

## **The Chinese Diaspora and China's Public Diplomacy: Contentious Politics for the Beijing Olympic Float in the Pasadena Rose Parade**

HONGMEI LI  
Georgia State University

This article examines the controversy over the Beijing Olympics–themed float for the 2008 Pasadena Rose Parade in the broad context of China's public diplomacy and contentious international politics involving the Chinese community in Los Angeles, human rights activists, the City of Pasadena, and other players. It aims to understand the ways in which a nation's public diplomacy strategy can be contested in a local setting and how different players mobilized their resources to strategically frame their messages. It explores three questions: (1) How did different parties draw on the repertoire of contentious politics to frame the controversy? (2) What role did the Chinese diaspora play in the development of the controversy? How does the controversy clarify the function of Chinese immigrants in China's public diplomacy? (3) What did this controversy imply for China's soft power and international communication? This article draws on materials from media reports, official records, videotaped meeting records, personal observations, and semi-structured interviews with the float sponsors, organizers, officials in Pasadena, and human rights activists.

On April 15, 2007, at a press conference in San Gabriel, Los Angeles, a prominent Chinese American community leader, Sue Zhang, enthusiastically announced that a Beijing Olympics–themed rose float would roll down Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena's New Year Rose Parade on January 1, 2008. The float was expected to cost US\$400,000. Half the expense would be covered by Avery Dennison, a Pasadena-based label maker that employs thousands of workers in China, and the other half by 10 wealthy Chinese Americans, each contributing US\$20,000. The announcement was warmly received by

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Hongmei Li: hongmei.li9@gmail.com

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conference participants, most of whom were community leaders and ethnic Chinese from mainland China. Commenting on the diverse background of the sponsors, a few participants stated that the float would stand for the Chinese community's first overcoming of ideological differences to accomplish the common goal of celebrating China.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese cultural consul in Los Angeles, Huaizhi Chen, gave a speech at the conference and remarked that "the float will symbolize the fulfillment of a one-hundred-year dream" and that "it will be a proud achievement for all Chinese throughout the world." On May 21, the entry was officially announced at the Pasadena Tournament House by Hui Wang, deputy director (and later director) of the Media and Communication Department of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG) and deputy director of the News Office of the Beijing Municipal Government, who was accompanied by Pasadena Mayor Bill Bogaard, officials of the Tournament of Roses, and other officials from Pasadena and Beijing.

Falun Gong practitioners and other activists in California, however, were shocked by this announcement and immediately started to mobilize and organize various protests against the float. The City of Pasadena spent hours negotiating with the protesters about possible resolutions. It requested its Human Relations Commission (HRC) to conduct an official investigation, which held two public hearings. The City Council of Pasadena had a special meeting on October 29, 2007, and other informal interactions with the protesters. Local newspapers such as *Pasadena Weekly* and *The Pasadena Star-News* devoted extensive coverage to this issue, and national and international media also reported on the controversy.<sup>3</sup> The float supporters ranged from the sponsors and Chinese students to some officials of the City of Pasadena, the Pasadena Sister Cities Committee, and the Tournament of Roses. Major opponents included Falun Gong practitioners and other human rights activists, who later gained support from American media and some officials in Pasadena. While supporters viewed the float largely as a vehicle for cultural exchange in a nonpolitical promotional event, protesters viewed it more as part of China's propaganda machine, which legitimates the rule of the Chinese Communist Party and endorses China's human rights abuses. Interestingly, the Chinese diaspora played a key role in the controversy. In many aspects, the controversy was the prelude to the worldwide protests against the global journey of the Beijing Olympic torch relay in spring 2008, which was watched by hundreds of millions of viewers throughout the world.

This article examines the controversy and its implications in the broader contexts of China's public diplomacy and transnational activism, aiming to understand how a nation's public diplomacy strategy can be contested in a local setting. Three questions are analyzed in this article: (1) How did different parties draw on the repertoire of contentious politics to frame the controversy? (2) What role did the Chinese diaspora play in the development of the controversy? How did the controversy generate new insight into the function of Chinese immigrants in China's public diplomacy? (3) What did this controversy imply for China's soft power and international communication? Materials this article draws on include media reports, official records, videotaped meeting records, and personal observations. I also conducted

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<sup>2</sup> Over the years, different attitudes toward Beijing and Taipei have divided the Chinese community in Los Angeles, and Beijing and Taipei have competed with each other to win the support of Chinese immigrants.

<sup>3</sup> The controversy was covered by media such as the *Pasadena Star-News*, *Pasadena Weekly*, the *Los Angeles Times*, KPCC, the Associated Press, *Voice of America*, KTLA Channel 5, KABC Channel 7, and Chinese-language media.

six 45- to 90-minute face-to-face semi-structured interviews and one 20-minute follow-up phone interview with float sponsors, officials in Pasadena, and activists.

Given the increasing resources China directs toward its international image and public diplomacy, it is essential to study this controversy for several reasons. First, of all controversies over the Tournament of Roses Parade, this one attracted the most media attention.<sup>4</sup> Second, the case provides an opportunity to study how various forces, especially the Chinese diaspora, shaped discussions about the Beijing Olympics in particular and China's image in American society in general. Third, it also offers insight into the complex interactions of local and global politics, and into protesters' and supporters' mobilization of resources to promote their causes. At the same time, it allows assessment of the structural forces that enable and constrain the ability of both China supporters and activists to pursue their agendas in a localized context. Finally, the Tournament of Roses Parade has become one of the most watched entertainment events in the United States and throughout the world. Launched in 1890 as an annual event to showcase the balmy Southern California winter climate, the two-hour parade features marching bands, flower-covered floats, and equestrians. Its wide range of participants includes corporations, private clubs, high schools, universities, the police, and military units. Most parade participants are from California and neighboring states, and some are from other U.S. states and other countries.<sup>5</sup> In the past, the parade also included floats celebrating the Olympic Games in Mexico City, Athens, and Los Angeles.

The float organizers and sponsors for the Beijing Olympics deemed the 2008 parade, themed "Passport to the World's Celebrations," an appropriate public outlet. The 2008 parade was reported to have been viewed by around 1 million spectators in person, covered by nine networks and stations in the United States, and televised in 215 international territories, reaching approximately 15.96 million U.S. households (equal to 40 million U.S. viewers, and an estimated 400 or 500 international viewers (Rose Parade Float Application, N/A). The official Tournament of Roses website also attracted 1 million views between December 31, 2007, and January 1, 2008.

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<sup>4</sup> The controversy over the Beijing Olympic-themed float is far from the first to mark the Rose Parade. During the Vietnam War, antiwar activists blocked the parade routes. The choice of former President Gerald Ford as grand marshal in 1978 was criticized because he had pardoned Richard Nixon. The 1992 "Voyages of Discovery" parade, meant to kick off the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of the new world, roused controversy because its grand marshal, Cristobal Colon, was a 20th-generation direct descendent of Christopher Columbus. Many outraged Native Americans protested the choice, as they viewed the Spanish conqueror more as an exploiter than an explorer. Further criticisms cited cultural myopia, police violence, and sexism. To quell the criticism, the Tournament of Roses selected a co-grand marshal: Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a Cheyenne Indian and the only Native American in Congress. In 2012, anti-Wall Street protesters, carrying a 250-foot banner reading "We the People," demonstrated after the two-hour parade to voice their opposition to home foreclosures and corporate corruption.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the U.S. Honda division entered its first float in 1977 and has since been a regular presence and award winner. In 2011, Honda became the first Presenting Sponsor of the Rose Parade. The Taiwan-based China Airlines has also participated for more than two decades (since 1987).

The essay begins by discussing China's public diplomacy and soft power and then turns to the role of the Chinese diaspora in China's international communication and the construction of Chineseness. Following that is an analysis of the background of the controversy, focusing on how the discussions about China's human rights issues relate to local and global politics. I then examine how human rights activists mobilized resources to frame the controversy and the responses of float supporters. The essay concludes with reflections on the episode's implications for China's public diplomacy and for global human rights activism focused on China.

### **China's Public Diplomacy and Soft Power**

Traditional diplomacy—characterized by relationships between governmental actors or representatives of nation-states—has tended to shift toward public diplomacy involving governments, foreign and domestic publics, and nonstate players, groups, and organizations (Manheim, 1994; Melissen, 2005). The purpose of public diplomacy is to win "the hearts and minds" of foreign publics through "persuasion by means of dialogue" (Melissen, 2005, p. 18). Joseph Nye coined the widely used term "soft power" to describe the assets a country brings to bear in winning foreign publics based on shared values and the ability to "co-opt" individuals (Nye, 2004, p. 2). Soft power is most relevant in the "marketplace of ideas" (p. 7), where the ability to sway opinion lies in either the attractiveness of a country's values or the capacity to make dissident views seem irrelevant, impossible, or unnecessary. Nye cites three resources through which a country exerts soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policy. A country's public diplomacy depends on how its cultural artifacts, high and popular, reflect broader international values and beliefs, to what extent domestic policies resonate in a larger context, and how a country interacts with the global community regarding issues such as human rights, financial assistance, and so forth. Ultimately, public diplomacy and soft power depend on credibility.

To China soft power means anything outside the military and security realm, including popular culture, exchange programs, and more coercive economic and diplomatic measures such as aid, investment, and participation in multilateral organizations (Kurlantzick, 2007). China has recently embarked on various public diplomacy initiatives, such as wooing neighboring countries in Southeast Asia (Kurlantzick, 2007), collaborating with local media in Africa, establishing more than three hundred Confucius institutes worldwide, and launching various cultural exchange programs. In addition to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which was generally viewed as rolling out China's new image as a global power, China recently hosted other large-scale international events such as the World Expo and the Asian Games. Furthermore, China was reported to have allotted 45 billion yuan (US\$6 billion) to expanding the outreach capacity of its three major media outlets: Xinhua, China Central Television, and *The People's Daily* newspaper (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). China has also launched publicity campaigns in the United States, among them a 30-second television commercial about Chinese products on CNN in 2009 and a high-profile publicity spot at New York's Times Square in 2011.

Despite such publicity and diplomacy efforts, however, China faces tremendous challenges in cultivating its soft power and international image. The Beijing Consensus, which combines political authoritarianism and economic liberalism, with an overwhelming focus on modernization at the expense of

civil and political rights, has some attractions for authoritarian regimes, but the Western world sees it as lacking core values, moral authority, leadership, and desirability (Zhao, 2009). All contributors to Mingjiang Li's (2009b) edited volume *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics* agree that China has rarely demonstrated any power to shape or set a global agenda as conceptualized by Nye, except on the issue of global climate change (Chen, 2009). Instead, Li (2009a) points out, China's international reputation comes largely from conformance to international norms and rapid economic development. China's soft power often means its "soft use of power," which is often treated as an end in itself (Li, 2009a, p. 3). Meanwhile, China's global expansion has challenged its own core policies, particularly the principles of absolute sovereignty and noninterference in foreign policy. While the West has started to move away from the principle of absolute sovereignty established by the Treaty of Westphalia, China still zealously guards its noninterference principle (Zhao, 2009). Indeed, the Chinese government commonly rebuts Western criticisms with rhetoric claiming Western countries are attempting to interfere with China's domestic politics.

### **The Role of the Chinese Diaspora in China's Public Diplomacy**

The term "diaspora" was originally used to refer to Jews who, though dispersed around the world, maintained a distinctive identity and desire to return home (Anand, 2003; Cohen, 1997; Miller-Loessi & Kilic, 2001). Some scholars (Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991; Tölölyan, 1996) have listed characteristics of the diaspora, but others (e.g., Butler, 2001; McKeown, 2001) have criticized this approach as essentializing the diaspora without attending to changes in it. The concept has now been generalized beyond the traditionally viewed Jewish, Greek, and Armenian diaspora communities to embrace any dispersed people away from their place of origin.

The term "Chinese diaspora" refers to Chinese descendants of any citizenship residing outside mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Members of this complex group represent different generations, places of origin, tenures outside China, and political and ideological stances. Their demographics and psychographics have transformed from pre-1950s sojourners to assimilated immigrants during the Cold War to the current, more diversified new migrants (Liu, 2005). The Chinese diaspora consists of Chinese nationals working and residing overseas (*huaqiao*), ethnic Chinese with foreign citizenships (*huaren* or *huayi*), and students (*liuxuesheng*). The term "diaspora" also implies a real or imagined linkage among the dispersed, as manifested in the somewhat distinctive Chinese communities overseas and the close connections between new migrants and China. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the term "Chinese" refers not only to the Han Chinese, who make up over 90% of the Chinese population, but also all minorities residing in China. In this sense, exiled Tibetan refugees and minorities from China are all considered part of the Chinese diaspora, though some exiled refugees might contest their identification with China.

Diaspora populations serve as an important intermediary between the host country and the country of origin in terms of how they influence the politics and foreign affairs of both countries (e.g., Cano & Delano, 2007; Shain, 1994–1995; Thunø, 2001), and how the diaspora community becomes the target of international activism (e.g., Hägel & Peretz, 2005). Diaspora communities play a significant role

in American foreign policy, and their engagement in domestic and foreign policy discussions symbolizes fundamental democratic principles (Shain, 1994–1995).

Chinese immigrants have played a significant role in China's international communication, economic development, and the construction of Chineseness. Historically, Chinese immigrants provided financial and political support for China's revolutionary overthrow of the Qing Dynasty, its war against Japan during World War II, and its liberation movement (Li, 2007; Young & Shih, 2003). Except during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when overseas connections were viewed negatively, China has consistently wooed overseas Chinese to support its modernization efforts. Since the 1990s, the Chinese government has regarded "new migrants," including students, migrant workers, and immigrants, as patriotic Chinese based on their cultural allegiance rather than citizenship (Nyiri, 2001; Thunø, 2001). For instance, China has established the Federation of Returned Chinese (*Qiaolian*) and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office under the State Council (*guowu yuan qiaoban*) to work with Chinese residing in other countries. At most Chinese embassies or consulates, a cultural consul in charge of overseas Chinese affairs works to keep close ties with the Chinese diaspora through informal networks with the leaders of associations—especially those formed by new immigrants—such as alumni associations, associations of provincials or townspeople (*tong xiang hui*), or other specialized organizations. The cultural consul in Los Angeles maintains very close relations with association and student leaders in the Chinese community. This community receives and welcomes delegations from China and hosts a yearly flag-raising ceremony on China's National Day. The Chinese consulate has also institutionalized its relationship with the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations on U.S. campuses through financial support, relationship cultivation, and institution building.<sup>6</sup>

Chinese immigrants, a source of much needed foreign investment in China, are also viewed as having enormous potential for supporting China's unification, the containment of separatism, the dissemination of Chinese culture, and people-to-people diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> After having successfully bidden to

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the Chinese consulate in Los Angeles provides the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations in Californian universities with modest funding to host annual celebrations of important Chinese holidays. In 2003, the Los Angeles consulate guided the founding of the Southwestern Chinese Students and Scholars Association, which comprises Chinese Scholars and Students Associations from eighteen universities and national laboratories in Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Hawaii (Xinhuanet, 2003). The centralized leadership facilitates communication with and the management of the Chinese student population.

<sup>7</sup> For example, at a conference on overseas Chinese affairs in February 2005, Hu Jintao stated: "At various historical moments of Chinese revolutions, societal constructions and reforms, numerous overseas Chinese, returned Chinese and their family members have made important contributions to the independence and liberation of the Chinese nation, and the prosperity and development of China. . . . History has proven and will continue to prove that overseas Chinese, returned Chinese and their relatives are an important force to speed up the modernization of our country, realize the unification of our motherland and resurrect the Chinese nation." He continued: "The work of overseas Chinese affairs can make great strides in solidifying the hearts of overseas Chinese (*ningju qiaoxin*), and utilizing their strength (*fahui qiaoli*) to realize the grand goal of a full-scale small wealthy society (*xiaokang shehui*). It

host the Olympics, Beijing made various attempts to incorporate Chinese immigrants into the official “one world, one dream” narrative by encouraging them to donate money, be volunteers, and participate in various Olympic-related activities.

The importance of Chinese immigrants also has something to do with their sheer numbers. More than 35 million Chinese live and work in 151 countries, making this the largest immigrant group in the world. Chinese immigrants mainly settle in Australia, Europe, and North America (*China Daily*, 2007). The 2010 U.S. census put the Chinese American population (excluding Taiwanese) at approximately 3.8 million. California is home to some 1.25 million Chinese Americans, 370,000 of whom live in Los Angeles County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c). Among non-U.S. students on U.S. campuses, those from China form the largest contingent. One of the most favored U.S. destinations for Chinese studying abroad, Los Angeles has a large Chinese student population.

Overall, the Chinese diaspora’s relationship with Beijing is ambivalent. On the one hand, first-generation immigrants generally maintain close ties with China and thereby benefit from the rapid development of the Chinese economy (Yin, 2007). Since the outset of the “engagement vs. containment” debate, most Chinese American groups have staunchly supported engagement with China and the Chinese diaspora community has shown a strong sense of nationalism (Zhu, 2007). According to a survey by the Committee of 100, a nonprofit elite Chinese American organization, Chinese Americans have a more favorable impression of China than does the general public (75% vs. 59%) and believe the United States should have more dialogue with China (Committee of 100, 2005). On the other hand, as a country ruled by one party and lacking a free press, China is the origin of numerous political refugees in the West, including dissidents who fled China after the Tiananmen Square movement in 1989, Falun Gong dissidents, Tibetan refugees, and other human rights activists, who have the sympathy and support of the general public, opinion leaders, and members of Congress in the United States. These activists have founded nongovernmental organizations to promote democracy and monitor human rights conditions in China. Every year, dissidents testify, demonstrate, and pressure the presidential administration to raise human rights issues in talks with China (Béja, 2003). Chinese dissidents have also established extensive networks with U.S. politicians and the media. Containment policy has taken a back seat to economic engagement since September 11, 2001, but dissidents still play an important role in shaping U.S. policy toward China, which oscillates between the pragmatic considerations of economic engagement and the moral obligation to uphold universal human rights principles.<sup>8</sup>

Since 1999, practitioners of Falun Gong—a religious sect blending Buddhism, Taoism, and traditional Chinese body cultivation exercises that has been the target of a Chinese government

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can make great advances in fighting against and containing Taiwan separatism and promoting peaceful unification of our ancestral lands; it can [also] make significant progress through people-to-people diplomacy, spreading Chinese cultural excellence and building friendly relations between Chinese people and peoples of the world” (Li, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> The recent example of the blind Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng exemplifies the conflict the U.S. faces between pragmatic considerations of maintaining good relations with the Chinese government and its often-proclaimed principle of respecting and protecting human rights worldwide.

crackdown—have joined prodemocracy activists and exiled Tibetans to mount a huge challenge to Beijing via their domestic and international influence.<sup>9</sup> After the crackdown in 1999, core members, now radicalized, campaigned in search of overseas support. In the last decade, Falun Gong has established major branches across North America, eastern and western Europe, Australia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, and it is officially recognized in a number of U.S. cities (Chan, 2004). Its members have developed efficient informal communication networks and support systems. Falun Gong practitioners hold regular public gatherings and group practices and have also built a media empire of TV and radio stations, newspapers, magazines, and websites. Of these, *The Epoch Times* and New Tang Dynasty TV station are probably the most influential.<sup>10</sup> By centering on a media strategy, Falun Gong exiles have exposed the Chinese regime's persecution of Falun Gong practitioners through such means as forced labor and the alleged harvesting of organs from live prisoners, and they have very aggressively pursued justice in the United States. It is thus unsurprising that Falun Gong adherents led the protest against the Beijing Olympic-themed float.

Generally speaking, the overall view of China in the U.S. has been negative since 1989. Various Gallup Poll results indicate that U.S. perceptions of China since 1989 have been mixed, and that a slightly higher percentage of respondents hold a negative, rather than a positive, view. According to a 2007 survey released by the Committee of 100, a majority of U.S. congressional staffers (62% in 2007 and 79% in 2005) viewed China negatively, and since 2005 the percentage of respondents who viewed China negatively has increased among the general public, opinion leaders, and business leaders (Committee of 100, 2007). According to Shain (1994–1995), immigrants' power to influence policy in their home country and host country increases when favorable relations prevail between those countries. But if the regime of the homeland is undemocratic, siding with their country of origin undermines immigrants' standing in the United States. Chinese immigrants are thus in a paradoxical situation: siding with China often means siding with an undemocratic regime, and not siding with China often means being shut out of participation in China's modernization. Many Chinese immigrants thus choose to engage via less sensitive issues of economics, society, and culture. Indeed, Sue Zhang, the Beijing Olympic float organizer, stated that she was more interested in cultural exchange than in political issues (personal communication, December 15, 2007).

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<sup>9</sup> At its peak between 1998 and 1999, Falun Gong was practiced at thousands of sites in public parks throughout China (Chan, 2004). While the movement claimed to have attracted more than 100 million followers, the Chinese government put the number at only 2 million in 1999 ("China Begins Trial," 1999).

<sup>10</sup> *The Epoch Times*, founded by two graduate students in the basement of a suburban home in Atlanta, now boasts print editions distributed in 12 languages and an online presence in 19 languages. According to its website, its Chinese edition—one of the largest Chinese-language newspapers outside China—has a weekly circulation of 2 million, offices in more than 40 countries, and journalists and reporters in more than 60 countries and regions ("Guanyu Dajiyuan," 2012). Its Chinese website has more than 1 million visitors daily. Falun Gong practitioners now also own more than ten websites and a YouTube-like video site, Youmaker.com.



### **The Rose Float Controversy: Background**

The float controversy has to be understood in the larger context of discussions about China's human rights issues in general and Pasadena's particular history of dealing with human rights. Since 1989, human rights have been a key concern, defining China's relationship with the West. Over the years, China has regularly weathered criticism by global human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. For example, from 1994 to 2004, 20% of Amnesty International's background reports and 11% of its press releases on China concerned the death penalty and executions, while 26% of the background reports and 32% of the press releases concerned dissident actions and freedom of expression (Rodio & Schmitz, 2010).

Not surprisingly, the issue of human rights proved an obstacle on China's road to the Olympics. In 1993, Beijing lost the bid for the 2000 Olympic Games to Sydney, largely because of forceful criticism of China's human rights record. When Beijing was awarded the 2008 Olympics in 2001, human rights activists were outraged. After an initial shock, they mobilized, using the spotlight on Beijing to promote their agenda. As various groups—including groups that loosely fall under the heading "global civil society," foreign governments, and other organizations and individuals in and outside China—sought to challenge China's position as a host country, human rights issues attracted the most attention (deLisle, 2008). Two key movements emerged from these efforts: the movement against genocide in Darfur, and a variety of protests against suppressions and other infringement of rights in Tibet.

The issue of human rights has also troubled the sister city relationship between Pasadena, a city in Los Angeles, and Xicheng, a district in the heart of Beijing. In 1996, former Pasadena mayor Bill Papanian welcomed the Dalai Lama to Pasadena. In 1999, a measure to adopt Xicheng as Pasadena's sister city barely passed (4–3) in Pasadena's city council, largely because of concern over China's human rights problems. One council member distributed extensive materials about human rights abuses in China, and three members saw China as having "serious human rights problems and thus as disqualified from having a connection with Pasadena" (A. Lamson, personal communication, December 26, 2007). In December 2001, Falun Gong adherents requested the Pasadena city council to terminate its sister city relation with Xicheng. The council then demanded that the HRC conduct an official investigation, which subsequently heard testimony from a Falun Gong practitioner in January 2002 and held another meeting one month later. On March 15, 2002, the HRC submitted a divided report to the city council. The majority report, endorsed by five members, stated that "[g]iven the United States long history of mistreatment of indigenous people," it was inappropriate to "condemn another country's internal affairs," and that considering its limited resources, the City of Pasadena "cannot and should not be involved in foreign affairs" (Pasadena Human Relations Commission, 2002, pp.1–2). However, a minority report signed by three members disagreed, recommending that the Pasadena City Council issue a letter to China's president urging China to abide by the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, send a copy of the letter to Xicheng, and "express concern for the government's current policy towards the Falun Gong" (Pasadena Human Relations Commission, 2002). The Pasadena City Council adopted the majority report and selectively adopted the minority report by reiterating that "the City of Pasadena condemns the violation of human rights wherever they occur, past and present" and that adherence to human rights principles should be considered in future adoptions of sister cities. A council member noted that the

"overall relationship" between the United States and China was a federal issue and that representatives of the federal government should be asked to take human rights violations into consideration when deciding foreign policy with China ("Council Action," 2004). The Sister Cities China Subcommittee also commented on the report and confirmed its position that "people to people contacts are a more effective means of promoting the long-run growth of open and democratic values" (Stebenne & Lamson, 2004). These divisive views somewhat mirrored the divisive views toward the Beijing Olympic float: The majority of council members attempted to promote engagement, while a minority sought to directly confront China.

In 2004, the Pasadena Sister Cities China Subcommittee suggested that Xicheng send a rose float representing Beijing or China as a form of cultural exchange. Mayor Bogaard was a staunch supporter of this idea. China's consul general in Los Angeles was involved in the discussion, but talks on the subject were only sporadic, as the Beijing municipal government viewed Xicheng as "having no right to enter an Olympic float" (S. Zhang, personal communication, December 15, 2007). The conversation gained new momentum when Sue Zhang, a Chinese community leader in Los Angeles who maintains close connections with the Chinese consulate there and with high-ranking officials in China, became interested and actively promoted the project. Zhang was supported by prominent Chinese officials such as Xiaoyu Jiang, vice-chair of BOCOG, and Hui Wang, deputy director of the BOCOG Media and Communication Department. Zhang initially asked Beijing to provide money, but Beijing refused as BOCOG was afraid of opening the door to similar requests from other Chinese immigrant communities. Instead, Beijing agreed to provide a performing band and permitted the float to use the "one world, one dream" logo and the five mascots. Beijing also helped clear copyright concerns with the U.S. Olympic Committee. Beijing initially wanted to charge Zhang US\$1 million for the logo and mascots, but the intervention from above helped waive the charge, suggesting that Beijing and the U.S. public evaluated the float very differently. Through the Pasadena Sister Cities Committee, Zhang connected with Avery Dennison, which agreed to contribute US\$200,000. She also approached her wealthy Chinese friends in Los Angeles. As an active community leader who held cross-association positions, Zhang secured sponsorships from ten Chinese Americans, most of whom were active community leaders with extensive business and family ties in China.<sup>11</sup> The Roundtable of Southern California Chinese-American Associations was created to present a unified front.

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<sup>11</sup> The sponsors included Dunson K. Cheng, chairman and president of Cathay Bank and board member of the Tsinghua Education Foundation North America; Feng Deng, vice president of strategy for Juniper Networks, founding managing director of Northern Light Venture Capital, co-founder and director of Hua Yuan Science and Technology Association, and board member of the Tsinghua Education Foundation North America; Gareth C. C. Chang, chairman and CEO of WorldCom Warner Mobile TV Media Group, chairman of GC3, former president of DirecTV International, and member of the Committee of 100; Richard Lee, president of Amsino International and director of the board of the Peking University Alumni Association of Southern California; Leo Chu, owner of Hollywood Park Casino and Crystal Park Casino, honorary chairman of the Friends of Shanghai Foundation, and former board member of the USC Viterbi School of Engineering responsible for collaborations with Chinese institutions of higher education; Julie Yen, vice president of Comerica Bank; Grace Chew, vice president of the Hong Kong Commercial Association and life member of the Chinese Scholars Association; Evans Lam, senior vice president of Wealth Management and portfolio manager at Citigroup Smith Barney, chairman of the Business Committee of the Kiangsu-

### The Repertoire of China's Human Rights

The controversy also has to be understood in the larger context of the human rights repertoire about China since 1989. Charles Tilly (2008) defined repertoire as "claim-making routines that apply to the same claimant-object pairs: bosses and workers, peasants and landlords, rival nationalist factions, and many more" (p. 14). According to Tilly,

claim-making resembles jazz and commedia dell'arte rather than ritual reading of scripture. Like a jazz trio or an improvising theater group, people who participate in contentious politics normally have several pieces they can play, but not an infinity. . . . Within that limited array, the players choose which pieces they will perform here and now, and in what order. (Tilly, 2008, p. 14)

Sidney Tarrow (2005) states that Tilly attributed contentious repertoire to three factors: "a population's daily routines and internal structure, the prevailing standards of rights and justice, and the population's accumulated experience with collective action" (p. 102). Contentious politics requires activists to grasp the "opportunity structure" in a political context that allows certain actions and constrains others (Tarrow, 2005). Hagan (2010) develops the concept of the "human rights repertoire" centered on media and information tactics, including but not limited to written, oral, and visual accounts; images and video of corporal violence and suffering; and personal testimonies. Traditionally, human rights groups such as Amnesty International predominantly used "public shaming" and focused on rescuing individual dissidents and "persons of conscience," but recently they have shifted to analyzing broader economic and cultural issues (Rodio & Schmitz, 2010).

However, while human rights advocates tend to proclaim the universality of human rights, acceptance of a human rights regime is "less than universal" if at all extant, and "human rights" means different things in different local contexts (Tarrow, 2005, p. 188). Scholars (e.g., Angle, 2002; Peerenboom, 2005; Wang, 2011) argue that human rights are often functions of social, cultural, historical and economic conditions and that China has a distinctive rights discourse based on its communist legacy and Confucian tradition. While Western liberalism treats individual rights as separate from the state, Chinese people privilege collective rights over individual rights and view the state as the guardian of individuals' rights (Peerenboom, 1995; Wang, 2011). In China's social and historical context, discourses about human rights, from the late Qing dynasty to the Republican era up to post-Mao times, are always

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Chekiang-Shanghai Association of Southern California, and board member of the Organization of California-Asian American Entrepreneur Advisory Network and the Sino-U.S. Human Resources Institute; David Hsu and May Hsu, honorary members of the Chinese Scholars Association, and Yuling Li, board member of the Chinese Overseas Friendship Association (*Zhonghua Haiwai Lianyi Hui*), founding vice president of the Beijing Association, and honorary president of China's Philanthropy Association based in Beijing, among many other titles (Chinese Roundtable, n/a). A search on Google in English of Li's self-claimed successful company, the U.S. New Century Success Group (*Meiguo Xin Shiji Chenggong Jituan*) yields no results. May Hsu is also the president of China Electronic Commerce Association (CECA) North American office and activists asserted that this organization was a front group of China (Ruiz, 2007a).

situated in the broader context of protecting national interests from foreign invasion (Weatherley, 2008). "What was particularly striking in Chinese rights discourse," remarked Peerenboom (2005), was "the lack of emphasis on anti-majoritarian function of rights" (p. 295).

While identity politics in the United States often highlights inevitable conflict, China still attempts to harmonize different interests. Surveys conducted in multiple countries show that Chinese are among the least tolerant of those with different ideas and appreciate free speech only when it corresponds with their own views (Nathan & Shi, 1993; also cited in Peerenboom, 2005). Even though the surveys were conducted in 1993, the cultural values might still resonate with contemporary Chinese. The human rights issues promoted in Western contexts are therefore unlikely to enjoy full support in China. Indeed, while Chinese dissidents have a positive image in the West, Chinese media often label them as "anti-China" forces, shaping people's perceptions accordingly. Even the Chinese community in the United States is ambivalent toward activists who publicly shame China, where one-party rule makes it difficult to distinguish the country from the administration. Only a minority of Chinese Americans and the American public are concerned with China's human rights issues: The same 2005 Committee of 100 survey cited above found that 46% of the U.S. general public, but only 20% of Chinese Americans, expressed concern over human rights in China. Sue Zhang also stated that it was impossible to separate Chinese economic development from the Communist Party, suggesting a predominant idea among China supporters that the government should take credit for China's economic boom (personal communication, December 15, 2007).

### **Activists' Strategies: From Shaming the Float to Shaming the Float Supporters**

In this section, I will explain how activists drew on the human rights repertoire to frame the float controversy in the local and transnational political context. Since media were key sites for activists' framings of the controversy, this section will focus on activists' communication strategies. As Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) state, "Events do not speak for themselves but must be woven into some larger story line or frame: they take on their meaning from the frame in which they are embedded" (p. 117).

### **Activists' Framing of the Controversy**

Activists began by using familiar symbols and strategies to publicly shame the Beijing Olympics in general and the float in particular. Falun Gong practitioners first voiced their concerns to *Pasadena Weekly* on June 7 (Piasecki, 2007a), testified at a Pasadena city council meeting on June 25, 2007, and subsequently played a key role in protesting the float. They were later joined by other groups, such as Reporters Without Borders, Visual Artists Guild, Amnesty International, the Conscience Foundation, China Ministries International, the Los Angeles Friends of Tibet, Human Rights Watch, the New York Coalition for Darfur, and human rights groups focusing on Burma, and Justice for American Victims in China—a one-person organization by Maxine Russell to seek justice for her son who was killed in China in 2005. At least one member of each group actively organized or participated in various protests, criticizing the Chinese government's stance on a wide range of issues, such as the torture of Falun Gong practitioners, the imprisonment of journalists and Christian ministers, police corruption, suppression in Tibet, and lack of media freedom.

John Li, president of the Caltech Falun Club, played a crucial role in coordinating the human rights coalition and determining protest strategies and plans. Initially, protesters pressed Mayor Bill Bogaard, the City of Pasadena, and the Tournament of Roses to remove the Beijing float. The activists repeatedly voiced their concerns at city council meetings, testifying to their own or someone else's suffering, lobbying city council members, calling attention to the issue, and educating council members.<sup>12</sup> A common strategy was to personalize the persecution with emotional testimony. The activists argued that the float endorsed the human rights abuses in China and was embarrassing to Pasadena. They also disrupted the selection of the Queens of Roses outside the Tournament House, signifying their protest by carrying roses upside-down or snapped at the stem (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Human rights activists advocating removal of the float from the Rose Parade.**

*(Photograph: Xiao Rong)*

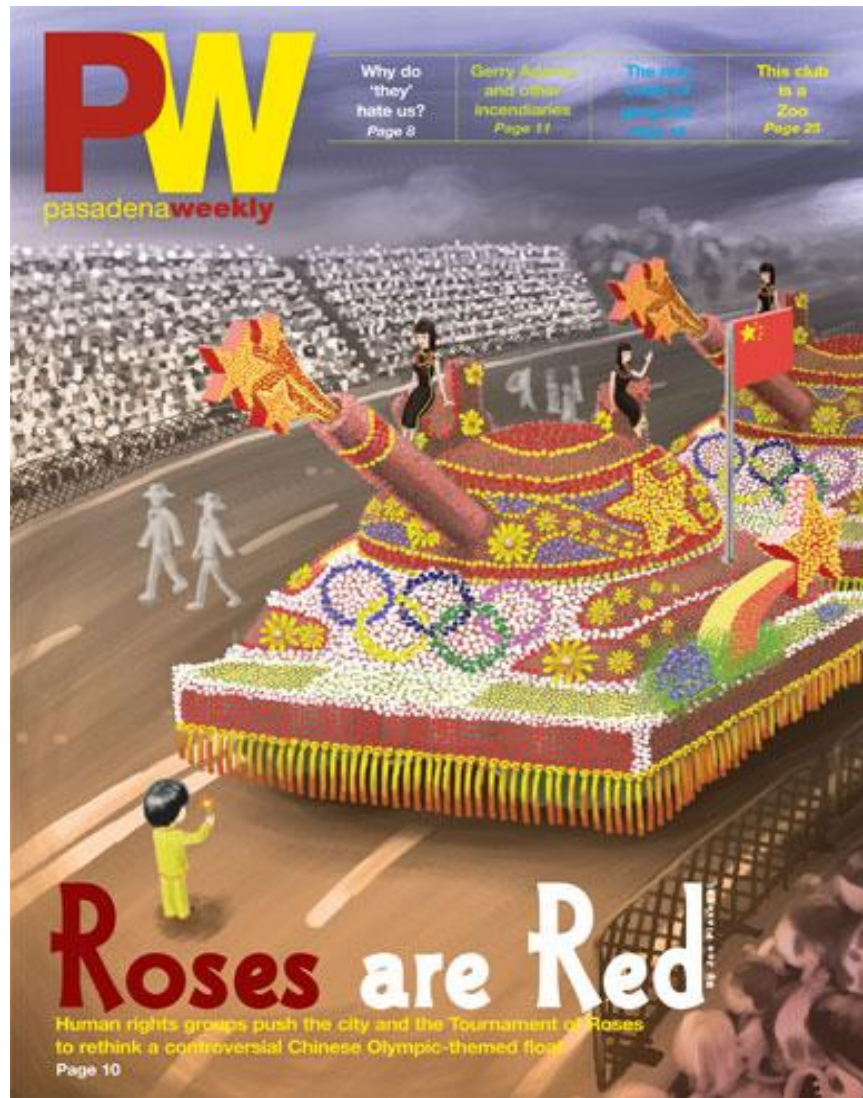
To further reinforce their message, activists repeatedly compared the Beijing Olympics to the 1936 Olympic Games in Nazi Germany in public speeches and media interviews and some argued that the former was even worse than the latter, especially considering Beijing's human rights violations before,

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<sup>12</sup> City council meetings normally allot 20 minutes to public comments on issues not on the official agenda. Depending on the number of cards received, each speaker usually gets two to three minutes. Human rights activists seized these opportunities; many of them attended several city council meetings to voice concerns. Leslie Levy, a human rights activist in Southern California, read her poems at several city council meetings. Activists spoke in public comments sessions on June 25, July 16, July 23, July 30, Oct. 1, Oct. 8, Oct. 15, Oct. 22, Nov. 5, Nov. 19, Dec. 3, Dec. 10, and Dec. 17.

during and after it won the bid for the Olympics. They called the float "the float of shame," "the propaganda float," "the float of genocide" and the bloodstained float. On various occasions, John Li called the Beijing Olympics "the Olympics without the Olympic spirit." Fully aware that the human rights issue was the main reason for China's failure to win the bid for the 2000 Olympics, they argued that China was still not qualified, given its deteriorating human rights records. A series of images circulating on the Internet transformed the Beijing Olympics logo, which evokes the Chinese characters of "culture," "Beijing," and "people," into an image of a prisoner pinned to a wall who was later shot by Chinese soldiers.

A powerful image on the cover of the July 19, 2007 issue of *Pasadena Weekly*, depicting a lone person holding a rose in front of a tank decorated with the Olympic logo, recalled an iconic photo from the Tiananmen Square student movement in 1989 (Figure 2). One of the most recognizable, evocative, powerful images in modern history, the photo was of a lone protester standing in front of a column of tanks, trying to stop the Chinese soldiers' advance. This incredible act of defiance was endlessly circulated to represent the spirit of people's resistance to oppression in general and tyranny in China in particular. Numerous Western newspapers published the image, which perhaps damaged Beijing more than any other media report on the topic. While discussion of the Tiananmen Square movement is still banned in China, this image circulates constantly and has been recycled globally. As recently as 2006, the Public Broadcasting Service produced a 90-minute documentary titled *The Tank Man*. Attempting to capture the spirit of local activists, *Pasadena Weekly* appropriated this famous image. In an open letter to the newspaper, Ann Lau, chairwoman of the Visual Artists Guild, stated that "a float design depicting the iconic symbol of one man's stand for freedom in the face of tyranny would reflect positively on the City of Pasadena and would be a perfect fit for the Tournament's 2008 theme of 'Passport to the World's Celebrations'" (Lau, 2007).



**Figure 2. The Float of Shame (cover of Pasadena Weekly, July 19, 2007).**

In early December 2007, Reporters Without Borders, together with Visual Artists Guild, set up a billboard at the intersection of Del Mar Avenue and Arroyo Parkway depicting the Olympic five rings as interlocked handcuffs under which the words "Beijing 2008" appeared in red. This image, with varying written messages, was distributed to city council members, pedestrians, and media on several occasions. Protesters wore T-shirts featuring the image, which was also widely used in protests against the overseas leg of the Beijing Olympic torch relay (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3. The Olympic five rings as handcuffs (Reporters Without Borders).**

With this framing of the controversy, the activists succeeded in having their voices heard in local, national, and international media. Joe Piasecki, a reporter for *Pasadena Weekly*, and Todd Ruiz from *The Pasadena Star-News* staunchly supported the protesters, who also disseminated their messages via *The Epoch Times*, their own blogs, the Internet, and other media.

#### **Activists' Lobbying Efforts**

Activists combined their strategy of public shaming with lobbying efforts and street protests, aiming at influencing policies and decisions in their favor. After hearing testimonies from protesters on July 16, 2007, Pasadena's city council gave the HRC three months to conduct an investigation and issue an official report. Having obtained extensive input from protesters and float supporters, the HRC submitted an 11-page unanimous report (5-0) to Mayor Bogaard and the city council. The HRC chair also presented the report, which some protesters praised as a "milestone" document, at a special meeting on October 29.

The report's key elements were as follows. First, it affirmed that, given its sister cities relationship with Beijing, Pasadena had jurisdiction over the issue. It viewed "human rights as a core value" of the Olympics and listed a wide range of human rights violations in China. It also separated individuals who supported the float but "expressed concern about human rights issues" from those who viewed human rights issues as the "political views of the protesters" and thus outside the purview of the Olympics (Pasadena Human Relations Commission, 2007). Acknowledging that human rights issues might "compete with and are overshadowed by other interests" and that many individuals were proud of the



economic and social developments in China, and aware of the difficulties involved in critiquing another nation, the HRC maintained that "the City Council should issue a strong statement that supports the principle of human rights and that reaffirms the need for renewed effort in China to address the human rights issues" (2007, p. 8). The report listed other options and suggestions, and recommended that the city council facilitate a meaningful dialogue between different parties and create an "ad-hoc committee for the purpose of reaching out and communicating with the various individuals and groups" to further "a lasting and improved understanding of the vital role of human rights" (2007, p. 10).

Though the city council expressed unanimous support of human rights and denounced human rights violations in general, the majority of council members (5-2) stopped short of following the recommendation to send a letter to Xicheng about this issue. Rather, they opted to send all five of Pasadena's sister cities a generic message endorsing the UN's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, declaring December 10 to be Universal Human Rights Day in Pasadena, and denouncing human rights violations without mentioning China, although a cover letter indicated that the action was an outcome of testimonies on China's human rights record. The council decided unanimously to keep the float, though. The majority decision viewed human rights abuses in China as the federal government's responsibility and affirmed that Pasadena council members were elected to deal with local affairs.

This decision was harshly criticized by local media and protesters. Much of the criticism centered on Bogaard for being too soft on Beijing and inconsistent in treating Pasadena's role in international affairs. Two council members also pointed out that Pasadena had a moral responsibility to directly denounce China's human rights violations. Council member Chris Holden criticized Pasadena for missing "an opportunity to be specific about how people are being treated in China" (Pierson, 2007b). Former Pasadena Mayor Bill Papanian, who had welcomed the Dalai Lama to Pasadena in 1996, lambasted the city's decision as a "shameful display of political cowardice" (Ruiz, 2007b).

Amidst the controversy, in November 2007 U.S. Representative Adam Schiff, a California Democrat, sent a letter, signed by himself and other members of Congress, to the BOCOG president requesting Beijing "to release prisoners of conscience, reform repressive laws and end censorship." The letter did not specifically mention the controversial float, but it resulted from Schiff's long-term relationship with human rights groups (Coleman & Piasecki, 2007a). Schiff called for the release of an activist's mother from a labor-reeducation camp because of her practicing Falun Gong. Pasadena Councilwoman Jacque Robinson and the U.S. Congress member Hilda Solis also joined the effort to request her release.

### **Activists' Increasingly Antagonistic Approach**

In the wake of the HRC report, representatives of the City of Pasadena, the Tournament of Roses, and Avery Dennison started dialoguing with representatives of the human rights coalition about including human rights elements in the parade. After weeks of discussions with the activists, tournament officials made an unprecedented gesture of allowing a human rights march two hours before the parade, which included a 100-person marching band, a Cushman super truck and a human rights torch relay. Citing

security reasons, however, Police Chief Bernard Melekian rejected the proposal and the revised proposal, and countered with his offers (Ruiz, 2007c, 2007d). Melekian stated that he had offered options like scaling the event down to one vehicle with the runner, or holding the full event on December 31, but activists declined the offers and criticized the decision to be politically-motivated and suspected that Mayor Bogaard might have influenced the decision.

On Friday, December 23, 2007, a closed-door meeting was held between two representatives of the human rights coalition and representatives of the city, the Tournament of Roses, and Avery Dennison. According to Tim Kelly, the Avery Dennison consultant who participated in the negotiations, all parties tentatively agreed to host a human rights event by choosing from two scenarios for the morning of the parade.<sup>13</sup> The next day, however, instead of accepting either of the options, the coalition proposed holding a 100-plus member human rights demonstration on Colorado Avenue one minute before the scheduled start of the Rose Parade, largely as a gesture showing the activists' frustration. Unsurprisingly, the police, the Tournament of Roses, and the City of Pasadena rejected this proposal for reasons of security and logistics ("Human Rights Coalition," 2007). According to John Li, the coalition rejected the previous options because they "diminished the importance of human rights" and were "not equal to the Beijing float" (Coleman & Piasecki, 2007b), indicating both unrealistic hopes about what they could accomplish in such a short period and unwillingness to compromise. After all, the Beijing Olympic float had been accepted under the official rules months before the parade. And whereas the city and the tournament had a moral duty to address human rights issues, they had no official obligation to accommodate the activists' request. Indeed, the city officials and Avery Dennison representative generally regarded the activists as not flexible enough to grasp the opportunity to advance the human rights cause. For example, Tim Kelly remarked on the activists' inflexibility in contrast to the "amazing flexibility" of the City of Pasadena, adding that the activists "were zealous for a good cause, but missed a good opportunity" (personal communication, December 28, 2007).

Frustrated by their incapacity to remove the float or significantly influence the political outcome, activists gradually developed a more antagonistic approach and intertwined their campaign with domestic politics. Using a purifying rhetoric, many activists, especially the Falun Gong group, denounced Pasadena's efforts to engage with Xicheng as a contamination of Pasadena. On various occasions, activists and their supporters criticized Bogaard for supporting Beijing and endorsing "the cruel rule" of the Chinese Communist Party. They made repeated requests asking Pasadena city officials to disassociate itself from the float. The activists condemned Bogaard's position as a bad excuse that separated the Olympics from politics and treated the float as a local float.

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<sup>13</sup> One scenario was to "have a runner bearing a torch symbolizing human rights proceeding at 6:00am on Colorado Boulevard from the area of the Rusnak auto dealerships, running easterly to Euclid Avenue and then to the eastern entrance of City Hall," whereupon "a rally would be held on the steps of City Hall, including human rights speakers and others invited by the Coalition." The other was to "have a series of runners representing different human rights organizations bearing a torch symbolizing human rights proceeding at 6:00am on Colorado Boulevard from the area of the Rusnak auto dealerships, following the full parade route to Sierra Madre Boulevard. Afterwards the Coalition could hold a rally at the park of their choice" ("Agreement Rejected," 2007).

Some activists stated on various occasions secret discussions were conducted between Bogaard and Beijing, but my research suggests that most of these accusations relied on public information. At the press conference after the failed negotiations, Jingsheng Wei, an invited speaker and one of the most widely known Chinese activists in the United States, remarked that Pasadena "was in the suburb of Beijing and it received Beijing's order" ("Secret Discussions," 2008). This defiant stance was pervasive among activists and their supporters. For example, on February 28 *Pasadena Weekly* ran an item with the title "Welcome to Beijing, Calif." (Piasecki, 2008a). The article criticized Bogaard, quoting attorney and former Pasadena Mayor Bill Paparian, who stated:

It's unfortunate that the sister-city relationship did not serve its original purpose, which was to help a city in China become more like the United States. Instead, the opposite has happened. Pasadena has become more like Beijing when it comes to people expressing themselves. (ibid.)

Naturally, activists sided with politicians who supported their position, such as Pasadena city council member Chris Holden and the HRC chair, Kenneth Hardy. Holden, who had not supported the decision to make Xicheng a sister city in 1999, viewed Bogaard's endorsement of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a "fake pass" and "easy exit" (Piasecki & Uhrich, 2007). Holden and Paparian attended several protests. At the post-negotiation press conference, Jingsheng Wei awarded Holden and Hardy the "award of conscience." Activists also threatened to sue Pasadena for violating the First Amendment, though ultimately this did not happen. By seizing the opportunity that was open in the U.S. political system, the activists—intentionally or unintentionally—became involved in local racial politics. One news article pointed out that the two council members who had supported direct criticism of Beijing were African Americans, that the divisiveness of their views in the Pasadena city council reflected Pasadena's discrimination against African Americans, and that the only Latino council member Victor M. Gordo was criticized for not actively supporting the HRC report, even though he advocated council action on human rights in China (Piasecki & Uhrich, 2007).

Facing recrimination for raining on someone else's float, protesters increasingly called for public support. They organized various street demonstrations, including organ-harvesting guerrilla shows in front of the House of Tournament on October 8 and a candlelight vigil before the Pasadena City Hall on October 14 in honor of people who had suffered or were still suffering in China. On December 31, 2007, and January 1, 2008, more than a hundred protesters gathered near the Tournament House at the Orange Grove, distributing flyers urging people to turn their backs when the Beijing Olympic float passed by. However, the protesters represented only two groups—Falun Gong practitioners and supporters of Tibet—indicating failure to sustain the human rights coalition, given that many more groups had been involved in earlier stages. From an organizational perspective, a coalition's success depends on activists' establishing a lasting network and sharing at least a "rudimentary" sense of identity (della Porta & Diani, 1999, cited in Tarrow, 2005). In this case, even though the activists shared the common target of the Beijing Olympic float and Chinese government, the broad range of their complaints from the release of individual prisoners to the pursuit of systemic social and political changes, and their identification with China, or lack thereof, kept the activists from forming a sustainable network. For example, many Tibetan exiles pursue independence for Tibet, whereas most Chinese dissidents are only interested in ending one-party rule and

promoting democracy in China. Indeed, the Falun Gong movement, a crucial player in shaping the protests, identifies with Chinese nationalism and positions itself as a more authentic representative of traditional Chinese culture than the Chinese Communist Party (Liang, 2011; Sinclair, 2002). Even their criticisms of Bogaard implied a state-centric ideology. This might also explain why Falun Gong did not play an active role in the protests against the global Olympic torch relay leading up to the Beijing Olympics.

Meanwhile, Visual Artists Guild sponsored a contest calling for submissions of photos and videos that "capture the true human rights sentiment" as the Beijing Olympic float passed by. On New Year's Eve, All Saints Church held a special service focusing on religious persecutions in China. However, on January 1, 2008, when the Beijing Olympic float, featuring five mascots and the logo "One World, One Dream," rolled through the Orange Grove and down Colorado Boulevard, very few spectators turned their backs. Except for on-site viewers who happened to pass by the demonstrators, very few attendees were aware of the controversy, and some who were aware showed indifference. Because the Tournament of Roses tightly controlled the location of TV cameras, no protesters appeared on live TV coverage. All demonstrators opposing the float were segregated because the Tournament of Roses did not want protests to destroy its celebratory tone. A coalition of antiwar protesters walked together with "peace mom" Cindy Sheehan, but the protesters against the Beijing Olympic float did not walk. Furthermore, the Beijing Olympic float won the Theme Trophy Award for "excellence" in presenting the parade theme "Passport to the World's Celebrations," suggesting that the protests had little influence on the float's symbolic treatment from the Tournament of Roses. (See Figures 4 and 5 for the Beijing Olympic Float.)



**Figure 4: The Beijing Olympics float in the Pasadena Rose Parade, Jan. 1, 2008.**  
(AP Photo: Reed Saxon)



**Figure 5. Beijing Olympic mascots accompanying the float pass protesters in Pasadena Rose Parade, Jan. 1, 2008. (AP photo: Reed Saxon)**

### **The City Government and the Pasadena Sister Cities China Subcommittee: Walking a Tightrope Between Domestic Politics and Not Offending Beijing**

Human rights activists commonly use the strategy of public shaming to promote social change, but the protesters' inflexibility blinded them to other parties' positions and alienated potential supporters. While the HRC report cited evidence of Pasadena's human rights tradition, such as its resolution not to buy from companies doing business in apartheid South Africa in 1989 and a 2006 resolution "opposing a federal bill that would change immigration law," Bogaard and his supporters insisted Pasadena also had a tradition of celebrating Olympic-themed floats. The protesters viewed the Chinese regime as evil, but those involved in a broader spectrum of China-related issues were more likely to have a nuanced view of China. For example, Alan Lamson, former chair of the Pasadena Sister Cities China Subcommittee, said: "We are friends. You have problems and we have problems and let us solve them together" (personal communication, December 26, 2007). President of the Pasadena Sister Cities Committee Jane Hallinger remarked, "If [America] were lily-clean, we might have the right to take a stand" (Pierson, 2007a). On several occasions Bogaard expressed the view that "the U.S. is not perfect and China is not perfect" and that dialogue and mutual respect were the only path to improving the human rights situation.

Understandably, the City of Pasadena and the Sister Cities Committee aimed to maintain good relations with Xicheng. After all, Sister Cities International, as envisioned by President Eisenhower, has the mission of connecting with people in other countries—even enemy countries—via informal networks to promote peace and people-to-people diplomacy. The Pasadena Sister Cities Committee is supposed to bypass politics and engage in a friendly relationship with Xicheng. Mayor Bogaard supported this engagement, and the Sister Cities Committee, most Pasadena city council members, and float supporters treated the float as apolitical, hoping that open discussion and long-term contacts would gradually lead to future changes.<sup>14</sup> Consistent with the mission, the Pasadena sister cities relationship has focused on cultural and educational exchanges such as music performances, library exchange, art exhibitions, sporting events, student exchange, and training programs for government officials involved in city planning, administration, community building, and public health. In the past 10 years, Xicheng and Pasadena have maintained close relations and constant communication, and have regularly sent

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<sup>14</sup> The majority of council members viewed the float as having potential to function as a vehicle for political purposes, but since no officials would be on the vehicle and the float was sponsored locally, no explicit evidence supported this argument. Laurence Dwyer, Avery Dennison's senior director of media relations, stated: "This is a float that celebrates the Olympics, which is a global event that virtually all nations participate in, and its stated goal is to help build a better world. . . . It represents an opportunity for athletes to foster good sportsmanship and friendship between nations" (Piasecki, 2007b). Surprised at the controversy, Mr. C. L. Keedy, president of the Tournament of Roses, said that "The Olympics is a world celebration of athletic endeavors, so it fits with this year's theme of the Rose Parade. The Olympics is the issue, not the politics" (Piasecki, 2007a). Bogaard and his supporters thought that "keeping communication channels and interactions open between the United States and China is more likely to lead to the progressive development of China, and that the Beijing Olympics was part of this process" (HRC, 2007).

delegations to each other's cities. In 2009, Pasadena and Xicheng celebrated their 10th anniversary as sister cities and signed a mutual friendship declaration at the Huntington Library. For several years, China has been the Los Angeles area's top trading partner, and the trade volume between China and Los Angeles (counting goods moved to and from local airports and seaports) reached US\$126 billion in 2006 (Pierson, 2007a). Pasadena also helped Xicheng District correct the English grammar on billboards, street signs and in other public places prior to the Beijing Olympics. Bogaard's dilemma is shared by American politicians who support a policy of engagement with China.

U.S. media coverage was sympathetic toward the activists,<sup>15</sup> but city council officials, people on the sister cities committee, and the Avery Dennison representative complained that the coverage was sometimes inaccurate and biased. Some said journalists covered only the perspective of human rights activists without consulting city officials. Such incomplete coverage harms the human rights by producing distrust. Understandably, a few individuals expressed displeasure over the "hijacking" of the float and questioned why protesters did not target the Chinese garden at the Huntington Library, or General Electric or Walmart, which have large businesses in China.

### **Responses of the Chinese American Community**

While the City of Pasadena, Pasadena Sister Cities Committee, Tournament of Roses, and Avery Dennison defended the float, they were cautious not to defend China or its human rights abuses. They only regarded the float as contributing to relationship building that could lead to long-term change. However, some Chinese supporters went so far as to defend China's human rights record, characterizing the testimonies and materials as personal opinion. One explanation for this is the Chinese community's genuine sense of pride about the Beijing Olympics. Many Chinese are heavily invested in a positive image of China, as evidenced by the overwhelming number of first-generation Chinese immigrants organizing protesters to counter pro-Tibet protesters during the overseas leg of the Beijing Olympic torch relay (Li, 2010). Such pride was also apparent in the Los Angeles Chinese community. For example, the Committee of 100, whose members are drawn from the science, business, and arts communities, discussed difficulties facing China and Chinese Americans at its three-day annual conference in Beverly Hills in April 2008. At

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<sup>15</sup> In addition to news items, *Pasadena Weekly* published letters from residents that mostly condemned China's human rights records and viewing U.S. human rights policies as too soft on China. In an online poll conducted by the *Pasadena Star-News*, an overwhelming majority supported the protesters as of October 10. The *Los Angeles Times* posted its second online article on the controversy in October 2007 (Pierson, 2007b). Most of the 49 reader responses received in the next two days viewed the Chinese government and China negatively. They linked the float and the Olympics to Hitler, lead toys, "poisoned food," and human rights abuses. One person stated, "So the Rose Parade is kissing up to murderers, torturers, environmental destruction, and slave labor. How much did China pay to censor the reality of what China is doing in Tibet and elsewhere?" Another reader stated, "I am proud of my Chinese heritage but sickened of human rights conditions." All respondents who supported the float thought it and the Olympics should remain apolitical.



this meeting they welcomed the Beijing Olympics and expressed a strong sense of pride at seeing China host the Olympic Games (Piasecki, 2008b).

As for the float, Chinese community leaders, especially the first-generation immigrants among them, expressed enthusiasm for it. The float's organizer, Sue Zhang, stated: "If we do not have a float for the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese here will lose face. . . . Overseas Chinese are happy about the Olympics. The only thing we can do is to donate money and effort (*chuli*), and we hope the rose float will celebrate cultural exchange and friendship, not politics" (personal communication, December 15, 2007). The Chinese sponsors insisted that the float had little to do with politics or the Chinese government. It was thus unsurprising that the float's Chinese sponsors and supporters had no direct contact with protesters, who accused the roundtable of being a front for the Chinese government. The protesters' antagonism forced the sponsors to take a defensive position. In the month prior to the parade, one sponsor worked so hard on the float that he felt that it "has almost become" his child, and the activists' extension of the "platform" to promote their agendas displeased him greatly (E. Lam, personal communication, December 15, 2007). The sponsors maintained that they did not benefit from the sponsorship as their names or their companies would not appear on the float. However, Chinese media such as the overseas edition of *People's Daily* and important websites such as *Sina.com*, Shenzhou Xueren (*chisa.com.cn*), and *Xinhuanet.com* lauded the Chinese sponsors' patriotism while characterizing the protesters as doomed, like a praying mantis attempting to stop an advancing vehicle (*tangbi dangche*). As most sponsors had business ties in China, they likely stood to gain the goodwill of the Chinese government through their sponsorship. The sponsor Yuling Li is heavily invested in the Chinese market, having more than 30 companies in China, with total investment amounts reaching 2.8 billion Yuan in China (China Overseas Friendship Association, n/a). Li is also a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, an advisory political body that convenes in tandem with the annual National Congress Conference. A Boxun report accused Li as having obtained fame and fortune in China by false pretense and that Li was sued for fraud in the United States (Boxun, 2010). Even the neutrality of Avery Dennison's sponsorship came into question in 2009, when the company was implicated in inside transactions in China and fined US\$200,000 by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission over charges that its employees had bribed Chinese officials over the past few years with kickbacks, sightseeing trips, and gifts in order to win contracts (Olivarez-Giles, 2009). Nonetheless, some individual sponsors' donations merely reflected their sense of pride and obligation to contribute to the Chinese community in Los Angeles.

After the float's passage down Colorado Boulevard, the Xinhua News Agency published an article, which other Chinese newspapers and the official website of the Beijing Olympics later reprinted, stating that "millions of spectators from around the world cheered as the Beijing Olympic Float passed." Citing the organizers' views, the article described the float as "a generous gift from the Beijing Olympic Games to the American people and the Parade" (Xinhuanet, 2008). Most first-generation Chinese immigrants and Chinese students, however, maintain a distance from the Chinese consulate in Los Angeles. This silent majority is likely to support a positive image of China but unlikely to unconditionally endorse the Chinese government, let alone its human rights abuses.

For many Chinese Americans, the best way to deal with China is to promote cultural and economic exchanges rather than focus on China's political reforms or human rights issues. Falun Gong

practitioners, pro-democracy dissidents, and other human rights activists are often marginalized by the impact of China's economic boom. Many recent Chinese students on U.S. campuses benefit from China's economic development and thus support the Chinese government. At the HRC's public hearing, some twenty Chinese students, who made up two thirds of the supporters who spoke, unsurprisingly took the position that human rights issues were "political views," that the Olympics was apolitical, and that the protestors' requests were inappropriate (Pasadena Human Relations Commission, 2007). With a singular focus on Falun Gong, some denied the human rights issues by discussing their own positive personal experiences in China.

Performing nationalism and developing networks benefits some Chinese student leaders' future career advancement in China. *Sohu.com*, a major Chinese Internet portal, has reported on elite Chinese students who have returned or plan to return to China after overseas study. The article, titled "Blue Blood," stated "one can become a state leader only if one becomes a student leader when studying overseas." Student leaders use their position to connect with Chinese embassy and consulate officials, Chinese community leaders, the business elite, and politicians in China (Zeng, 2007). Their overseas experience is thus a strategic opportunity to accumulate political capital. The report quotes Xiaofei Wang, a former president of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association at the University of Southern California who later became the chair of the Southwestern Chinese Students and Scholars Association in the United States, as asserting that such networks could "be very useful in the future." Interestingly, Wang also represented the Chinese student organization by speaking at the public meeting on August 7, 2007 in Pasadena. In a blog post of August 2009 that was reprinted on several other websites, he described his fight against the "evil cult" of Falun Gong as protecting China's interests. Positioning Falun Gong practitioners as anti-China forces and troublemakers opposed to the "beautiful Beijing Olympics" to attract funding in the United States, Wang related how he had used his knowledge of history and English speaking skills at the meeting to delegitimize his opponents and gain "approving looks" from the Pasadena officials (Wang, 2009). The blog appeared only when he became a government official in the Beijing Office of Henan Province, after obtaining his PhD in the United States. Interestingly, the account contradicted the HRC report's deep concern about the students' position and their insensitivity toward human rights issues.

Several Chinese sponsors, although they expressed sympathy toward Falun Gong and disagreed with the Chinese government's stance on human rights abuses in private conversation with me, also predominantly viewed Falun Gong practitioners as troublemakers. Tending to stay away from politics, they said that whereas human rights were important, they saw the rights to food, shelter, and education as more important. Notably, the Chinese consulate was not involved in the controversy even though "Beijing was extremely anxious about the float" (S. Zhang, personal communication, December 15, 2007). Obviously, the embassy had gained experience dealing with American politics since 2001, when the Pasadena Sister Cities Committee denied the Los Angeles Chinese consul general's request that they not rent City Hall to Falun Gong for a conference (A. Lamson, personal communication, December 26, 2007). The students and the Chinese diaspora are important players in China's international communication precisely because of China's tremendous difficulty winning public support in the United States.

### **The Legacy of the Controversy**

The controversy forced the float sponsors to celebrate the float more modestly than they had planned. Several celebrations and performances scheduled in Pasadena were canceled. A reception slated for December 30, 2007, was also canceled, and on January 1, 2008, a reception was held at Sue Zhang's home instead of a public place. The protesters' stance drove Pasadena to enact strong security measures for the float before and during the parade, so the float was "not among the majority of entries snaking into position" before the New Year celebration (Ruiz, 2008). Similarly, imposing security details guarded the overseas leg of the Beijing Olympic torch relay in spring 2008, and the torch was sometimes rerouted to avoid protesters. Heavy security made the float in particular and the Beijing Olympics in general occasions for anxiety rather than celebration, greatly limiting the positive exposure Beijing might have gained.

The protests might further deter people from actively promoting Chinese culture. For instance, Alan Lamson stated, "If I had known there should be such a controversy, I probably would not have suggested to Xicheng that they could co-sponsor the float" (personal communication, December 26, 2007). When I asked whether Mayor Bogaard would have done anything differently if he had been forewarned about the controversy, he replied that he would not have pushed so actively for a float because "it would not do much harm without a float" (B. Bogaard, personal communication, December 20, 2007). Interestingly, although Falun Gong practitioners led the protest in the rose float controversy, it was Tibetans who led the protests in the Olympic torch relay. Falun Gong adherents were not among the protesters in spring 2008, probably because they associated the Olympic Games with Chinese national pride.

One important legacy of the controversy is that since 2007, Pasadena has commemorated International Human Rights Day with themes ranging from "say no to family violence" (2009), the UN Year of Youth (2010), and sustainable energy (2011). The institutionalization of the celebration of human rights encourages activists to examine a broader range of human rights issues and gives them a platform for continued protests of human rights violations. Indeed, in December 2008, when Amnesty International, joined by some of the same float activists, again pressed the City of Pasadena to push for China's release of political and religious prisoners, the debate about human rights in China was once again on the agenda.

It is noteworthy that the controversy failed to produce systemic changes in China. Keck and Sikkink (1998) discussed the "boomerang" impact of transnational activism, whereby domestic groups reach out to international allies, appealing to them to pressure their domestic governments for social change. Although Falun Gong practitioners, Chinese dissidents, and Tibetan exiles are not based in China, the boomerang impact still applies conceptually because these activists still have many supporters in China. However, international pressure does not work independently but must instead collaborate with national players (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Tarrow, 2005). Keck and Sikkink (1998) point out that human rights activism has failed in China because of "a weak, repressive, and divided domestic movement, combined with little possibility for leverage politics" (p. 118)

### Conclusion

To what extent is human rights activism transformative in terms of influencing or contesting China's soft power or national image? I argue that its impact is limited for several reasons. First, activists often fail to understand the complicated structural forces underlying U.S.-China relations in general and discussion of human rights issues in particular. U.S.-China relations and U.S. policies in general are simultaneously characterized by two traditions: realism, which promotes interests over moral values; and idealism, in line with the Woodrow Wilson tradition that promotes universal values, human rights, collective security, and global justice. These two traditions correspond roughly to the two parts of Washington's policy orientation to China: engagement and containment. Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. government's China policy has been increasingly oriented toward engagement. Especially since the global recession, the United States and China have developed even closer economic ties. Capitalists often favor stability under an authoritarian regime over a democratic society waiting to arise (Bunker, 2011). They and the large media corporations, business establishments, and administrators that support capitalism are unlikely to favor activism, but instead often attempt to marginalize human rights issues. In the case under discussion, the float advanced as planned and only a small audience was aware of the controversy. The same organizer also sponsored a Shanghai Expo float in the 2010 Pasadena Rose Parade, which met with little protest.

Second, many global capitalists and Chinese residents and immigrants who have benefited from China's economic boom are likely to support the current economic, cultural, and political arrangements. The Chinese government is able to use the sense of national pride among the Chinese diaspora to advance its agenda. Meanwhile, human rights activists who use simplistic rhetoric and strategies to deal with the complexity of the issues find that it can be counterproductive. In this controversy, even though activists partially succeeded in pushing their agenda and making their frame dominant in Western media, the earlier positive coverage did not help a larger coalition develop, despite Kolb's (2005, p. 101) argument that sympathetic media coverage can lead to a "self-reinforcing upward spiral." The divisive claims and polarizing rhetoric might have alienated some potential supporters who preferred to take a middle ground balancing domestic politics and support for human rights with a continuing relationship with China. Human rights activists also failed to distinguish between supporters of the Chinese regime with little regard for human rights abuses, and float supporters who did not endorse the regime. They also failed to recognize that Pasadena and its Sister Cities Committee had legitimate concerns about Pasadena's limited resources, its long-term relationship with Beijing, and logistics and security issues. The activists' dilemma resulted from the entwined U.S. and Chinese interests across national borders in the absence of an effective global mechanism to deal with human rights abuses occurring within a state's sovereignty in a situation where activists did not have leverage.

Third, human rights issues are functions of social, political, and economic development. The United States and China understand human rights discourses differently, and Chinese citizens and even Chinese immigrants in the United States are unlikely to accept a universalizing human rights rhetoric unconditionally, given that human rights issues are historically related to national interests in China. Seeking foreign support can be a double-edged sword for activists. On the one hand, it can help publicize their cause and increase international pressure for change in China, especially now that Beijing is carefully

tending its international image. On the other hand, Chinese activists' search for foreign support also gives the Chinese government a legitimate excuse to crack down on them. Seeking foreign support might also further alienate many Chinese who do not support the government but nevertheless are concerned with China's international image. Many Chinese nationals and Chinese living overseas are still heavily influenced by the dominant narrative of China's 100-year humiliation under Western colonial powers. Activists' efforts to expose human rights abuses in China might embarrass the Chinese nationals who hold that "family embarrassment should not be publicized" (*jia chou bu ke wai yang*). Over the years I have known quite a few Chinese to express displeasure with Falun Gong practitioners. Some, when shown graphic images of prosecutions and the harvesting of organs from live prisoners, said they believed some of the pictures were exaggerated or fabricated. Without strong support from Chinese residents in China, global human rights activists are very unlikely to produce systemic lasting changes in China.

Meanwhile, several challenges hinder the Chinese government's pursuit of attraction and soft power in the United States. The fragmentation of the U.S. Chinese community and the American public's mixed views of China keep the Chinese government from gaining soft power in the United States. Far from being an undifferentiated group, the Chinese diaspora is extremely diverse in terms of gender, class, ideology, and relations with the Chinese communist regime (Zhou, 2006). Float supporters' decoupling of the float from the Chinese government and constant reiteration that they did not endorse the Chinese government minimize the prestige the Chinese government might have expected to gain by hosting the Beijing Olympics. Though few in the diaspora would speak ill of Chinese culture, the current Chinese political system is associated with widespread corruption, lack of free speech, environmental issues, corrupt labor practices, and human rights abuses, which certainly has a negative impact on China's international reputation. What is more, a great many Chinese dissidents in the West oppose the current Chinese regime, if not China, which makes it difficult for Beijing to project the image of a harmonious society and a responsible country. Beijing can hope only for limited advances by relying solely on pro-Beijing diasporas, who often have strong business and family ties in China and can be viewed as brainwashed or bought. Relying on pro-Beijing diaspora only sidesteps the human rights issue at best. And economic benefits can only play a limited role in boosting China's negative overall reputation in the West.

According to Manheim (1994, 1997), when a country with high visibility and negative overall image delivers a positive message about itself in the United States, the message is highly likely to be perceived as propaganda. Manheim thus suggests that such a country should go less public instead. Quite in line with Manheim, the float organizers downplayed the significance of the float and canceled some marketing activities. China also scaled back its Olympic torch relay activities when faced with overwhelming global protests and negative media coverage. Along with the rise in its global status, China can expect more global scrutiny and criticism. Still, China has the opportunity to seriously change its domestic and foreign policies and carry out political reforms toward a world more in line with recent UN human rights discourses that, having expanded to include economic, social, and cultural rights, overlap with official discourses on human rights in China. Only when China's political system starts to protect individual rights, freedom of speech, free press, and curtail widespread political corruptions, can China as a nation and a regime, profoundly increase its attraction and soft power in the international community.

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