

No Chaos in China for the Olympic Torch

At least for China's readers and viewers, the torch's journey across the west is singularly placid

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China's promise of unfettered media coverage for the Olympics is a shaky work in progress, at least as far as its own coverage of the Olympic torch's 21-nation promotional "Journey of Harmony" is concerned. In its global hopscotch the flame's journey has been mostly all good news as far as the official Chinese media is concerned despite the chaos that is being visited in its path across the planet.

"Warm reception in cold London," read the April 7 headline in *China Daily*, the country's largest English language newspaper. Warm? Well, yes, in fact it was almost explosive if you read accounts from western newspapers and watched (erratically blacked out by panicked Chinese censors) CNN and BBC-World television accounts via mainland cable and satellite that detailed the hundreds of protestors who disrupted and twice almost extinguished the "sacred flame" as State news agency Xinhua continually refers to the torch.

It wasn't until the ninth paragraph that *China Daily* hinted that the "Olympic fever gripping snowy London" was nearly fatal to Beijing's best laid plans. And even then only 25 protestors were said to have been arrested – compared to 35 or 36 arrests and descriptions of hundreds along the 30-mile route in western press accounts. At Xinhua's Chinese language Internet site "a very few Tibetan independence secessionists" were blamed late in the story with London's mayor quoted as saying: "It is very normal to encounter demonstrations. It happens to me too." He added, in a very un-London sounding sound-bite: "that even though the weather was bad, the masses showed a harmonious spirit and enthusiasm."

"What an advert for London 2012: Our Olympic showpiece ends in violence and farce," read the London tabloid Daily Mail which went on to describe the debacle as a combination of "sinister and slapstick."

The slightly more restrained *New York Times* proclaimed "Protests of China Make Olympic Torch Relay an Obstacle Course." "Shouting 'Shame on China!' and waving Tibetan flags, pro-Tibetan demonstrators and others protesting Chinese human rights abuses turned the running of the Olympic torch through the streets here on Sunday into a tumult of scuffles," said the *Times*.

In any event, however, it is debatable how much the Chinese government needs to protect their own people from the media. The widespread feeling among most Chinese is that the Tibetans had it coming when police cracked down on the riots that blossomed in Lhasa and other cities in March. That feeling is fostered not so much by a severely restricted news media – which it is – as by a Han Chinese ethos that their country, poverty-stricken only three decades ago, has lifted most of its citizens into a relative prosperity they had not known for centuries. The lawyers, rights activists and journalists who are regularly thrown in jail are fighting an uphill battle for attention in a population that believes things are getting better faster than anybody could have imagined.

So, undeterred by messy reality, next stop, Paris – historically no stranger to mass protests – but

where “French passion greets torch,” trumpeted China Daily, neglecting to note the flame was actually extinguished three times by organizers who cut the journey short after putting the torch in a van due to safety concerns caused by “Tibetan separatists” and then cut the journey short.

Back at Xinhua it turned into outright denial, however. “Foreign media reports saying the Olympic torch was forced to be extinguished during the relay in Paris were false,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu said early Tuesday morning. End of story. Nothing happening here folks, move on.

“Details of the protests are skimmed over, in that there’s never any explanation of why people are protesting. They’re simply lumped together by the generic phrase “Dalai clique” or “Tibetan separatists” and their supporters,” said one foreign editor at China Radio’s International English Service. “Another constant is that the torch relay is referred to as ... ‘should not be interrupted’ because the Games are all about sport. Oh, and of course all the protests are either ‘doomed to failure’ or ‘will not succeed.’”

The lumping together of protestors who range from Tibetan independence activists to Reporters without Frontiers, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Falun Gong, individuals calling for the release of Chinese activist Hu Jia recently sentenced to three and a half years in jail for “subverting the state” as well as just attention seekers is not important to Beijing, however, which still continues to doggedly blame the bad PR on the “Dalai clique” when even the dimmest of them must have realized they would be the target of every human activist with an ax to grind or placard to wave in the months leading up to the Games. Still they continue to doggedly stick to the old script of pretending nothing is amiss. Many editorials and spokespeople – Chinese and Western alike are also repeatedly quoted saying the Olympics have never been embroiled with politics, as if Germany 1936, Mexico City 1968, Munich 1972, Moscow 1980 and Los Angeles 1984 never occurred.

There are a few cracks, however. On Monday night as Paris was burning with controversy, the CCTV-4 English language service veered from its thinly veiled “bash the West in order to pity and praise China” template for its “Dialogue” talk show with a live broadcast about the Paris torch debacle that admitted all was not well before coasting into a final 15 minutes assuring viewers that while the flame may flicker, the Olympic spirit can never be truly extinguished. Meanwhile Chinese language TV news was showing brief film clips of peaceful Sino-Franco Olympic torch harmony spliced in with pre-recorded travel footage of Paris spotlighting the usual travel suspects – the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, Seine boat cruises and the Louvre.

But average Chinese who are understandably hurt and outraged by Western news accounts of the flame’s troubled journey and accounts of the riots in Tibet are making their voices heard on the Internet. A notable example of what a US blogger in China calls “the huge collision between Chinese and Western worldviews and our inability to communicate” can be found at his Mutant Palm site. There translations from Germany’s leading news magazine *Der Spiegel* that outraged and wounded a Chinese woman working in Germany who wrote about Tibet and arguments with coworkers it in her blog. With the unfortunate title “Die Gelben Spione”, or “The Yellow Spies” it’s a racist and unverified attack on Chinese in general that paints them as a nation of monkey brain-eating spies.

Meanwhile, the sacred flame’s next leg takes it to San Francisco Wednesday – the only city in the United States for it and one prominent in historic terms as the “Gold Mountain” that lured immigrant Chinese as long ago as the 1850s. It is also unfortunately a city famed for protest in favor of or against almost any cause – so much so that authorities first made a decision to keep the torch’s route a secret. News reports Tuesday noted that climbers had actually managed to scale the Golden Gate Bridge to hang a large Tibetan independence banner from the famed landmark. Surely China has some idea what to expect in a city for its history of creative and flamboyant public displays of

emotion.

P.S.

* From Asia Sentinel:

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