

Much of this new thinking by the authorities on labor issues has been driven by the unavoidable reality of rising worker consciousness and labor militancy in China—a factor that threatens to derail the government’s “harmonious society” project and therefore compels it to start making concessions to workers’ demands. Ms. Harney’s gripping and well-researched account provides the essential background to under-

standing this crucial new dynamic in Chinese labor relations today.

#### Note

1. Silicosis—the inflammation and scarring of the lungs—is caused by inhalation of crystalline silica dust.

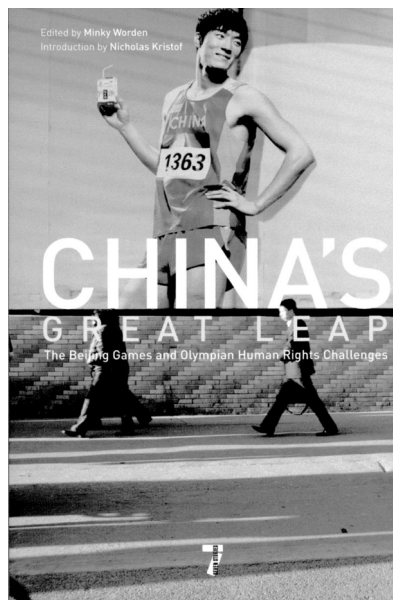
## Table Talk about the Olympics and Human Rights

BY JEFFREY N. WASSERSTROM

The “Acknowledgements” section of *China’s Great Leap* comes at the end of the book rather than the beginning, but I read it first and am glad I did. Why? Because in it Minky Worden uses a lovely simile to describe the role she played in pulling together this thought-provoking volume. “Producing an anthology,” she writes, “is like planning a dinner party—you imagine the people you’d most like to have around a dinner table, and how their expertise and life experiences will combine to make the most interesting and engaging discussion possible.”

This dinner party image stayed with me while I read her wide-ranging book, which covers everything from the plight of members of the “invisible army” of migrants who built stunning venues such as the Bird’s Nest Stadium (the subject of Mei Fong’s powerful chapter and a poignant photo essay by Dutch photographer Kadir van Lohuizen), to limits on press freedom (the focus of Phelim Kine’s “A Gold Medal in Media Censorship”). I kept musing on how interesting it would have been to be a dinner guest at an actual pre-Olympics gathering with the international group that Worden assembled, with its mixture of expected and unexpected participants in a discussion of Chinese human rights. For, thankfully, Worden took her self-imposed charge of trying to line up “guests” with varied “life experiences” and forms of “expertise” very seriously. Thus we

***China’s Great Leap: The Beijing Games and Olympian Human Rights Challenges***  
 Edited by Minky Worden  
 Seven Stories Press  
 May 2008  
 336 pages, \$18.95



get to hear from both a sometime contributor to *Sports Illustrated* (Dave Zirin) and an internationally-renowned expert on the Chinese legal system and law professor at New York University (Jerome A. Cohen), from a former child laborer in a garment factory who struck it rich in Hong Kong’s clothing and media worlds (Jimmy Lai), as well as from an iconoclastic literary critic and wonderfully articulate political gadfly who heads the independent Chinese PEN Center in Beijing (Liu Xiaobo).

It is pure fantasy, of course, to think that such a dinner party could have taken place. There are, after all, some very busy people represented in this volume, such as journalist Nicholas Kristof (who wrote the “Introduction”), Hong Kong democracy activist Martin Lee (who gives us a lively survey of post-1997 trends in the former Crown Colony), Human Rights Watch

Executive Director Kenneth Roth (who weighs in with “A Dual Approach to Rights Reform”), and former law professor turned Human Rights in China Executive Director Sharon K. Hom (represented here by “The Promise of a ‘People’s Olympics’”).

In addition, there’s nowhere on earth that everyone who wrote for the volume would be able to convene. At least one contributor, Bao Tong, a former confidant of Zhao Ziyang who is now an outspoken critic of the

Party, can't leave China. And at least one other contributor, the U.S.-based one-time Tiananmen protest leader Wang Dan, can't enter the PRC.

The book that resulted from Worden's dream dinner party is admirable in many ways, but not without its flaws. Let's begin with issues of style. The volume contains a few fresh and memorable turns of phrase, such as Bao Tong's reference to the Chinese Communist Party growing "addicted to tactical cosmetic patches, such as hosting the Olympics," in order to distract attention from its "social justice" failures. And some of the chapters are written in a very lively and engaging manner, such as Emily Parker's look at sports and nationalism in recent PRC history. Nevertheless, the book suffers from some repetitiveness, both in terms of rhetoric (too many uses of stock phrases such as the Olympics as a "coming out" moment for China) and subject matter.

Another shortcoming or pair of shortcomings has to do with historical and comparative context. Too often, authors seem hesitant to look any further in Chinese history than the Cultural Revolution. And too often they seem to take for granted that it is enough to bring in one, or at most two, foreign examples when thinking through a Chinese dilemma. Here the most obvious illustration is that past Olympics other than those that took place in Berlin in 1936 (held up as a cause for despair) and Seoul in 1988 (held up as a cause for hope) are rarely discussed. (It is true, though, that Zirin's chapter breaks from the mold in a refreshing manner, highlighting the relevance of thinking about the repressive and politicized aspects of Games that have taken place or will take place in countries that are neither Fascist, run by a Communist Party, nor located in Asia.)

Readers with little previous familiarity with China would have benefited from being told just a bit more

about a few historical and comparative matters. The book could have been improved by discussing more of the complex ways that ideas about rights (including the "now-you-see-it-now-you-don't" issue of gender equal-



**Petitioners hold letters of complaint in the "Petitioners' Village," which housed up to 4,000 petitioners in Beijing. It was torn down in the fall of 2007. Photo credit: 2007 Kadir van Lohuizen/NOOR.**

ity) figured in the revolutionary upsurges of the 1910s–1940s and the first years of the People's Republic. And, for comparison, by hearing more about how concepts of human rights have been understood differently in varied settings. More specifically, it is important to mention—even if ultimately to debunk—the fact that Chinese officials have sometimes claimed that "Asian Val-

ues" or socialist traditions justify an interpretation of UN documents, such as 1948's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, that differs from that which is the norm in the United States.

It may be churlish when dealing with a volume that covers so much to say that it could have done still more. Nevertheless, the kind of added historical and comparative context I have in mind could have been dealt with simply. All it would have taken is the working in of a chapter by someone like Marina Svensson or Merle Goldman, to name just two scholars who have done academic research on China's past and shown an ability to write accessibly and forcefully about the Party's discourse on, and abuse of, human rights.

Last of all, there is what seems at first to be a flaw in the book, but perhaps need not be thought of as one in the end: how quickly it has already begun to seem dated. The problem here is not just that the chapters were written with the Olympics still on the horizon, and now they have come and gone, but also that the chapters were written before the torch run protests, the May earthquake, and other notable early-to-mid 2008 events had occurred. Reading the volume post 08/08/08, I found myself wishing, with even the best chapters in the volume, that they came with epilogues that con-

tained reflections on how the Olympics had defied or confirmed the author's expectations, and whether other headline-grabbing Chinese developments made them rethink any of their conclusions.

In one sense, then, *China's Great Leap* now needs to be read not as something that prepares us for a coming event but as a kind of period piece. It offers us a valuable window onto how the PRC was, and how it was being thought about and discussed, before a series of major developments took place.

But there's also a more forward-looking way to view it. This is a work that makes for stimulating reading for anyone trying to get a head start on thinking about the twentieth anniversary of the Tiananmen protests and

the June Fourth Massacre that crushed them. *China's Great Leap* may focus on the Olympics, but one of its appealing features is that it offers us a good sense of what some of the most inspiring and thoughtful participants in 1989's drama—not just Wang Dan and Bao Tong, but also Liu Xiaobo (who co-wrote the moving June 2nd hunger strike manifesto that remains perhaps the most powerful and insightful document produced during the movement) and the courageous labor activist Han Dongfang—now think about important issues. So, *China's Great Leap* may be just as interesting to read with the upcoming 2009 anniversaries in mind (that year will also see the Communist Party marking the passage of 60 years since the PRC was founded) as it was to pick up when China's Olympic moment was on the horizon.