

Comment & Debate

Time to stop criticising China – we've already come so far

Those who attack the Chinese regime miss the point. There have been huge advances in personal and economic freedoms

Lijia Zhang



When I was at school, sports lessons included an exercise where we threw hand grenades (made from wood topped with metal to resemble the real thing) against a wall over which a red slogan had been stretched offering the reason for such a militaristic pastime: 'Exercise our bodies and protect our motherland.' We feared that China might be invaded one day by the American 'imperialists' or Soviet 'revisionists'. Indeed, the whole West held evil intent towards us. Living in a closed country, we had little idea about the outside world.

I went to school in Nanjing in the early Seventies, when the revolutionary fever of the Cultural Revolution was calming down. A few years earlier, my father had been banished to the countryside for criticising the government. My grandfather, a small-time grain dealer, had committed suicide, as he worried his not-so-politically-correct background would land him in trouble. These were the darkest of times for my family, as well as for our nation. China has come a long way since then, yet the image of those dark days remains deeply imprinted on Western minds. I wonder whether the West is a little too keen to report the negative stories. Or perhaps the West feels more comfortable hearing such stories?

That's my impression, as a Chinese who has lived abroad, but has returned to Beijing. Even during those days throwing grenades, I dreamt of becoming a journalist and writer. That dream was shattered when I was 16 and my mother dragged me to work at a state-owned missile factory.

My journalistic career started with the Olympics. In 1993, on the night when the result of the first bid was announced, I was at Tiananmen Square. I recall the fountain going off as we thought China had won the bid. It was heartbreaking to interview the bitterly disappointed crowds. But, in truth, China wasn't really ready. The memory of the bloody crackdown in 1989 was still fresh.

I was also in Beijing eight years later when China did win the bid. In our neighbourhood, grannies spent the whole afternoon practising their dance steps and their husbands beat drums and gongs. This time, we were



not disappointed. The wild celebration, the deafening noise of fire crackers, laughter and ecstatic cries went on the whole night. I was interviewed by the BBC. I said: 'In the ecstatic cries, I heard Chinese people's longing for the recognition and respect from the world.'

I was just as happy as everyone else. Ever since the economic reforms, China has lifted millions of people out of poverty. An incredible feat. As a child, I used to roast cicadas to satisfy my craving for meat; now my 19-year-old nephew, a student in Nanjing, drives his own car. People are enjoying a great deal more personal freedom. As a girl in the rocket factory, I had to endure so many rules. I worked there for 10 years. I was never promoted, partly because of my naturally curly hair – my boss thought I wore a perm. Back then, only those with a bourgeois outlook would curl their hair. These days, young women curl their hair, shave off their hair or change the colours of their hair whenever they want. It's not a small thing.

Over the past few years, I have seen how the capital has been transformed. State-of-the-art buildings – not just Olympic buildings such as the Bird's Nest and the Water Cube – have popped up like mushrooms after a spring rain. With only a few days to go before the opening ceremony, Beijing, having under-

gone a facelift, has never been so beautiful, clean and quiet.

Huge efforts and sacrifices have been made. To ensure the best possible air quality, polluting factories around Beijing have been shut down, construction work has been halted and cars have been taken off the roads (the results, admittedly, have been mixed). Other measures are excessive: beggars, the homeless and migrants without documents have been driven out. Petitioners who bring their grievances to the Supreme People's Court have been stopped from entering the capital. Potential trouble-makers are being monitored or are under house arrest. Such has been the stance the authorities adopt while dealing with uncertainty.

Yet Beijing's Olympics will be a success because the majority of the population want them to be, not just because the government wants to use Olympic success to gain legitimacy. Xia Fengzhi, a 67-year-old retired worker and a volunteer, told me how happy and excited he is about the Games: 'I want foreigners to see what China has achieved. We were called the "sick man of Asia". Now we are strong and rich enough to hold such a major international event.'

The Olympic Games will provide a chance for China and the rest of the world to understand each other

Illustration: www.briancairns.com

No doubt there will be many more negative stories abroad, criticising China's human rights abuses, the lack of media freedom and the over-tight security. Of course, some Chinese have no access to the reports, but those who do tend to dismiss them as grumbles from anti-China forces. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre, China's people ranked first among 24 nations in their optimism about their country's future, buoyed by the fast economic growth and the promise of the Olympics.

There is, I believe, another factor – the timing. The survey was conducted this spring, just after the unrest in Tibet and during the troubled Olympic torch relay, when China experienced a surge of nationalism in response to what many Chinese regarded as an 'anti-China feeling' in the West and 'biased' Tibet reports.

I have no problem with the negative stories, but I think it's wrong for the West to stand in moral judgment, especially when some of the accusations are not true. For example, what happened in Lhasa, in my view, was far more complicated than 'the Chinese government's ruthless crackdown on Tibetan protest'. There was a peaceful protest, but there was also a violent racial riot, one I doubt that would be tolerated in any country.

As a journalist, most of my stories criticise the government, which seems to have little idea as to how to present itself. Blessed with such domestic support and armed with skills in mass organisation, the authorities could have taken a more relaxed approach to this festival of sport. Why didn't it make the Olympic Games a fun event – China's big coming-out party? It didn't need to cause so much interruption to people's lives. It would have been far better to let the world to see China as it actually is.

I can't help feeling there's been a missed opportunity on more important matters, too. Our leaders could have made use of this to address the real issues: cracking down on corruption, improving the rule of law, relaxing media control and opening the country further.

But don't doubt our support of the Beijing Games. The Olympics are meant to be an occasion to bring different people with different views together. It'll provide a chance for China and the rest of the world to understand each other. Although I can understand how China's undemocratic political system and lack of transparency make the West uneasy, especially when matched with the country's rise, much of the fear is generated by ignorance.

Today's schoolchildren enjoy far more sophisticated sports than throwing hand grenades. They know a lot more about the outside world. I wonder if Western children know as much about China? And if they did, would there be still be the same fear? Maybe the Olympics will bring us closer.

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Brian Morton



So much for those old Fringe benefits

A dozen years ago, George Steiner found himself the object of Batemanesque shock, and indeed horror, by seeming to suggest that the Edinburgh Festival had become too big and should quietly slim itself down. Needless to say, that wasn't really what the good professor stood up to say in his Edinburgh Festival Lecture, which was a typically erudite and measured account of what purpose festivals serve in our society and culture.

His suggestion that the Festival might go back to first principles was tucked away in the peroration, but the media seized on a quick August headline, ignoring a learned disquisition that touched on the meaning of the word 'festival' and managed to take in the social function of arts and sport in Hellenic Greece.

Steiner's lecture is worth rereading, not least because the Festival – festival-going generally – seems to be at a cusp again. It's probably always

a good time to ask the question, but never more so: what are festivals for? And is the replenishing mix of creativity and contention, novelty and familiarity, coming to an end?

I'm sometimes inclined to think of the Edinburgh Festival as the cultural equivalent of binge-drinking: four weeks of steady intoxication on Mozart, Berkoff, a few comics, Salman and Doris at the Book Festival, then back to *Ground Force* in September. Like teenage boys, we all like to rack up the number of shows visited and books signed. The annual numbers game does get tiresome: this many visiting companies, that many productions, so many actual performances, five *Coriolanus*es and six shows about Che Guevara. The numbers aren't really the point.

My big beef is always about the Fringe, which, strange to say, has become excessively professional. The problem with the International Festival's cuckoo offspring isn't that

it has long since overgrown the nest and gobbled up more than its share of the media rations, but that it's simply not cuckoo enough.

I worked for a time at BBC Scotland on a programme that, during the run of the Fringe offered a nightly cabaret or tasting menu of sometimes underdone, sometimes overcooked tidbits. Researchers and producers prowled undersubscribed performances by day, booking acts to come on air that night. At first, the response was almost invariably positive and the results successful, except in those rare instances when inexperienced researchers booked mimes and jugglers (never great on radio) or extracts from theatre pieces that consisted entirely of long silences and meaningful looks. Earnest thespians doing four-hour dramatisations of *War and Peace* cheerfully found self-contained four-minute segments; comics trimmed stopwatch-accurate turns to fit the slot; everyone said

yes, even if it meant running through the streets in costume to get from performance to broadcast. You can do that in Edinburgh.

Ten years on, all had changed. Where groups would once clap their hands delightedly when they learned there might be a small fee, we had to dicker with 'our manager' (these were student shows, for God's sake) over a portion-controlled slice of an already small budget. Many troupes simply said 'no'; whether on aesthetic or financial grounds wasn't clear.

The Fringe was at its best when the aesthetics were basically rough and ready, 'experimental' and unconventionally shocking. I rather long for the days when the well-heeled patronised the 'official' Festival and (in the other sense) patronised Fringe-goers as long-haired reprobates. Even so, the Fringe has just been allowed to grow like Topsy. It's getting in everyone's eyes. It needs a trim. And then maybe a tousel.