



Chinese paramilitary police officer sets up a security barrier outside the National Stadium just before the closing ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. PHOTO: AP PHOTO/ODED BALILTY

# THE PEOPLE NOT INVITED

Beijing proved its critics right. These were the No-Fun Olympics.

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I remember visiting Beijing in January 2001. The streets were already preparing for the party they were certain was about to come. Plastic flowers in Olympic colours adorned the streets. A giant screen at the airport shouted out slogans and presented vivid images of athletes and Olympic logos.

Beijing was ready then, even six months before the IOC decided to let the city become the host of the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympic summer games. They had, after all, been snubbed before – they lost the 2000 Olympics to Sydney. It wouldn't happen again. And it didn't.

Hosting the Olympics is, as we've been reminded countless times over the past months, a dream that has been lingering in Chinese minds for the past 100 years. When the rest of the world acknowledged that dream in 2001 by allowing Beijing to host the games, the city erupted in a massive party. People poured into the streets. Shouting, screaming, hugging, and crying. They drove their cars around town all night while waving Chinese flags at each other. Tiananmen Square filled with festive people celebrating a wish come true in a spontaneous fashion not seen since.

Fast-forward seven years. Fast-forward to that auspicious date, 08.08.08. The city feels deserted. The streets around Chang'an, Beijing's main road, are empty. Most of the people I see

are police or security guards. It doesn't feel festive at all. In fact, it feels everything but. The loud noise of screaming cicadas only added to the intensity that many people in Beijing could sense on that important date, 08.08.08.

Most people were, of course, gathered in living rooms, in bars and restaurants, in front of massive TV screens that had been erected around town. Who in their right mind would want to miss the Opening Ceremony?

Eventually I found myself staring at the impressive spectacle in front of one of those massive screens, surrounded by a swarm of warm, sweaty people. It was a very hot evening in Beijing.

Perhaps the heat might help explain why no one seemed to be in much of a party mode. The flame was lit, people were happy, but there was no spontaneous outpouring of joy in the streets this time around. Not at the opening, not during the 16 days of sporting events. It turned out to be, as had been warned, the «No-Fun Olympics».

Now, I'm not saying that the Chinese didn't celebrate during the Olympics. They were proud, happy and.. did I say proud? But the happiness was subdued and kept under a lid. One could ask, as I intend to do in my next sentence, why the Chinese didn't celebrate like they did in 2001, or like Norwegians did here in Lillehammer during the Winter Games of 1994.

So – why? The main reason is probably simple: Fear.

It is close to impossible to underestimate the importance of these games – in terms of sports, politics and psychology – for China. To paraphrase Mao: This was the moment when the Chinese people would stand up after so many years of being disregarded by the rest of the world.

The official Olympic song, sung by none other than Jackie Chan, has an interesting line: «Let the eyes of the world descend and focus on us». It is a revealing line. There's a reason why they call their country the Middle Kingdom.

China wanted to stage the perfect Olympics. An enormous amount of money was spent on arenas, infrastructure, pollution control and security. Unwanted elements like migrant workers, prostitutes, beggars and – for some reason – many foreign businessmen were thrown out of the city, refused to enter it or left on their own accord because the authorities weren't particularly friendly towards them.

There were threats of terrorist attacks. There was the massive fear that something might go wrong, that the organisers might somehow lose face. So security was increased to ridiculous levels. At one intersection in central Beijing I counted 17 security guards or policemen whose main job seemed to be to prevent jaywalking. That, and to tell every single person in Beijing the following: We're here, and we're watching you.

These Olympics were not intended to be a people's party. They were a political tool to serve China's long-term interests as a growing power. Mission accomplished.