which China is involved? By Chinese outside of China? Many have said that they think that the Western media is deliberately manipulating coverage of how China proceeds in its political issues.

GB: The issues of Tibet, or more generally of "Tibetan China" (that is the territories in China with large ethnically Tibetan populations in Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan), are extremely complex. While the Chinese official story fixates on the bloodshed of March 14 and the activities of agitators for Tibetan independence, it judiciously avoids discussion of the protests in the other dozens of towns and cities with large Tibetan populations, or the state violence and extrajudicial punishments meted out in the process. Nor is any real attempt made to help the public understand how or why such widespread and, in the main, peaceful protests could have taken place apart from ascribing them to the "premeditated plots" of the "Dalai clique." In the Chinese media there is now a propaganda push to extol tirelessly China's constant contributions to the Tibetans and their material prosperity; there is scant evidence of there being

any willingness to concede that there could be any reason whatsoever for anyone to protest about anything. No one asks whether the aggressive modernization foisted on the Tibetans (and enjoyed by many, but concomitantly a process that has created numerous iniquities and problems) should be questioned. With that as the rhetorical backdrop to all reporting in China then protest, even if peaceful and moderate, must invariably be depicted as the result of the callous manipulations of the dreaded “Dalai clique” and their shameful desire to see China rent apart, or for a restoration of the old lama-dominated theocracy of pre-1950s Tibet. For an excellent article on the rhetorical (and policy) dead-end that results from this kind of argumentation, see Isabel Hilton’s April 12, 2008 article [“Ditch the Tatty Flag of Nationalism.”](#)”

Most people know nothing more of the Tibetan realm than a few songs and dances, a few famous spots and glib ideas about Tibetan Buddhism. They certainly know little about the economic displacement that seems to be a major issue for some protesters, or of the effects of forced sedenterization of nomad communities, or the new Party control of the selection of reincarnated lamas, all issues of great importance for people in the Tibetan areas. Chinese comments I generally hear are of a kind that we in Australia are familiar with from the days of Pauline Hanson (a right-wing parliamentarian active from 1996 who helped during the long-years of the Howard Coalition government to shift public debate to the right): remember when Aborigines were derided for being bludgers on the social security system of “mainstream Australia”? Remember too that for all of the social and economic problems of Aboriginal communities, they were blamed for their own dire straits and attacked for “having it so good” while “average Australians” were “doing it hard on strugglestreet”? Similarly, I have often heard people say in recent weeks that the Tibetans have it so good and are freer than mainstream Han Chinese; they should be grateful for all the largesse they enjoy. Issues of socio-economic importance or questions of legitimate cultural and religious concerns seem to be virtually ignored in the mainstream Chinese media, nor are the actual on-the-ground policies debated in the public realm (they are daresay the subject of far more considered discussion behind closed doors). That the public is deprived of informed information and open discussion is an inevitable reality in a constrained media environment.

On this same anecdotal level, I have encountered common expressions of contempt for Tibetans as an ethnic group (that is, that they are “backward,” with “low IQs,” are “dirty” and “resistant to modernity”) since I was first a student in China in the mid 1970s. But I would also note that, Tibet-fascination—for its culture, landscape, religion and social relations—has also been a common feature of Han culture (alternative and mainstream) since the mid 1980s (see, for example, the material that John Minford and I included in the 1988 second edition of our *Seeds of Fire, Chinese Voices of Conscience*). It is also said that there are numerous Han converts to Tibetan Buddhism, people who are among the many who are searching for some greater human meaning beyond the arid landscape of material acquisition that is the predominant feature of mainstream consumerism.

One of the crucially complicating factors related to events since the initial demonstrations in Lhasa on March 10 (these were peaceful protests that preceded the mob violence of March 14 and the widespread unrest and crackdown ever since) was that the Chinese authorities enforced a blackout that kept the Western media out of Lhasa and then restricted access to virtually most of Tibetan China. A lack of media freedom, and sensationalism, as well as state guided propaganda and emotionalism have added to the escalation of rhetorical violence and blind prejudice all around. For many Western media outlets, the media blackout and sensational circumstances of the torch relay have fed the frenzy. A cogent and measured reflection on the official responses to March 14 is the [12-point petition](#) issued on March 22 by leading Chinese intellectuals and public figures. It remains essential reading.

Q: Some protesters were angry that white/non-Chinese Australians were protesting in the name of Tibet. Can you shed light on this?

GB: This is an added unpleasantness to an already unpalatable situation. Regardless of where

one stands on issues related to the Tibetan question, freedom of speech, peaceful protest, and demonstration are guaranteed under Australian law. It is unfortunate in the extreme that in my home city of Canberra Chinese protesters—the majority of whom it would seem are not Australian citizens, although they naturally enjoy basic rights guaranteed under Australian law—have attempted to curtail or deny others the right to protest peacefully on non-Chinese sovereign soil. Sadly, perhaps even tragically given the scale of the perceptions now generated, many observers feel they have seen a sort of “export authoritarianism” masquerading as Chinese patriotism. A lot of work will have to be done to ameliorate this distasteful impression. It is noteworthy that some bloggers in China are also disgusted by the self-indulgent rhetorical hysteria of their (generally) middle-class countrymen and women overseas. They say that they’d like to see them go back to China and fight for political reform, media freedom, and human rights on home turf rather than making an hubristic spectacle of themselves internationally. Indeed, if China enjoyed true intellectual, media and political pluralism it would be possible to have a more rational and reasonable discussion of whether non-Chinese or non-Tibetan Australians have a right to express publicly their views on matters of international concern. Given the present state of affairs, this is simply not the case.

Q: Some have claimed that Tibet has long been part of China. Why? Or, would you say there is any academically recognized truth in this?

GB: The era of the nation state began for the territory of the Qing empire (the last Chinese dynasty, 1644-1911) in the mid nineteenth century. Like other modern countries “China” is a relatively recent construct as a modern nation-state. Prior to this time the sway of imperial rule, the relations between different imperial courts and bordering states or tributary states is what determined issues of territory. To project anachronistic views regarding the territory of the present People’s Republic of China into the distant past is a dubious undertaking at best. Similarly, to claim a unique independence for the territories of “Tibet” or “Greater Tibet” in the context of the imperial era is spurious. Although there were moves for an independent nation-state status for Tibet during the first half of the twentieth century (especially under the influence of the British imperium), such a status was not achieved in practical terms. For a study of the relations of the Tibetan areas of contemporary China to dynastic empires from the Mongol Yuan era (thirteenth century) to the high Qing (mid eighteenth century), I would refer your readers to the excellent work of the late historian F.W. Mote of Princeton University (see his *Imperial China, 900-1800*, Harvard University Press, 1999).

Furthermore, I would note that there is a dearth of independent scholarship on this subject of note in the People’s Republic as all historians and their research must conform to the official party-state line when dealing with issues of Chinese territorial integrity. This makes it particularly difficult for readers of Chinese alone to acquaint themselves with the rigorous, objective, and painstaking research that has been done on such issues by international scholars (not just English language scholarship), especially as the work of such scholars when produced in Chinese translation is usually censored or “cosmetically edited” when it touches on sensitive issues.

Q: Can you say anything about the concept of “motherland”?

GB: The “motherland” or in Chinese “*zuguo*,” which could also be translated as “fatherland,” a term with uncomfortable connotations in English, actually means “land of [one’s] ancestors.” It is a term and concept created in Japanese and Chinese during the era of Western imperial politics in the nineteenth century (see above). It has gained increased force in China over the past twenty years as the Chinese party-state (that is the nation which is run by a one-party system) has promoted

patriotism as a positive unifying force, in particular through constant “patriotic education” (*aiguo jiaoyu*) classes from primary school onwards and popular movements that see party propaganda, patriotic sentiment and slick commercialism combined (see the chapter ‘CCPä & Adcult PRC’ in my *In the Red*).

Q: We find it ironic, and concerning, that many protesters were rejecting politicization but responding with further, at times quite explicit politicization; that they were responding to claims of violence on behalf of their government with antagonism and intimidation; that they were protesting for the cause of an autocratic government under the protection of a foreign democratic one. Do you think Chinese political culture is cognizant of such contradictions?

GB: One of the underlying elements of mob patriotism/nationalism in any highly charged environment is the lack of self-reflection. We see careful thought abandoned; there is an indulgence in emotionalism and the mindless drift towards extreme and simplistic responses to what are generally complex issues. The politics of the Games itself are fraught, and now more so than ever. The Chinese media in the PRC has never been clear about the various undertakings that were made to the international community to ameliorate the human rights situation in China prior to the 2008 Games, and so most people have no idea that the constant news of human rights abuses coming from China (the appalling Hu Jia case being only the most recently well-advertised case: see the enlightening article “Hu Jia in China’s Legal Labyrinth” by Jerome A. Cohen and Eva Pils in the early May 2008 issue of *Far Eastern Economic Review*) have formed over some time a very negative backdrop to the recent Tibet issue.

It has been a great source of regret to many of us that the strident and vociferous activities of large mobs of Chinese “patriots” since London and Paris have so profoundly tarnished the image of China’s young people internationally. Furthermore, some have pointed out that the high-decibel denunciations of any who voice opinions not in keeping with what is dubbed “mainstream [Chinese] opinion” (*zhuliu minyi*) have created the impression that people in China and abroad are expected to support unquestioningly the People’s Republic of China, and all of its policies, regardless (for an approach that mitigates against such compliance, see the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s speech to the students of Peking University, April 9, 2008, and my April 12 analysis of it, “[Rudd Rewrites the Rules of Engagement](#)”). Doubts, questioning and informed discussion are, at present, not tolerated. Independent commentators in China have noted that while rabid patriotic Chinese demonstrators have enjoyed the right to protest internationally under the protection of the police of their resident countries, and with the full enjoyment of democratic freedoms that Western bourgeois democracies allow, in China they would enjoy no such freedoms.

Q: Questions of violence and intimidation aside, would you say that the show of support for China’s Olympics, and the sense of national pride, and the sense of the need to protect it internationally, is shared by most Chinese?

GB: It is impossible to gauge what “most Chinese” think or feel, as there is no means of making such assessments. I would imagine that there is widespread pride in the Olympics and a fervent hope that the year passes without further incident. However, I would note that a people that has had a history of mass movements, agitations, rallies, and mob agitation for nigh on a century now, will not resile from further displays of collective anger and raucous protest. The Olympics will now be fraught and there will inevitably been extreme official paranoia generated by the fear that some athlete, or visitor, or even playful prankster, will unfurl a Tibetan flag or shout “Free Tibet” at some moment during the Olympics—be it in the main sports venues, or anywhere in Beijing. Everyone will have to pay the price for this in advance through over-zealous security measures and a virtual state of martial law. This will make for a baleful environment indeed. But elsewhere I have pointed out that “harmonious society” is

a laden concept, one that consists of political tutelage, social quiescence and commercial frenzy, among other things.

I would further point out that many Chinese interlocutors are often more than happy to tell you what “We Chinese” feel or believe on any given topic. Given the lack of media freedom or true transparency in the Chinese public realm (added to by the shifting rhetorical ground of internet bloggers and commentators), claims that assert that individuals are able to represent anything but personal (even if it is “bestowed”) opinion are, needless to say, risible.

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