

Cheering for goliath

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Abstract: I was told that only Germans cheer for Germany except Chinese. Just as the Chinese won't root for underdog in sport, they won't sympathies with minority groups.

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I live and work in China, but it's easy to forget how special China can be. I've just returned from travel abroad, and the main topic of conversation was the Euro 2008. Everyone I met was overjoyed with Spain's victory over Germany.

In Israel, my friends cheered against Germany for obvious reasons. In Austria, they cheered against Germany for less obvious reasons: Germans are viewed as arrogant and somewhat uncouth. In Hungary, my friends cheered against Germany for more widely-shared reasons: the Spanish play more exciting football, they were clearly the better team throughout the tournament, and it seemed just that they should win after such a long drought.

More than once, I was told that only Germans cheer for Germany. But there's one exception: in China, Germany was the clear fan favorite. On the way home from the airport, our driver, a serious football fan, explained why. Their disciplined and team-oriented form of football, to her, is more inspiring than the fancy moves of Spanish players. She knows the German players and developed an attachment for the team by following German football on Chinese TV over the years.

There are other factors at work. Chinese fans support traditional football powers such as Germany, England, Brazil, Argentina, and Italy. It is difficult to overestimate the passion for such teams. In the 2002 World Cup, the CCTV hostess Sheng Bing wept openly at Argentina's early exit. In 2006, China's best-known football announcer, Huang Jianxiang, was barely able to control his enthusiasm when Italy beat Australia on a last minute penalty kick.

Partly, the preference for traditional football powers can be explained by love of the game: Chinese fans support teams that have performed well in the past and are likely to generate exciting games in the future. But football lovers elsewhere tend to prefer the stylish Spaniards over the dull Germans, so that can't be the whole story.

The key underlying emotion is a special form of internationalist nationalism. The support for established teams may be an expression of a more general appreciation for nations with long histories and cultures. As director of the Institute of Italian Culture in Beijing, Francesco Sisci could find common ground with his Chinese counterparts by appealing to their love of history, by showing how Italy served as an important cradle of western civilisation, just as China served as the cradle of East Asian civilisation.

Conversely, the Chinese won't cheer for underdogs – in fact, it is impossible to translate the word "underdog" in Chinese with the right nuances. Nor will they cheer for teams with a long track record of losing (such as Spain prior to this year's European Cup) or relatively small teams and countries without substantial talent, global impact, or long histories.

Does any of this matter, other than for Hollywood producers marketing movies that end with the triumph of underdog athletes and teams? It matters for those of us who sympathise with the aspirations of small nations or minorities, such as the francophones of Quebec. A sure way to upset my Chinese father-in-law – a veteran of three revolutionary wars – is to tell him that my francophone mother supports independence for Quebec. Why would she want to break up the country, he wonders? Bigger is better, isn't it?

In the same vein, the Chinese are often baffled by Tibetans who seem to value political autonomy and religious freedom over material wellbeing. The Chinese government is bringing economic benefits to the Tibetans, why can't they appreciate it, why do they want to separate from a big country?

The way to address the concerns of Tibetans is not by asking the Chinese to change their mental outlooks. For one thing, political independence for Tibetans is a complete non-starter: I've yet to meet a single Chinese person who favours breaking up the country so that a minority group can enjoy its own way of life.

What is feasible as a way of securing the interests of minority groups – and culturally-sensitive, in a Chinese context – is to promote Confucian ideals of soft power. When China was weak and bullied by foreign powers, it seemed natural to emphasise military power to unify the country and build the state's capacity to protect itself from foreign interference and internal chaos. Mao himself justified his actions with reference to such legalist ideas and compared himself to the anti-Confucian first Qin emperor who used brutal tactics to unify China after centuries of chaos and warfare.

But now China is stronger than before, and it doesn't have to worry as much about foreign incursions. The political context allows for the reassertion of traditional Confucian ideas of virtue: moral example and

persuasion rather than force is the right way to win the "hearts and minds" of people in outlying lands. The Confucian ideal of "tian xia" defended by such contemporary intellectuals as Zhao Tingyang of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is a peaceful and harmonious unified world where rulers rule by means of informal norms and rituals.

In the Confucian moral framework, it may be the case that other cultures and moral systems are implicitly downgraded to second-class status. But that's no different than Christianity and other universalising traditions that aim to spread their values to the rest of the world. And for minority groups in China, the practical choice is between harsh legalism and hands-off Confucianism. Clearly the latter is preferable.

Let Tibetans have freedom to worship as they see fit, but the Chinese should also have the freedom to show the moral power of their way of life within unified boundaries, so long as no coercion is involved. And both sides should interact with an open-minded attitude. Buddhism has enriched Chinese culture in the past (and vice versa) and such engagements can continue in the future.

Just as the Chinese won't cheer for underdogs in sports, so they won't sympathise with minority groups that seek to wall themselves off from larger countries.

为强者喝彩

贝淡宁

吴万伟 译

摘要: 我不止一次听到有人说只有德国人才会给德国队加油，但在中国是个例外。中国人不会为体育比赛中的失败者喝彩一样，也不会同情那些试图脱离大群体的少数民族。

关键词: 强者；喝彩

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