

Speaking Notes

Western Perceptions, Eastern Realities

Groningen, November 28, 2008

The ups and downs of China's reputation in 2008

- 2008: eventful year → a bumpy ride for China's leadership, many ups and downs.
- First half: instead of focussing on the final preparations for the Olympic Games and enjoying a 'harmonious' Olympic Torch relay, China's leaders had to deal with a number of unforeseen events.

Downs: (1) uprising in Tibet in March; (2) the May 12 earthquake in Sichuan (69.000), (3) the problematic Olympic Torch relay, (4) tainted milk scandal that unfolded after the OG. (4) financial crisis.

Ups: (1) in terms of image the praise China received for the way it has dealt with the earthquake and short period of relative openness (2) The two weeks of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games (3) successful space walk during the Shenzhou-7 mission (4) financial crisis and China's fairly constructive behaviour in dealing with the crisis

Presentation: discuss how some of these ups and downs were handled by China and see what we can learn from that.

Events in chronological order

I Tibet (March 10): negative impact.

Could China have handled the crisis differently? No room for the Chinese to manoeuvre without giving up on crucial policy lines.

1. In case China's national sovereignty is at stake, perceptions outside world matter less.
2. In the case of Tibet the Chinese feeling/perception is that whatever they do, it will be interpreted negatively as long as they don't make major concessions. China did hold back.

II Wenchuan earthquake (May 12): positive impact; what stood out and why?

Tragedy but put China in positive light and diverted attention away from Tibet.

1. Images of victims, People like you and me, relate → China got a human face again.
2. Beijing handled well: Wen went immediately and took a strong lead. Within 3 days, China mobilized a force of more than 100,000 people and rescued 80,000 from underneath the rubble. Rescue efforts played nonstop on Chinese television: Wen with a hardhat and bullhorn giving directions and comforting the injured → leadership too got human face.
3. Openness: reporters could do their job. However, openness was short-lived: problems → censors.
4. Decision on May 13 to downscale the torch relay's route through Sichuan - a reaction to the flood of Internet protests calling the original plan insensitive – seen as sign that officials are not deaf to public sentiment.

5. What added to this positive image: fresh memories of the cyclone in Myanmar and the government's languid response whereas Beijing's response showed China can act and it can care.

Not all was well: criticism: corruption, shoddily built schools responsible for deaths; "Tofu" projects—that is, as soft as Chinese bean curd; authorities responded to parents' petitions and protests with police repression.

Wen finally admitted partial govt responsibility for not having been able to stop the corruption that resulted in shoddy workmanship and use of substandard materials

III The Olympic Torch Relay (March 24 - Aug), mixed impact; handled strategically planned as a 'harmonious journey', disrupted by demonstrations and incidents. Strong reaction Beijing to London and Paris led to carefully orchestrated routes & much police protection in remainder.

Examples of Australia and Seoul (diplomatic incident).

Involvement Chinese authorities? To what extent orchestrated? Chinese undercover police?

IV Olympic Games mixed impact

- major tool for China to boost and improve its image

- Success? Depends on perspective and on what China wanted to achieve: People's Olympics, High-tech Olympics, Green Olympics. Acceptance .

A total success in terms of organization, effectiveness, television audience

Moment of political glory: all the leaders of the world came to pay homage

Issues: human rights; environment;