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POINT OF VIEW

## Tibet Through Chinese Eyes

**Most Chinese think the West's real aim is to deny them the triumph they deserve for their success.**

By **Kishore Mahbubani** | NEWSWEEK  
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The recent crisis over the Olympic torch and Tibet represent an epic clash: not just between Tibetans and Beijing, but between a self-congratulatory Western worldview and the very different vision of a billion-plus Chinese. Until Western leaders start trying to understand the Chinese perspective, friction is likely to grow, and the victims will include the Tibetans themselves—the very people Western leaders say they want to protect.

According to the current U.S. and European narrative, the popular protests in Tibet and elsewhere were entirely justified. The demonstrators pushed a moral cause: to free the poor Tibetans from an oppressive communist government. And the European leaders who decided to boycott the Olympics' opening ceremonies, like Germany's Angela Merkel, deserved nothing but praise for their courageous stance.

The Chinese view could not be more different. Before describing it, however, it is vital to dispel a major Western misconception. Many Americans and Europeans think that China's furious reaction to the protests—a reaction that has now inspired a massive boycott of Western goods and businesses in China—has been the result of media manipulation and information control by Beijing. If only the Chinese public had access to real facts, Westerners think, their attitudes would be different. This is a huge mistake. The reality is that some of the strongest anger toward the West at the moment is coming from liberal Western-educated Chinese intellectuals who have access to accurate information. China today enjoys the most competent governance it's ever had, and its elites are intelligent, well educated and sophisticated—the exact opposite of the "goons and thugs" described by CNN's Jack Cafferty.



The Chinese are so angry because virtually all of them believe that the Western protests have had little to do with human rights, Tibet or Darfur. Instead, the Chinese think, the West's real

motivation is to deny China the triumph it deserves for its enormous successes. According to this view, Westerners cannot stomach the thought that China is poised to hold the best Olympics ever. Such a spectacle would vividly demonstrate how power has shifted from West to East. This would be intolerable, and thus Americans and Europeans are dead set on finding some way to disrupt the Games—and if Tibet or Darfur won't suffice, they'll find some other method. As several Western-educated Chinese friends have whispered to me, "Kishore, this is pure racism. The West cannot bear the thought of China's succeeding."

Chinese skepticism about the Western commitment to human rights is well founded. Indeed, there is something ironic about those who have committed genocide against American Indians or Australian Aborigines now castigating China on Tibet. Furthermore, Guantánamo—which Amnesty International has described as "the gulag of our times"—plus Abu Ghraib and European complicity in Washington's extraordinary rendition program have badly damaged the West's credibility and legitimacy.

Most Chinese also believe that Tibetans have received special treatment from Beijing. After the disastrous Cultural Revolution, in which all Chinese suffered, Deng Xiaoping adopted a more pragmatic approach to the region. Ruined religious sites were repaired, monasteries were reopened, new monks were allowed to join orders and the Tibetan language was permitted to be used more extensively than before. Chinese leaders believe that China has exercised sovereignty over Tibet for 700 years now, ever since the Yuan dynasty—one reason the "Free Tibet" slogan angers them so much. Then there's the recent territorial disintegration of the Soviet Union and memories of how the West seized Chinese territory in the 19th century: still more reasons why Chinese suspicions run deep.

What really frustrates Beijing is the West's apparent lack of comprehension of China's aims for the Olympics. In 2005, World Bank head Robert Zoellick called on China to become a "responsible stakeholder." The Beijing Olympics were meant to symbolize China's willingness to do just that, and the Chinese expected their efforts to be welcomed enthusiastically. But now most Western leaders seem intent on slamming the door in Beijing's face instead. The tragedy is that this will only stoke angry Chinese nationalism, which has already begun to surface. A fire-breathing Chinese dragon will clamp down on Tibet even harder than the current government has, which would serve no one's interests. The West's failure to recognize this fact demonstrates a serious failure of long-term strategic thinking.

If Europe's leaders really want to show political courage, they should attend the Olympics' opening ceremonies. Doing so would encourage China to open up further and engage the world. Over time, this will liberalize Chinese society and even lead to greater political and cultural autonomy for the Tibetans. So far, only one major Western leader has shown the requisite courage and foresight: George W. Bush. It is hoped numerous leaders from other continents will join him in Beijing. When that happens, it will only underscore Europe's growing irrelevance: a tragedy that Europeans are bringing upon themselves.

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