ICWA
LETTERS

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

AJB-7
EAST ASIA

Alex Brenner is a Fellow of the Instiute examining how the Chinese are adapting to economic and cultural globalization.

From Chaos to Kosmo: Globalization and the Search for "Scientific" Standards

JANUARY 30, 2005

By Alexander J. Brenner

BEIJING–Several months ago I was on-line at the local supermarket with my groceries, which happened to include several large bottles of spring water. The middle-aged woman behind me had also just heaved a few bottles of water onto the counter, but of a different brand. I clearly observed the following chain of events: she looked at my bottles, looked at her bottles, looked back at my bottles—then gathered hers up and disappeared, returning 20 seconds later with several bottles of the brand I was buying.

I of course had no idea what brand of water I had selected.

In my last report I described how Chinese sell each other all manner of goods by passing their sales pitches through the mouths of foreigners. Here in China, white skin serves as a marker of expertise, a kind of permanent lab coat. My check-out-line experience suggests the power of the "white people just know better" advertising strategy. This reverence for foreign know-how goes so far as to blur the boundaries between fictionalized advertisements and the real world. I know of a local architecture firm here in Beijing that hired a Canadian graduate student (researching an entirely unrelated field) simply to attend client meetings and appear at their office on key days when clients were visiting. Every once in a while he was asked to rehearse a few basic lines to deliver in a meeting, but his job otherwise consisted of shutting up and looking white.

Of course, it doesn't really matter if anything comes out of foreigners' mouths because Chinese continue to tell themselves stories about what white people represent, stories that fit into the broader narrative Chinese tell themselves about their modern history. As discussed in the last report, at this narrative's center are a hundred years of "humiliation" at the hands of foreigners characterized by dual expert/imperialist identities. This narrative emphasizes how the advanced foreign powers trampled on a weak, feudalistic China for a century after the Opium War of the early 1840s; how Mao and the Communists "liberated" the country in 1949 and enabled the country to "stand up;" and how the New China has been catching up with the West ever since, particularly with the launching of the Reform and Open era a quarter century ago.

Chinese are the first to insist that even if the country is gaining on the West, it has a long way to go. Despite the fact that foreigners are still viewed with suspicion, they have been welcomed back to assist in this difficult catch-up process. These "experts" on the ground—be they managers at multinational corporations, legal scholars or English teachers—are seen as representatives of the advanced West, and as conduits for the theory and practice China needs to modernize its economy and society. China looks to foreigners to help it improve everything from

its stock market to its judicial system to its national soccer team—in short, to help China catch up to Western standards. This report offers some extended thoughts on the link between globalization and this obsession with Western standards.

* * *

You can't make it very far into your day here without being reminded of the Chinese fixation on the idea of the standard. On your breakfast table, your milk carton, your yogurt bottle and other packaging all inform you that their contents adhere to ISO 9000 standards, a classification issued by a Geneva-based quality-control organization. As you go over the newspaper headlines you find stories on the status of China's plan to create "world-class" (*shijie yiliu*) universities that will achieve Western standards for higher education, as well as on the controlled opening of the Chinese stock market to foreign institutional investors, who, it is hoped, will make decisions backed by research and help raise standards for domestic investors.

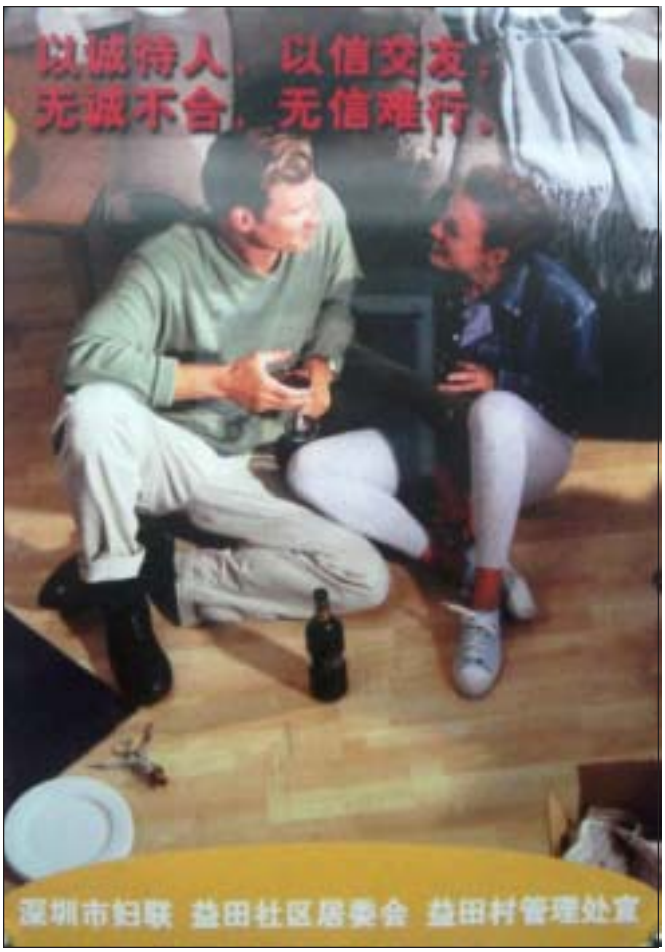
You get in the elevator and you find a community public service announcement showing an attractive Western couple, advising you to "Treat Others With Honesty, Build Friendship Upon Trust"—in other words, behave according to Western standards of decency. You jump in a taxi, and after you commiserate with the driver about inhaling the horrible pollution he explains hopefully that the situation should improve next summer, when new cars will be forced to meet European Union category-III emissions standards.

You've been up for an hour, and if you are awake enough to notice, you have already been reminded of the following: that the Chinese food supply is perceived as sufficiently suspect that an indication of quality control from a Western organization becomes a ubiquitous selling point; that China looks to the West to improve its sub-par higher education system and sub-par stock market regulation; that Chinese are less civil in their dealings with each other than Westerners are; that Chinese are employing Western benchmarks in their attempt to clean the foul air in their cities.

This is no one actual morning, but rather every morning: urban Chinese, at least, swim daily in a sea of comparisons to the West. Everywhere there are signs alluding to a parallel world of standards, existing like Platonic forms above the dank Chinese cave—signs either telling you or selling you the need to clamber up into the fresh air and true light of the Western sun.

In major Chinese urban areas the wish for clean air and sunlight is more than metaphorical—according to the World Bank, the country is home to 16 of the world's 20 most polluted cities. "*L'année de la France*" in China began early last October, with President Jacques Chirac arriving for a summit and kicking off a year of cultural events. The French Air Force acrobatics squadron, the *Patrouille de France*, was slated to perform outside Beijing for the occasion, but visibility was so low due to pollution that their first show was cancelled, with 50,000 spectators turned away; days earlier, 30,000 spectators hoping to see a practice run had gone home disappointed for the same reason. Clearer weather finally allowed a performance—but not before China had shown how far it has to go to meet developed-world air-quality standards.

The last several years have seen a huge surge in private-car ownership across China, particularly in major cities like Beijing. While this trend has slowed from its height, when 1,000 new cars hit Beijing's streets each day, China is and will remain the fastest-growing major market for automobiles in the world. It is thus amazing that air quality in Beijing has been steadily *improving* since the late nineties. These improvements have largely come from strategies like relocating industry farther from the



"Treat Others With Honesty, Build Friendship Upon Trust" *I saw this public-service announcement in an elevator at a Shenzhen apartment complex. I assume it is targeted at Chinese men in particular, as one of the sponsors is the Shenzhen municipal Womn's Federation. Indeed, we can see what a trustworthy friend the fellow is by the way he attentively keeps the wine bottle near at hand to refill the woman's glass, and how he has considerately maneuvered her into such a comfortable spot next to the sofa. The point of this poster, of course, is to imply that he has only the most gentlemanly of intentions. Memo to Chinese: be civilized like Westerners.*

urban area, phasing out leaded fuels, imposing fines for the use of high-sulfur coal, etc.—all intended to clean up the air in time for the Olympic Games in 2008.

But given how bad the air remains, how much can it possibly improve by 2008? With continuing increases projected in both motor vehicles and coal usage, the press has raised concerns that Beijing won't be ready to host the Olympic Games. Indeed, even on days with only moderately thick pollution, many of us find unappealing the prospect of running errands, let alone running a marathon.

Despite these concerns, most people I know think Beijing will manage to clean up in time. A large fleet of electric vehicles is already in the works for use during the Games, but more extreme measures may be required—drastic traffic reduction in weeks leading up to the event? The installation of huge fans to blow the pollution away, an idea proposed for Mexico City? In the end, however, the air will be breathable. It has to be: the 2008 Olympic Games are to be the shining moment Chinese have been waiting for, the biggest civilizational coming-out party the world has ever seen—in effect, a chance to showcase China's ability to meet international standards.

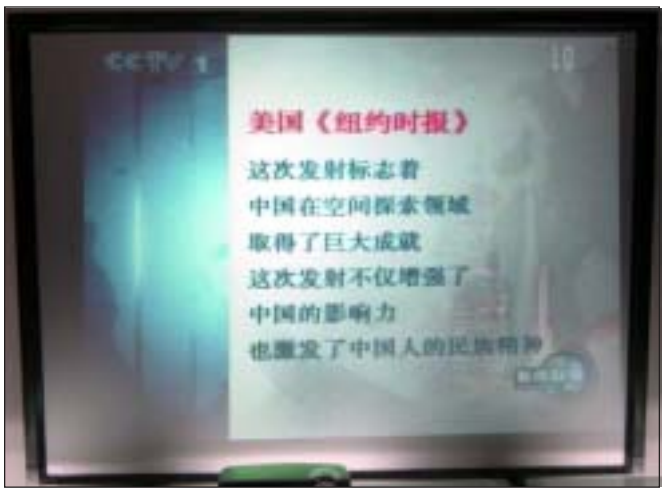
However, no matter how well organized the Games are or how well the Chinese athletes perform, it may be impossible to equal the mass jolt of euphoria delivered by the 2001 decision to award Beijing the event in the first place. Winning hosting rights, particularly after barely losing the competition for the 2000 games, was understood as overdue recognition of China's progress toward first-world status. While China's rapid development undoubtedly impressed international opinion and helped it get the Games, this line of argument escalates too easily into self-congratulatory excess. As the government news agency Xinhua editorialized, "The competition to host the Games is one featuring comprehensive national strength, economic potential, technological power and cultural charm." Actually, being awarded the Olympics hinges on having the basic infrastructure and organizational capacity to host a large-scale event, as well as the ability to negotiate an intensely political selection process. The feel-good claims in the editorial don't stand up: every country has its own cultural "charm;" Mexico is not a "technological power" today, much less in 1968; Greece hasn't impressed anyone with its "comprehensive national strength" for about 2,000 years, etc.

That such phrases are thrown about to explain China's successful Olympic bid hints at how international attention is magnified and reinterpreted in order to squeeze from it every last drop of confidence-boosting benefit. This same phenomenon was on display during China's first manned space launch in the fall of 2003, when television coverage included screens full of glowing quotes from the foreign press. It isn't enough to tell your audience (and yourself) "Wow, what a great accomplishment!" Even more persuasive is "Wow, America's *New York Times* says this is a great accomplishment!"

True, the government is ever-attempting to spin signs of approval from abroad into proof of its competence, and thus its legitimacy. The fact that the government spins foreign press, however, doesn't change a basic fact: most people instinctively latch onto positive international attention as a boost for China and the Chinese people as a whole. Even when speaking to people who are *critical* of the government, from elite students to taxi drivers, you still hear the same overly emotional arguments about why China is getting the Games.

When Beijing's selection was announced in the summer of 2001, American television-news coverage showed city residents gathered to celebrate. I distinctly recall a young man frantically screaming "China Number One, China Number One!" One plausible interpretation of what he was really screaming goes as follows: "Of course I know China's not Number One. Certainly, I am a patriotic person who loves his country, and I may even harbor certain beliefs about the superiority of Chinese culture. However, I am realistic about the large gap between China and the developed world in many areas. Thus, for the moment, what we really crave is respect, a feeling of being recognized in a positive manner—which is why I am so excited right now!" Underlying this intense response to international recognition is the inferiority complex discussed above. Each time the world, and the West in particular, acknowledges China's progress, another shovel of dirt may be tossed atop the country's memories of humiliation at foreign hands.

A telling phrase pops up everywhere from political



If the* New York Times *says we're good, it must be true: *This is a still from televised coverage of China's first manned space launch in October of 2003. It announces the origin of the quote: "America, New York Times" and gives the following translation: "This launch means that China has achieved a great success in the area of space exploration. The launch has not only increased China's influence, but has also aroused the Chinese national spirit."*

speeches to casual conversation: China needs to "walk towards the world" (*zou xiang shijie*). The words have become cliché: whenever you want to sound open-minded and cosmopolitan, just throw in a comment about "walking towards the world." As one of my Chinese friends noted to me, the expression carries a subtext of alienation—it establishes Chinese as exiles in a location somehow outside the rest of the world—and perhaps of pessimism as well. Chinese may be moving closer to the world without any guarantee of ever fully joining it. Whatever the insecurities buried inside the phrase, it points in a hopeful direction: to walk "towards the world" is to move closer to Western standards and away from China's problems.

Given such an outlook, you see why Chinese might look positively upon globalization, a process that brings increasing contact with first-world standards. And in fact, this line of thinking guided the Chinese leadership's decision to push for entry in the international body most-associated with globalization, the World Trade Organization (WTO). From the perspective of reformers like Zhu Rongji, China's Premier from 1998 until 2002 and a main architect of the country's WTO entry three years ago, international competition would assist China's transition from a planned to a market economy. This competition would result in more blood-letting for bloated and inefficient state-owned enterprises, but that was the point: the weak would be winnowed out, allowing for what Zhu called the "more rapid and more healthy development of China's national economy." As we'll see below, there is an expectation that globalization will expose China to standards that promote the "healthy development" not just of the economy, but of society as a whole.

* * *

In previous reports I have discussed how Chinese debates on globalization differ from the kind we're accustomed to in the West. While intellectuals can be critical of the economic and cultural influence of multinational corporations, your average person is much less likely to worry. Chinese understand that trade and foreign investment have been fueling the country's growth. Perhaps more basically, many remember life in a closed society and seem overwhelmingly glad to live in an era of openness. I don't know anyone who conceives of hamburgers or cappuccinos as direct threats to Chinese cuisine or tea culture.

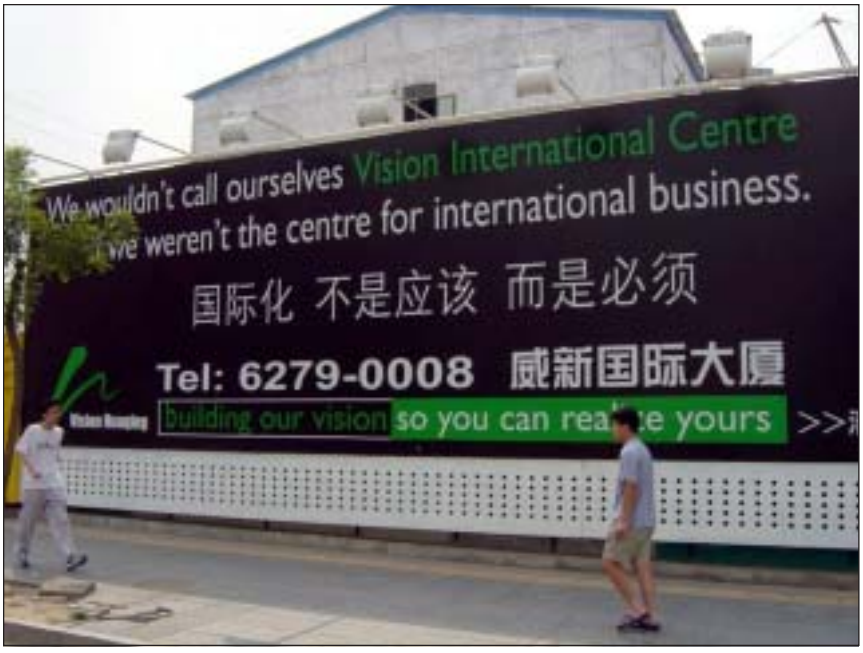
In AJB-2 I quoted an Ipsos poll that showed about two-thirds of urban Chinese believe the cultural influence of the United States to be positive, versus only 19 percent of Canadians and 15 percent of Germans. One other reason Americanization may seem less threatening in China is that it is occurring against the backdrop of rapid internal transformation. For example, if you take the longer view of China's transition to a market economy, the opening of restaurants offering all types of Chinese cuisine has far outstripped the spread of fast-food or Western food as a whole. Likewise, an expansion of tea houses has more than answered the proliferation of coffee shops.

On a recent flight a man sitting next to me swigged his cup of coffee, then asked the flight attendant for tea. I was intrigued and asked him jokingly if this one-two-punch approach might be some new trend in the Chinese bridging of the coffee-tea divide.

"No, this is just my personal taste," he responded.

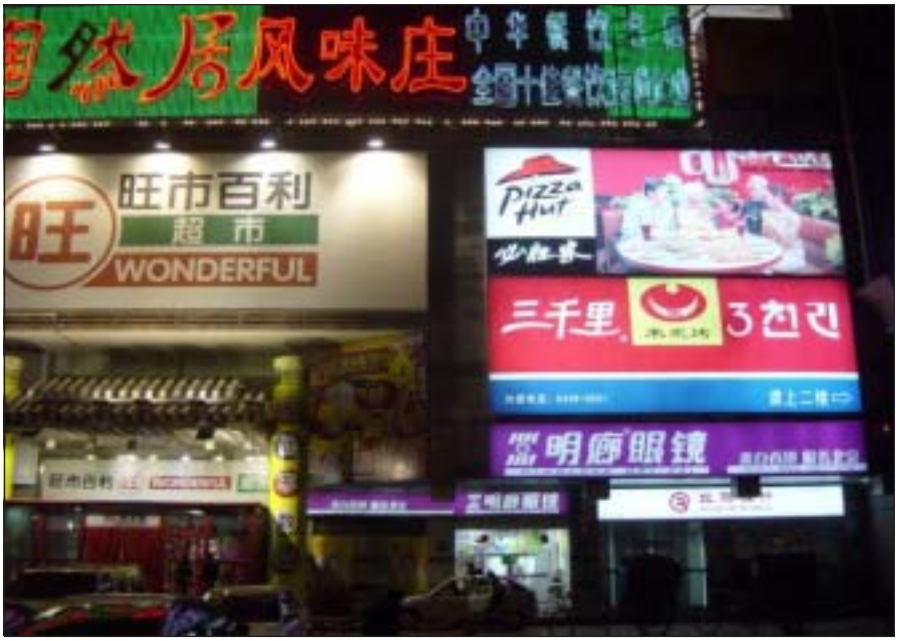
His personal taste, however, hints at the behavior of his countrymen. Globalization brings more choices from abroad, but the domestic growth it has helped stimulate also spreads more choices from within—and greater wealth is synonymous with a greater ability to take advantage of all of these possibilities. With Chinese downing more cups of everything, the effects of Westernization and Americanization are diluted within the broader boom.

That said, the growing Western economic and cultural presence in China possesses a disproportionate symbolic importance. The Western chains that have made their way here already stand as a bricks-and-mortar scale of the country's movement to-



The English on this billboard lets us know it is an ad for real estate. The Chinese, however, reads: "Internationalization. It's not something we should do, it's something we must do." The message: If you want to survive and prosper, you have to "walk towards the world"—and having the word "international" (guoji) *in the address on your business a card is a good place to start.*

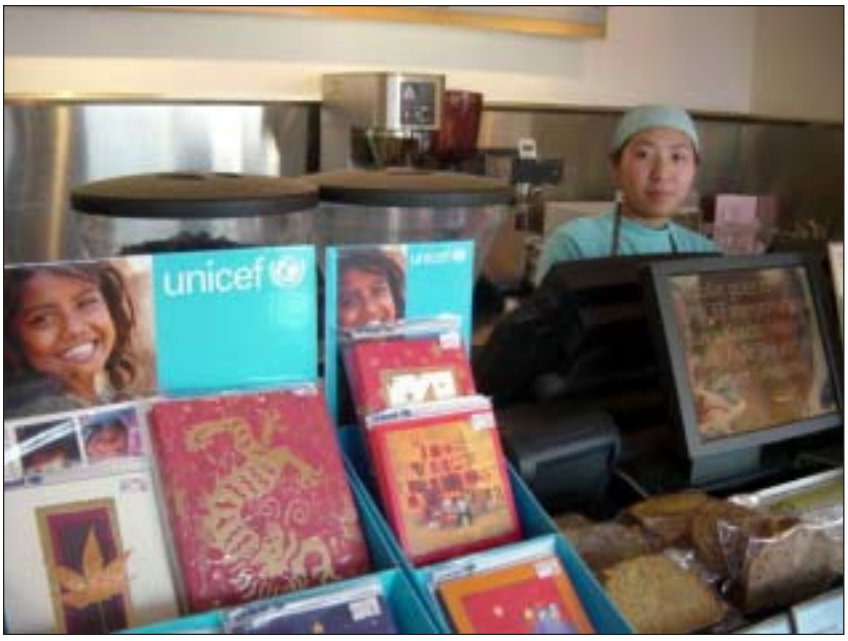
wards developed-world standards. Take the mainland's 100-plus Starbucks: almost all of them are clustered in China's most international cities, Beijing and Shanghai, with a few other branches in other wealthier cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen. However, as the company expands its presence tenfold in the next six years, a whole new wave of urban areas will soon be measuring out their progress in coffee cups: each new Starbucks opening is a bet on a demographic *nouveau* who can not only afford a three-dollar beverage, but is "cosmopolitan" enough to spend those three dollars on coffee. Indeed, when Chinese walk through the door of a Starbucks or some other Western establishment, they are not simply coming to consume food and drink that tastes different, but also to walk "towards the world" — and, in a sense, escape China's problems.



Pizza Hut is not an inexpensive restaurant here. It is the kind of place middle-class families take their children for a treat; the arrival of one in your neighborhood signifies a certain density of disposable income and, believe it or not, bourgeois worldliness.

A recent Western arrival is Kosmo, a chain of coffee-shop-cum-juice bars with a message carefully tailored to appeal to Chinese desires both for worldliness and escape. In case you hadn't figured it out yourself, the chain's website helpfully explains that "KOSMO is derived from the word 'cosmopolitan' which is spelled 'KOSMOpolitan' in its original Greek form" (who knew the Greeks had such strange capitalization habits?). If you're wondering just what Kosmo is all about, the company motto explains: "It is about a world where healthy living transcends national boundaries, ethnic groups & cultural barriers." Such a vision plays to the Chinese desire to "walk towards the world" and find true acceptance, even as it plays upon concerns about food safety, and, more generally, about the stresses of negotiating the chaotic landscape of modern China.

The Kosmo branch near my house is bright and comfortable, and its coffee is very much up to Western standards, so I sometimes bike there to read or write. To get there, however, you must embark on a short but potentially harrowing ride, a mini-epic adventure each time. You have to find your way through a convoluted maze of narrow streets, or *hutongs,* packed with pedestrians and two-, three- and four-wheeled vehicles; you slalom between them, trying also to avoid running down a variety of surprises waiting around corners, from old ladies and their tiny, well-dressed rat dogs to the yellow-hatted, red-scarved children who seem to be continuously going to or leaving school in great waves; you may even have to dodge the occasional bucket of waste water hurled Elizabethan-England-style from a doorway. The challenges are not purely physical: you pass the vendors peddling pirated DVDs, or the "barber" shops where siren-like young women smile and beckon from the windows. If you survive the *hutongs* you are ejected onto a main thoroughfare, which you must cross by weaving your way through grid-locked, honking cars and buses. Next, you wedge your way into a dense pack of fellow cyclists, many rushing at you headlong in the wrong direction, forcing you to play repeated, anxiety-inducing games of chicken—all the while



At Kosmo, UNICEF as marketing

holding your breath as you pass the ever-present road crews whose main task seems to be the relocation of dirt from the ground into the atmosphere.

This ride takes not more than ten minutes, but you can imagine how you might feel upon stepping into a clean, quiet, well-designed coffee shop. To relax yourself further you can order up a "stress reducing" Lavender Latte; to counteract the pollution you have just been inhaling you can choose any number of "healing juices," including the Kosmo Detox, designed to "cleanse" and "flush out toxins." While you'll find beverages like these at juice bars anywhere, in China their appeal is much more literal and immediate. Felix Hu, one of Kosmo's Shenzhen-based managers, emphasized to me how "food safety is a major issue in China;" what Kosmo really runs, he explained, are "wellness cafés" designed to take advantage of and further stimulate the growing appreciation for healthy living among Chinese. And this healthy living is not just about the body. Kosmo's new marketing slogan for 2005 is "Do good. Feel good." A portion of the cost of your drink goes to support Unicef programs (now including tsunami relief), thus encouraging a belief in yourself as a connected, upstanding world citizen. You come to Kosmo to clean and fortify not just your body, but your soul as well.

I've been focusing on Kosmo because the symbolism is irresistible: the firm's self-marketing as cosmopolitan purveyor of physical and spiritual "wellness" is the mirror image of the Chinese belief that globalization will lift their country toward Western standards. Of course, different Western chains in China package "wellness" differently—McDonalds, for example, wraps it in a Happy Meal. Kosmo's promotional literature takes care to distinguish its products from the "over-processed, highly refined, often deep-fried and mostly additive-laden" ones sold by McDonalds or KFC. And, in an example of how health-food partisans, like Bolsheviks, reserve special contempt for the insufficiently fanatical fellow-traveler, the firm takes aim at the "so called 'healthy' juice and smoothie chains [who] use so-called fat-free sherbet or yogurt in making their juice and smoothie beverages."

On the one hand, these distinctions about "fat-free" sherbet would seem to miss the larger point about globalization, standards, and wellness: from the Chinese perspective, what these chains have in common is much more important than what they don't. They all provide their own kind of fresh, cosmopolitan experience, and at the heart of this appeal are standards—of quality control, comfort, cleanliness, efficiency, customer service, etc.—that offer an antidote to the disorder and unpredictability of Chinese life.

On the other hand, distinctions about "fat-free" sherbet are very much the point. Kosmo is a business run to Western standards that uses extensive market research and careful branding to distinguish itself from its competitors. Compare this to developments in my neighborhood, which in just the last year has become a hub of new bars and Western-style cafés. The problem is that these cafés all look about the same and all offer about the same (generally sub-standard) Western food and coffee. And with most of them empty most of the time, it's not surprising when they shut down or change owners every few months. And yet, amazingly, new cafés are still opening up. You've heard of over-investment in the steel or automobile sectors in China; the same holds true here in my neighborhood's "café sector."

A main reason Zhu Rongji wanted to invite in foreign competition was to introduce Western standards of rational economic decision-making. A main reason I go to Kosmo is their Western standards of coffee-making. Beyond using quality ingredients, they also use French machines, costing almost $10,000 each, that do everything in exactly the right proportions at exactly the right temperatures—meaning a better cup of coffee, every time.

In fact, in recent years Chinese seem to be doing better at avoiding overheating of both their economy and their coffee. I think one useful way to understand these improvements is that globalization has helped reinvigorate China's long-standing emphasis on "scientific" solutions to the country's problems. As I hope becomes clear from my discussion below, the "scientific" nature of Western standards forms the core of their appeal.

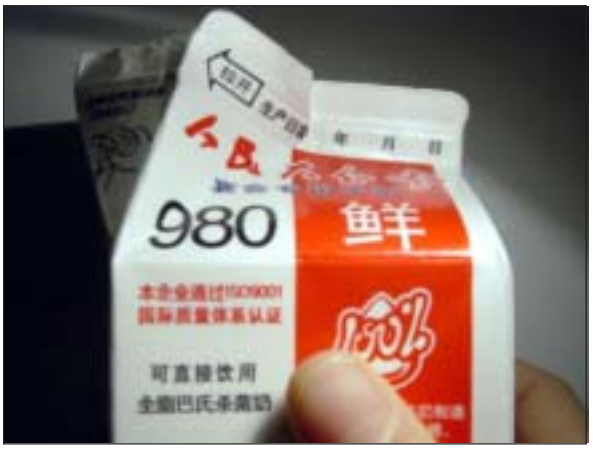
* * *

When customers escape the chaos of rush-hour traffic by coming in to sip a Kosmo Detox, they are walking metaphors for China's modern history: only by walking towards the world and purging itself of its particular "toxins" could China bolster its physical and moral constitution and become modern. During the May Fourth Movement, a period of vibrant intellectual discourse that began in 1919 and continued into the twenties, reformers engaged in extended debate on why China was so weak compared with Europe and America—with an inward-looking, corrupt Confucian tradition often vilified as the prime toxin. Chen Duxiu, editor of the May Fourth era's flagship intellectual journal *New Youth*, believed China would only wash away Confucianism if it emulated the West and embraced the concepts he dubbed "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy." "Only these two gentlemen," Chen wrote, "can cure the dark maladies in Chinese politics, morality, learning and thought." While reformers from across the political spectrum concurred that "Science and Democracy" were central to modernity, they differed as to what these concepts meant.

Chen, who helped found the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1920, was later attacked as a Trotskyist and forced out of his position as secretary-general. As we all know, the CCP leaders who would follow defined democracy in a manner far removed from the Western interpretation—and this remains the case today, with President Hu Jintao recently calling multi-party democ-

racy a "blind alley" for China. However, despite hard times during Maoism, Mr. Science ended the 20th century in far better shape than Mr. Democracy. This is because it has been somewhat easier for Chinese to agree on just who Mr. Science is, and in any case, the country has been pursuing him for a much longer time. During the Opium War of the early 1840s, Great Britain effectively forced China open by bombarding the coastline with well-designed guns on powerful new steam-driven gunboats. This was the Sputnik-like wake-up call forcing Chinese to realize that Western science and technology were far ahead—and the country has been attempting to close the gap ever since.

Deng Xiaoping enshrined "science and technology" as one of his "Four Modernizations" of the Reform and Open era, and this recent emphasis has helped produce a vast pool of engineers, software designers and other applied scientists—a group that looms menacingly over Western hi-tech workers. The extent to which China really takes tech jobs from the developing world is contested, but there is no doubt that foreign corporations are rushing to set up research centers here to take advantage of the skilled and relatively cheap human capital. Experts estimate that within five years China will surpass Japan, Britain and Germany as a base for corporate research, leaving it second only to America. Even if foreign corporations like Microsoft and Motorola are direct beneficiaries, globalization is nonetheless helping push China toward world-class scientific innovation.



***Waking up to ISO 9000**: You can start your day with confidence knowing that the key components of your breakfast have been certified up to standard by the Geneva-based International Organization for Standardization.*

What interests me here, however, is the connection between globalization and the Chinese emphasis on a "scientific" outlook in society at large. In this broader definition, the word refers to a range of qualities like being "systematic," "logical" and "orderly." Defined as such, the word *kexue* (which means both "science" and "scientific") is thrown out so frequently I still have to scold myself not to giggle internally when I hear it: e.g., the country must hold fast to the path of "scientific" development; we would all be much happier if only we had a "scientific" life attitude, etc.

At this point we need to reintroduce the concept of *luan*, the "chaos" or "disorder" to which this emphasis on scientific is a direct response. *Luan,* both noun and adjective, pops up in daily conversation and can simply mean "messy," as in, "Your room is *luan,* clean it up before you go out to play." Here we're referring to the term in its wider social and political meaning. Long stretches of Chinese history were marked by extreme political messiness, with central authority giving way to the feuding of warlords. Frequent *luan* characterized the hundred years beginning in the mid-1800s, until the Communists took over and cleaned the country up in the 1950's—Mao's famous "70-percent correct" rating stems in large part from his putting an end to a century of chaos. This orderly lull lasted a while, until Mao launched his period of being 30 percent wrong and things got *luan* again.[1] The young Red Guards who took to the streets during the Cultural Revolution were *luan* personified; a main sin of the student protestors on Tiananmen Square in 1989 was stirring up these memories of chaos.

For the last dozen years the country has been in the midst of an amazing run at prosperity, and in certain respects has never been less *luan*. The term, however, has taken on a second life as a description of the myriad new problems accompanying China's reforms. Millions of migrants pouring in make the cities increasingly *luan*. Millons of new cars pouring onto the streets make traffic *luan.* Crime has never been so *luan*. SARS made everything very *luan*. The environment in many places is *luan*. With increasing frequency, disgruntled farmers and workers stir up *luan* at the local level, staging walk-outs, sit-ins and the occasional rampage through a government office building.

Of late a common cause of small-sale protest is the perception among citizens that they are receiving insufficient compensation for government-appropriated land. In such circumstances, each side blames the other for the disorder. Those stirring up trouble feel it is the only way to express their anger over corruption and injustice. The

[1] In the period of political reassessment following the disaster of the Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party hierarchy agreed to agree that the late great Chairman Mao had been 70 percent correct and 30 percent wrong in his decision-making.

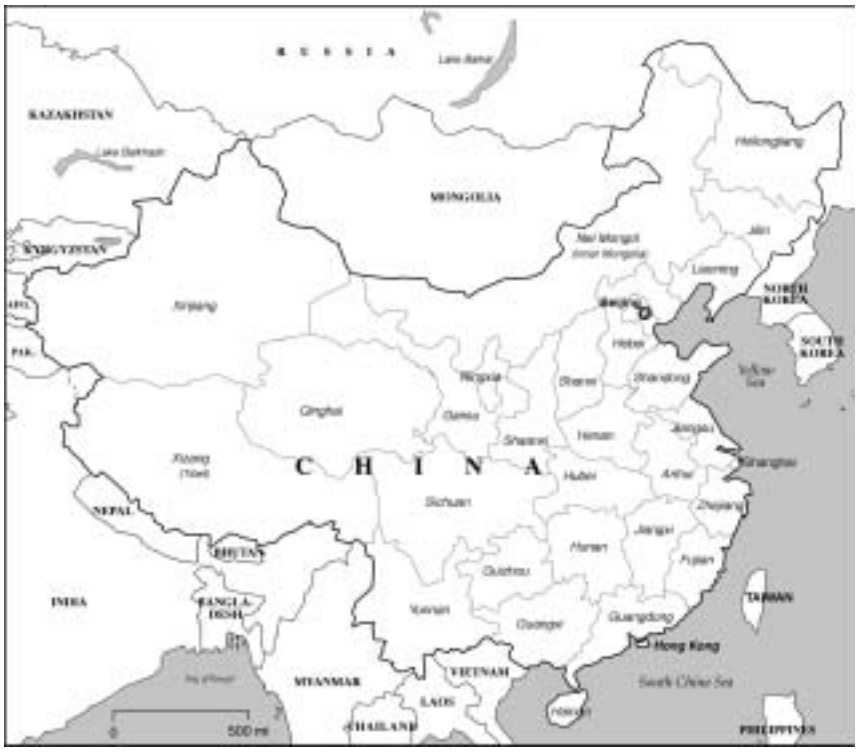
Party, of course, presents itself as the ultimate guarantor of order. Indeed, as the leadership likes to hint, "if things seem chaotic today, just imagine how *luan* they would be if we weren't here to keep order."

The leadership holds firmly to this line, but it of course understands how the government's own deficiencies help create the conditions for *luan*: it thus struggles to create policies to fight corruption within its ranks, to rein in the over-investment that leads to messy popped bubbles, etc. Basically, chaos is what you get when don't do things scientifically enough—particular scientific answers are needed for managing particular kinds of *luan*, from traffic jams to infectious diseases to high rates of non-performing loans.. As we've alluded to above, one unsettling instance of *luan* many of us face each day is wondering what is in our food. Last year China saw a long succession of food-related scandals. You may have heard about the disaster in Anhui province in which a dozen infants died from drinking a bogus baby-formula made only of water and starch. But there have been many other incidents you haven't read about: eleven deaths in Guangzhou from a whiskey containing methanol; a major pickled cabbage factory in Sichuan using inedible industrial salt; fake tofu composed partially from paint in Shanghai; farmed fish fattened with toxic, growth-speeding additives that leave men with a severely reduced sperm count.

One hopes these are isolated incidents in a huge country, and the most extreme cases probably are. Evidence confirms, however, that the sub-standard food problem is one of broad proportions. Take the slightly icky example of sausage and other processed-ham products. While people the world over prefer not to know too much about the contents of their sausages, in China it's actually worth being informed: the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine has just announced that only 31 percent of products in these categories meet national safety standards. In fact, most foreigners I know here instinctively avoid processed foods. But even if you do have a weakness for those ubiquitous, mysterious little red sausages Chinese children love so much, the more common safety problems cited by the inspectors (e.g. excessive food coloring) are unlikely to be a big threat to those of us who are in China temporarily.

The same logic goes for every other kind of food. Chinese who eat these foods every day of their lives, however, face a real long-term concern, and they know it. Last summer a seven-city survey of 2,415 people found less than half willing to profess confidence in the safety of their food; many of those responding "confident" were only marginally so. (Wealthier Chinese, of course, can and do insulate themselves from such worries; I have white-collar friends who avoid whole categories of food, grocery stores and restaurants out of safety concerns.)

Governments have taken action in the wake of last year's scandals. The Guangzhou mayor's office is launching a "Safe Breakfast Project" this winter, while the Shanghai government announced a "Fear-Free Food Campaign" last year. In this war on unsafe foods, we can understand the important role of food packaging in the manufacturers' fight for the customers' hearts and minds. Many Chinese brands feel they *have* to provide some indication that they are more than just Chinese: they meet *international* standards, in other words, those of the developed Western world. Hence the absolute mania in China for certifications by the International Organization for Standardization, a non-governmental organization based in Geneva. If you have never heard of this body, it's probably because you live in a country where the food supply is generally safe and home appliances explode only rarely. Developing countries, however, are wild about ISO ratings, with China, apparently, wilder than most. In the latest issue of the riveting in-house magazine *ISO Management Systems* you can read about "China's Great Leap Forward in certification." China, it turns out, "leads the world in ISO 9001:2000 certificates for the second year running and moves from 5th place to 3rd for the number of ISO 14001 certificates."[2] (Of course by now "ISO 9000-certified" is splashed on to so many products



[2] The ISO website explains their two main families of certifications: "ISO 9000 is concerned with 'quality management'….ISO 14000 is primarily concerned with 'environmental management'."

Mr. Wang runs this spring-water distribution business in the hutongs *near my house. He choose to sell Nestle water because "it's a well-known international brand, and people know it's safe and of high quality."*

it has become almost meaningless. I would really like to know what percent of products claiming the certification have gone through the process—it may be time for yet another international body that certifies certification.)

Given this context, it is easy to understand why Western firms have a history of playing up their scientific credentials. Following the opening of the first mainland McDonalds in Beijing in 1992, public-relations personnel provided five-minute tours of the kitchen on demand. During these tours one would learn how meals were prepared according to "scientific" methods (as well as how frequently employees washed their hands). McDonalds managers explained to the media that menus were "scientifically designed" to cover the nutritional bases, with a "standard meal" guaranteed to provide half a day's nutritional value. Mention of nutritional value and McDonalds in the same sentence might make American readers gag. In fact, as dietary consciousness spreads in China, the idea of McDonalds as a purveyor of nutritious food has been softening. However, people still believe that fast-food restaurants employ scientific methods and uphold standards. I went to a McDonalds to ask customers about this issue; a typical response came from a father accompanying his overweight son, who noted "Chinese food tastes better, but the strong points of McDonalds is that it's fast and sanitary (*weisheng*)."

In a world tinged with lurking *luan*, each time you walk into a McDonalds you can't help but get that refreshing, standardized feeling. I am not a fast-food fan, but I can certainly understand the local perspective about McDonalds. Where developed-world anti-globalizers see a red-and-yellow outpost of a conformist corporate distopia, I see a clean, air-conditioned restaurant offering a fish sandwich that won't mess with my sperm count.

* * *

Considering its effects on your arteries, the "sanitary" Big Mac is a somewhat unfortunate symbol of globalization's contributions in the struggle against *luan*. Ideally, however, the scientific, rational, efficient standards imported from the West will help China develop in a healthy manner. ISO certification helps clean up the food supply. Western economic advisors help clean up the money supply. Foreign investors help clean up the mess in the stock market. WHO guidelines help clean up the mess in the wet markets (where the SARS virus jumped from animals to humans). EU emissions standards help clean up pollution. WTO-membership helps clean up intellectual property violations. Clean is the opposite of *luan.*

For most Chinese citizens, cleanliness starts at the bottom, and even here, globalization is helping. Indeed, according to WTO director Jack Sim, "toilets are a basic human right and that basic human right has been neglected." We are of course talking of that *other* WTO. Last November Beijing hosted the World Toilet Summit, a meeting of scholars, toilet designers and environmentalists co-organized by the World Toilet Organization—a group based in, you guessed it, Singapore, that cleanest and least *luan* of cities. Before the event concluded on November 19th ("World Toilet Day"), the participants held forth in symposia including "A Global Perspective—Relationship between Toilets and Quality of Human Life" and "Toilet: The Past, Present and Future of Public Toilets in Beijing." The host city took advantage of the occasion to show off the fruits of the 238 million RMB (almost $30 million) it has spent on building or renovating 747 restrooms around the city. A four-star rating system has even been introduced, based on criteria like remote-sensor flushing, automatic hand-driers and ambience music. As of last November Beijing boasted 88 four-star, 161 three-star, 312 two-star and 110 one-star lavatories (thousands more await upgrades).

Liang Guangsheng, deputy director of Beijing's Municipal Administrative Committee, commented that "new public toilets are an important symbol to demonstrate the development of the city." As this official pronouncement hints, the toilet situation is more sensitive than you might first expect. Last summer the National Theater of China debuted a play called *Cesuo,* "Toilet," narrating three decades of Chinese modernization from the point of view of a Beijing public restroom. The jokes were all

A tale of two toilets: *(right)* ***A new, WTO-approved restroom…:*** *This recently-remodeled public restroom along a touristed street in my neighborhood has spotless floors and automatic everything. Beyond providing a more comfortable toilet-going experience, the restroom's upgrade to international standards is also trickling down to provide a new life for a migrant couple living there as full-time attendants. Mr. Yu and Ms. Zhou came from Anhui province to Beijing five months ago specifically to take these jobs; they heard about the openings the usual way, via friends from their village already in Beijing. Apparently Anhui province has something of a monopoly in this area, with Mr. Yu asserting that 95 percent of all the public-restroom attendants in Beijing are from his province. The couple had to leave behind their two children, now in their grandparents' care, and while they won't be able to go home to visit over the upcoming Chinese New Year holidays, they seem content. "This is much better than working in the fields," Mr. Yu assured me. Husband and wife each earn 600 RMB a month (about US$75), with food their only daily expense (electricity, heat and water are included). When I asked them how many stars their restroom rated, they seemed not to know about this rating system. They did know that other facilities were even fancier: "This is nice, but it's still second-class; the ones around Tiananmen Square are first-class."*

*(left)…**and the old, non-WTO-approved kind:** The tile roof gives this public restroom near my house a certain charm—from the outside, that is. On the inside you won't find any automatic hand driers, which is fine since there are no sinks to wash your hands. No automatic flushing either—in fact, no flushing at all, a fact leading one to realize that these 0-star public restrooms are basically high-class outhouses.*

potty humor but the government still banned domestic media coverage of the play—the topic was simply too embarrassing and touchy, on various levels. For one, the people using public toilets in the old neighborhoods of central Beijing are also the people who get evicted from their homes, with minimal compensation, in order to make way for new developments that are difficult for them to afford. Also, since the renovation work is partially in preparation for the Olympic Games and toilets being upgraded first are mostly in tourist areas. In 2008 the world will be welcomed to public restrooms featuring the latest flushing technology (and the same old Kenny G songs), while most Beijingers will still be making do in their unheated, glorified outhouses.

Still, these improvements are progress toward developed-world standards, and at least we are seeing motion on this front. In other areas there has been movement, but in the wrong direction. In the pre-boom days of the mid-to-late eighties, air pollution in Beijing was less oppressive than today—and in certain ways, the same can be said of the political climate. Backed by key patrons in the top leadership, including the recently deceased Party Chairman Zhao Ziyang, pro-Western intellectuals openly pushed for bolder, more rapid political reform. In the summer of 1998, this group received a major airing of its views in the form of a six-part television documentary called *River Elegy.* A core theme of the documentary was that China should embrace the "blue" civilization of the progressive, seafaring, mercantile Western powers. The root of their critique was that China had for too long hunkered down behind its Great Wall, land-locked and inward-looking. If the Great Wall was a barrier of shame, that other ancient symbol of China, the Yellow River, came in for equally unfortunate treatment—silt-ridden and brackish, it stood in murky contrast to the clean, blue water of the open seas.

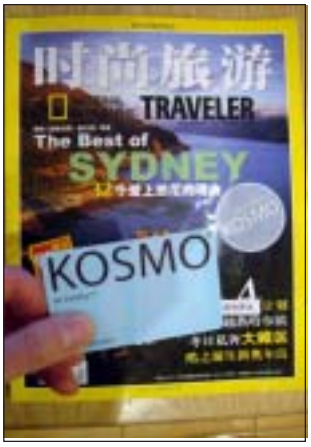
A coalition of defenders of traditional Chinese culture, inside the mainland and out, attacked *River Elegy*—

but it was after the June 4th, 1989 crackdown that the documentary was banned, with conservatives naming it an instigating force behind the student demonstrations. *River Elegy* remains banned today, but I was able to see a copy here in China when the series was screened at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center. The showing was ostensibly for us American students, but many of our Chinese classmates "happened" to get word and "happened" to "drop by." And so over the course of several days Chinese and Americans crammed into a small classroom to watch the documentaries, sitting on desks and leaning against the walls. It was an odd moment in the recovery of semi-white-washed history. My Chinese classmates, all Masters students in their mid-20s, were not quite teenagers during the late eighties. How would the call in *River Elegy* to "irrigate the yellow earth with the blue waters of the spring of science and democracy" sound to them now?

Actually, pretty hokey. Like the students on Tiananmen Square who hoisted a foam and plaster statue modeled on the Statue of Liberty, the intellectuals in their oversized eyeglasses interviewed in *River Elegy* seem to exist in a different reality. First, in the post-Belgrade-embassy-bombing world, the United States in particular doesn't appear to have as much business irrigating anyone's yellow earth—even less so now, post-Abu-Ghraib. America may still lead the world in most everything, but the love fest is long-since over. Su Xiaokang, the journalist who wrote most of *River Elegy* and who now lives in exile in Princeton, New Jersey, has even conceded it was a mistake to present the West in such positive light.

But If the West's aura has dimmed, it is mostly because China's has grown brighter. Sure, the Yellow River may be even more brackish, and Beijing may running out of water. But when you're getting rich, you can afford things like a $50 billion hydrological project to transfer water from the Yangtze to parched Northern China, not to mention those hand-driers. And even if it's still tinged with feelings of inferiority, you can also afford a lot more self-praise and the (slightly scary) nationalism that comes with it. You can pay for all this in great part because in the space of a dozen years you have become a leading seafaring civilization—at least in as much as your annual trade volume in 2004 exceeded $1 trillion, making you the world's number-three trading power after the US and Germany. Meanwhile, back on the homefront, for a couple of dollars you can sip "blue civilization" at your local Starbucks.

Globalization is lifting China up—but with the result of defining "blue civilization" down. When it comes to Western standards, Mr. Science is a one-man show. China is going to be a major the test case of whether high "scientific" standards wafting in on globalization—cleanliness, efficiency, quality, even customer service—have cross-over power. In other words, if your legal system becomes cleaner, more efficient, more concerned with truly serving the customer, does meaningful political liberalization gradually, quietly, sneak in the back door? I mention legal reform because it is the one area most closely tied to the political process where Westerners and Chinese are working closely to bring something akin to "scientific" improvements. Let's hope it works—it's unclear how long good coffee alone keeps *luan* at bay.



*"**Blue Civilization," defined down:** The Kosmo card, your ticket to the blue waters of the spring of Science and—well, the coffee made on that really expensive machine sure is good, isn't it? But no doubt, Kosmo still provides a bath in Western civilization, if only through a cup of coffee and the pages of the magazines on offer, like this Chinese edition of National Geographic Traveler.*

It's possible *luan* will be held off the good old way: Orwell's jackboot stamping on a human face, forever. China could be a major test case of this possibility as well. The current leadership, however, is made up of modern, image-conscious authoritarians who have no wish to be associated with brutality. Hence the appeal of a more palatable third option: the plan is for everything to get richer and cleaner and more efficient and richer and automatic-flushing and automatic-drying and everything's all automatic and it's basically hands-off and China is looking like Singapore on whatever Barry Bonds was taking—and at some point you can even start slipping the jackboots off, at least enough to wiggle your toes.

Beijing's laces look to remain tight: Copying the model of wealthy Singapore is a long-run proposition, and Western standards of liberal democracy are not even on the horizon. Because jackboots aren't made for walking towards the world, the globalized Chinese leader thus learns how to stride the corridors at Davos in a smart Western suit and emphasize his country's embrace of all those *other* kinds of Western standards. In a speech at this January's World Economic Forum, Vice-Premier Huang Ju gave China's "consistent and unswerving commitment" to uphold international standards of intellectual property-rights protection, and promised to "honor its commitments on its accession to the World Trade Organization."

The top leadership does wish to show progress on these fronts — hopefully enough progress to be granted "market economy status" by the United States and the European Union. Possessing this status would make it harder for American and European companies to claim that Chinese competitors are exporting goods below cost. China also hopes the EU will soon lift an embargo on arms sales imposed after the Tiananmen Square crack-

down, allowing the military to purchase more advanced weaponry. An end to the embargo seems likely this year, with European leaders supporting the move on the grounds that the ban is outdated and that China should be rewarded for moving in a positive direction during the last 15 years. Certainly, success on these two counts could bring real economic and strategic pay-offs. More basically, they would also be moral victories in China's struggle to win acceptance in the world and a validation of the country's movement toward Western standards.

An end to the EU arms embargo may be mostly of symbolic importance anyway: For years now, China has been buying certain types of banned "dual-use" equipment for "civilian" purposes, while other arms may remain blocked following the planned overall tightening of Europe's official weapons-trade code of conduct. But even if China purchases nothing new of value, the lifting of the embargo will still serve as a solvent, helping at least to lighten the dark stain of June 4th. Of course Beijing has been attempting to cleanse itself ever since 1989, washing the pavement, fixing the cement chewed up by tank treads and even, somewhat surreally, calling in the American public relations firm Hill and Knowlton for advice on sprucing up its image. During the post-June 4th period Beijing latched onto hosting the 2000 Olympic Games as a major re-branding opportunity. One rather sad-sounding slogan used during the 1993 selection process was "give China a chance" (*gei Zhongguo yige jihui*)—in a sense, a chance to show the world that they were not the "butchers of Beijing." The Chinese bid lost, leaving the country nursing the perception that US opposition had dashed its dream of Olympic self-rehabilitation.

The above helps put the preparations for 2008 in context. At a press conference this month, Beijing Mayor Wang Qishan reminded the city to keep focused on the coming multi-year clean-up: "In 2008, more than 30,000 foreign journalists are expected to pour into Beijing. They will not only report on the Olympic Games, but also record every tiny feature of Beijing…If they find smelly back-street toilets, stinking rivers and litter everywhere, what will they make of Beijing and further, China?" Now that the world has finally "given China a chance" to show how civilized it can be, all this scrubbing-down and fixing-up and boosting the number of World Toilet Organization-compliant restrooms make perfect sense. It also seems both a bit pathetic and a bit sinister—as if an overwhelming showing by a sparkling Mr. Science is at some level designed to make up for the absence of Mr. Democracy, for his being cut down on June 4th, and for his apparent continued irrelevance to China's development.

The Olympic Games always present the chance for an emerging host nation to display its progress—Tokyo in 1964, Seoul in 1988. The Olympics in Japan and Korea, however, ended up highlighting not just the countries' growing wealth, but also their movement toward Western democratic standards. In all likelihood, the 2008 Olympics will show us a China still rising fast on the momentum of globalization. But where will it be going? Is all the scrubbing clearing the way for something new, a sustainable, scientifically-efficient market-authoritarian model? Or might the cleansing foreshadow the day that Chen Duxiu longed for, when Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science would together "cure" China's "dark maladies"? Our official hosts, planning on the former, have proposed Tiananmen Square as the site for the beach-volleyball competition. Remember that image of a lone man standing in front of a column of tanks? No, you don't. All you see are athletes wading across sandy courts, and over their shoulders a bright sun in a clear, blue sky. ❑

You can reach Alex at abrenner@aya.yale.edu

Author: Brenner, Alexander J.
Title: ICWA Letters (East Asia)
ISSN: 1083-4265
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: South Asia; The Americas; Europe/Russia; Mideast/North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4265) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599
E-Mail: icwa@valley.net
Web address: www.icwa.org

Executive Director:
Peter Bird Martin
Program Administrator:
Brent Jacobson
Publications Design & Management:
Ellen Kozak