

AdvertisingAge®

China: West Is Overreacting

Others May Mention the Summer Games and Tibetan Protests in the Same Breath, but Many Chinese Don't Make the Connection

By [Normandy Madden](#)

Published: March 31, 2008

BEIJING (AdAge.com) -- Public sentiment against the crisis in Darfur and Tibet may be escalating in the U.S., but in Olympics-crazed China, protests against the country's support for Sudan or treatment of Tibet are viewed -- when they can be seen at all -- with surprise, frustration and even anger, but little sympathy.



Photo: Thanassis Stavrakis

little desire to use the spotlight on the country as host of the 2008 Olympic Games as a platform to voice political and human-rights concerns.

"Personally, I think the West is overreacting," said Viveca Chan, chairman-CEO of WE Worldwide Partners, an independent Chinese ad agency. "The Olympics are a sports event and should not be linked with different political points of view."

Her opinion is common in China, where many people are aware of what's happening outside their borders as well as in Tibet, but show

Darfur "doesn't come up at all, nor do any other political issues" in the latest round of research by Beijing-based consulting firm R3 and TNS Group's CSM Media Research division in China, said R3 principal Greg

Paull. The pollsters do thousands of in-person interviews in ten Chinese cities every three months to gauge the brand awareness and performance of major sponsors.

"We have seen a lot of discussion about [Steven] Spielberg's withdrawal from the games on bulletin board sites in China, but many people here think Spielberg made the wrong decision," Mr. Paull said. "There is tremendous national pride in this event and unprecedented interest; it's much more important than just as a sporting event, it's a cultural event too."

Green games

Olympic sponsors are being lobbied outside China to bring up human rights issues with the Chinese government. In China, that pressure is absent. Marketers like Coca-Cola, Samsung and PC-maker Lenovo, for instance, are known for sponsoring the Olympic torch relay, with hundreds of Chinese chosen in contests to be torchbearers and escort runners. In Beijing, GE is giving the games a green tint with wind and gas turbines, solar-powered lighting and water purification systems.

"There is increasing interest in what sponsors are doing, which I also put down to the Olympic torch relay. We haven't reached sponsor-fatigue yet," said Mr. Paull.

The Chinese "just don't associate the Olympics with political causes," said Scott Kronick, president of Ogilvy PR in China, who advises Olympic sponsors like Adidas, UPS, VW and Johnson & Johnson. He is also advising the Chinese government, which is eager to maintain stability during the games without looking like draconian thugs. "The government is expecting some [protests] by foreigners and it has already asked us questions about how to deal with that situation, if it happens," he said. "We told them how they deal with protests during the games is the most important thing in the world, because the world will be watching."

Chinese apathy can be explained partly by censorship. Western news, even online, is severely restricted, and news channels such as CNN are limited to hotels and gated compounds housing multinational executives.

Edited out

Local media portrayed the deadly anti-government riots in Tibet as unprovoked attacks on Chinese police by unruly protesters. And the March 24 torch-relay protest in Athens, deeply embarrassing to China, was edited out of local coverage.

The internet and increasing travel outside the country make it harder to isolate citizens from Western news coverage. But pervasive propaganda from local news outlets feeds a patriotic population. China's strong sense of national pride is often underestimated in the West.

China's rapid economic development over the past 20 years -- after periods of famine and poverty -- has transformed the country, catapulting millions of Chinese into white-collar jobs with middle-class status and aspirations in just one generation. Today a young worker in Shanghai or Chengdu owns or plans to buy a car at the same age his parents dreamed of owning a bicycle.

Chinese aren't pressuring their government or Olympic sponsors, but that doesn't mean they don't have some concerns related to the games. Their hot-button issues: pollution, corruption and inflation. Prices are soaring in Beijing, and most city offices and factories will shut down for three weeks to limit cars on the congested roads to control traffic and pollution.