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The Yin and Yang of China's Olympic Volunteers

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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As always, the word “volunteer” will be getting much use in mid-August during the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing (<http://en.beijing2008.cn/>). There have been many stories already about the special effort the Chinese authorities have put into recruiting and deploying an estimated 1.7 million people into volunteer roles. One good example of the press coverage appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor* on July 17th with the headline “For Beijing's Olympic Volunteers, the Rules are Many” (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2008/0717/p04s01-woap.html>).

The article begins: “Ms. Cai, crisp and efficient in her bright blue Olympic volunteer shirt, has a list of instructions to remember.” We learn that she is staffing one of 550 information booths where she is expected to provide services to visitors and do a lot of smiling. But then the article says:

But after each interaction, out comes the red logbook – where Cai, who didn't share her first name, makes a careful tally of hours worked, people helped, papers distributed, and media outlets spoken to.

This isn't your typical volunteer operation, run by independent groups working to improve a local school or save old homes from developers' bulldozers. This is volunteerism Beijing 2008 style – managed rigorously by the state and for the state.

"The government has its own structure to organize volunteers [and] prefers such ways rather than to let the volunteers organize themselves," says Jia Xijin, deputy director of the NGO Research Center at Beijing's Tsinghua University.

Next the reporter notes that, although China has made a real effort to engage volunteers for the Olympics, this does not mean that the country wants NGOs (non-governmental organizations) to gain power. She describes the serious application and screening process for Olympic volunteers, and the intensive training given, not as examples of quality volunteer management, but as indicators of suspect “government control.”

From our perspective of volunteer management, such descriptions should evoke contradictory emotions.

I certainly don't want to defend the Chinese government in terms of its human rights record or openness to criticism or change. But, on the other hand, I can't find much wrong in their approach to volunteering for the Olympics. To wit:

- All indications are that the volunteers really do *want* to be there. Over two million Chinese citizens applied to become volunteers, sincerely wanting to put on the most hospitable show for foreign guests. Most observers, including the reporter quoted above, have not challenged the voluntary-ness of the volunteers. As I wrote in my [Hot Topic of October 2004](#), when Betty Stallings and I were in China on vacation, we met people already eager to become volunteers. Conversely, contrast the Chinese situation with what's happening in Canada in advance of the 2010 Winter Olympics hosted by British Columbia. The Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) ran a story in February headlined, "[B.C. Civil Servants to Be Paid to Volunteer at 2010 Olympics](#)" and then opened the topic up for [comments](#). They got them!
- As I've pointed out so many times in this space, it is simply wrong to think that volunteering for a nonprofit organization is completely different from volunteering with a government agency. Even if the government in question is Chinese, why shouldn't citizens be involved in assuring the success of something that will affect their whole society (again, assuming *non-coercion* to help, which was my first point)?
- How can anyone expect local NGOs collectively to run the Olympic Games? The scale of the event effectively requires centralization. And why assume that local groups of volunteers would necessarily organize the event in a less demanding manner? Every Olympics in the recent past has developed procedures, systems, rules, and management strategies for coordinating thousands of volunteers. This is hardly a new idea.
- If we accept the fact that the Chinese government is running the Olympics – which clearly is the case – then don't we want them to practice the best volunteer management? Of course we do. They are right in wanting the best people and in training them well. Why *not* ask volunteers to record their activities? Why infer that this has a negative reason, such as spying on the volunteer or giving information on the visitors for political purposes? In a world obsessed with "metrics," it will be interesting to see the total numbers reported of volunteer acts in two weeks of hosting the world.

So here's a challenge to readers.

You'll probably end up watching some or a lot of the Olympics this month. Pay attention to when and how you hear mention of "volunteers." Are the references positive? Do they imply that the Chinese government is being too stringent in its requirements for volunteers? Or are other issues being raised?

Then, return here and post your observations – both what you saw/heard and what you felt while listening to it. Maybe we can create a log of responses that will prove useful to other reporters or even to future organizing committees.

Let the Games begin!

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Submitted 20 August 2008 by Be Potter, Adelaide, Australia

In response to the comment "If I were a person living in China..." First of all I agree with your basic belief and I'm glad I live in a pretty good, albeit flawed democracy, however, if you were a person living in China you probably would only see things from that Chinese, political, moral, and dare I say, conscience based perspective. Currently, the Chinese people have probably got the most freedom they have ever had in history, and lets face it religion has been the main means of 'control' over the rest of 'western' society so I'm kind of glad the Chinese government still has some control over that huge population. Imagine if they had not introduced the one child policy, and the one car per family policy? Perhaps in time they will conform to some sense of democracy but it will take time, I believe the Chinese intellectuals, thinkers and artists are working slowly to make positive change and that with the support of western nations China will slowly shake off the mantel of oppression as means of control.

Submitted 19 August 2008 by DJ Cronin, Ramsay Health, Australia

Given this current joint Hot Topic I thought you might be interested in this article ("[London will struggle to match this army on volunteer frontline](#)") from the UK's *Guardian* newspaper [about how the Chinese Olympic volunteers are setting a very high bar for London in 2012]. I enjoyed it and found some of the reponses very humorous!

Submitted 18 August 2008 by [Jayne Cravens](#), Consultant, Germany

CNN International has done a lot of mentions of the Olympic volunteers, all focusing on Chinese volunteers, and the references are always positive, showing how much the Chinese people themselves want to make visitors feel welcomed, and how coveted these volunteering spots were. The volunteers in China remind me of the German volunteers here during the World Cup -- they could not WAIT to help visitors with any little thing they needed (wish the country was that way all the time...). They were *everywhere*. And they were *very* well trained.

I should also note that CNN International, in every story, almost always says something about the Chinese government's human rights record, lack of freedom of speech or the press in the country, and the government's broken promises on such.

Several news outlets reported that the Beijing Olympics Volunteers Guide had some not-so-appropriate things to say about people with disabilities, and the government ended up apologizing

for such. You can read some of the outrageous statements from the guide here:

<http://hoydenabouttown.com/20080527.1772/beijing-olympics-volunteers-guide-lays-into-people-with-disabilities/>

Submitted 12 August 2008 by Amanda, New York, NY US

Any good volunteer program incorporates a screening and training process. This helps to insure public safety as well as effective service delivery. Volunteering for a private NGO does not guarantee anyone freedom of speech, and usually involves volunteers signing some type of release/agreement concerning his or her activities as they relate to the mission/vision/values of the organization. It may be naïve to believe that the government doesn't have an agenda; it is equally naïve to assume that agendas don't drive civil society actors/NGOs providing volunteer services.

As the public sector critics and leaders alike champion the need for evaluation and results based management, I can't understand how clear record keeping that could inform the planning of future Olympic volunteer initiatives is so scandalous. Government already uses existing, more sophisticated systems to track foreign activities in the country. Personally, I volunteered last summer at the Chao Yang Senior Center teaching English to seniors selected as volunteers. They anxiously studied both vocab and grammar for the games and to the expected medical, physical, and cultural needs of their expected targeted audience—foreign seniors. I hope the seniors who lost meds or have other problems encounter one of these “over trained and indoctrinated” volunteers.

Posted by Susan on 12 August

Yesterday we were treated to a rather unusual Olympic volunteer assignment: searching in the sand of the beach volleyball arena for athlete Kerri Walsh's wedding ring! It went flying off during the competition and volunteers used metal detectors and hands-and-knees digging to find it. The [Associated Press](#) opened their article with: " Even the volunteers go for the gold at the Olympic beach volleyball venue."

Posted by Susan on 8 August, immediately after the telecast of the Olympics Opening Ceremonies

Who knew? I nearly fell off the sofa when I heard the announcer say that the translation of the title of the Chinese National Anthem is "March of the Volunteers"!! Of course its meaning is far from our topic here, but you can read about it as an interesting [entry at Wikipedia](#). I did challenge us all to be alert to mentions of "our" word, but didn't quite expect this immediate reference!

This month's Hot Topic has been simultaneously posted here and at [OzVPM](#), because our Australian colleague and friend Andy Fryar also wanted to draw attention to the Olympics and volunteering. We agreed to cross-post responses and the following was submitted on 7 August, anonymously.

Allow me to rain on the Olympic parade. If I were a Chinese citizen living in China I simply wouldn't be allowed to express a view that may seem critical of the state. The fact that even here In Australia I

seek anonymity in my response speaks volumes on what is at stake here and is not mere paranoia as can be attested by others in our free nation.

I appreciate that Susan doesn't want to defend the Chinese government in terms of its human rights record or openness to criticism or change. But on the other hand she cant find much wrong in their approach to volunteering for the Olympics.

Personally I disagree and find it hard to separate the two at the end of the day. And all this talk about what a brilliant volunteer program this is etc just doesn't sit quite right with me. Maybe others feel that uneasiness too.

Ok – I accept people will respond to this and say “well, what do you expect China to do – not have volunteers at this Olympics?” People will also say that we should separate the Olympics, its volunteer movement and so called politics.

Can't we still praise the good volunteer management practice while reminding people that it is indeed regrettable that those who volunteer their time to object to the human rights abuses in their own country face persecution and imprisonment or worse?

The Chinese authorities have broken their promise to improve the country's human rights situation and betrayed the core values of the Olympics, according to a recent Amnesty International report.

I am sure that the volunteers at these games will do a great job as volunteers have been doing for many Olympics. But what if one of those volunteers were to make a brave and bold statement on the world stage and manages to unfurl a banner calling on the nation for human rights, or to stop persecuting people for their religious beliefs or freedom for Tibet. God help anyone who volunteers to pull off a stunt such as this!

Volunteerism is a wonderful movement in any country around the world. But we have to ask if that movement is capable of being hijacked by governments for their own political agendas.

It's a pity that we haven't learned the lessons of 1936.

“Cowardice asks the question, 'Is it safe?' Expediency asks the question, 'Is it politic?' But conscience asks the question, 'Is it right?' And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular but because conscience tells one it is right.”

Thank you Martin L King.

Let the debates begin.

Submitted August 4, 2008 by David Brettell, currently in Beijing [but he's from Australia, where he headed volunteer coordination for the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000]

Appreciated your article re: Beijing volunteers – very good points. I am in Beijing right now, under contract to the organising committee for four weeks – and I'm pleased to say the reason is that they want to learn from our experience with the Sydney Olympics. Attached is a 📎 about my stay here. Your readers might find it interesting.

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