

Failing on human rights: China watcher Sophie Richardson

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

China's crackdown on protesters in Tibet has brought attention to China's record on human rights—unwelcome attention for the country that hopes this summer's Olympic Games in Beijing will bolster its image in the world. Protests have accompanied the travels of the Olympic torch as it makes its way to Beijing. Sophie Richardson, Asia advocacy director for Human Rights Watch, has worked on issues of human rights in China for years. Her book on China's foreign policy will be published by Columbia University Press.

What effect have the protests associated with the Olympic torch had on efforts to highlight human rights abuses in China?

Within the space of three weeks we went from not being able to pay people to write stories about China's human rights record to not being able to handle the flood of requests for information. The protests take place where they do because they can't take place in China. You can bet that you are not going to see more of those protests once the torch is in the People's Republic of China. The Chinese government wanted to use the Olympics to mask its record on human rights. Instead the Olympics are helping draw attention to it.

What are China's primary transgressions against human rights?

For a long time, attention has focused on violations of civil and political rights: People can't vote. People can't freely publish. They can't practice their religion freely. But we are starting to focus as well on social, cultural and economic violations. Some of these include cases of minorities claiming the right to educate their children in their own languages or of people being forcibly relocated or being subjected to the effects of pollution. You can pick from the fullest of menus when addressing the problem of human rights in China.

This is a government that placed a four-month-old baby under house arrest. A prominent government critic was sentenced to three years' house arrest for saying he thought that China hosting the Olympic games wasn't appropriate given its human rights record, and his wife and baby daughter are also under house arrest and are expected to remain so until he finishes his sentence.

On the positive side, we are beginning to see more personal freedom for individuals in terms of choosing where they work or where they live. But there are consistent constraints on free speech and participation in any organization that the Communist Party considers to be threatening, whether it is a church or a semi-organized political party.

What strategies have been effective?

One example of relative success is in the area of the environment. That's because there is a recognition even at the senior level of the Chinese government that environmental problems are serious. China does not have the resources to tackle these problems on its own, and cooperation with inside and outside groups on this issue doesn't really threaten the government in the way that other issues do.

Has success in addressing environmental issues had a spillover effect on other human rights concerns?

That's what a lot of people hope for. But the government isn't as keen on changing its position on religious freedom or on caring for people with HIV/AIDS or on changing its treatment of people who criticize the government. It will be an extraordinary day in China when the government realizes that a truly free press could be an asset.

What is the relation, if any, of the country's economic dynamism to how it approaches human rights?

The crackdowns in Tibet laid bare the lie that if the government presses ahead on issues of trade and lays off talking about human rights, everything will turn out fine. Recently I was debating Kenneth Lieberthal, a professor at the University of Michigan who was national security adviser on China in the Clinton administration, and he remarked about how much improvement China has made because of trade relations. There may be moderate changes in, for example, contract law. But because rules are so selectively enforced and because regulatory frameworks

remain so lax, China-made toys with lead paint still show up in American markets.

A free press and a genuinely independent judicial system that enforced the laws would create both better human rights protections and a better trading partner.

Has the Internet and information technology changed the situation?

It's true that it is far easier to access information and make contact with people in China than it was 20 years ago, and that is definitely a step in the right direction. At the same time, the government is deliberately manipulating certain kinds of technology, sometimes with the help of Western companies, so it can monitor citizens.

Are there particular philosophical or political traditions endemic to China that can be used to address the question of human rights?

The Chinese Communist Party loves to go on about Chinese vs. Western values. They'll tell you that Confucianism is the foundation of their worldview, forgetting that they fought a 30-year Cultural Revolution to overthrow it. That's a way of rebutting globally agreed-upon documents like the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Or they will appeal to Malthusian economics and say that their first obligation is to get everyone above the poverty line and then they can talk about human rights. These are tactical maneuvers that are common to any authoritarian regime.

Should heads of state refuse to attend the Olympics?

We have called on heads of state to hold off on accepting the invitation until certain human rights conditions have been met. It's important to understand that it is not standard Olympic protocol to invite so many heads of state. It was clearly a political gesture for the government to have invited more than 100. It is a bid for approval. Now is not the time to give that to them.