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[On the Other Side of Tibet](#) CHINESE VIEW READING #2

[Wenran Jiang](#), the acting director of the China Institute, University of Alberta, says, "Failing to understand the deep-rooted emotions on both sides will only hinder potential solutions." From [The Globe and Mail](#):

Emotions have been running high on all sides since riots and unrest broke out last month in Tibet and the surrounding provinces. Critics of the Chinese government charge that what happened was the result of a resistance movement by the Tibetan people against Beijing's long-time repressive policies in the region. They call for international attention to the Tibetan situation, organize protests along the routes of the 2008 Beijing Olympic global torch relay and push for a boycott of the Summer Games.

The Chinese authorities claim that the Dalai Lama and his separatist forces masterminded these unrests, which turned into violent rampages, looting, burning and killing of innocent civilians. Beijing insists that law and order be restored and rioters be punished; it will not tolerate further violence, and has indicated it will do whatever is necessary to fight Tibetan independence, even at the cost of damaging its reputation as Olympic host.

It is not surprising that such a bitter confrontation has extended beyond China's borders. Tibetans in exile took to the streets in India and Nepal. In major European and North American cities, well co-ordinated demonstrations were staged in front of Chinese embassies and consulates as the unrest was spreading in Tibet and neighbouring provinces.

For their part, many in the Chinese diaspora have exhibited a strong sense of nationalism that opposes any Tibetan independence movement and resents any form of boycott of the Beijing Olympics.

What is surprising, however, is the very high level of mobilization of Chinese public opinion that is not as much a response to Beijing's rallying calls for national unity as it is a strong reaction to what many Chinese perceive as the one-sided reporting of the Tibetan unrests by the mainstream Western press. Chinese people everywhere want their side of the Tibet story told.

Unlike in 1989, when Chinese all over the world, including scholars and students from the mainland, protested against the government crackdown on students in Tiananmen Square, Chinese people have taken to streets this time in support of Beijing. In the past week, such rallies have taken places in European cities, in Montreal and Calgary, and one is expected in Edmonton this weekend.

While many overseas Chinese believe that Beijing's extremely harsh and hostile words against the Dalai Lama are neither effective nor well received by the Western public, they still see mainstream Western news media as being excessively anti-China. (Many noted errors in the reporting, including the mislabeling of photos of Indian and Nepalese police confronting demonstrating monks as Chinese soldiers cracking down in Tibet.)

They have fed their observations back to Chinese cyberspace instantly, and what we are witnessing is an emerging synergy of cybernationalism connecting many Chinese at home and abroad.

But what has propelled this strident nationalism? Why has the disdain for Tibet independence and its ambitions become so highly charged and emotional? Hasn't the Chinese Communist Party simply been using nationalism as a tool of legitimacy for staying in power? Aren't most Chinese brainwashed since childhood?

First of all, there is an overwhelming sense among the Han Chinese (the country's predominant ethnic group) that Tibet has been part of China for centuries. True, Chinese control over Tibet was weakened when China was invaded by Western powers in the 19th and 20th centuries. But the Han have not forgotten the earlier ties. As well, Central Intelligence Agency-funded Tibetan covert operations against China in most of the Cold War years are well documented, stirring further resentment.

As such, historical memory ensures that in the minds of the Han, any perceived attempts to separate Tibet from China will be linked with the humiliation the Chinese suffered at the hands of Western and Japanese imperialism. So, to most Chinese, a potential boycott of the Beijing Olympics is viewed as a denial of China's moment in restoring its respectable position in the world.

Second, many Chinese deeply believe to this day that the People's Republic of China has lifted Tibet's people out of a medieval serfdom that was degrading to the majority of Tibetans, especially women.

The attitude, felt particularly by the communist and socialist idealists, is not unlike that felt some years ago by many in North America who saw the spread of their European culture as bringing civilization to the native people. Just as aboriginal children were put in boarding schools and forced to learn English, many Chinese thought they were giving emancipation to an oppressed people under the name of socialism and progress.

While not denying Chinese policy failures in Tibet over the years, many reacted angrily to the recent charge that they were committing "cultural genocide" in Tibet. They point out that what China did in Tibet is generous in contrast to how native Indians were treated in North America over 400 years.

Finally, many Han Chinese also think Tibetans should appreciate the tremendously high level of financial and other support that has been poured into their region, both from the central government, in the form of subsidies, and from the market adventurers who have invested heavily in the area in recent years. To the Han, such economic development is seen as eliminating poverty and bringing prosperity to the ordinary people of Tibet, as in the rest of China.

That's why the shocking images of angry young Tibetans violently attacking Han Chinese and other non-Tibetans made Chinese people recoil in indignation. (Even though they might note that

while the gap between the rich and poor in the rest of China is mostly a distribution issue, the division line between the haves and have-nots appears to be drawn along ethnic lines in Tibet.)

Taken together, these historically-conditioned perceptions will continue to shape events. And failing to understand the deep-rooted emotions on both sides will not only hinder potential solutions to the complex issues involved, but may risk generating further divisions.

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