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# Olympic Misunderstandings

By Lothar Katz

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*“Spain's Olympic basketball teams have risked upsetting their Chinese hosts by posing for a pre-Games advert making slit-eyed gestures. The advert for a courier company, which is an official sponsor of the Spanish Basketball Federation, occupied a full page in the sports daily Marca, the country's best-selling newspaper.*

*The advert features two large photographs, one of the men's basketball team and one of the women's team. Both squads pose in full Olympic kit on a basketball court decorated with a picture of a Chinese dragon. Every single player appears pulling back the skin on either side of their eyes. The advert carries the symbol of the sport's governing body.”* [The Guardian, August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008]

No one involved in it seems to have given much thought to the manner in which this ad could be interpreted in China (or elsewhere) and whether it was appropriate to run. That's all the more surprising when considering that one of the primary sponsors of the Spanish Basketball teams is actually a Chinese company.

The issue went largely unnoticed in China. The country was too busy fulfilling and celebrating its role as the host of the biggest games in Olympic history. Otherwise, many Chinese would have been offended upon learning about this ad.

Or would they? After all, it used to be commonplace in China, and still is in some of its rural areas, that people would curiously stare at and openly make fun of foreigners. The term *gweilo* (literally “ghost man”, more commonly translated as “foreign devil”) is also still in use here and there. The Chinese are certainly no strangers to making fun of others, so we can expect them to be tolerant of others making fun of them, too, can't we? Well, not really. We all tend to be less forgiving about outsiders making fun of us than the other way around, and the Chinese are no exception to that rule. On top of that, the joke was about THE OLYMPICS IN CHINA.

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were a remarkable event in more than one way. Not only did we see fantastic athletic achievements and great sportsmanship, but those looking closely also witnessed countless examples of profound cultural misunderstandings. To the world outside of China, these were the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games. Maybe a bit more colorful and flashy than past ones, but at its core, this was just another meeting of the world's top athletes to determine the best of the best, celebrate, and enjoy life together. As viewed from abroad, the Chinese somewhat spoiled the fun, with their over-protectiveness of the Olympic torch during the pre-game relay, the omnipresence and intrusiveness of the country's police force, and the censorship of the media and others. All of this was further complicated by the tensions around Tibet. In short, country and people seemed to lack the “laid-back-ness” and sense of humor that made some of the past Olympics such fun events.

The picture looks vastly different when viewed through Chinese eyes. To the Chinese, these Games were *much* more than, well, games: a crucial milestone in the country's return to greatness, a celebration of its aspirations and achievements, and a demonstra-

tion of the unity of nation and people. This event *had* to be perfect. The pride that almost all of the Chinese, no matter where they live in the world, felt about conducting these games in China is hard to describe or compare. Even most of those normally critical of the country's leadership shared this pride, flat-out rejecting any critique of the ways in which the event was conducted. To the Chinese, the 2008 Olympics were definitely not a mere sports event. Actually, watching and celebrating sports is not that common in the People's Republic anyway: even the table tennis finals found relatively limited public interest. That's a sport that more than 50 million Chinese practice regularly! No, it wasn't interest in sports that got them excited, it was being party to an event that presented China center-stage in front of the whole world.

It seems that neither side, China and the West, quite realize how fundamentally different their perceptions of the event were. As is common in the business world as well, each side saw things clearly from their own perspective but had trouble adjusting to the other's views. If nothing else, the Beijing Olympics made it obvious that both sides still have a long way to go before they can truly understand each other.

That observation notwithstanding, the Games were fun to watch, weren't they?

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.

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