

A Not-So-Fine Romance

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In the aftermath of the Tibet upheavals, the complicated romance between America and China is degenerating into mutual recriminations, muttering about Olympic boycotts and tensions that are likely to rise through the summer.

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

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It would be convenient if we could simply denounce the crackdown in Tibet as the unpopular action of a dictatorial government. But it wasn't. It was the popular action of a dictatorial government, and many ordinary Chinese think the government acted too wimpishly, showing far too much restraint toward "thugs" and "rioters."

China and the U.S. clash partly because of competing interests, but mostly because of competing narratives. To Americans, Tibet fits neatly into a framework of human rights and colonialism. To Chinese, steeped in education of 150 years of "guochi," or national humiliations by foreigners, the current episode is one more effort by imperialistic and condescending foreigners to tear China apart or hold it back.

So what do we do? A boycott of the Olympic Games themselves is a nonstarter. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has raised the possibility of a boycott of the opening ceremony, and that is plausible.

The best answer is: Postpone the decision until the last minute so as to extort every last ounce of good behavior possible out of the Chinese government — on Darfur as well as Tibet. But at the end of the day, if there have been no further abuses, President Bush should attend — for staying away would only inflame Chinese nationalism and make Beijing more obdurate.

If President Bush attends the ceremonies, however, he should balance that with a day trip to a Tibetan area. Such a visit would underscore American concern, even if the Chinese trot out fake monks to express fake contentment with fake freedom.

President Bush and other Western leaders should also continue to consult with the Dalai Lama, even though this infuriates Beijing. The Dalai Lama is the last, best hope for reaching

an agreement that would resolve the dispute over Tibet forever. He accepts autonomy, rather than independence, and he has the moral authority to persuade Tibetans to accept a deal.

The outlines of an agreement would be simple. The Dalai Lama would return to Tibet as a spiritual leader, and Tibetans would be permitted to possess his picture and revere him, while he would unequivocally accept Chinese sovereignty. Monasteries would have much greater religious freedom, and Han Chinese migration to Tibet would be limited. The Dalai Lama would also accept that the Tibetan region encompasses only what is now labeled Tibet on the maps, not the much larger region of historic Tibet that he has continued to claim.

With such an arrangement, China could resolve the problem of Tibet, improve its international image, reassure Taiwan and rectify a 50-year-old policy of repression that has catastrophically failed.

But don't hold your breath. Instead, President Hu Jintao — who made his reputation by crushing protests in Tibet in 1989 — will make up for failed policy within Tibet by trying to stir up Chinese nationalist resentments at nosy foreigners.

America and China get on each other's nerves partly because they are so similar. Both are big, self-absorbed, and insular nations; both are entrepreneurial overachievers; both are infused with nationalism and yet tread clumsily on the nationalism of others — whether in Vietnam or Iraq, or Tibet and the Muslim region of Xinjiang.

Both the United States and China also hurt themselves by petulantly refusing to engage leaders they don't like. The U.S. shrinks from talking with Iranian and Cuban leaders, and China refuses to negotiate directly with the Dalai Lama, whom it recently denounced as “a jackal wrapped in a habit, a monster with human face and animal's heart.”

That refusal to talk is stunningly foolish. Nearly every Tibetan I've ever spoken to in Tibet, Qinghai, Sichuan or Gansu has been loyal to the Dalai Lama — except those who think he's too gentle and accommodating toward China. After the Dalai Lama dies, there will be no one to hold Tibetans back, and more militant organizers in the Tibetan Youth Congress and other organizations will turn to violence, and perhaps terrorism.

The only other Tibetan who could fill that vacuum is the Panchen Lama, the No. 2 Tibetan leader, who turns 19 later this month. But the Chinese government kidnapped the Panchen Lama when he was 6 years old and apparently has kept him under house arrest ever since.

Americans sometimes think that the Tibetan resentments are just about political and religious freedom. They're much more complicated than that. Tibetan anger is also fueled by the success of Han Chinese shop owners, who are often better educated and more entrepreneurial. So Tibetans seek solace in monasteries or bars, and the economic gap widens and provokes even more frustration — which the spotlight of the Olympics gives them a chance to express.