

Olympic heat

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More than light in China debate

SEOUL in 1988, or Berlin in 1936? Debate about the staging of next year's Olympic games in Beijing tends to polarise opinion. Most Chinese—and foreigners optimistic about the country's direction—see it as a fitting symbol of China's emergence as a global power. They also argue the games will ease political repression and open China up to the outside world.

The Berlin-1936 camp argues that China's record of human-rights abuses and repression is such that it should never have been awarded the games at all. And far from bringing liberalisation, the Olympics will actually make things worse: residents in places earmarked for stadiums will be uprooted, dissidents harassed and protesters locked up.



A debate just staged in London by *The Economist* and the Stockholm Network, a European think-tank, followed a familiar pattern. A Chinese economist claimed things are improving in her country. Audience members and opposing panellists, including a representative of Amnesty International, a human-rights organisation, disagreed volubly.

The audience included some who had been victims of persecution at the hands of the Chinese state. One follower of Falun Gong, a quasi-Buddhist religious sect that China's government bans, gave an impassioned and harrowing account of her ordeal.

This same argument has been going on for a decade, but since China was awarded the Olympics in 2001, it has become anachronistic. Hardly anyone

(certainly not Amnesty) is calling for a boycott of the Beijing games, and, barring some unforeseen disaster, they will go ahead.

The proposition actually up for debate was rather different: that “the Beijing Olympics will allow China to fool the world.” In other words, at issue was not whether China “deserved” the games, or whether they will be good or bad for the human rights of its citizens. The question was actually whether the international attention brought by the Olympics will allow China to present itself to the outside world as something it is not.

It is possible that the thousands of journalists who converge on Beijing for the games will simply file awe-struck panegyrics about the spectacular Olympic architecture, dazzled descriptions of the new-found wealth of China’s urban elite and naive interpretations of patriotic pride as evidence of devotion to the Communist Party.

They might ignore the poverty that still afflicts large parts of China, the hideous environmental cost being paid for China’s breakneck growth and the government’s efforts to prevent or quash protests.

But this seems unlikely. Sports reporters aside, editors will expect journalists cover both sides of “the China story”: the spectacular economic advance as well as the survival of one-party dictatorship, with all the repressive consequences that implies.

The authorities may—indeed, almost certainly will—try to thwart their efforts to report the latter story. As with other big events in Beijing, such as the Communist Party’s quinquennial congress in October, security will be stepped up, dissidents warned not to make trouble and censorship tightened. But that will become the news.

One of the panellists opposing the motion, David Smith, economics editor of the *Sunday Times*, made a convincing case that the increased scrutiny the games will bring will make it harder, not easier, for China to fool the world.

He seemed to win over the audience. In a straw poll before the speakers had opened their mouths, a majority supported the motion, presumably as an expression of their distaste for China’s government. But at the end of the debate, the motion was comfortably defeated.

Even one of the proposers had switched sides, having re-learned the lesson that is drummed into every schoolchild at exam time: answer the question, even if you think it is the wrong one.