

Statement by Randolph Kluver, Texas A&M University
U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
June 18 2008

I am honored to testify before you on the question before this panel, namely, the extent to which the government of the Peoples Republic of China has honored its pledges for increased media openness and information transparency, as well as attempted to control the image of China in the international media, in the preparations for the Olympic games.

Before I begin, I would like to offer some sense of the context of my remarks, and the approach I take to these important questions. I am an academic, who primarily studies communication, information technologies and media, and their impact on Asian societies. What I hope to offer in my remarks here is an informed contextual understanding of where Chinese media has come from, is today, and is going, within the larger context of China's development.

There are two specific questions before us today, namely; How have preparations for the Olympics affected the efforts of the PRC government to control domestic and international perceptions of China's domestic situation and foreign engagements? And is the PRC government honoring its previous pledges of media freedom made in association with its bid to host the Olympics?

My preparation for this session today has included in-depth discussions in the Peoples Republic of China and Hong Kong, with journalists and with media and journalism educators from some of China's top universities, as well as others who follow these developments around the world. In addition, I have been in several conversations with contacts within the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games, so I understand the concerns and goals of that organization, also. Therefore, my remarks are meant to be analytical, rather than polemic, and will hopefully provide some insight as you consider recommendations to US policy.

Without a doubt, Chinese society is rapidly changing, and most, if not all, of the social and political institutions within it. Change doesn't necessarily imply speed, nor does it necessarily imply a positive direction, but this is what I believe is happening in China's media sector. The hosting of the Olympic Games has become what I would define as the most important issue in China right now, as every governmental body, every company and organization, and virtually every citizen is trying to find a way to carve out a space within the larger narrative of the Beijing Olympics.

The Olympics has had a significant impact on daily life in the host venues, including cities other than Beijing. In the past two months, I have travelled to four of the six host cities, and without exception, I found that each of them has become festooned with Olympics slogans, billboards, commercials, and exhortations. Massive effort has been ongoing for several years now, and probably in excess of 20 billion dollars has been spent on infrastructure upgrades, the construction of Olympics facilities, and so on. In many ways, I think it would be fair to say that China is not only trying to promote its image through the Olympics, it is attempting to define itself through the Olympics. This is true not just for foreign audiences, but for domestic ones as well.

So, what has been the effect of all this investment and all of this energy devoted to the Olympics on the issues of relevance to us today, the practices of information openness and transparency? I think that for many of us, the changes have not been as dramatic, nor as clear, as we would have liked. There is evidence that the increased international attention is having an impact on how individual citizens conduct their lives, and increased attention from the government such as the quality of life, the quality and trustworthiness of public technologies, governmental offices, and the availability of foreign media. But the evidence is less evident of a wholesale transformation of the way in which the media operates in the Peoples Republic.

In 2007, China's government (parliament) promised to allow access to international reporters covering the Olympics to interview anybody and cover any issue. The new regulations will come into force on 1 January 2007 and expire two months after the Olympic Games in 2008. Entitled "Regulations on reporting activities in China by foreign journalists during the Beijing Olympic Games and the preparatory period" the rules allow foreign journalists to travel anywhere in the country without prior permission from local authorities.

These rules specifically do not apply to Chinese journalists, and as a number of people pointed out at the time, it didn't guarantee that interviewees would agree to requests, leaving open the possibility that the government could still control information by forbidding Chinese employees to give interview. They also said that the rules covered reporting on the "Olympic Games and related matters," which obviously is open to interpretation, in terms of what "related matters" would be.

Given these qualifications, how has China responded to these new rules, and has it, in fact, honored the promises it made earlier? The answer is mixed.

Certainly the removal of travel restrictions that occurred in January 2007 has had a dramatic effect on how foreign journalists do their job. The primary restriction that remains is that a journalist must obtain prior to permission from interviewees, and of course, there are numerous ways to make sure that that doesn't happen. But a number of journalists that I spoke to say that this has made their lives dramatically easier. Of course, it still is not as easy to report in China as it is in Hong Kong, but it is much easier than it was ten, five, or even two years ago. This, of course, must be qualified, as at least in the case of Tibet, China still does not allow foreign journalists into "anyplace in the country," unless it is in highly controlled circumstances. Obviously, the Chinese leadership did not anticipate the events of this past spring in Tibet when it offered the new rules, but two months after the events, the nation is still off limits to foreigners.

In conversations with Western journalists who are trying to cover the Olympics, I heard a variety of stories. For a number of journalists, their experiences were highly negative. Government officials, including those from BOCOG, seem to be doing all they can to guarantee that coverage that emerges from China is positive, and limited solely to Olympics games coverage. Regulations are opaque, when they exist at all, and officials give little or no interpretation of regulations, or interpret them so vaguely that journalists feel that they have no idea what is

allowable and what is no. These journalists believe that covering China right now is like a “living hell.”

But, for other journalists, there are few, if any problems. Although it was clear that the government knows they are working, and looking deep beneath the contours of Chinese society, and even asking them about their work, they felt no pressure, obfuscation, or other problems from the Chinese government. They spoke of complete freedom to travel where they wanted, when they wanted; of being able to hire whoever they wanted as assistants; of being able to cover issues that highlighted the costs of China’s development, both social and financial; of covering corrupt officials, and so on. These journalists were unable to travel to Tibet immediately after the riots, but they were able to go into Western Sichuan, which is predominantly Tibetan, and believed that they were able to accurately report on what was happening in the area.

I asked some journalists to explain the discrepancy, and there were a number of factors that were mentioned. European journalists told me that media representing the US or the UK were regarded with particular suspicion. Television media also tend to face greater scrutiny, or barriers, than print media, because television has a uniquely intrusive nature, and tends to drive the storyline for other types of media. At least one journalist suggested to me that the attitude of the journalist is largely responsible for their ability to get at information. Whatever the reasons, many foreign journalists in China do believe that China is completely honoring their commitments for openness.

I do believe that within the West, we have tended to interpret the rules of openness a bit more broadly than have those in China. We often assume, for example, that the rules apply to Chinese journalists, or to the publication of content in Chinese media, when they clearly do not. We also tend to assume that that means completely free access to government officials, who will respond to questions on any topic, when it does not.

There have indeed been improvements to access to information that are in my mind, significant. The actions of the government of the May 12 Earthquake is a good example. For this event, the government allowed relatively open freedom to Chinese press to cover the extent of the earthquake, the responses of individuals, societies, and the government to meet the huge needs precipitated by the quake, and for a brief period of time, criticism of the processes of construction and regulation that allowed so much devastation to occur. This kind of reporting has not gone away completely, but the government has stepped in to limit the amount of reporting that could ultimately reflect back negatively on the government’s performance of its duties. As one media expert in China told me, you can criticize the actions of people in the past, you can speculate about the competence of performance in the future, but it is difficult, and dangerous, to criticize those currently in power, or things that are happening right now, without being very indirect.

On the question of the Chinese government’s attempts to “manage its image” internationally in the past 18 months or so, there is a more encouraging trend. In spite of a concerted effort on the part of the government that began several years ago to enhance its international image, China has been clearly stung in the past year by several key events, including the negative publicity

emerging from tainted food, medicine, and toys in 2007, the Tibet riots of this spring, china's relationship with Sudan, ongoing criticism of its human rights record, and the Olympic Torch run. In each of these cases, China has attempted to respond in some fashion in order to blunt negative criticism, but its responses have either been inadequate or ignored in international press. In many cases, Chinese officials believe that the global media is deliberately distorting information in order to help China's critics.

For example, China executed the head of the bureau which oversees the safety of medicine for corrupt practices that led to the distribution unsafe drugs, and although this was reported globally, it was usually interpreted as yet another brutal response to embarrassment, rather than as an attempt to redress a significant regulatory problem. Likewise, the government organized a tour of journalists to Tibet immediately after the spring riots. From the Chinese perspective, this was a risky move to allow journalists to get the "real sense" of the reality in Tibet, and they were dismayed when almost every published piece to emerge from the trip was highly critical of the Chinese government. A story circulating among media circles in China is that two Japanese journalists actually wrote highly positive pieces, but that the stories were killed by their editor, because he wanted to "publish what the audience believed." Whether this story is true or not, it is largely believed among many, and reinforces the belief that international media don't really want the "truth" about China, but rather pre-established narratives that demonstrate Western superiority.

In addition, China has been actively promoting an image of itself as a willing and committed partner to global geo-political concerns in areas such as the conflict in Sudan and the North Korean nuclear standoff. CNPC, which is a major shareowner in Sudan's state-owned oil companies, sent a high level delegate to tour refugee camps in Darfur to show that China was not blind to the human rights travesty there. But China's own needs for oil mean that it is highly unlikely for the nation to walk away from the significant investments they have there in order to pressure the Sudanese government beyond what it already has. Likewise, China avoids controversial policies that might feed a perception of being overly close to the North Korean government, including in areas such as investment and education.

China has also engaged in a high profile "soft power" campaign to enhance its image. I am most familiar with the "Confucius Institute" project, because I work closely with the Ministry of Education in this project, and this effort is clearly modeled after several similar models from the West, including the British Council, the Alliance Francais, and the Goethe Institute. The Beijing Olympics are another example, where the image that China is constructing around the Olympic games have little to do with authoritarian state power. The five mascots of the Olympics, the "Fuwa," have names that when read together, say, "Beijing welcomes you!" the facilities reflect some of the most interesting designs in contemporary architecture, the city has attempted (but largely failed) to ban smoking in public places, and so on. But, again, these attempts are largely met in the West with numerous stories about the impact of the pollution on the Olympic games. In many ways, China's attempts to shape the international perception of the Olympics illustrates the difficulty the nation has in controlling its international image, and to many Chinese, demonstrates a conspiracy on the part of Western governments and media to "keep China down." Many Chinese believe that because an emerging China represents an economic and political challenge to Western hegemony, the West must undercut china's attempts to achieve a global

influence appropriate to its role, while still maintaining that there is in fact no such attempt at undermining China.

This, in fact, is really one of the key issues that I believe this committee must understand. Because of China's reading of, and one might say obsession with, history, and particular the Western dominance over China, I think it is safe to say that most Chinese do in fact regard international criticism of the nation and its policies as an attempt to keep China subservient. Shifting standards, constant criticism, and an inexplicable ability to ignore some events while highlighting others, are the evidence they cite to demonstrate this belief. While we in the west believe that our comments serve to highlight international standards and expectations, and help the Chinese achieve them, the Chinese interpret them very differently. It has been my experience that very few Westerners understand why Chinese react as they do to our comments, as we typically do not understand the historical context in which they are placed by Chinese. Likewise, very few Chinese believe our professed goals of our criticisms, and do not believe our professed ignorance of the historical dominance of the West over China.

As evidence of this, let me quote from a recent post on a Chinese blog: "The westerners have harbored prejudices against the Chinese people. We often hear them say: The Chinese have been brainwashed because they can no longer tell the truth about something. In their view, all Chinese are ignorant, undeveloped and close-minded. They have no idea that many Chinese people know as much as they do and in fact visited a lot more websites than they have. The westerner stoops down condescendingly to stretch out a helping hand to the wretched little yellow men so as to educate and instruct them. They are totally oblivious to the possibility that they are dealing with live human beings who are thoughtful and sentient." These sentiments, of course, are widely shared on the Chinese internet, but even that ultra-nationalistic medium is not exceptional in this. These views are widely believed across China.

China believes that it has very few tools available to it to influence global media coverage, and so is actively trying to improve its ability to use the few it does have, as well as develop new ones. For example, Tsinghua University has been training government officials for about five years now on how to be an effective spokesman, teaching them how the media works and the expectations of media personnel, and trying to help them overcome the bureaucratic and non-responsive attitude that characterized them in the past. Although many have gone through this training, it hasn't yet translated into a critical mass of government spokespersons who understand the expectations and values of Western journalists. Thus, government briefings tend to rely on static phrases, slogans, and warnings, and to be primarily defensive in nature.

Further, China regards its international image as a "propaganda war," and this defensive mindset then leads them to be less responsive to international perspectives. It has even been suggested that the fact that Chinese tend to not be able to write well in English is a major reason that their perspective isn't accepted, so some outlets have taken to hiring native English speakers to produce essays that demonstrate subtlety of thought and fluency of expression to counter negative images of China.

I understand the implications for US foreign policy of Chinese culture as following. First, this is an important issue for the US, and it rightfully ought to be. I have had a number of Chinese

citizens tell me that the US has no inherent right to make demands of China's media system, and particularly to force China to adopt a more open media system. Many of these believe that China's media is opening up in significant ways, and that that is rightfully so, but ultimately the character and logic of China's media is for the benefit of Chinese citizens. There is some truth to this, but I think that there a number of reasons that it is wrong.

First, US economic, political, and security issues demand that we have accurate information about the nations with whom we have close ties. I believe very strongly in closer relations between our two countries, and that these should not be characterized by mistrust. A greater openness on the part of China's government would better serve both nations, not just the US. Thus, I would encourage the US to continue to raise this issue in relevant contexts, and to seek more ways to encourage media and information openness. We have seen similar trends in other issues, such as intellectual property. Although China has a great distance to go to fully protect the intellectual property of other nations, the government's vigilance over the Olympics symbols and logos goes to show just how much they can develop new practices, when they see it as in their interest.

Second, the US approach to China must be sensitive to the ways in which China's citizens perceive the criticisms that come from abroad. This is more than just a canard tossed about by China's leaders to deflect criticism. Ordinary Chinese take great offense at slights at their nation, and grow increasingly defensive when this is all they hear from foreign media and governments. Our complaints and criticisms are often self-defeating, because they only serve to create defensiveness on the part of the Chinese people, even when we believe that our intent is sincere.

Our approach to China should be that of a sincere friend who remonstrates a friend for moral purposes, rather than that of a constant critic. Last week, China for the first time in decades officially recognized the holiday honoring Qu Yuan, a patriotic poet who publicly remonstrated the emperor, and committed suicide when the kingdom was invaded. There is in Chinese culture a basis for friendship that holds us to higher standards, and we should not neglect that basis in US relations with the Chinese.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide this statement to you today.