Andrew J. Nathan

MEDALS AND RIGHTS

What the Olympics reveal, and conceal, about China.

The two million foreign guests who are expected to visit Beijing in August will encounter a largely familiar and exceedingly cosmopolitan environment. They will find clean air, smooth traffic, easy Internet access, and standardized restaurant menus, all intended to provide them with seventeen days of physical, mental, and moral ease. Beijing has trained 1,500 “civilized bus riding supervisors,” appointed 5,000 anti-jaywalking monitors, held “queuing awareness days,” and mounted campaigns against spitting and slurping. The planners have paved over old neighborhoods to make way for five-star hotels, malls, and theme restaurants. Migrant workers who built the Olympic venues will have been dispatched back to the countryside, beggars and petitioners shipped home to their villages, and dissidents and would-be demonstrators placed under temporary house arrest or jailed. Visitors will see an edited Beijing, the way its governors and many of its residents would like it to be seen, a world capital with its exotic side under control.

And yet these same visitors may detect a deep ambivalence in the city’s welcome. The pride may seem leavened by Beijing’s monumentalism. Multiple families were crammed into old houses, street trades were eliminated, and tunnels were dug for civil defense. The peddlers and handicraftsmen disappeared, and street life turned drab. But the alleyways and the low buildings of the old city remained largely untouched, at least physically.

Deng Xiaoping’s commercial revolution after 1979 created crowds, bustling supermarkets, fast food outlets, high rises, bland sprawling residential districts, and wide congested roads. Several international athletic events, such as the Asian Games in 1990, contributed new construction. And this year’s Olympics has finally completed the destruction of the historical city, with a huge new airport terminal, thirty-one competition venues, new roads, subway lines, hotels, bridges, neighborhoods, and parks. What remains of the old-style houses and streets, crafts, means of transportation, and ways of life is mere outdoor museum displays, according to Lillian M. Li and her co-authors in their narrative of the city’s lost past. Visitors should carry this readable book with them as an aid to imagining what is no longer there, and to understanding the political sources—including hubris and corruption—of what they see.
no precedential effect for other cases. The 380 hostesses guiding the athletes through the Olympic awards ceremonies will all be about the same age, height, and weight, and they have been trained to walk and gesture in standard ways.

By contrast, people who suffer from hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS are treated with widespread discrimination in college admission and employment. In search of something called “population security,” couples are forbidden to bear more than one child, pregnancy screening has been upgraded to prevent “defective births,” and mothers are taught how to raise children of “high quality.” Despite the loosening of restrictions on migration for work, a legally entrenched caste system still grants rural residents political and social-welfare rights inferior to those of urban residents. Worsening income inequality shows its marks on the weathered faces of migrant workers who come to the cities from the villages to do the hardest labor, often going home cheated of their pay at the end of their term of employment.

The Olympics have been designed to showcase the upside of this dialectic: glass towers, modish people, prosperity, and health of every kind—economic, political, and physical. As Xu Guoqi points out, when China was the “sick man of Asia,” many of its people were ill as well, and social thinkers of the time were obsessed with the connection between the two problems. They understood the relationship through the theory of social Darwinism, an idea then popular in the West, which held that human history was the story of competition for survival among the races. A Chinese elementary-school textbook of the 1920s explained that “Mankind is divided into five races. The yellow and white races are relatively strong and intelligent. Since the other races are feeble and stupid, they are being exterminated by the white race. Only the yellow race competes with the white race. This is so-called evolution.” Mao Zedong’s first known published essay was on physical culture, and his theme (borrowed from contemporary thinkers such as Liang Qichao) was that China’s involvement with international sports. In the 1950s, the new communist government set up a nationwide physical-education system modeled on that of its ally, the Soviet Union. The purpose, the Physical Culture and Sports Commission said at the time, was “to give participants a stronger physique and will power in order to better serve socialism and the defense of the fatherland.” In those days China’s sports diplomacy was limited to the Soviet bloc and what were called “the Games of the Newly Emerging Forces,” because the mainland People’s Republic of China had withdrawn from the Olympic movement in the mid-1950s to protest the participation of the rival regime located on Taiwan, called the Republic of China.

Both Xu’s and Brownell’s books contain withering accounts of decades of the International Olympic Committee’s clumsiness in handling the two-Chinas problem. Xu’s analysis is based on research in the IOC archives; Brownell is informed by conversations with a senior Chinese Olympics statesman, He Zhenliang, whose biography she has translated (He Zhenliang and China’s Olympic Dream, Liang Lijuan, published by Foreign Languages Press last year). They tell how the contradictions between the two-Chinas problem. They tell how the facts that Olympic committees do not represent nations and IOC members transcend their countries’ interests clashed with the zero-sum struggle over legitimacy between the PRC and the ROC. Each side claimed to be the government of all China, and each took turns boycotting games when the other was allowed to participate.

The American Avery Brundage, who served as IOC chair from 1952 to 1972, oscillated between trying to get both Chinas in and keeping them both out. When he tried to get the ROC committee to change its name, he earned a verbal flogging in the anti-communist U.S. press. When the Canadian government refused visas for the ROC team to participate under its national flag in the Montreal Games in 1976, Canada was roasted by American politicians. But four years later, after the United States had switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, Washington copied the Canadian strategy and denied the ROC team the right to use its own name and flag in the Lake Placid Winter Games. It was not until 1984 in Los Angeles that both Chinas participated, having finally accepted a 1979 IOC proposal that Taiwan use the name “Chinese Taipei” and give up the right to display its national flag, anthem, and emblem. This so-called Olympic formula has subsequently been used to enable Taiwan’s participation in a variety of official and unofficial settings, and is supposed to be used again in August when Taiwan’s teams come to Beijing.
Under Mao, talented athletes went to special schools run by the military. That system was restored after the Cultural Revolution and confronted a series of doping scandals in international competitions in the 1990s. The system has been civilianized, but today as in the past, Xu Guoqi reports, recruitment and training for international competition remain major priorities under central state planning. Little seems to be known about training methods or the physical cost to the athletes, although Xu reports that in order to keep their focus on their sport, athletes are not allowed to fall in love or to marry until they reach the age of twenty-eight for men and twenty-six for women. Brownell, herself a top track-and-field athlete who participated in the 1986 Chinese National College Games when she was an exchange student, corrects misrepresentations about athletes: automaton, genetic engineering, and child abuse. But she acknowledges, as do other authors, that the Chinese government puts most of its sports funding into competitive sport rather than community sport. The reason is that sports in China is about the nation, not the public. Having come in second to the United States in Athens in 2004, China is aiming for the highest number of gold medals in 2008.

II.

Few foreign visitors to Beijing will see—but surely few can be unaware of—the state repression that is as integral to the contemporary Chinese model as urban monumentalism, social conformity, and state-managed sports. In July 2007, police in northeast China arrested a peasant land-rights activist named Yang Chunlin who had collected thousands of signatures for a petition titled “We Want Human Rights, Not the Olympics.” He was held and tortured for eight months, then tried and sentenced to a five-year prison term on the vague charge of “inciting subversion of state power.” Lu Gengsong, a Hangzhou-based activist who campaigned online for women’s rights, is even more egregious. Chen Guangcheng, the blind activist for women’s rights, is even more egregious. Chen is a soft-spoken man in his early thirties who got involved in helping draft appeals against forced abortion and sterilization in the rural area where he lived, which is part of Linyi city in Shandong province. (Chinese cities administer surrounding rural areas.) After a visit to Beijing, Chen was kidnapped and brought home by public security agents from Linyi, who placed him under illegal house arrest. When he persisted, he was roughed up by thugs, then arrested on charges—intentionally ludicrous, for a blind person—of destroying property and assembling a crowd to disrupt traffic. Defense lawyers who came from Beijing to see him were taken off a bus, beaten, and kept from attending his trial, which was sentenced to three and a half years in April 2008 by a Beijing court for—again—inciting subversion of state power because of his writings, including an open letter on “The Real China and the Olympics.” For months before his arrest, Hu had been harassed. At one point he posted on YouTube an ominous yet comic video of buff young plainclothes security agents outside his apartment smoking, lunching, and picking their teeth. When Hu’s wife went on an errand, they crowded and jostled her like bullies in a high school hallway.

This must be especially terrifying when the bullies run the country. I have asked activists why they take such risks. They usually say that they know how to maneuver within the limits allowed by Chinese law. But for many of them this gamble eventually goes wrong, and Hu Jia was such a case. After his arrest, Hu was tortured with stress positions and sleep deprivation. As Jerome A. Cohen and Eva Pils have observed, “It is part of the logic of political systems that treat opposition as a crime that they must not only punish the opposition, but also break its spirit.”

The case of Chen Guangcheng, the blind activist for women’s rights, is even more egregious. Chen is a soft-spoken man in his early thirties who got involved in helping draft appeals against forced abortion and sterilization in the rural area where he lived, which is part of Linyi city in Shandong province. (Chinese cities administer surrounding rural areas.) After a visit to Beijing, Chen was kidnapped and brought home by public security agents from Linyi, who placed him under illegal house arrest. When he persisted, he was roughed up by thugs, then arrested on charges—intentionally ludicrous, for a blind person—of destroying property and assembling a crowd to disrupt traffic. Defense lawyers who came from Beijing to see him were taken off a bus, beaten, and kept from attending his trial, which produced a sentence of four years and three months. On appeal a higher court did something that virtually never happens in China—it sent the case back for rehearing. But the local court reaffirmed
the original sentence, which Chen is currently serving under harsh conditions.

_How do cases like this happen in the up-to-date China of Hu Jintao?_ As James Mann pointed out in _The China Fantasy_, many American politicians and businessmen claim to believe that China’s leaders are forging ahead against cultural and social obstacles to establish the rule of law and democracy. Yet here was a case that must have been well known to Hu Jintao and “Grandpa” Wen Jiabao (as the premier identified himself to children during the recent earthquake relief efforts), a case so troubling that even a Chinese court intervened, a case that Hu and Wen could have corrected if they had wanted to.

Instead, the official who presided over the railroad of Chen Guangcheng was promoted. This official, named Li Qun, is a typical product of modern China’s ladder of success, the Chinese Youth League system that produced Hu Jintao. Like many in today’s technocratic leadership, Li Qun is broadly experienced and lavishly credentialed. He studied physics at Shandong University, worked in the Chinese Youth League, served as mayor in a smaller Shandong city, took an executive training course in economics at the Shandong Party School, led a group of Shandong cadres to take a special M.P.A. course at New Haven University in Connecticut, and enrolled in an in-service Ph.D. course in “management engineering” at Northwest Industrial University in Xi’an, the capital of Shaanxi province.

At the time of Chen Guangcheng’s persecution, Li Qun was Party secretary of Linyi. In China the local Party secretary runs everything—the police, courts, media, the people’s congress (a rubber-stamp representative body), the population-planning bureaucracy, the agriculture bureau, industry, commerce, and so on. Li Qun’s joint appointments (besides his Party role) were as mayor, head of the people’s congress, and head of the local Party school; he also chaired or assigned his deputies to chair coordinating committees that exist in every Chinese territorial unit on legal and political affairs, family planning, propaganda, and other key sectors.

This universal Chinese set-up—some scholars call it “de facto federalism”—has produced both China’s remarkable economic surge and its environmental disasters and rights abuses. The regime gives local officials full powers, and holds them accountable to achieve a short list of priority tasks. The key benchmarks are high economic growth, close conformity with mandated annual birth rates, and low levels of what the regime calls social disorder, such as demonstrations and episodes of collective petitioning. Having too many local citizens visit Beijing to petition national authorities counts as a black mark. To keep their records clean, according to a 2005 Human Rights Watch report, local officials send “retrievers” to Beijing forcibly to repatriate their local citizens who have gone there to petition. These well-dressed young men wait across the street from the petition offices with their car doors open, waiting to kidnap local citizens and bundle them home, often for terms of forced labor. This was what happened to Chen when he petitioned for Linyi women in Beijing.

Chen Guangcheng’s activities threatened to weaken Li Qun’s record on two counts essential for Li’s promotion: family planning and social disorder. When Chen didn’t get the message from harassment and beatings, Li Qun either did—or like King Richard caused to be done—what needed to be done, and had Chen convicted. Apparently the Party’s secretive internal personnel department, the Organization Department, approved: in 2007 Li Qun was promoted to the post of head of Propaganda Department of Shandong provincial party committee.

_Another successful Youth League alumnus was in charge of Tibet during the recent disturbances. Before going to Tibet, Zhang Qingli—coincidentally a Shandong native like Li Qun—held county- and city-level posts in his home province, did a stint in the central CYL office in Beijing, and served in provincial-level posts in Gansu and Xinjiang, in China’s far west. Like Li, Zhang garnered a variety of academic credentials along the way and worked some of the time in propaganda. In late 2005, he was posted as Party secretary to Tibet.

There Zhang pushed the third round of a multi-year “patriotic education campaign” under way since 1996, which requires Tibetan monks and nuns to thank the motherland (meaning China) for the gift of modernization and to denounce the Dalai Lama for “splittism.” Mickey Spiegel explains in her essay in the collection _China’s Great Leap: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression_ that during such campaigns Party officials take over the monasteries, deciding who is promoted, what is published, and how daily rites are conducted. This time the Party tightened control even further by publishing a formal decree in July 2007 proclaiming that no incarnation of any lama would be valid in the future without government approval. This extended an existing practice. In 1995, the Party had named a Panchen Lama in violation of Tibetan religious procedures, taking custody of the incumbent recognized by most Tibetans and disappearing him from the public scene. And it had claimed the right to the final say in recognizing the future incarnation of the Dalai Lama. These are among the two highest lamas in Tibetan Buddhism. The “Measures on the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas,” promulgated in 2007, extended this principle to the entire range of Tibetan religious leaders at even the lowest level.

During the patriotic education campaign, Zhang Qingli is said to have remarked that “the [Party] Central Committee is the real Buddha for Tibetans.” Such statements do not register as insulting among most Han Chinese, because they reflect the social Darwinist conviction that religions are superstitions and minority cultures are backward. Such faiths and cultures are expected naturally to dissolve as their adherents experience modernization.

Among Tibetans, on the other hand, the campaign against their religion generated dissatisfaction even more intense than that created by Han-dominated, environmentally insensitive economic development. For this reason—and to take advantage of the international attention generated by the upcoming Olympics—young monks carried out peaceful demonstrations in Lhasa starting on March 10, which was the anniversary of the uprising against Chinese occupation in 1959. When the demonstrations spread and turned violent, Zhang Qingli rushed home from a meeting in Beijing to convene a Party and government conference on restoring order. He told those assembled that “the Dalai Lama [Chinese officials don’t grant their enemies the honorific ‘lama’] is a wolf in a monk’s robe, a monster with a human face but the heart of a beast; we are in a fierce battle of blood and fire with the Dalai clique, a life and death battle between us and the enemy.” There followed a violent crackdown revealing, among other things, the failure of the designated civil order force, the People’s Armed Police, to master the crowd-control techniques they were supposed to have.
been studying since the Tiananmen tragedy nearly two decades ago.

There is no reason to think that Zhang's career will suffer for exacerbating the split between Han and Tibetans. After all, China's top ruler, Hu Jintao, was promoted to the status of heir apparent in 1992 partly on the strength of his having declared martial law in Lhasa in 1989. The government publicly rewards leaders who show toughness because it wants to make sure people understand that it is determined to keep control.

In some political systems, Li Qun’s promotion to the post of provincial propaganda chief might count as being kicked upstairs. Not in China: propaganda is one of the most important domains in the Chinese party-state.

It is thanks to the success of China’s propaganda work that public assent is procured not only by repression, and runs both wide and deep. As Anne-Marie Brady demonstrates in a superb study of this central and hidden part of the Chinese system, the surface diversity of the Chinese media hides the guiding hand of a high-level Party office in Beijing called the Central Propaganda Department, which works its will across the whole spectrum of activities in media, education, entertainment—and also in sports. Deliciously, Brady reveals that the department is funded partly by a 3 percent tax on enterprises ranging from bookstores to karaoke bars, golf courses, and bowling alleys, because all these units fall within its orbit of control; and it uses these funds partly to support Party and army publications, rural bookstores, literature prizes, and social science research. She does not say whether the Beijing Olympic Committee is also paying this tax, but it may well be doing so, since sports are under the partial control of the propaganda system.

Brady reveals that China’s central propagandists have studied the theories of “manufacturing consent” by Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays, and have learned from media critics such as Noam Chomsky, and—although she does not make quite this ultimate ironic point—emulate such Western visionaries of popular journalism as Rupert Murdoch. They know how consent and contention within a permitted range of subjects render invisible the subjects forbidden by the regime and placed outside the perimeter; how naming and framing place inconvenient facts in a desired light. The department intervenes at all levels of the media hierarchy through a system of news guidance, post-publication review, and reward and punishment. Its most effective tool is a traditional Chinese invention rather than a Western import: a “you know what we mean” style of regulation that allows experimentation, tolerates ambiguity, and then punishes retroactively and arbitrarily.

The efflorescence of creativity that foreign visitors will see in Beijing in August is not a challenge to Party control. It enables that control. The lively art and music scenes, colorful newsstands, crowded bookstores, stylish clothing, experimental dance, innovative architecture, sexy advertising, rampant consumerism, luxurious housing, ebullient schlock, even the considerable scope for academic inquiry: this lightly patrolled free zone is not the antithesis but the twin of the permanent crackdown on the political frontier, where the few who insist on testing the regime are crowded to the cultural margin and generally ignored. In this sense the energetic new Chinese art that has caught the imagination of Western buyers, with its pictorial irony and cynicism, repudiation of history, detachment from the world, and love of stunts, is not the challenge to those in power it is sometimes construed to be. Rather, it is a secret joke that the regime shares with the artists and their audience—part of a new social contract that allows the children to have their sly fun so long as the grown-ups run the house.

Brady argues that the end result of this sophisticated cultural programming differs little from the mass media in the West, where just as in China nothing important is discussed. Like American TV viewers and tabloid readers transfixed by the photo shoot of the teenage star Miley Cyrus and the debate over whether to lift the federal gas tax for the summer driving season, Chinese readers feel they are living in an environment of freedom. The difference is that even those motivated to do so have no way to break into the monopoly circle that decides on the fundamental issues that confront their society.

III.

The Beijing Olympics have never been anything but a conscious part of this strategy—what Brady nicely calls a campaign of mass distraction. Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China is a grudgingly admiring analysis by communications specialists in the West of the Beijing organizers’ strategies for “seizing the platform,” shaping the space, and “controlling the narrative.” A central theme is...
that the Olympics redefine citizenship—both Chinese and foreign—as consumership, abetting the depoliticization of public life that lies at the heart of China’s post-Mao propaganda strategy.

Indeed, the Beijing Olympics mark the full mastery of marketing techniques by Chinese bureaucrats. According to Xu Guoqi, “The Beijing organizing committee hopes that through merchandising, sponsorships, and other commercial applications, China’s logo will by and large pay for the Games.” (This hope may have failed, given the escalating costs noted by domestic critics.) Authorized vendors have sold zillions of dolls, keychains, T-shirts, Swatch watches, papercuts, and telephones representing the five Olympic mascots—the saccharine, symbolically laden, and cutely named fuwa. The official game logo, a running stick figure against a red background, has been crammed with meanings: the running man is both winning a race and throwing his arms out in welcome; the shape of his body resembles the Chinese character for jing in Beijing; and the red background evokes a traditional Chinese chop by which people used to sign their names on documents and precious art works.

To be sure, the Olympics so far have not entirely worked out the way the planners intended. Beijing’s bid in 1993 for the 2000 games was defeated at least partly on human rights grounds (although Frank Ching implies in China’s Great Leap that bribery from the winning city of Sydney had more to do with it). It is not clear whether Beijing made explicit human rights commitments in its second bid. Sharon K. Hom notes, in China’s Great Leap, that despite numerous requests, the host city contract has never been made public. Brady says foreign p.r. consultants advised Chinese officials to mention human rights in the bid document, and Brownell reveals that they debated at the very high vice-premier level whether to do so, deciding in the end to keep such mentions informal. This may explain a remark—often cited by critics—made around that time by Liu Jingmin, vice president of the Beijing Olympic Bid Committee, who said that allowing Beijing to host the Games would “help the development of human rights.” Whether or not human rights were explicitly included, Beijing certainly made pledges that it would not fulfill. China’s Great Leap documents non-compliance with all four elements of the published 2002 Beijing Olympic Action Plan: Green Olympics, High-Tech Olympics, Free and Open Olympics, and People’s Olympics. Even the logo has evoked ironic caricatures, including one in which the red running man is the bloody silhouette of a firing-squad victim.

The campaigns to embarrass China over the 2008 Olympics have been as long in the works as the Games themselves. From the moment the Games were awarded to Beijing in July 2001, human rights advocates, instead of calling for a boycott, began planning to use the event to ramp up pressure on the Chinese government. Human Rights Watch and Human Rights in China set up special websites tracking the Beijing organizing committee’s failure to make good its commitments. (I am on the Asia advisory committee of the former and am board co-chair of the latter.) The Committee to Protect Journalists issued a series of reports on violations of press freedom. Amnesty International’s “Olympics Countdown” series has tracked violations over the two-year period leading to the games. Chinese Human Rights Defenders has issued an “Olympic Watch” series of press releases. The Save Darfur campaign and an offshoot, Olympic Dream for Darfur, pressed China to address the Darfur problem via the link between Beijing and Khartoum. Advocacy groups recently demonstrated along the route of the Olympic torch, clashing with blue-and-white-suited Chinese escorts who were drawn from the student body of the People’s Armed Police academy.

All this is also propaganda, of course—human rights groups prefer the term “advocacy”; but precisely for that reason it is a mystery why the Chinese leaders and the IOC ever thought they could get away with throwing a party to celebrate China’s accomplishments at which no one would mention China’s shortcomings. Why did China put its face out to be slapped? And why did the IOC abet them in doing so? Evidently both parties were blinded by the charm of their own blarney, the line that sports is only sports.

But in the end this miscalculation has not mattered much. In the Chinese leaders’ accurate real-politik analysis, they had already stared down Western human rights pressure after Tiananmen, defeated Bill Clinton’s “human rights conditionality” in 1994, rolled back post-Tiananmen sanctions, forged alliances with other rights-violating states to pull out the teeth of the United Nations Human Rights Council, and pushed Western criticism into the confidential government-to-government “human rights dialogue” and “private diplomacy” channels where there is no fear of real action. The West’s economic interdependence with China has become so intense that an Olympic boycott—or indeed any effective sanction against China—has become unthinkable.

At home, if the government cannot have Western approval, it can make stone soup out of disapproval by playing the criticisms as an attack on the pride of the nation. This official attitude was well expressed in a book that Chen Guangcheng’s persecutor, Li Qun, published in 2004, well before the Olympic controversies had reached high pitch. During his studies at New Haven University in 2000, Li Qun did an internship in the office of Mayor John DeStefano Jr., and after his return he published a book unforgottably titled I Was a Mayor’s Assistant in America. He described his studies in America as a “political test” that confirmed his confidence in the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics. “Most Americans,” Li wrote, “are friendly to China, although they do not understand it very well. But a small group of politicians strike the banners of democracy and human rights to critique us constantly by their own standards, distort things, and interfere with our domestic affairs. Their real purpose is not to protect the so-called human rights but to use this pretext to influence and limit China’s healthy economic growth and to prevent China’s wealth and power from threatening their world hegemony.”

There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of Li’s sentiments, clichéd though they are, or the degree to which they represent the views of many Chinese
inside China and out. Coming to the United States and seeing how things work here does not necessarily shake the faith of Chinese officials, or students, in their country’s way of doing things. Quite remarkably, and in general for the better, tens of thousands of Chinese students have returned home from the West to play their willing roles in academia, the media, business, and other sectors, accepting subordination to the ruling party and its national project.

Thus it is not only China’s growing military and economic power that renders it less and less vulnerable to human rights advocacy, which depends on international reputational costs. Perhaps even more importantly, the government is protected by its success in shaping its own public’s reaction to the criticism. Indeed, the regime faces more risk in yielding to Western criticism than in being subjected to it. The audiences that matter are not in the United States and Europe, but in China and the Third World. Even the main Olympic sponsors—GE, Coca-Cola, Kodak, McDonald’s, Visa, and seven other American and foreign companies, who are front and center in the eyes of international consumers—have decided to hunker down and absorb whatever hits cannot be avoided in order to protect their enormous long-range stakes in China. This is an almost unimaginably large market, and a market that remembers. Name and shame works with countries dependent on the West, but China is no longer such a country.

Xu Guoqi raises the possibility that the Olympics will lead to the transformation of the Chinese regime the way the Seoul Games in 1988 brought on Korean democratization. True, the regime this year has suffered a series of what some Chinese see as cosmological portents—a crippling snowstorm, Tibetan unrest, and the huge Sichuan earthquake. The leaders certainly react to any such challenge, and much smaller ones, as if their rule is fragile. Yet sophisticated crisis management and canny media spin have earned the government broad public support each time. Even if an unexpected event occurs in August—something security agencies have been gearing up to prevent—the likely consequence will be to strengthen the regime’s already robust grip on power. Assertive and unapologetic, the new and future China now struts the stage. Its character dovetails with what is reported to be the forceful personality of the designated future leader, Xi Jinping, currently the vice president, who is slated to succeed Hu Jintao in 2012.

This is modern China. It is not what we imagined it would be when Richard Nixon wrote forty years ago that we should not leave China “forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates, and threaten its neighbors,” and started us down the path of engagement. When we wondered all these years whether China would modernize or not, Westernize or not, become civilized or not, we were asking the wrong questions, making the wrong distinctions. What we got instead is a China that is both proud and resentful, open and closed, like us yet not at all like us. We used our three wishes and now we must live with what we got. The one-time sick man of Asia is in exuberant health—that is the intended message of the Beijing Olympics, and the unintended one.

Alan Wolfe

HEDONIC MAN
The new economics and the pursuit of happiness.

HAPPINESS:
A REVOLUTION IN ECONOMICS
(MUNICH LECTURES IN ECONOMICS)
By Bruno S. Frey
(MIT Press, 240 pp., $35)
PREDICTABLY IRRATIONAL:
THE HIDDEN FORCES THAT SHAPE OUR DECISIONS
by Dan Ariely
(HarperCollins, 280 pp., $25.95)

WHEN I FIRST began hearing about what Bruno S. Frey, professor of economics at the University of Zurich, calls the “revolution” in his discipline, my reaction was one of delight. As far as I was concerned, it could not happen fast enough. Neoclassical economists had insisted upon the primacy of self-interest only in order to model human behavior, but the way rational choice theory developed (at the University of Chicago in particular) suggested that self-interest was not just a fact for these thinkers, but also an ideal: not just how people do act but also how they should act. Their relentless advocacy of market-based public policies was finally ideological—and, by my lights, ideologically wrong. Also the jargon grew impenetrable, and the mathematics ostentatious and obnoxious. When Chicago-style economists started to apply their methods to other social science disciplines, and then to virtually all the perplexities of human life, the charge of academic imperialism could be added. Friedrich August von Hayek and Milton Friedman had always seemed to me to be marginal and somewhat bizarre thinkers, especially when compared to such intellectual titans as John Maynard Keynes and Joseph Schumpeter. The rapid spread of their ideas throughout so much of academia did not bode well for the future.

And so I was heartened by the first sustained attacks on neoclassical economics. For one thing, the thinkers who launched them—Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky—seemed to be geniuses of some sort. Both had good reason to become fascinated with how human beings make decisions. Kahneman was born in Tel Aviv in 1934 and raised in Paris; his family decided to remain in France after the Nazis took over the country, and then to rely on business connections to spring his father from the death camps, and then to move to Palestine before the creation of the state of Israel. Tversky, born in Haifa in 1937, earned, at the age of nineteen, Israel’s highest military decoration, for rescuing a fellow soldier from an exploding device, in the process injuring himself. These men grew up under conditions that might have led them to divide the world into black and white, good and evil, but this did not happen. Instead they developed an appreciation of human complexity, even a love for it. “Some people were better than others,” Kahneman described what he learned from his parents, “but the best were far from perfect and no one was simply bad.”

The collaboration of Kahneman and Tversky produced one of the major intellectual accomplishments of the late twentieth century: a series of ingeniously designed experiments that raised uncomfortable questions about “utility maximization,” which was the major assumption of microeconomics. To wit: it makes no difference in theory whether you lose a ticket to a play or lose the $10 that the ticket cost, but when people lose the ticket they are far less likely to buy another one than when they lose the money. Kahneman and Tversky’s explanation is